All According to Plan

by inwardtransience, PseudoLeigha

Summary

Thirteen year old Bella Black intended to go back in time to start a war in service to her patron Power. Ritual magic goes awry and she finds herself in 1993, faced with a failing House of Black, an insane alter ego, and a Dark Lord on the rise. Chaos ensues. (Title drop.)
Let's do this

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Are you sure this is right?

Eris?

I know, I know, "It wouldn't be as much fun" if you gave me all the answers but I'm really not sure about that copy of Ptolemy... I thought you wanted this to work as badly as I do.

Fuck it. I've checked and double checked everything as best I can, and I trust you would stop me if I were about to kill myself... Nothing? Okay then, let's do this.

Ancient House, the ancestral seat of the Black family, had grown in a rather haphazard way over the centuries. A decent human enchanter could, of course, bend space to her will without going out and building an entirely new wing onto the house, but that wasn't nearly as visible and visceral a symbol as a proper physical building. So what had once been a simple tower keep had grown generation to generation, as vines spreading year to year, into a sprawling manor house, a display of their wealth and influence for their peers, a memorial ever looming over their descendants. What the great structure lacked in coherent architectural design and elegance, it made up for with the gravity of its history, and that of its people. It was an impressive monument to the continuity and power of the Black family through the ages, and so Cherri thought, as she made her morning rounds, dusting and tidying the disused, long-since-abandoned rooms, it was only appropriate that it was now slowly decaying into a mouldering ruin.

Not that she was pleased about this. It was a house elf's duty and joy to care for the House, both its places and its people, and in this, the elves of the House of Black had failed. She was still trying — she had to try — but that only meant she was still failing. She couldn't keep up. She was only one elf, and with the humans of the House so reduced in number (and quality, though she would never say so aloud), the House Magics had grown fragile, so weak that she dared not use her own magic to maintain the property for fear of entirely losing control of it.

Some days she thought she should just go, like so many of her friends and family had, so long ago now, but she was the only one left, at least here. She had heard rumors that there were still elves at some of the other properties, but it had been years since she had spoken to any of her kith. She knew that they had left her with the House, knew they would tell stories about her — so noble, to die with one's House, to be the last elf, serving out of some mad dedication to memory and honor. So tragic. One did hear such stories, or one used to, when one used to see and speak with others. Cherri had never understood when she was young why anyone would choose to go on like this, forsaking magic and companionship, but somehow she had become that elf, and, equally inexplicably, neither could she bring herself to entirely abandon the once-grand manor and the House for which it stood to the ravages of disorder and time. Even if everyone else had.

Especially since everyone else had, she thought darkly, lovingly wiping dust from an end table.

For a time it would remain a warm, vibrant mahogany, until the dust inevitably returned, dulling the piece to a faded ghost of its true self. The entire house was like that now, little bits and pieces come alive with care, but never all at once, and always fading again before she could return to them. It was a futile cycle, slowly slowing as she aged, drawn out longer and longer each time. In
the far off future, she could see it slowing ever more, as she did, until, eventually, they
both...just...stopped. She made her way as quickly as she could through the endless rooms,
determined to put that day off as long as possible, despite her certainty that it would eventually
come.

Until, quite abruptly, something changed.

She didn't hear it, but rather felt it, the arrival of The Girl. The House Magic *shuddered*, guttered,
as a hearth nearly dying before flickering to moody life, no longer the diffuse, placid thing it had
become since the beginning of the end, but polarized, no, *magnetized*, focused and centered upon
the anomaly as though some magic-seeking lodestone suddenly at the heart of the House.

Cherri raced from the third floor library down to the Ritual Room which was, she felt, the origin of
the disturbance. Its source, she quickly found, was a human girl, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years
of age. Her features — hair and eyes and face — could have been a compilation taken from the
portraits of the Family in centuries past, wild, dark, and sharp, and her soul burned with a greater
intensity than Cherri had felt since...probably since Mistress Bellatrix had gone away. Master
Arcturus, even, had never had the same impact on the magic of the House.

There was no question in the elf's mind that The Girl was a Black, or that she had come to revive
the House, breathing life back into it like the first warm touch of spring.

There *was* some question as to whether Cherri might have *lost* her mind, succumbing to isolation
and sorrow at long last and escaping into a fantasy from which she would never return. But upon
reflection, she found she didn't much care.

The Girl made her way deliberately from the heart of the Tower, the oldest part of the House, to
the Lower East Wing, the most recently inhabited area. It had been favored by the last generation,
Cherri recalled, because it was most conveniently organized, with its own auxiliary kitchen and
informal dining hall amongst the bedrooms and parlors and baths and studies which populated most
of the other wings. The Girl did not seem pleased with it, glaring at the dustcovers and muttering
invective under her breath.

Cherri followed, wondering whether she ought to make herself known and listening when The
Girl's frustration finally broke the long years of silence. "The fuck is going on? Seriously, it looks
like no one's lived here in years! 'Oh, it looks fine, stop fussing.' Well *this* doesn't look fine to *me*!"
she grumbled, then, several minutes later added, "And of course you're still ignoring me! Answer
me you bloody twat!" She stuck her head in the kitchen, shaking it in confusion before proceeding
into the living quarters of the wing.

The elf continued to follow her, wondering whom she had so rudely addressed. Certainly there was
no one else in the house. The wards had been neglected, but they were still strong enough to keep
out anyone who wasn't meant to be there, and the House Magic would react to anyone who was,
much like it had when The Girl appeared, however she had done so.

Eventually, having established that there was no one where she clearly expected to find them, The
Girl circled back toward the Tower and, casting an amplifying spell on her voice, shouted, "Hello?
Uncle Castor? Auntie Nora? Anyone?"

The sound echoed through the empty halls. Cherri, knowing there could be no other response, took
this as her cue and stepped out of the shadows. She cleared her throat softly to call attention to
herself and, before she could offer a greeting to the strange and unexpected guest, found herself
lying on the floor, silenced and bound by conjured ropes from head to toe.
The girl had reacted without thinking, silencing and binding the source of the quiet sound behind her before she had even fully turned to face it. *In my defense, I did think something was following me,* she thought, justifying her actions to anyone who might have been watching and now secretly laughing at her from another plane of existence. *It could have been anything!*

As it turned out, however, it was only a house elf, quite possibly the only one on the property — she didn't recognize it, but when it came down to it they were all more or less interchangeable.

"Dark Powers, elf!" she snapped at it, even as she dispelled her charms. "Don't sneak up on me!"

"Yes, Missy," it said, scrambling to its feet and bowing low.

"Miss Bella," she corrected. "I am Bellatrix Black, daughter of Cygnus, son of Pollux. Do you recognize me?"

The elf let out a startled squeak, comically large eyes bulging even larger, and bowed again. "Yes, Mistress Bellatrix, Cherri is recognizing Mistress."

Good. It was infinitely easier to deal with House Elves if they recognized you as part of the Family, and therefore one whom they were meant to obey. Bella had been almost positive that the family magic would accept her as one of its own, but there had always been a chance that, out of time as she was, she wouldn't register properly. After all, assuming she'd gone when she'd meant to, Cygnus would be...what, eleven? She was technically older than her own father right now, so she wouldn't have been entirely surprised if the elf had decided she couldn't possibly exist, and therefore needn't be minded.

But 'Mistress'? Bella had never been called 'mistress' by an elf in her life. She was too young, for one, and not even the heiress presumptive anymore, let alone the head of the house. If the state Ancient House had been allowed to deteriorate into hadn't given it away, that would have been a major clue that she hadn't, in fact, managed to show up when she'd meant to.

So, might as well get the most important question out of the way. "What year is it?"

The elf twitched in surprise, wide eyes staring up at her. With a strangely dumbfounded tone for an elf, it squeaked, "I-it is being Nineteen Ninety-Three, Mistress."

*Nineteen Ninety—*

Bella bowed her head a little, rubbing at both temples with her fingers. That...*was not* what she'd been aiming for. In fact, that was the *exact opposite* of what she'd been aiming for. She couldn't imagine how that could possibly happen by accident — actually, most theoretical models for temporal mechanics posited travelling forward through time was *impossible.* A suspicious thought, that.

*You did this on purpose, didn't you.*

The cold presence at the back of her mind echoed with an amused sort of silence.

*Yeah, that's what I thought.*

Letting her hands fall again, Bella glared sightlessly up at the ceiling with a heavy sigh. Well...*fine,* then. Change of plans. She could work with that. *Some* warning would have been nice but, really, she didn't expect much else from Eris by this point. She had the feeling only letting Bella know half of what was going on was part of the fun.
Not that it made any difference, when it came down to it. She hadn't made much in the way of plans anyway, she'd intended to just sort of...feel it out. She could do that just as well in 1993 as she could have in 1933. Assuming there was something interesting to do with herself in this era, but she assumed Eris wouldn't "accidentally" send her here if there weren't. So far as Eris really planned anything, anyway. This could well be a diversion the goddess had arranged for her own amusement before they got back to the programme, there was really no way to tell for certain.

Really, she wouldn't have minded at all, if sending her into the future didn't present such a disadvantage. She'd learned all she could about the state of things in 1933, but she knew nothing about 1993 — of course she didn't, it hadn't existed yet! She'd have to do a lot of catching up, so, yes, she was slightly annoyed. Not particularly surprised, but annoyed.

"What is Mistress being doing—?"

Bella winced — she'd been avoiding the things for long enough, she'd somehow forgotten how irritating their mangling of English was. "Stop it. Just, speak in elvish."

The elf stared up at her for a few seconds, mouth and eyes so wide with surprise Bella had to hold back a snicker. "You know elf-speak?"

"I know many things." Of course, elvish was technically her first language. Not that she'd ever admit that out loud, and certainly not to an elf. "Now, Cherri, was it? Where the hell is everybody?"

The elf toed the ground awkwardly, tugging at her left ear in agitation. "It has been some time since I have had news from outside this home, but most of the Black humans are gone, and the elves left."

Well that was the epitome of unhelpfulness. "Which humans are still alive, and where are they, to the best of your knowledge?" she asked more specifically.

"Mistress Walburga was keeping at Grimmauld Place the last I heard. House Head Arcturus was keeping at the Keep, but he is gone, now. House Head Sirius is..."

Save her from the pointless dithering of elves. There was a point excessive meekness just got annoying, and elves seemed to exist far beyond it. "Yes?"

It flinched, instinctively pulling away from the ice on her tone. "House Head Sirius is keeping in the wizard prison. He was not able to return to the House and take up his role, and so the magic has faded since House Head Arcturus is gone."

"Okay, so Sirius — that is Orion and Walburga's Sirius, right?" It seemed the most reasonable guess — though when Bella had last seen him he'd been a bloody toddler — but that was one of the names the Family reused every generation or so. There was no telling for sure. But the elf nodded. "Sirius is in Azkaban. Why didn't Walburga take up the Head of House?"

"House Head Arcturus barred Mistress Walburga from Headship because..." The elf fidgeted, eyes sliding away from hers and to the floor.

"Tell me!" the witch demanded, then tisked. "You're allowed to speak ill of whomever you like, you won't be punished for that." If she didn't stop with this hesitant nonsense, though, well...

"Mistress Walburga was ill. She refused to go to human healers and closed herself in Grimmauld with the elf Kreacher. The elf Kreacher has not been seen or spoken to since Nineteen Seventy-Nine, and Mistress Walburga was not fit to care for herself, far less the House. I doubt that she has
recovered since I have been here alone."

While it was rather odd and consequently somewhat interesting that there was a family elf pretending not to exist at Grimmauld place, Bella couldn't really see that it was very important. "Very well, who else is left? What happened to my sisters and me?"

More awkward shuffling, more ear-tugging. "Please forgive me for speaking out of turn, but may I ask a question?"

Clenching her teeth, she held in a frustrated sigh. Honestly, getting through a simple conversation with an elf was bloody impossible. "If you're quick about it."

"Mistress... what has happened to you, that you are young again and do not remember what has happened to the House?"

Bella glared at the impertinence, but she supposed it did make a certain sort of sense: the elf couldn't tell her what had happened to the Bellatrix Black of this timeline since it thought it was talking to her, and didn't know why or how she'd suddenly appeared, looking thirty years too young, with no memory of the intervening time. She really couldn't blame it for the confusion. (Unfortunately.)

"I'm not your Mistress. I'm a different Bella, from thirty years ago. I came to this time by accident, and now, if you please, I would like to know what happened to Mistress Bellatrix and Andromeda and Narcissa! And for that matter, Sirius and Regulus, too!"

The elf swallowed hard. "Yes, Miss. Mistress Bellatrix joined the Dark Revolution and became the right hand of the Dark Lord. There was talk that she could have been a Dark Lady in her own right, before he fell and drew her with him into madness. She swore he would return, and awaits him in the wizard prison. Miss Andromeda left the Family to marry a muggleborn. She never returned home from Hogwarts, but broke her tie to the family magic and ran away from the school. We had not heard of her again. Mistress Bellatrix forbade it to discuss her, and it was as though she had never been. Miss Narcissa married into the Family Malfoy and renounced her tie to the Family Black as is the custom. Young Master Sirius...renounced the Dark Powers and damaged the Family Magics, then distanced himself from the House, though he was not cast out, for most of the other Blacks had gone by then. Young Master Regulus followed Mistress Bellatrix into the Dark Lord's forces and now is gone."

Funny, how the elf actually being helpful and finally bloody answering her just left her with more questions than she'd started with. She guessed missing thirty years could be like that. "What Dark Revolution? What Dark Lord did I — Mistress Bellatrix — and Regulus follow?"

The elf shrugged helplessly. "The Dark Lord," it said, as though there had only ever been one. "The humans call him He Who Must Not Be Named. He was Mistress Bellatrix's Lord and Master, but that is all I know."

...Her Lord and Master? What the bloody buggering fuck had the other her done? It was possible the elf was misinterpreting their...relationship, yes, but that she was willfully remaining in Azkaban — Bella didn't doubt she could simply leave if she wanted to — obediently awaiting his return, that certainly suggested something along those lines.

But, but that was wrong. That was just impossible. She could only assume the other Bella was a black mage the same as she was. (The way the elf had reacted to her name, half-ecstatic half-confused and half-terrified, had implied as much.) She recognized but one authority over her, and one authority alone — even Arcturus she only obeyed when it suited her, and that not because
she must, but because she chose to. She owed fealty to one Lord, and one Lord alone. Whoever this Dark Lord was, he was not Her.

Even excluding the apparent collapse of the Family, something was very seriously wrong.

She shook her head, adding that problem to her growing mental list of priorities to be addressed soon, but not immediately. She was certain the elf couldn't offer any more useful information on that point anyway, and there were more pressing concerns at the moment.

"And Andromeda— No, I don't suppose you know the name of the muggleborn she married?" The elf shook her head, looking rather despondent at not being able to answer her question. "Never mind, then, I'll track her down later. And Cissy's fine, and Baby Reggie's dead? Well, I can't say I expected that. But how did Sirius end up in Azkaban?"

"House Head Sirius was accused of joining the Dark Lord's forces and betraying his friends of the Light. He was also said to have killed a wizard and twelve muggles. It is not true. House Head Sirius, then only Master Sirius and House Traitor, had no friends to hear him, but he had chosen his side. He renounced the Dark in defiance of the Covenant and shattered the Family Magics. They were never the same after, and for that, perhaps, he should not be forgiven. But he could never have joined the Dark over the Light. Not after that."

Well, I suppose that makes my priorities fairly clear. Sirius, as the proper Head of the House and apparently the only sane Black left, would have to be gotten out of Azkaban and cleared of his crimes. She was less than pleased that Sirius had apparently broken the Covenant but, well, she hadn't a lot of options. And in any case her own covenant with Eris superseded the family Covenant with the Dark; it wasn't as though she — or rather, her alter ego — would have been personally affected. And about that other Bella, she was more hesitant to see her released. She was quite certain she wanted to know a bit more about why she had chosen to follow a bloody Dark Lord — and who even was that, anyway — and the "madness" she had apparently been drawn into with his downfall. Though personally she rather thought she'd've had to've been mad long before that to join any Dark Lord in the first place.

Not to mention, to suborn herself to one that he could be referred to, in any way, as her Lord and Master. That was just...

Eris' voice came as a cool wave of thought, pulsing through Bella's mind. I might be able to shed a bit of light on that, ducky.

Oh, now you decide to talk to me? Well, later. I'm in the middle of something, in case you hadn't noticed. Perhaps it was immature of her, but she conjured a mental image of herself pouting and sticking her tongue out at the form Eris most commonly chose to physically manifest. She was still annoyed with her Patron.

Which of course Eris only found amusing. Whatever.

"Right," she said, addressing the elf again. "What about my parents? Cygnus and Druella?"

"Mistress Bellatrix killed Master Cygnus." Honestly, she couldn't bring herself to even pretend to be surprised. He'd almost certainly done something to deserve it. "It is not meant to be known, but we elves thought she was right to do so. Miss Druella returned to House Rosier after Master Cygnus was gone."

She thought for a moment, smirk pulling at her lips — the elves' apparent approval for her alternate self murdering Cygnus was weirdly funny. Right, obviously Castor and Nora were gone, since
Ancient House had been allowed to deteriorate to this state. That left... "Uncle Alphard?"

"Gone."

"Cassiopeia?"

The elf hesitated. "Mistress Cassiopeia is...missing."

That wasn't entirely surprising. Metamorphs were known to simply vanish on a whim, taking on new names and faces and starting new lives periodically as they eventually outlived all their friends and immediate family. With the Family nearly extinct as it was, she would honestly be more surprised if Cassiopeia were still around. "Arcturus and Regulus? Sirius's sons?"

"Both gone. And Sirius son of Phineas, and Phineas, son of Phineas, and all of the cadets, gone. Miss," the elf added gently, "the House of Black is Fallen. There are no other humans left, and soon there will be no elves, and no House at all."

Bella shot the elf a glare — angry not at the elf, but at the very idea it had voiced, that such a thing would dare come to pass while she still lived. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

For the first time since she had made herself known to Bella, the elf beamed.

While Diagon Alley might have looked a little different than it had in Bella's time, any changes were mostly cosmetic.

There were only a handful of things she noticed, casually strolling toward the Prophet offices from the apparation point near the bank. (Back issues of the Prophet seemed as good a way to catch up as any.) The name of an apothecary was different. A slightly sketchy pub — by the standards of Diagon Alley, that is — had been replaced by an equally dingy pet store. What had been the office of a prolific (and rather talented) wardcrafter was now a shockingly muggle-looking ice cream parlour. Everything else was virtually the same.

Really, she wouldn't be surprised if most of the shopkeeps were still the same people she remembered — thirty years wasn't that long by magical standards, after all.

The geography was mostly unchanged, but that didn't mean it didn't look different. Cleaner, in a word. Charing had always been a messy, noisy place, the varied cultural and social strata that made up Celtic magical society meeting in one place. Such a melting pot could never be as orderly as some of the more rigid-minded would like. It had always been almost violently colourful, posters and leaflets pasting over the relatively drab paint and stone beneath, the streets filled with mages. A fair few of the proper sort going about their business, yes, but also the occasional clump of nonhuman beings of all kinds, unattended children playing and shrieking and running about, animated graffiti defacing wall and cobblestone alike.

Most of that was gone now. The walls were clear and clean, shops shining in a way they hadn't before, crumbling corners touched up and glass polished. The crowd was plenty noisy, but far less chaotic, proper adults properly going about their proper business, occasionally trailed by an obedient child or two. Far more orderly, far more civilized, far more...

...boring. Gods and Powers, it was boring. It made her skin itch, she had to resist the urge to kick over one of the tables in front of Fortescue's and start tossing jinxes around just to make it more...more... She didn't what word she was looking for. More something, anyway.

She could feel Eris giggling at her, but she tried to pretend she didn't notice.
It was only as she was passing that same table she'd nearly overturned that she noticed an abandoned copy of the Prophet folded up in the middle. Bella jerked to a halt when she saw the headline, snatched the thing up sharply enough it ripped at one corner.

**ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN!**

*Ministry Scrambles after Convicted Death Eater Sirius Black*

Bella's eyes flew through the article as quickly as she could possibly read, before biting out a frustrated sigh and pitching it back onto the table. Perhaps a little harder than necessary, sending it sliding across the smooth surface to spill onto the bench, from there to the ground. There had been a list of Sirius's crimes — which he apparently hadn't even committed — but most of the article had been tarring the Ministry for its incompetent bumbling in the days since his escape — which wasn't at all surprising. It wasn't the least bit helpful. Not that she had honestly expected the thing to tell her exactly where to find Sirius, but...

Not all of it had even made sense. There had been an oblique reference to something that had happened between this Dark Lord of theirs and someone laughably referred to as *Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.* (Aunt Dorea's son? grandson? There weren't that many Potters...) It hadn't explained what the bloody hell had actually happened that Samhain twelve years ago, so it was apparently common knowledge.

Great. Now she had to catch up on the last thirty years of history, and track down her idiot baby cousin before he managed to get himself killed. Perfect. It would have been much simpler if Sirius had just stayed there until she could arrange—

Bella blinked, glanced toward the paper on the ground. Wait a second. Sirius had escaped from Azkaban? Huh. Maybe he wasn't as useless as Bella had been assuming ever since she'd heard he'd broken the Covenant.

No, your instinct was correct. He's useless. Entertaining, but useless.

You think most mortals are useless, Bella thought, rolling her eyes. Putting the article out of her mind for now, she started off for the Prophet offices again.

Hypocrisy doesn't become you, little ducky.

I think it suits me quite well, thank you.

Chapter End Notes

[Charing] — Diagon Alley, because Lysandra does this worldbuilding thing where she changes the things she doesn't like and/or things which are dumb, like naming a town after a pun.

So, this is a thing that exists. (IT LIVES!) Um... I don't usually do ANs... —Leigha

Well, rambling is my thing, okay. This is a random idea LeighaGreene and I (inwardtransience a.k.a. "Wings" a.k.a. Lysandra) had, and decided to run away with it because we are the nerdiest couple on the face of the earth. It's in many ways split
from "Coming of Age in the House of Black", which is a LeighaGreene fic, so people who've read that might have an easier time jumping on board. Mostly it's only relevant for Bella's backstory — for example, just what the fuck Eris is, and why her native language is elvish — but it's not necessary to have actually read it. The characters and background and such are mostly canon otherwise, and where it isn't that actually matters will be explained, so.

These first couple chapters are gonna zip by quick with little scenes like this, until we actually sit down to explain exactly what the fuck is going on in chapter three. Yes, exactly chapter three — there's an outline. Leigha is a terrible influence on me. — Lysandra

I am the best influence.

I am also kind of a flake, though, so next chapter whenever it's done. —Leigha
Andromeda Tonks straightened in her chair, the tingling sensation of a guest crossing the wards drawing her eyes narrowed in an absent frown.

Not that she was particularly concerned by the intrusion — she had left the street entrance unlocked, and the wards would have given her a far more irritating warning if the guest held any harmful intent. She simply hadn't expected anyone to drop in. Most professional offices were closed on the major holidays, and hers was no exception. She wouldn't have ordinarily come in herself, but she had a hearing coming up, had forgotten a volume on the relevant civil precedents she'd meant to review over the weekend. She'd stayed a little later than she'd meant to, but nobody should have expected to find her in here anyway.

Well, it was possible a muggleborn was coming in with some urgent concern. They did have a tendency to lose track, sometimes years after joining magical society — even Ted still forgot the ones too far removed from muggle holidays now and then.

Andromeda sat back in her chair, letting her eyes fall shut with a weary sigh. It was getting quite late, the sky through her window already fiery with approaching darkness, but she really should appropriately deal with...whoever that was out there. Brushing off someone who might be in serious need of help would be rather bad form. She had a reputation to maintain, after all. Pushing herself to her feet, she slipped out from behind her desk, opened the door into reception.

Her pace hitched with surprise, just for a moment: her guest was quite a bit younger than she'd expected. The girl was facing the opposite wall, so Andromeda couldn't tell for sure, but judging by her figure she would guess somewhere between twelve and fifteen, probably weighted toward the younger side. Her age wasn't that odd, really — it wasn't unusual for Andromeda to have younger clients, family law being the serpentine morass it was — but there were plenty more unusual things to be getting on with.

The girl was wearing what looked to be, strange enough, trousers and tunic and heavy boots intended for light duelling, the loose cut not dissimilar to what one would generally see in tournament professionals. The quality of the cloth wasn't quite right, though, composed of fine, glimmering black silk instead of the cotton one would expect. Her hair, thick waves a heavy black, was tied back with a plain silverish ribbon, left to spill nearly down to the small of her back. She hadn't turned to Andromeda, still facing the wall, examining clippings from the *Prophet* and the *Herald* hanging there, the few times her exploits had managed to make the papers.

Shaking off her momentary confusion, Andromeda softly cleared her throat. 'Excuse me, Miss, I was—' She cut off abruptly, the rest of the sentence stolen from her throat as the girl turned to look over her shoulder.

*Bella.*

Except, no, no, it couldn't be her. For one thing, Bella was in Azkaban, Andromeda would have heard something if she'd been released. Or, more likely, escaped — and what did *that* say, that she thought Bella *escaping* Azkaban was more likely than her ever being released? (Of course, Sirius had apparently done it, so it wasn't impossible, but still.) More to the point, Bella was *forty-three*
years old. She supposed she could have altered her appearance somehow, but no, nothing short of polyjuice or serious high magic could create an illusion this perfect. No, it couldn't really be her, it couldn't.

But the girl looked so... No, not similar, identical — she looked exactly like Bella had at that age. That oh-so-familiar narrow face, the Black eyes such a deep grey they seemed to come back around to an unnatural purplish-blue, complete with the dark light that always seemed to flicker half-seen, even down to the exact placement of the thin scar crossing her lower lip, barely visible, she'd had as long as Andromeda could remember. Exactly like her, too similar to be a coincidence.

When she'd been young, before starting Hogwarts, the single person Andromeda had seen more of than anybody else had been Bella. Despite only being a couple years older, she'd been more a parent to her than their actual parents. If anyone in all the world were to recognise Bella at this age, it was Andromeda.

But... But that was impossible. She... She didn't...

The girl's lips pulled into a crooked smile. "All right there, Meda? You look like you've seen a ghost."

The words battered Andromeda over the head, hard enough she was dizzy, had to prop a hand against the doorframe to keep herself from falling. Not so much the words that were said, but the voice that had said them. It was exactly Bella's voice, that same low, almost musical timbre, that same note of dark humour, exactly. "But you... You can't be here, you're not..."

"Honestly, it's like you've never heard of time travel before."

No. Was she supposed to believe this Bella was from decades in the past? No, that was too much.

Was what she would say if it were anybody else. Honestly, the thought that a teenaged Bella might have taken it upon herself to muck about with time didn't even come as a surprise, despite the fact that, so far as she was aware, travel forward through time was considered impossible.

Andromeda wasn't entirely certain "impossible" meant anything to Bellatrix Black.

It took a few long breaths, a few careful swallows, to fully compose herself again. She'd admit her reaction might be a bit much, but she thought it was understandable given how impossible this was. Bella had already turned back to the clippings before she found her voice.

"How far?" It had to be a few decades, Bella couldn't be older than fourteen. Which was a bit...uncomfortable, because, well, things had happened since then.

If that wasn't an understatement. The last time she'd seen Bella, she'd been warning her to leave the country and never return, under threat of one of the other Death Eaters murdering her and her family. Dora hadn't even been born at the time, and she was older than this Bella now. The thought was difficult to wrap her mind around.

Somewhere, less than fully consciously, Andromeda remarked to herself how easily she was, just, accepting that this girl was her teenage sister, inexplicably transplanted from decades in the past. But then, it was Bella.

Bella shrugged. "When I woke up this morning, it was Nineteen Sixty-Three."

Ah. Exactly thirty years, then. In Nineteen Sixty-Three, Andromeda had been ten and preoccupied with keeping Cissy away from their parents, and Bella had been at Hogwarts, but she'd still been
Meda's best friend and closest confidant. They had still spoken by mirror at least once a week — more often when Dru and Cygnus were being particularly awful. "But wait, I don't remember you ever being gone. At least, not for very long. And you certainly never mentioned this little adventure to me."

Her sister — unmistakably her sister — smirked. "Aww, baby sister feeling retroactively neglected? Don't worry, you didn't miss anything."

"What?" She could have come back to the exact moment she left from, true, but she hadn't suddenly seemed older either, so if that was the case, this Bella shouldn't be staying here for very long at all. But Andromeda would still argue that even a brief jaunt into the future to have a chat with her thirty-years-older self was deserving of some mention. And she would certainly remember that.

"You don't remember me leaving, I never mentioned it, because I never left."

"What the bloody hell? You never left? But you're here, in Nineteen Ninety-Three!" Andromeda objected, growing snappish with frustration.

With a thin sigh, Bella turned around again, shooting Andromeda a disappointed look, as though to say, How do you not get this, it's obvious. It was a look Meda had received many times before, and it never grew less irritating in its condescension. Just because everyone wasn't a bloody genius when it came to languages and magical theory... "I mean, the me of this timeline never left. This is not my future, and I'm not from your past."

Andromeda blinked. That... Well, she'd heard theories of multiple universes, but it was just that: theory. As far as she knew, it'd never been confirmed one way or the other. Granted, she hardly spent much time researching that sort of thing, but if people from alternative timelines were known to just turn up now and again she was all but certain she would know about it. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Yep. There are some very distinct differences. Not least of which, I'm pretty sure this Voldemort person didn't exist in my timeline. Been very confusing catching up."

"Er, are you sure? It was pretty early in 'Sixty-Three. I mean, Mister Tom became Voldemort, but I don't think he was using the name back then."

Bella's head tilted a bit, raising a single eyebrow at her. "Mister Tom?"

"Well, that's what you called him all the time. Monsieur Thom de Mort? That was his alias. You're thirteen, right? You'd already been his apprentice for a few years by then."

The confusion on Bella's face only intensified. "What the fuck are you talking about? I would never take an apprenticeship with anyone."

"...Really."

"Well, obviously. I really doubt Eris would appreciate that much."

Andromeda winced — she tried to forget Bella was a black mage if she could help it.

For no obvious reason, Bella flinched nearly in sync with her, annoyance flicking across her face. "Dammit. Is everyone in this timeline a fucking idiot? Because really, that's what it's starting to look like to me."
While Bella shook her head, muttering and cursing under her breath, Andromeda just stared at her. Because there really was no response to that.

"So are you ready to go, then? I can't wait to meet this muggleborn of yours. Mummy must have been so pleased."

Yes, definitely her sister.

"So you're the degenerate mudblood who knocked up my baby sister," Bella said with a grin, offering her hand to shake the way muggleborns always did at Hogwarts. One never got a second chance to make a first impression, after all.

Theodore Tonks, the wizard Meda had chosen to elope with out of Hogwarts — The Scandal of the Decade according to one 1971 Prophet gossip column — wasn't making a terribly good first impression himself. It was a bit difficult to tell, since he was sitting in an armchair, but he seemed to be of average height and build. He had thinning, sandy hair and a moustache, but no beard. His features were, she supposed, fairly well-proportioned, but nothing special. Meda obviously hadn't chosen him for his looks. His response to her greeting was to blink at her for several long seconds with a rather befuddled expression before saying, "I'm sorry, sweetie, but is this some sort of joke? I don't get it."

Bella pouted at him, withdrawing her hand. Meda obviously hadn't chosen him for his wits, either, a conclusion which was only strengthened when he proceeded to ignore her — how long had it been since someone had so blatantly passed her over like that? — instead addressing his wife over her shoulder as she entered the room. "Wotcher, Andi. Find that book you needed?"


It's almost like she knows me or something.

Eris' presence emanated amusement. You are rather unforgettable, ducky.

Tonks' confusion only intensified. "Er... What?"

"Cunning and articulate," Bella said, derisive humor clear on her voice. "Good choice, Meda. It's so clear why you exiled yourself from the family for this one."

Meda sighed. "Ted, darling, this is... This is Bella, my sister. Bella, this is Ted, my husband. Please do me the favor of at least pretending to respect him while you're under our hospitality."

Bella snorted. Not bloody likely — Bella didn't really make an effort to respect...well, anyone. She started to ask what the point of pretending would be, if they all knew she was only pretending, but Tonks talked over her, now not only confused, but also amusingly alarmed, lurching to his feet. "Your sister Bella? You mean Bellatrix Lestrange? The one who's supposed to be in Azkaban? Andi, I— What? How?"

"Apparently there's time travel involved," Meda said blythely, patting him on the shoulder before shoving him back into the chair. "Do you want a drink? I need a drink," she added, crossing to a cupboard on the other side of the parlor.

Tonks stared up at her, blinking to himself. "Sure?"

"Firewhisky, neat," Bella ordered, before addressing Tonks' concerns. "I'm not her. Lestrange. I'm
not even past-her — different timelines, as far as I can tell, diverged...maybe in the Nineteen Thirties? Earlier? Definitely before the Fifties, but I need more time for research to say how and why."

"Oh," the wizard said. Meda handed him a bright green cocktail. He considered it, or perhaps Bella's existence, for a moment, then threw it back and stood to get another.

Bella was given a bottle of butterbeer as her sister sank elegantly onto the chair her husband had vacated, sipping coolly at a Tam Lin. Mother would have been impressed.

Bella wasn't. "What, I'm not good enough for a real drink?"

"You're not old enough for a real drink," Meda corrected her, smirking slightly over her flaming cup. "Stop pacing and sit, would you?"

Bella considered refusing, just to be contrary. She was beginning to find this adult Meda rather irritating, especially since she insisted on treating Bella like a child — side along apparition, bleh. Sure, she was technically younger than Meda's daughter now, but as far as she was concerned Meda was still her baby sister. It was weird, Meda had been ten years old just a handful of hours ago, and now she was suddenly trying to tell Bella what to do (which never did turn out well for anyone). But it had been a rather long day, and she was somewhat tired.

"But Meda, I got lost in time today," she whined instead, flopping onto the sofa and kicking her booted feet up onto the cushions. After throwing back a less-than-modest gulp, she set her butterbeer on an end table, without a coaster, too. Behaving like this would have sent most of the adults she knew up the wall, but Meda just smirked. Perhaps there was hope for her yet, despite her apparent emulation of Auntie Walburga. This room had a decidedly more relaxed atmosphere than any at Grimmauld Place, but Bella hadn't missed how Meda's offices had been distinctly reminiscent of their aunt's favorite parlor, all dark wood and heavy brocades.

"So, you're a time traveller, then?" Tonks said, returning to his armchair. "Any idea when you'll be going back? You're welcome to stay with us as long as you like, of course," he added quickly, glancing toward Meda for approval after the fact, "but I assume you do want to go back." He sounded almost hopeful, saying it — it appeared someone was less than entirely comfortable with the thought of having her around.

But Bella shrugged. She hadn't really been planning to go back. Of course, she'd been planning on going to the past of her own timeline, and disrupting it so thoroughly that the future that produced her would never actually exist. She herself would become what time theorists called a persistent magical anomaly, but Eris had assured her that, with her connection to the Dark to "ground" her, she should be unaffected by the temporal instability which would otherwise result from the paradox.

Since she hadn't managed to go back in time, there was no chance of her destabilizing the past, which meant she had effectively just vanished on her own Meda (and Cissy, Siri and Reggie). Which, on the one hand, stopping to think about it, she did feel rather bad about. Her plan would have likely prevented them from being born in the first place, but abandoning them was something quite else. Taking care of Meda had been her job ever since she could remember, and she had never intended to fail her baby sister like that.

But on the other hand, Meda did just fine taking care of herself when Bella had to go off to school, and in any case she wasn't really sure how she would even begin to try to find her way 'home' from this alternate timeline, anyway. Even if she did try to go back, she'd probably end up in the past of this timeline, which didn't really solve anything anyway.
Time travel was complicated like that.

"Not particularly. I can carry on with my plans here just as well as I would have done in the Nineteen Thirties. Was only ever going to make it up as I went along anyway, so."

Meda gave her a look. "And what plans are those, exactly?"

Bella smirked at her. "Oh, you know. Wreaking havoc and spreading chaos in the name of my Lady."

("Erm—" Tonks started, but Meda whispered, "Don't ask.")

She raised an eyebrow at that little exchange, but went on like she hadn't heard it. "And I might try to do something about the frankly deplorable state you've let the House fall into lately. Track down little Siri and see how he managed to escape from Azkaban. Whatever seems most interesting, really. I haven't quite decided yet where I ought to position myself for the best effect. I don't know enough about the present to say for certain where that would be. Any thoughts?"

The adults' matching expressions of consternation promised an amusing reaction, regardless of what they might think to say to that, but before either of them could answer, they were interrupted by the loud crack of a lazy (or simply inept) apparition.

"Mum? Dad?" a tired voice called.

"We're in the sitting room, hon," Tonks replied, even as Meda reprimanded her daughter: "How many times have I asked you to apparate outside and use the door, Nymphadora?"

"Probably as many times as I've asked you not to call me Nymphadora! Besides, everyone knows doors are for suckers who aren't keyed into the wards!" (Bella smirked — she wasn't wrong.) The girl's voice moved to a different room, and was soon accompanied by the sound of cupboards opening and closing. "Is there any food here? Moody's such a sadist! Penderghast couldn't summon his wand this morning, so he made us practice through lunch. Fucking firsties!"

"No one ever said Auror training would be easy," Tonks answered, a hint of amusement in his tone.

Bella blinked. "Your daughter's an Auror Trainee?"

"She just started the third year of her apprenticeship." Meda was the very picture of a proud mum. And rightly so, it wasn't everyone who could get in with the Aurors straight out of school. "Dora, come in here, please, there's someone I'd like you to meet!"

"Just a— Okay, coming!" A witch who looked to be about fifteen appeared in the doorway a moment later, a hastily constructed sandwich in one hand, an empty plate balanced on the other, and an expression of deepest exhaustion on her face. Her mouth was full — she had obviously misjudged how long it would take for her to walk from the kitchen, or else how long it would take to swallow — and her close-cropped pink hair gave an impression of zero fucks to spare for anyone else's opinion of her.

On seeing Bella, she managed to trip over her own feet and knock over a lamp with her left elbow while trying to save both her dinner and her balance. "Bugger," she muttered. "Sorry, mum. I'll fix it," she added, pulling out her wand to repair the damage, her face glowing red. "Um, hi? I'm Dora. And you must be... Aunt Cassiopeia?"

Tonks was trying very hard not to laugh at the one-woman wrecking crew that was his daughter,
while Meda looked nearly as embarrassed as the girl.

"Cassiopeia?" Bella repeated. "The elf at Ancient House told me she's missing."

"Then, who...?" Nymphadora frowned intensely. "I mean, you've got to be a Black, and that bone structure and those eyes, I would say a young Bellatrix, like Mum's sister? But you're way too young, and well, not in Azkaban. I thought I was the only metamorph in Britain—"

Bella felt her own eyes go wide with surprise. Her niece was a metamorph? She hadn't known that. Metamorphs had once been rather common in House Black — more than they were in most other families, at any rate — but they'd become rarer and rarer as the centuries went by. Cassie had been the first in nearly a hundred years. Mulling it over, Bella couldn't help a narrow-eyed glance over at Meda and this Tonks bloke, squeezed tighter together in that armchair than looked entirely comfortable. She'd had doubts about Meda marrying some no-name muggleborn, but if the Powers had seen fit to make their daughter a metamorph, well, Bella didn't really see how she could say anything against it.

She'd still tease Meda about it, of course, but this was Bella. Anyway, the girl was still talking. "—so Aunt Cassiopeia was a long shot, but there aren't any other Blacks that young, so it's either that or, I don't know, it was really Bellatrix who broke out of prison, not Sirius, and de-aged herself somehow, and is now having drinks with my parents in the middle of Hogsmeade like it's any other Saturday evening. Budge up," she added, nodding pointedly at Bella's feet.

Bella, of course, left them exactly where they were. "Sterling theory, Nymphadora. You should be like, an Auror or something. Best work on those interrogation skills, though. I never said I wasn't Cassie."

"Oh, stop teasing her, Bella," Meda interrupted. Weird, how Meda kept telling her to do things she had to know would never, ever happen. "Nymphadora, you were right, this is my sister Bella, or rather, her time-travelling alter-ego. Bella, this is my daughter, Nymphadora."

"Don't call me Nymphadora," she interjected, scowling at the both of them. It wasn't until after she flopped down onto the couch — directly onto Bella's shins, which honestly was more amusing than anything; she suspected that it was far less comfortable for Nymphadora than herself — that her mother's words registered. "Did you say time travel?"

Tonks nodded. "She did. Drink?"

Nymphadora hesitated. "Well, maybe just one. Moody said we didn't have to come in until eight, but I wouldn't put it past him to ambush me in my bed at five."

Bella smirked. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

The girl sighed. "I wish. He might go easier on me if we were. I mean, probably not, but— Seriously, time travel? That sounds even less likely than Evil Aunt Bellatrix escaping from prison and disguising herself as a twelve-year-old."

"Thirteen," Bella corrected her, "Nymphadora." (The witch in question glared at the sound of her name; Bella smirked.) "And just because it's unlikely doesn't mean it's not true. And, Meda, you've been telling my niece I'm evil? I think I'm hurt."

She couldn't quite muster a proper pout over her smirk, but it hardly mattered: Meda just raised an eyebrow at her. "Your record, or rather, your alter-ego's, speaks for itself."
"Oh? Do tell." She had managed to find some stories about herself in the *Prophet*, of course — it would have been difficult to miss the coverage of her trial, searching for her own name in the Archives — but the details of her exploits in the war in which she had apparently been an integral player were surprisingly scarce.

"Well, there's the Longbottoms, of course," said Tonks, returning with what Bella thought might have been a Cerridwen's Cauldron for his daughter and another absinthe-looking cocktail for himself, but his wife interrupted him.

"Don't indulge her, Ted."

Bella sighed at her. "Fine, be boring. I'll just find out some other way." She was pretty sure she could ask Eris, if it came down to it. "Besides, I already know the highlights. By the way, any idea why I finally killed Cygnus?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop about ten degrees, as Tonks froze and Meda's face became a familiar, impenetrable mask of unfeeling neutrality, the one she had always worn around their parents. After several long seconds, she answered. "He... You made me a promise. He crossed the line."

Tonks moved to her side, again cramming too tightly into that single chair, arm slipping around her waist in a visible show of support.

It barely took a second for Bella to put together what she was talking about. It had only been a year ago.

Cygnus had always restrained himself from going quite that far, before. But when she'd come home from her first year at Hogwarts, he'd apparently had enough of...well, something, anyway.

He'd shown up in her bedroom that first night, hitting her with a body bind before she could even reach for her wand. And she'd been moved to her bed, her robes torn away, before she'd realised what was happening.

Somehow, the knowledge of what sex was supposed to be had only made it worse.

He'd left her there, still trapped by his curse. She knew what he'd wanted her to feel. He'd wanted her to be miserable. He'd wanted her to feel helpless, horrified. He'd wanted her to fear him. He hadn't managed what he wanted.

Instead, Bella had spent those minutes alone imagining how he would scream when she murdered him.

She would make it last.

But then Meda had been there. She'd taken Bella's wand from where it sat on the nightstand — in sight but out of reach — and lifted the curse off of her. And she'd crawled into bed with her, snuggling up against her side.

And Bella had known, then, she couldn't do it. If she killed Cygnus, she'd probably have to leave. She couldn't leave Meda, not here. Even with Cygnus gone, she would need her. But she'd made Meda promise her, that she would tell her.

She remembered what she'd said, when Meda had asked why, the exact words. *Because if that rotten bastard ever does to you what he just did to me, I'll kill him. I'll kill him without even hesitating, because nobody does that to my baby sisters.*
Bella scowled. She knew, without Meda having to say any more than she had, exactly what had happened. Because, when she'd said that, just thirteen months ago, she'd meant every word. "Right, so he was a fucking cunt who deserved everything he got. I hope I made it painful."

Meda's answering grin was positively feral. "Oh, I made sure of it."

"Good."

"Um...guys?" Nymphadora interrupted hesitantly. "You know I'm supposed to be in Auror training, right? You can't just talk about murdering your father in front of me..."

Bella made a dismissive *psh* at her. "Come off it, it was forever ago, and it wasn't even really me." Her niece still had a rather doubtful look on her face. "Also, he raped your mum."

The metamorph's hair went white with shock as she stuttered incoherently. Pity, Bella had almost thought this one might be able to keep up.

"Bellatrix," Tonks said firmly, suddenly holding Meda very close. Bella could see her hands shaking, her eyes tightly closed. It even looked like she was having trouble controlling her breathing. "We don't talk about that."

"That doesn't mean it didn't happen," Bella pointed out, rather confused by the sudden change in atmosphere. Hadn't Meda just been enjoying the memory of Cygnus' well-deserved death?

Of course, this was probably just her again. She was sure whatever Eris had done to her head when she'd first dedicated herself, in addition to immunizing her against the Imperius, also prevented her from reacting like a normal person to this sort of thing. A lot of things, actually. It was more than worth it, she thought, but just because she knew it was her brain being funny didn't mean it wasn't very confusing sometimes.

She really didn't understand people.

Meda muttered something to her husband too quietly for Bella to catch. "Are you sure?" he asked. She nodded. "Alright. You can use the spare bedroom," he added, turning to Bella with a glare. "Dora will show you where it is. We'll talk to you tomorrow. Good night, Dora." And with that, he escorted her sister out of the room.

A heavy silence rose in their wake. Bella heard a shower start, somewhere in the depths of the house.

Meda's daughter was still staring in that general direction, color slowly leaching back into her skin and hair. She'd been rather shaken — clearly, Meda hadn't told her about Cygnus. (Not that Bella was surprised. She didn't think she'd ever told anyone herself, and she'd had it worse than Meda for far longer.) She was pulling herself back to the present moment, but it was taking a little while. Finally she shook her head, turning to give Bella an awkward sort of look. "Sooo..."

"Yes, Nymphadora?"

"I told you not to call me that!" her niece snapped, then admitted, "I dunno. I was trying to think of something to say to change the subject, but... I've got nothing."

People were weird. "Oh. Well, then let's talk about Sirius. Have the Aurors been talking about his escape? Any clue as to where he's likely to go now?"

It was interesting to see the metamorph's reactions reflected in her size and hair color, as well as
her expression. She had been rather frail and tired looking, even before shock had turned her hair white, but this question had her taking on a form reminiscent of her mother: taller and older, her hair growing longer and dark, her face stern. She even grew heavier, her weight pressing Bella's feet deeper into the cushions, though she rose and began to pace almost at once. "Black's escape is the subject of an ongoing investigation, even if I knew anything, I wouldn't be able to talk about it. You should know that."

"But. He's a Black. I'm a Black. You're a Black. Well, kind of. You should be, anyway, if Meda hadn't left the family like an idiot. We'll have to do something about that eventually. But that's not the point. Family comes first, I know she would have taught you that. And besides, he's innocent, at least of the murders and the treason. He was a blood traitor, but I'm willing to overlook that — not like there's a lot of options left for reviving the house. Unless you want to go knock up a few witches for me."

Nymphadora looked rather startled at that, as though she had never considered the option before. "What? No. I may be a metamorph, okay, but I don't do party tricks, and I'm not going to be a bloody stud for the House of Black. I know you're all crazy about the Family, even Mum was, and well, you know how that turned out. But, no."

Bella snorted. "I was pretty much joking, didn't think you'd go for it." It was an obvious joke to make, considering the...contributions the last Black metamorph named Nymphadora had made to the Family. But the Seventeenth Century was a long time ago. If Meda's Nymphadora were willing to give the House a few bastards, she'd take them, but she hadn't thought it likely. Modern sensibilities, and all that. "And anyway, I'm a long way from bringing Meda back into the House, let alone you. Point is, I need Sirius, and he couldn't just sit patiently in Azkaban until I was ready to break him out—"

"Auror!" her niece interrupted. "I am an Auror!"

"In training," she said, rolling her eyes. "Still! You can't just casually talk about committing felonies in front of me! If you actually do anything illegal and they ask me what I know about it, I will be honor-bound to tell them!"

Bella couldn't help but snigger a bit at her glare. "You're kind of adorable, you know. 'I will be honor-bound...' Powers, you're such a Hufflepuff."

The metamorph sank into a body no older than Bella's own, topped with a mess of bright yellow, black-striped hair, glaring down at her over crossed arms. "What's wrong with Hufflepuff?"

"Wait — were you really? I didn't actually think you were."

"Yeah, I was. Dad, too."

"Wait. Meda left the family for a muggleborn Hufflepuff? Mother must have been ecstatic." She grinned, giggling internally at the thought of the explosion that must have ensued when dear old Dru heard the news.

"Hey, no changing the subject! What's wrong with Hufflepuff?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. Just, their whole truth, fairness, upholding the law and external loyalties thing? It's not very House of Black, that's all."

Nymphadora paused for a moment, apparently considering this. "Why do you even care so much about the House of Black?"
The question actually threw Bella for a moment. "I don't understand."

"Well, I mean," her niece elaborated, "It doesn't seem like you liked your family very much and, like it or not, most of them are already dead. Saving the House won't bring them back."

Bella hesitated. In her experience, it was always ridiculously difficult to explain why she did anything to anyone else. She didn't really know why. Her reasons always made perfect sense to her. "It's not about liking the Family. Though you're right, I didn't like most of them, and I wouldn't bring them back if I could. Liking people is kind of a weird concept in general, isn't it? Blacks tend to be more interesting than other people, I'll admit, but that's got nothing to do with reviving the House."

Her niece gave her a very strange look at that, but didn't interrupt with whatever inanity she was thinking.

"'It is the first duty of any scion of the House to ensure its survival,'" she quoted, imitating Arcturus's intonation. "People have been telling me that since before I can remember. I was the heir presumptive for most of my life, you know. Sirius' birth freed me up to do whatever, but until a few years ago... It doesn't matter that you know they're brainwashing you, it still sinks in. And more importantly, you know, I don't really exist at the moment. Not legally. This is one of those situations where it would really be helpful to have the money and power of the House behind me."

Nymphadora's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What would you do, if you had it? The money and power of the Blacks."

Bella shrugged. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to tell the soon-to-be Auror that she would most likely use the Family's influence to destabilize society and spread chaos and discord through all the land (Bwah ha ha ha!). "I'm not really sure," she answered, equally honestly. "I don't know what's been going on yet, politically speaking, but it would be easier to do...anything, really, with money and the family name to draw on. Maybe a place to sleep other than Meda's spare bed. You know, the basics."

Bella had never been very good at legilimency. She was very, very good at occlumency, one of the many advantages of Eris' presence hovering at the back of her mind, but that couldn't help her figure out what her niece was thinking, staring at her intently, saying nothing, her hair still distractingly badger-themed.

With no other obvious recourse, Bella stared back, her thoughts wandering toward bed. It had been a very long day, and she really should have a talk with her Patron before sleeping. Hadn't she said something about shedding some light on the decisions of Other Bellatrix?

Eventually, Nymphadora broke her silence. "And you're sure he's innocent? How do you know?"

Well, Bella hadn't expected that. "A house elf told me."

"A house elf."

"I showed up at Ancient House, and while I was there, I questioned the elf about the state of the House. She told me that Sirius was innocent. I believe her. You know they can't lie to their masters."

Nymphadora rolled her eyes. "No, but they can be mistaken, and house elves are more likely than most witnesses to have a blind spot for their families."

Bella let out a humorless chuckle. "Not in this case. Look, has Meda told you about the
Covenant?"

"The Covenant?"

"Guess not. Not relevant, since you're not really a Black, I guess. Okay, mini family history lesson. Back about five hundred years ago, the House of Black nearly died out. Onyx and Mela, who were twins and the only Blacks left at that point, dedicated the House to the Dark Powers in perpetuity in exchange for power and the continuation of the Family. The Powers agreed, Onyx and Mela had a bunch of incest babies, most of them went insane and killed a bunch of people including themselves and their kids in really creative ways, but eventually the ones that didn't lose their minds or their lives managed to get enough new blood into the House to revive it, regain all the power they had once had and more, blah blah blah. Point is, it was a fundamental part of the Family Magics that as long as the House of Black served the Dark, the House would never fall."

Her niece looked skeptical. Probably didn't really believe in the Powers. There were a lot of people, Bella had found, who said they believed, even superficially called on them, or attended the holiday rituals, but didn't really mean it.

"Okay, say I believe that. What does it have to do with Black?"

"Powers, Nymphadora," she said with a teasing glare, "impatient much? I'm getting there! According to the elf, Sirius broke the Covenant. Blacks are born dedicated to the Dark. He re-dedicated himself to the Light, shattered the foundation of the Family Magic. Trust me, there's no soft spot for him with the elves of Black. But that's kinda irrelevant. There's no way he'd have betrayed the Light for the Dark after that."

"He could have done. There's a difference between magical polarization and politics." Still skeptical, but Bella could see she was wavering, or rather, hear it in her tone.

"There is, but. Okay, I can tell you're not aligned yourself, so I'm guessing you don't know much about dedication rituals. I mean, they're kinda personal, or else family things, so."

Her niece shook her head. "But how can you tell I'm not aligned?"

"Are you telling me you can't tell I'm dark?"

"Well, no, but I learned how to tell from the Aurors."

Bella frowned. Thinking back on it, she supposed that had been one of the things Uncle Orion had taught her, long before school. Had Meda not thought to teach her daughter? Or had she not done so for some specific reason?

"Um, no, learning to recognize the polarization of someone's aura is one of the most basic magic-sensing exercises. I learned when I was, what, four? But that's not the point. Dedicating yourself to the Dark or the Light is... It's about your principles, as much as your magic. It's not just your magic that's aligned, it's you, everything you are. There's a reason shithead Light politicians argue that Dark wizards are inherently bad people: we're more selfish and more controlling, less predictable and sociable. Which aren't necessarily bad traits, and it's not like, deterministic anyway. There's still choice, maybe more for the Dark than the Light. Light-aligned wizards aren't generally keen on disrupting the status quo."

"But Sirius very explicitly rejected those parts of himself. He wouldn't have betrayed his friends after that. And, I don't really know much about the Dark Lord and that whole movement, but I wouldn't think he'd be the sort of recruit they were looking for after that. He would hardly have
been able to cast truly dark magic, for one thing, and there would be no political advantage in recruiting a blood traitor to the Blacks."

Bella wasn't sure which point did it, but Nymphadora finally caved: "They say he's headed to Hogwarts. Sirius. That's all I know, you didn't hear it from me, and if you say you did, I'll deny it. But yeah, Hogwarts is your best bet if you really want to find him. You'll have to beat the dementors to him, though. They've granted Emergency Powers to Fudge, that's the Minister, and he's been making noise about letting them loose to recapture him."

"Oh." Bella couldn't really think of anything else to say about dementors. She had never seen one in person, but she couldn't imagine their powers would have much effect on her. Feeling things generally didn't. The same certainly wasn't true of Sirius, though, and there was that whole Kiss thing to worry about. A Lord Black with his soul sucked out was worse than no Lord Black at all. "Why Hogwarts?"

The metamorph groaned, aging herself back up a bit. "Fuck if I know. That's just what I heard."

Huh. Well, Bella supposed that made her next step relatively clear. "Guess I'm going back to school, then." On the one hand, this was fairly disappointing. Hogwarts generally had been, since she'd been well ahead of her peers (and even some of the OWL students) from the beginning — there were advantages to having a god hanging out in the back of her head, not to mention pre-Hogwarts access to the Black Library — and the most interesting person in her class certainly wouldn't be there anymore. But on the other, access to the Hogwarts library and professors could only help to address the question of how her world and this one differed, and why. (Dumbledore, she had read, was now the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, as well as the Headmaster? How the fuck had that happened?)

Plus it would give her a place to be other than here. She wasn't great at interpreting other people's reactions to her, but she was fairly certain she had already worn out her welcome with Tonks. Oops.

Nymphadora put on an exaggeratedly skeptical expression. Bella wondered if she'd had to morph her face to do that, it seemed like a bit much. "And how, exactly, are you going to do that? It's not exactly easy to get a transfer in to Hogwarts, especially when you don't technically exist."

Bella shrugged, yawning for effect. "I'll figure it out tomorrow. Your father said something about a spare bed?"

"You mean my bed? I wasn't planning on going back to my flat tonight," the so-called adult groused.

"All the better to avoid being 'ambushed,'" Bella suggested with a smirk.

Nymphadora rolled her eyes. "Well, yeah. But really, the fucking sadist's just been keeping me so busy I haven't got to the shops in ages. I've half a spoilt grapefruit in the fridge, and nothing else."

While Bella would normally take full advantage of that admission to tease her niece about her failures as a competent adult, she felt there was a more pressing concern: "Where am I supposed to sleep, then?"

"Haven't you ever slept on a sofa before?"

Bella gave her niece her best 'you must be joking' look. Did she honestly think Bella ever had slept on a sofa? She could almost understand not having an elf to do the shopping and make regular
meals. Andromeda didn't seem to have one, and Bella herself had avoided interacting with the elves of Black for years, there were reasons not to want them around. Privacy, for one, but mostly because they were annoying. But she couldn't quite imagine not having enough beds for everyone. She was fairly certain she had never stayed anywhere with fewer than eight bedrooms. If there were too many cousins over, for a holiday or the like, they simply shared, they didn't start relegating children to parlors. "Of course I've never slept on a bloody sofa. Why would anyone?"

Of course, the idea of sleeping on a sofa was somewhat appealing, given that sofas were most decidedly not for sleeping upon, and this one wasn't terribly uncomfortable, so far as sofas went, but it certainly wasn't as comfortable as a bed. Too lumpy. Besides, unless Meda had changed drastically in the past thirty years — which wasn't outside the realm of possibility, seeing as she had married a muggleborn and did live in a tiny house with no elf to keep it for her — she would have a conniption if she found out a guest had been left to sleep in the sitting room, rather than in a proper bedroom. Even if that guest was only Bella.

Nymphadora gave her a look of complete incomprehension before apparently realizing this. "Ugh, fine, you can share with me, come on."

Bella shrugged. "If you don't want to, we don't have to. I can sleep here."

She didn't hate the idea of sleeping next to Nymphadora. It was somewhat novel, the idea of prolonged physical contact with another person. Meda had stopped being all snuggly and cuddly years ago (with a few particular exceptions). There was Zee, of course — Bella still wasn't sure what to think about that (not that it mattered now). But she didn't want to force herself on her niece if she was genuinely unwelcome.

"No, it's fine. I can't promise I won't change sizes and steal all the covers in my sleep, though."

Bella sniggered. "I can't believe you're supposed to be an adult. Bed, then?"

Nymphadora glared at her, but hopped off the couch, motioning for her to follow. "I'll have you know I'm a highly successful, very competent adult! I can't be held responsible for what this," she gestured at her body, "does when I'm unconscious!"

Any impression that she had full control over herself when she was awake was immediately undermined as she wheeled around to move toward the door, apparently forgetting about the coffee table she had been pacing around for the past twenty minutes. In the space of a second, the same lamp she had already repaired once was in pieces again, and the table it had been sitting on looked like so much firewood. "Shit!" she yelped, from the floor, examining the damage and a spectacular bruise on her left shin. "What did I do with my wand?"

A moment later, however, when the wand came flying through the air from the wreckage of the table, Bella was forced to admit that, all clumsiness and inability to feed herself aside, her niece apparently had a lot of control when it came to magic. But, well, metamorph — she was nearly as much of a cheater as Bella herself was. The bruise, for example, she simply morphed away, healed in a second without a single spell.

"You saw nothing," she said with a fake glare, hauling herself to her feet, carefully repairing the furnishings and levitating them back into place.

Despite herself, Bella couldn't help smiling to herself a little. Not even a smirk either, but a legitimate, almost pleasant smile. Weird. "Nope, nothing. Let's go to bed, before anything else mysteriously and spontaneously shatters in your general vicinity."
"Brat."

Liking people was still a weird concept, though.

It took maybe two seconds for Bella to realize she was dreaming, reliving one of her own less pleasant memories. It took another five for her to realize this wasn't the familiar nightmare.

After all, if Eris had shown up at Bella's fifth birthday party, she was pretty sure somebody would have noticed.

It was more than a little surreal. She was in a half-familiar parlor at Ancient House, surrounded by a couple dozen children around her age, laughing along with most of them at Yaxley. Ponce seemed to have gotten cake smeared all over his face. There did seem to be quite a bit of frosting on Bella's fingers, so she'd probably had something to do with that. She didn't remember this happening, she didn't know why she'd done it, but she didn't think she'd ever met a Yaxley who wasn't a smug little shit — she was sure he'd had it coming.

Her body was moving, talking on its own, she could feel another set of feelings, another set of thoughts, at an odd sort of remove from her. Fuzzy, indistinct, but there. That had to be her memory of...her own mind, which was...weird. But okay. It was odd, observing her five-year-old self from within, but it was far from the oddest thing she'd done.

And there was Eris, standing right there between Nott and Selwyn, laughing at Yaxley with the rest of them. She certainly hadn't actually been there. She looked as she always presented herself to Bella, aged down to match the children. Her short, bright blue hair, set in spikes angled all over the place in a mess, the glimmering piercings through her eyebrow, her lip, multiple places in her ears, the heavy khol about her eyes such an intense black her sclera seemed almost painfully bright, all of it seemed far more strange with her looking like a five-year-old girl than it normally did. Almost obscene. (Not that Bella had a problem with obscenity.) Her eyes all but danced with shifting shadows — though, as always, they couldn't seem to decide what color they should be, glance away and it changed, brown, hazel, violet, red, green, and back again — too-sharp teeth glinting in a wicked, too-wide grin.

Not for the first time, Bella wondered if Eris had anything to do with the existence of metamorphs.

Shifting eyes flicked toward hers, grin tilting into a teasing smirk. "Now now, you know better than that. That would be telling."

Bella tried to pout, but her lips weren't obeying her, too busy saying something to someone she wasn't really paying attention to. Doesn't really matter, I suppose. Just curious.

What are we doing here, anyway? She'd rather not stay here, if she could help it. Her fifth birthday had been... Bad, it had been bad.

"We won't be staying that long." The parlor around her shifted, blurred. The memory-Bella was moving, faster than should be possible, as though time were sliding by far faster than usual. But no matter how their surroundings changed, Eris stayed in the same place relative to her, a few feet ahead, slightly to the side. "I believe you wished to know what happened to you in this timeline."

Oh. So this wasn't her memory of her fifth birthday party — it was the other Bella's. Interesting. It looked virtually the same. She remembered this part, even. She'd caught a glimpse of Abraxas Malfroy, walking down the hall with Cygnus. (For some reason she'd forgotten since, she knew she used to like Abraxas.) She'd scrambled after them, backtracking in this timeline to wipe the frosting
off her fingers at the last second. They'd been at the hearth by the time Bella had caught up, and she'd—

Bella was dumbfounded enough she hardly noticed her past self run up to hug Abraxas, spouting off nonsense rapidfire, offering cake and begging for presents. (Powers, she'd been an annoying little kid.) Because Abraxas and Cygnus weren't alone.

*What the fuck is Professor Riddle doing at my fifth birthday party?*

Eris just stared at her, the usual grin notably absent.

The other Bella shut up long enough for Abraxas, not even bothering to hide his amusement, to make introductions. "Bella, meet Mister Thom. Thom, this wild little heathen is—"

*...What?*

"No, seriously, what?! Mister Tom? Like the Mister Tom who became the Dark Lord Mister Tom?"

Eris smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. Gazing at the memory of Riddle — tall and thin, blue eyes somehow darker and hair rather neater than Bella had ever seen on him — her smile was hard, sharp, deadly. Her voice light, yet at once oppressive, she said, "The very same."

But... But that was *Professor Riddle*. Sure, he was a bit more pale than she remembered him being, and he looked...cleaner, she would say, as though he'd put rather more effort into putting himself together. Fine robes sitting just so, hair cut even and held firmly in place, even his expression tight and controlled. That, just... He was *definitely* her antisocial swot of a Defense Professor, but at the same time...

"Always trust your instincts, little bellatrice. In your timeline, Tom Riddle became an underappreciated magical researcher and Professor of Defense at Hogwarts. In this timeline, he became the Dark Lord Voldemort. They are the same person."

That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! Really, Riddle? I would have believed anyone, anyone, before Riddle! I just... I can't picture it. I just can't.

She was so distracted by the thought of a Dark Lord Riddle she almost missed it entirely.

It was subtle. The little Bella's thoughts were an energetic jumble, a mix of curiosity and excitement and far too much sugar for a young lady. She was talking to Professor Riddle, who was *apparently* the bloody *Dark Lord*, when...

It was hard to describe, exactly. If she weren't inside the other Bella's mind, she might not have noticed. A light touch of magic, so weak it might almost not be there at all. And the other Bella's thoughts changed, bending ever so slightly, shifting themselves into alignment with the foreign magic, focusing on him. So subtle, barely there, but...

If she was reading this right — which admittedly she might not be, it had been years since her own mind had been this noisy — little Bella found him interesting. That's all he had done. But the effect lingered, and her own subconscious thoughts grew around it, wanting his attention, wanting him to want to see her again. Little Bella, the one under his spell, wanted to make a good impression, which Bella herself could honestly say was not a thing she had ever given two shits about before. The five-year-old modified her behavior at once, instantly becoming more subdued.

*If that was intentional, it was masterfully done.*
"Tom Riddle always did have a gift for compulsion," Eris admitted, her tone heavy with disgust. Bella wasn't surprised — compulsions, bindings, oaths, any such magic that limited a person's freedom, a person's choices, these stood in direct opposition to everything the Chaotic Power was. It was only right her Lady should hate them.

Not that she always agreed. You have to admit, I was an irritating kid. She honestly wasn't sure how long she could have spent with her younger self without wanting to hex her. Even just sitting here in her head was exhausting.

Eris glared at her, eyes gone dark. "Do you know, little bellatrice, why it is so very illegal to use mind altering magics on young children?"

In point of fact, she didn't. She had actually forgotten about that law. She knew it had been covered in her lessons on the Unforgivable Acts, but it wasn't as though she was going to go around casually controlling kids' minds, so she had hardly given it a second thought.

Eris sniffed disapprovingly. "You will see. Now, unless you've changed your mind and want to see the next part again, I suggest we move on."

Bella shuddered slightly. No. She didn't need to relive that particular memory.

But wait, if Abraxas didn't take the cake, why the hell did Cygnus Imperius me? She distinctly recalled that it was supposedly a punishment for acting like a House Elf, running around serving guests herself.

"Apparently seeing you behave properly for someone other than himself was just as 'legitimate' an excuse as your acting like a servant for someone other than himself. Now, hold onto your knickers, ducky."

The scene shifted suddenly, with a dizzying feeling of expanding that Bella had felt only once before. It was somewhat similar to free-fall, but more exhilarating, dropping into the vastness of everything without the safety net of a broom to catch her.

This was what it felt like to be Eris: It was big. Overwhelmingly so. Everything. It wasn't infinite, but the scale of Eris' experience, even just her moment-to-moment existence, was so vast in comparison to Bella and her limited, so very mortal soul, that it might as well have been. Things, events, existed in more dimensions than Bella could process, linked to one another by...she wasn't really sure. Her only point of reference was the suspicion that her goddess moved through time in the same direction as mortals, but there was something weird about the pacing of it, or else her perception of it.

Humans weren't really meant to try to comprehend godhood. She had had a migraine for a week on the one occasion she had dared to ask what it was like in the mind of Chaos. By unspoken agreement, they had never attempted to replicate that particular experiment.

As best Bella could tell — mostly in hindsight, she was in no state to try to analyze anything here — her patron was pulled in many different directions simultaneously, in all of those dimensions Bella couldn't quite grasp, toward confluences of events and people that she held some affinity for. Chaos, strife, war. Social collapse. And the people who could effect them, of course. Her strength lay in them, in their actions, and she could influence them somewhat on the mortal plane, or so Bella thought, she wasn't really sure. Eris perceived this multiplicity of events as equally present and relevant, watching and acting in ways which felt independent to Bella, who could only focus on one at a time, though Eris insisted that she was only one entity, regardless of universe and timeline.
Last time, on her tenth birthday, she had spent hours trying to wrap her mind around Eris's. (Attempting the impossible.) This time, the field of perception narrowed swiftly, Eris limiting Bella's access to something akin to human scale. There was still the sense of vast potential hovering just beyond Bella's...not sight, she didn't seem to have a body here, or eyes, or any sort of senses with which she was familiar, really. Just magic, and the instinctive attempt to translate the unknowable into something she could make sense of on a more rational level, like a metaphor. Everything that Eris was, was still there, but beyond her reach, anyway. She was still intangible, existing in the void-like space the goddess inhabited outside the mortal plane, but instead of being overwhelmed by hundreds of thousands of places and times and interactions and choices, there was only one.

One small, miserable, hope-filled soul, calling out to magic and beyond with will and pain and above all potential, resonating with Eris like a bell struck in the darkness. Hers, or at least, she would be.

"Please," the voice called, "Please, magic, Dark Powers, hear me. Help me. Give me the strength I need — save me from my father, and help me save my sister. I need this. I'll do anything. Please."

Eris drew closer, extending herself somewhat into the mortal plane, to watch alongside the other Powers whose attention the girl — Bella, another younger version of herself, attempting her first ever piece of ritual magic — had drawn. She joined in their collective as they spoke, manifesting and recognizing the child, offering her the Choice.

"Little warrior princess of the darkest House," they said, the words not quite entirely physical. The young Bella gasped, a hand rising involuntarily to her head at the intrusion of their magic. "Would you swear your soul, your magic, and your life in service to a single power?"

Her soul answered before she said it aloud. "Yes." She was theirs. She had always been theirs. There was no universe where she would not swear herself to them.

The old agreement, terms dictated by her blood, her humanity for their power, they offered it. They could tell that she knew not whereof she spoke when she agreed, but anything was anything, and that she had promised.

Eris' interest reached a sharp, nearly painful peak as they asked the final question — a formality. It was clear her soul was a reflection of Eris' own, and knowing so little as she did, that would determine her specific loyalty. The other Powers began to recede as they projected themselves onto the world, nearly physical in the same way they had nearly spoken. "In whose name would you serve?" they asked. She asked. It was mostly Eris, now, Bella thought, or at least mostly Chaos. They weren't actually interchangeable. Eris was different from Loki and Coyote and Apep, though they were all aspects of Chaos.

"What aspect of the Dark would you serve, child?" they elaborated when she hesitated, uncertain. "What Power? What goddess? To whom would you dedicate yourself in return for the power that you seek?"

"I get to choose?"

There was something heart-wrenching about that question, even for Eris, who didn't truly have a heart. Even for Bella, who had lived this, who already knew the life this younger version of herself had lived. There wasn't much choice in that life. Just this. Just the stubborn refusal to bow to Cygnus' demands and the expectations of Society. Just taking care of Meda, and she wasn't even sure how much of that had been a choice.
That was it. Permission, or something like it, for the gods to choose amongst themselves, whom she would serve. Bella was somewhat surprised to realize how closely she had come to being a dedicate of Eshu, as he argued (if a wordless contest of strength of similarity and resonance could be called "arguing") that her facility with languages and her desire to protect her sister placed the young Bella closer to him. But at seven, Bella had known nothing of the Yoruba Orisha — in truth, the only one she was even passingly familiar with now was Eshu himself — and she knew nothing of the maturity he favored in his Chosen. Eris won out and the others withdrew, their once-shared form shimmering into a shape entirely foreign to the young supplicant, but not unpleasant.

Fully present, she spoke, carefully (physically), in English stolen from the mind of the child herself. "It has been a long time since a child of the House of Black has made the Choice to declare herself a Black Mage...and longer still since anyone has managed to come so close without knowing. You are an oddity, my little bellatrice...brilliant and strong and full of potential, but so very ignorant...in some ways very much a child, and innocent to the ways of the world, but in others...not. Your soul is called to Chaos, and your heart is full of trouble and spite. You would serve me well, I think, if you are as willing as you seem."

They were the same words Eris had spoken to Bella when she made her own declaration. In fact, she was not entirely certain that this was not her, but Other Bella of the birthday party and the Dark Lord's army. But that would make far more sense than Eris suddenly deciding to show her a memory of her own past. Not that it wasn't interesting to see the experience from Eris' point of view, but.

"Might I know my Lady's name?" seven-year-old Bella asked, clearly frightened, but utterly determined to continue.

"They call me Eris, little priestess." She kissed the top of Bella's head, almost maternally, then led her through the ritual phrase to finalize the dedication.

"I offer myself to the Chaotic Power, in the Aspect of Eris. Twice and thrice sworn before the eyes of the Powers of Darkness and the spirits of my ancestors, I dedicate myself. So mote it be."

Eris was pleased, more so than Bella had ever felt before. That, too, was probably the same as her own dedication, she supposed, but she hadn't had the same connection to the goddess then. That had come later, after: "Good girl. Brace yourself."

Bella remembered this part as being unbearably painful, her soul burning and breaking and reshaping to accept Eris into her mind. She had done her best to maintain her willingness, telling herself over and over that this was good, she needed this, but she had certainly lost consciousness at some point, passing out from the pain and waking up in Eris's arms after it was done.

Eris remembered it somewhat differently. She was still staring into the young Bella's eyes, still holding her in place with a single finger beneath her chin. She thrust herself into Bella's mind like a human legilimens, tearing through her like a forest fire, consuming all the softness of her and leaving ashes in her wake. Empathy vanished, along with the vast majority of her capacity for emotional response as the goddess stripped her humanity, leaving only those parts of her being that reflected the attitude of the Powers, in the world but not of it, and Eris herself. There was amusement and anger still, and a sharp, self-destructive joy, but fear was gone, along with sadness and anything approaching remorse. She left Bella's affection for Meda (and the Family in the abstract, by extension) untouched, since she was half the reason Bella had made her Choice in the first place, but all other traces of love, all other loyalties were stripped from her.
Except one.

What **is** that? Bella asked, as Eris encountered a... The image that came to mind was a knot, as in a piece of wood, a scar in the regular development of her mind, a twisted, warped area of thoughts and feelings, diffuse and subtle, but deeply rooted.

That, the disembodied, present-tense Eris answered, even as past Eris continued to probe at the thing. *Is Tom fucking Riddle. His compulsions, twisting your mind, your growth, around him.*

She could feel past-Eris's consternation. Disgust. Rage. For a moment it almost seemed as though she would rip this thing out, burn it with the rest of Bella's more human impulses. But she hesitated, following the chain of compulsions and the connections to other thoughts and memories too quickly for Bella to register, let alone comprehend. And then, fury roiling off of her, she moved on, creating a place for herself, an irreversible bond between the two of them.

*His corruption was too deeply rooted in your mind to remove it, or even undermine it, without damaging your fundamental sense of self,* Eris explained. *Your personality had built itself upon certain beliefs and assumptions he had placed: You find Mr. Tom interesting. You like him. You want to please him. You trust him.* He built them up, adding one after the next, every time you encountered him for the two years between your first meeting and this. You were already very much his by this point, though you would not have said so at the time. So much you had learned with the underlying thought of impressing him, so much you had done and practiced with the thought in mind of whether he would approve, what he might do in such a situation. I had to leave it, or else risk destroying your memories and your personality entirely.

Bella would have nodded, if she'd had a head. 'Projected a sense of understanding and acceptance' was probably more accurate. She didn't like what she was seeing either, those twisted thoughts so obviously wrong in a mind so very similar to her own. She still wasn't sure she understood the full implications of it, though. She had obviously still been herself. She had still dedicated herself to Eris, still prioritized Meda and her own safety over everything else. And it probably wasn't objectively a bad thing if she had worked harder in her lessons because she had some sort of compulsion-induced crush on not- Professor Riddle.

If Eris had been visibly present, she would have glowered. Bella could feel her disapproval humming through her. *One more memory, then. Something later... Oooh, perfect.*

Bella was dropped into the mind of her older self, this time as she materialized out of an apparition, her arm tucked into Professor Riddle's.

She could feel the heat of his body through his robes, the swish of her own heavy dress around her ankles as they appeared, smell the perfume of his cologne and beneath that, a dry, almost reptilian scent that was all his own (at least, it felt familiar to Other Bella). They were on a mountain in a grove of trees, their branches nearly blotting out the stars, which were the only source of light. There was a muggle girl lying in the center of a small clearing, bound hand and foot, tears in her eyes. The details were difficult to make out, but Other Bella's eyes quickly adjusted, showing that the girl bore a clear resemblance to herself.

She turned to look up at the not-professor, raising an eyebrow at him in a silent question. Bella was somewhat startled to see the transformation he had undergone since she had first seen him in this timeline. It was still recognizably the same person, but only just. His cheekbones, always one of his most striking features, now dominated his face, so angular he looked almost emaciated. His skin was inhumanly pale, almost glowing in the darkness, and his eyes actually were glowing, as though dim lamps shuttered with red filters set inside his skull. The effect reminded her of a lizard, or some kind of snake, maybe.
Okay, now I can imagine him going full Dark Lord, she thought at Eris.

"This is not the time for levity," her patron chided, manifesting her blue-haired avatar, features contorted in hatred and disgust as she looked upon the pair of them, the not-professor and his...apprentice, she supposed. (It felt wrong even to think it.) "Look! Just look at what he's done to her!"

After a brief moment of confusion — this legilimency thing was harder than it looked, especially second-hand, in a bloody memory — Bella turned inward to examine the mind of her memory-host.

It was obvious, what Eris wanted her to see. It was the first thing she noticed, after fighting past the superficial sensations of apparition sickness and the idea that, as much as she hated the sensation of side-alonging, she apparently didn't hate it when he did it.

The knot she had seen in her seven-year-old counterpart's mind, the corruption of her thoughts leading her to a childish crush on the wizard at her side and a desire to impress him so deep that even Eris hadn't dared destroy it, it had spread. Like a Strangling Kudzu left to its own devices, choking the life out of every tree and creature in its path. There was hardly a part of her mind unaffected, now. She couldn't even identify this Bella's connection to Eris at first, buried as it was behind a thick web of obfuscations. Could they even speak, this Bella and her goddess? How had she allowed this to happen?

"No, I can't speak to her," Eris ground out, every syllable filled with rage, directed toward the man who had dared do this to her dedicate. "And as for why I allowed her to continue to associate with him, you know the answer."

She did. There was really only one reason Eris did anything, ultimately. For chaos. If she had allowed this Bella to become the apprentice of this Dark Lord Riddle, it must have been because she sensed greater opportunities for chaos to ensue should they follow that path.

Is— Was it worth it? she asked, disgusted. Did I, she, at least make a difference in your name?

"It...was. Though she made her mark in his name, rather than mine. Chaos is chaos and that 'civil war' you read so much about would never have grown as it did without her influence on him. It was the best I could have hoped for, with his teeth sunk into her before she called to me. It gets worse from here, though," she added, her own teeth clenched. "Watch."

Bella had lost track of external events, poking about in the mind of the memory. When she turned her attention to the other Bella's actions again, she was...

Is she... Is that an oath of fealty?!

"It is," Eris hissed.

Betrayal. So wrong. Hadn't Bella just been thinking that she had but one Lord, her Lady, to whom her loyalty was absolute? She understood, now, what the house elf had meant, but she still couldn't quite believe it, even as she heard herself speaking: "As my Lord does fulfil our agreement, I am submitted to him, and so choose his will in all things. Twice and thrice-bound, this I swear, before magic, my Patron and my Master."

Eris made an inarticulate sound of rage. "She called me as a witness! Me! Insult upon injury! That little...!"

Bella didn't like seeing her Lady angry at herself, even another version of herself. Maybe she
thought that was the most respectful thing to do, making you a part of it.

Her goddess made a visible effort to control herself. "I am not angry with you, my bellatrice. It's him. He has stolen, usurped my dedicate — watch!"

Bella's body was moving, now, toward the girl, still lying bound and crying in the dirt. She was vaguely aware that Riddle had said something like "prove your worth" which wasn't entirely outside the script of the oath of fealty, but asking her to kill a muggle girl in cold blood was... It was kind of a lame challenge, really. After all, she was already all tied up and helpless. Not to mention she didn't really know what "worth" this was supposed to prove. Her willingness to do whatever he told her to, maybe? But what the fuck was his deal with muggles? She had noticed how his people had targeted them, reading about his war, but...

She was rather suddenly and comprehensively distracted as the older, memory Bella straddled the girl, locking her fingers around her neck and squeezing. The body bucked wildly beneath her, pulse pounding at her fingers more frantically with every passing second. It was... well, to be honest, it was strangely arousing, though she probably wouldn't admit that to anyone but Eris, and maybe Zee. The body's limbs wrenched at the ropes, trying to escape, but she rode it out, or rather, memory-Bella rode it out, while Bella rode her, until at last the girl stilled, death settling upon her flesh like dew on the grass beside them.

Memory-Bella giggled, reveling in the rush of exhilaration which apparently came from taking a life — Bella herself hadn't ever killed anyone, she didn't know — and thinking to herself that maybe there is something to be said for the hands-on approach.

If Bella had eyes at the moment, she'd be rolling them. Is she in the habit of making awful puns now? I don't know if I can take that, on top of everything else.

Eris didn't bother responding to that one.

"I present unto my Lord this sacrifice," Other Bella said aloud, "as proof of the virtue of my service."

"I accept the proof of your resolve," Riddle answered, smirking as though he knew exactly how...disturbing she had found that whole exercise. "Kneel to receive my Mark."

It almost felt like Eris changing her, this 'marking' — painful on a level that most people were never even aware existed, let alone considered making alterations to. His magic sunk its hooks deep into her own, altering her fundamental identity, putting a stamp on her very soul that said mine, building his own connection between her magic and his which would only be severed by death or the breaking of their vows, as surely as if they were wed. She could feel it settling within memory-Bella, her alter ego refusing the negative associations of the pain of it, reveling in the sensation of him, being so close, being part of her, making her part of himself.

Bella felt sick. This was wrong. This was even more wrong than the vow of fealty. This was... Something clicked. This was because of what he had done to her mind. If he hadn't made her into...that, she never would have forsaken the loyalty owed to her Patron, never. This— This wasn't her. She, this other Bella, might as well be his puppet, an extension of his will even before she offered him the soul that was not hers to give.

"Yes," Eris hissed. "Now you understand. This is the reason it is so very wrong to do what he did to you. To her. You hate the Imperius, little bellatrice, because it forces you to want what someone else wants for you. But the Imperius you can recognize, fight. Compulsions, too, you might recognize, now, even without my influence, and ignore by an exercise of your own will."
"But when a child is compelled, especially if they are unaware, their thoughts and feelings, their entire personality can grow up around the compulsions, the very shape of their mind twisted and groomed into a shape determined by another. Far more insidious than the Imperius, far more permanent. It cannot be fought or even felt by the victim, who believes their choices to be their own, not recognizing limitations on their perception and reality. It is the vilest of the so-called Unforgivable Acts invented by you mortals, to take away all agency, entirely without the victim's knowledge, to force them to act in service to their shaper's design."

She finally got it. What he had done to her. Her alternate self. Whatever. She got it.

And she was furious. But she couldn't grit her teeth, she couldn't clench her fists, they were too far away from her. Instead it just hurt, a weight of rage overwhelming her.

He made me want whatever he wanted, and did it so subtly I never even realized...

"Yes."

Made me swear loyalty and fealty to him, until death and beyond, of my own free bloody will, if that's even fucking possible.

"Yes."

He used me, made me his creature, his fucking slave, and I thought it was all my own fucking idea.

"Yes."

If this were the present moment, if Bella were actually in control, she'd be smearing the bloody remains of his corpse across half the mountainside about now. But she couldn't. She couldn't fucking move, and she had to, needed to do something. To sit here watching, helplessly, feeling herself gasping, looking up at him adoringly, saying, "Thank you — thank you, Master. Thank you, my Lord," it was agony.

Every fiber of her being revolted against it. She could not, would not —

She jerked herself out of the memory, out of the dream, and found herself sitting bolt upright, the rising sun painting streaks of light on the far wall of the Tonkses' spare bedroom, panting as though she had been running or fighting for hours.

"Alright there, Trixie?"

Nymphadora. She was awake, and herself. Relief flooded through her, and she allowed herself to flop back onto the pillows. "Fine. I'm fine."

Trixie, though? Only Zee was allowed to call her that.

"Nymphadora," she added in retaliation.

She ignored whatever her niece said next in favor of sending a pleading thought to Eris. Please tell me you can fix her — fix that.

Her goddess hesitated. It's worse now than it was then, it's been twenty years since then and... I'll try, my little bellatrice, but...

She knew the unspoken thought there: If Eris hadn't been able to safely risk removing even the tiny knot of those very first compulsions, how could she even begin to reverse the mess Riddle had
made of her other self's mind?

I don't care, Eris. Just do it. Whatever you have to do. It's— If it were me, I'd die before I'd want to live like that. If she were in her right mind, she'd want you to do whatever you had to to free her, trust me.

Eris wasn't what Bella would consider highly prone to displays of affection, even for Bella, but she manifested herself at that to pull her into a hug — her presence perceivable only to her dedicate, of course, Nymphadora wouldn't see a thing. But to Bella, she was as real as anything, solid and warm as a person might be, but her presence so much more intense, unadulterated Darkness as ice tingling at her skin, wind tickling at her hair. Strange, perhaps, but not unpleasant. In fact, with each second she sat in her patron's arms, the agonizing rage gradually faded away. Assuring her without words that she had never been violated by Riddle. She had never turned away from her Lady in favor of some false Lord, betraying everything she knew herself to be for him.

Whatever she might have just vicariously experienced, she was still herself.

"I'll fix her," Eris whispered, her tone as full of smoke and mischief as ever, her words even more reassuring than her presence. "It will take time, my little bellatrice, but I'll fix her."

"Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Hogwarts." Bella took a slow sip of her tea, eyeing Meda as she fixed herself breakfast.

Watching Meda cook was sort of peculiar. Watching anyone cook was peculiar, really — anyone human, anyway, she'd only ever seen elves do it before. Bella wouldn't have any idea how she hadn't even known how to use the stove before watching Meda do it. She'd nearly called Cherri to fix her tea before deciding she could just boil the water magically, not hard. It was absurd, really, seeing her sister, a daughter of the House of Black, frying away like a...like a...

Well, like a commoner, she guessed. It was weird.

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she said, "I'm told Sirius will be at Hogwarts. Don't ask me why, apparently there's something or someone there he wants." Come to think of it, since Sirius was innocent, he might be attempting to get himself a moment alone with the Chief Warlock, to plead his case. That was almost even rational. That possibility hadn't occurred to Bella until just now — she still found the fact Dumbledore was Chief Warlock very, very strange. "So, the best way to find him before someone less friendly does would be to place myself at Hogwarts. The most convenient way to do that would be to pose as a third-year student."

Meda turned to look at Bella over her shoulder, temporarily ignoring her sizzling breakfast. She stared at her for a moment, a rather odd look about her. If Bella had to guess, Meda had put together Nymphadora had leaked Auror intelligence to her, and wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Either that, or she was stuck on Bella referring to herself as "friendly" — she had to admit, that was sort of funny.

But what she said was, "Bella, dear, you are a third-year Hogwarts student."

Bella brushed that off with a dismissive flick of her fingers. Calling her a Hogwarts student implied she'd ever actually learned anything there. She'd only ever gone because it was expected of her, and nobody expected anything of people who (technically) didn't exist. It would be more accurate to say she was a part-time Hogwarts resident, that she had reason to reside there again this season.

"The point is, I can't exactly turn up as Bellatrix Black now, can I?"
"No, I imagine that would be problematic."

*Problematic*, that was a word for it. Even if she could, just, explain the whole time travel thing, she doubted that would be a very good idea. From what little she had managed to gather, her alter-ego was *almost* as thoroughly vilified in the public consciousness of modern Britain as their Dark Lord. Even if she could get people to accept they were not the same person, technically sort of — and that was a rather heavy "if" — it would still make things... *complicated*. So, "I need a new identity, someone other than myself. A descendant of one of the Blacks inexplicably expelled from the Family would be best."

"Of course." There was a slight shade of humor on her voice, so weak it was barely noticeable.

"Right, well, you know who's who in this time far better than I do — who do we bribe?"

Part way through scraping whatever it was she'd made for herself out onto a plate, Meda froze. "Bribe?" This time, the tone on her voice was far more obvious: incredulity.

Bella blinked. "Yes?"

"With what, and in whose name?"

She opened her mouth to respond with the obvious answer — then she broke off, frowning to herself. Because the answer *wasn't* obvious. Her original plan, when she was to arrive in 1933, had been to convince the Lord Black of the time to establish her legal personhood by leaning on the proper bureaucrats to legitimize her existence. (Should it come to pass she *needed* to exist legally, which hadn't been a given.) But, there *was* no Lord Black now, not really.

She should, theoretically, have access to most of the family wealth, but actually *using* it might get complicated. While the Family Magics might recognize her as a Black, meaning the wards on their vaults *should* accept her, convincing the goblins to let her get far enough to prove it might be difficult. (Not to mention gravely irritating.) And even if she could get her hands on a pile of gold to shove at one bureaucrat or another, without the political weight of their name to go with it, that could easily turn out worse than useless. They might just turn her in.

She'd rather not see herself before the Wizengamot on trial for fraud, thanks.

A light clatter dropping directly in front of her startled Bella out of her thoughts. She blinked down at the kitchen table, finding a plate laden with beans, bacon, mushrooms, and fried bread. She blinked, glanced up. Meda was sinking to a seat on the opposite side of the table, an identical plate before her. And she smirked, a thin, self-satisfied, teasing sort of thing, as though daring Bella to comment, it would be *so adorable*.

So, of course, she kept her bloody mouth shut. She set her tea down, and picked up the plate, held it level against her legs with one hand. Chair still tilted back on its rear legs, her naked heels still planted on the corner of the table, she wordlessly speared a mushroom with her fork, meeting Meda's challenging smirk with a grin.

Some battles, she knew, were better not fought at all.

"Anyway," Bella muttered, the word half-muffled with mushroom. (Trying not to let her surprise show, that it was perfectly fine — not excellent, she could believe elves had been in no way involved, but if it had been Bella attempting to cook it wouldn't even have been edible.) "You wouldn't happen to have any better ideas?"

For a moment, Meda didn't say anything, bean-laden bread halfway to her mouth. Smiling over at
Bella. She'd caught her doing this a handful of times, since she'd tracked her down at her office. The expression was oddly... Well, she wasn't sure, exactly. Just, smiling at her, looking all...nostalgic, she guessed was the word. If she had to guess — and she did have to guess, people were confusing — she'd say Meda had missed her.

Or rather, she'd missed Other Bella, more specifically Other Bella when she'd been Bella's age, before she'd been twisted into the mad Dark Lord puppet she now was. Which was just incomprehensible, for a whole host of reasons. Luckily, Meda knew her well enough to avoid drawing attention to it.

Even now the oddly warm smile was slipping away, replaced with a thoughtful frown. "I'm not sure I do, actually." That bit of bread finally disappeared into her mouth, and she chewed in silence for a long moment, narrowed eyes staring sightlessly at the surface of the table. She shrugged. "Assuming there was some reason you didn't want to use Zabini."

Bella frowned. "Zee? What does she have to with anything?"

"I'm sure we've all asked ourselves that question at some point." Meda's expression had shifted to one that looked almost...exasperated, she would say, though the word seemed a bit mild. That Meda was allowing it to show at all meant Zee would have had to have been making quite a nuisance of herself. (Which wasn't really surprising.) "She's well-placed to help you. She's on the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and she was made Director of Education a couple years ago now. Didn't you know? I'd have thought you would have looked her up."

"I meant to. I got distracted." Zee had been one of the people she'd intended to read up on in the Prophet archives. But, before she'd even gotten there, she'd learned Sirius had escaped. She'd been too focused trying to decide how to deal with that to bother with idle curiosities. "Wait, Director of Education? Zee? Really?"

"I didn't entirely understand it myself. I can only assume she bribed or seduced an impressive number of people to even get herself in the running. Oddly enough, though, she's been making a good job of it. Granted, I doubt she would care the slightest bit about the state of magical education in Britain if she hadn't a son of her own, but—"

Unfortunately, when Meda fired off that one, Bella's mouth happened to be full of beans. She inhaled more than a little, the rest dribbling down her chin to plop back onto her plate. And she was coughing, hard and painful and breathless, her breakfast thrown to the table so she didn't drop the bloody thing. And she kept coughing, and coughing, until her eyes were filled and her throat was burning, and she still couldn't get any air, her face was already starting to feel too thick and fuzzy, and—

Bella didn't hear or see the charm cast, but she felt it immediately, cool, soothing magic flooding through her, beans and gravy and mucus vanished away. She drew in a gasp, the heat and tightness instantly banished, though her throat still ached a little. And she lay there, slumped bonelessly back in her chair, and simply breathed for long moments, waiting for her heart to stop pounding at her eardrums.

Well. That had been embarrassing.

Once she was mostly back to normal, Bella flicked out her wand, conjured a napkin to clear away the mess on her face, a backhand wipe at her eyes taking care of that. She blearily frowned over at Meda — who, thankfully, had the grace to sit there calmly eating her breakfast as though she hadn't just stopped Bella from choking to death like a fucking idiot. "A son? Zee has a son?"
Meda nodded. "Blaise. Actually, he'll be a third-year in September as well." At Bella's raised eyebrow, Meda shrugged, abruptly avoiding her eyes. "She writes me. It's uncomfortable."

Right, well, she wasn't touching that. "I just... I can't even imagine it. I really can't." Bella sighed, shaking her head to herself. "Seriously, it's one surprise after another in this timeline. First all the Blacks are gone, then Sirius is breaking the Covenant, I've apparently gone completely insane, my awkward Defense Professor is a Dark Lord, and now Zee is breeding..."

"Well, when you put it like that it does all sound...rather absurd."

That would be because it is rather absurd, Meda.

Eris giggling in the back of her head was by no means at all helpful.

Chapter End Notes

Right, that's the chapter, then. It did sort of get away from us, but we're both wordy bitches, so that should surprise no one.

It occurred to me that, Bella being the main character, and Eris's role being as significant as it is, some explanation of what exactly the Chaotic Power is might be necessary. Problem is, everyone in-universe already knows this, it will be some time before we run into a character in a situation that can be naturally used as an audience surrogate (maybe not even until fourth year at Hogwarts). So, to briefly (ha) hit the points I think most important... —Lysandra

Each Power has traits which might be considered 'good' or 'evil'. For example, the Deceptive Power ("dark") governs wisdom and experience alongside subterfuge and misdirection. The Naïve Power ("light") governs the thoughtlessness of youth as well as its potential. Whether a Power as a whole is considered "light" or "dark" is mostly a matter of social connotation rather than anything inherent in the Power. The "dark" Chaotic Power and "light" Deliberative Power have more in common, for example, than the Chaotic and Binding Powers, which are both "dark", but conceptually opposed. The Chaotic Power is considered "dark" because (among other things) it relates to individuals' freedom of choice causing social conflict. The Deliberative Power is considered "light" because it relates to an individual's ability to make (responsible) choices within a social framework.

Gods and goddesses are manifestations of an aspect of a power. For example, Fortuna (Lady Luck), Eris, Loki, and Coyote are all aspects of the Chaotic Power. They each have slightly different connotations. Eris is more spiteful than Loki, who is not only trickster but scapegoat, and Coyote is more whimsical and concerned with making trouble in the mortal realms, while Eris and Loki were largely troublemakers among the gods, or at a large scale. Fortuna is more serious. She's associated with a make-or-break-you kind of luck. She's tied to Fate, her Orderly ("light") counterpart, more closely than the others.

—Leigha

The most important point to get across at the moment, Eris, and Chaos in general, is
We may associate "chaos" with death and destruction, and while Eris's influence may result in death and destruction, they are incidental, not really the point. (Well, sort of. Eris can be a spiteful bitch sometimes.) The Chaotic Power is, fundamentally, all about choice and personal freedom — just, it doesn't recognize limits on freedom, which inevitably leads to conflict and discord. We have laws and social mores for a reason. By extension, Bella herself is not inherently evil. She is basically an artificial psychopath — and she was fucked up before Eris went playing with her brain — but apathy does not necessarily beget malevolence.

After all, one must generally care about someone one way or the other to enjoy seeing them suffer. And if you don't enjoy it, what's the point?

Right. That might be more than strictly necessary, but should hopefully alleviate the concerns of anyone uneasy with the idea of a main character dedicated to a dark god of chaos. And by this point we've rambled way more than enough. Next chapter when we get to it. —Lysandra
Mirabella Zabini popped into existence in the middle of her bedroom, immediately turned for one of the doors into a smaller side room, loosening her formal robes along the way. As she passed through the threshold, her skin tingled against thick wards, insulating the room beyond from the magic outside. A flick of a switch on the bottom of the clunky plastic box had the monitor taking up a significant portion of her desk powered on, but it would be a few seconds for the image to actually be legible. (Her computer was a significant improvement over the system she'd bought only two years ago, but it could still be a finicky, frustrating thing.) She had her robes off and folded in her arms before she could finally make out her calendar.

It looked like she didn't have to be in Cork for about an hour and a half. She'd be in Ireland rather late, since it appeared she had an eight o'clock dinner with Aiden and whoever would be representing a certain client of theirs, but that wasn't unusual — since she was often stuck at the Ministry in the morning, her business in Ireland usually did keep her late to make up for missing half the day. During the summer, anyway. The Department of Education practically went into hibernation from September through the end of April, which she'd always thought was a little odd. Well, she didn't have to be in Cork for an hour and a half assuming the wards hadn't slipped and cut off the internet again. She'd missed a couple meetings with investors the last time that'd happened. It'd been boring nonsense about minor changes in the tax code, which she couldn't bring herself to care about, but it had led to awkward questions from the Board she couldn't really answer.

After all, it wasn't like she could explain to anyone at the company that she had to maintain her own wards because seemingly nobody else in the entire bloody country was concerned with getting modern technology to work in a magical home. Being charged with a major violation of the Statute of Secrecy would be so very tedious.

Switching the monitor back off, tossing her robes aside to be dealt with later, Mira started off for the kitchen. It wasn't much of a walk, only a few doors further from the foyer down the main hall. (She'd quickly realized it was much easier to wire and isolate rooms on the ground floor, packed together as closely as possible, so it'd just ended up that way.) She heard Blaise's voice coming from ahead — not unexpected at this time of day — but he was clearly talking to someone else. The doors muffled the sound too much, so she couldn't be sure, but it didn't sound like Mary. She should be here any minute, probably, but Mary did have that adorable accent, the cadence of her speech was rather distinct...

Perhaps it was one of Blaise's school friends? She sighed and turned back to her room to fetch her housecoat. For some reason her son seemed to be uncomfortable with her wearing only her knickers in front of them, especially after she'd overheard that Finch-Fletchley lad telling him she was... What was the word again? Oh, yes, a MILF. She smiled over the memory. Muggles had such charming turns of phrase.

Mira froze just a couple steps into the kitchen, blinking thoughtlessly at the scene inside.

There was Blaise, of course, leaning against the long granite counter down the middle of the room, arms crossed over his chest and lips twisted with obvious frustration. An amused-despite-himself sort of frustration, judging by the softness in his eyes, but still frustration. He barely glanced at her for a second before turning his mild little glare back to the girl at the kitchen table.
Because there was a girl sitting at the table, one who had made herself quite comfortable in their kitchen, given the steaming cup of tea in her hand. There was an odd, lurching moment, Mira's mind harshly splitting between memory and the present moment. Because she knew this girl, instantly. That untameable mass of black curls, that mocking light in her dark eyes, that tilt to her lips that couldn't seem to decide if it wanted to be a teasing smirk or a reckless grin. Hell, she even recognized the way she sat, with the heels of her boots planted on the gleaming wood of the table, her posture almost confrontational in its lax ease, as though daring anyone to tell her to sit like a proper lady, dammit.

To see that girl in this place, in this time...

Everything clicked into place in her head in about two seconds.

A smirk belying the chastisement on her voice, Mira said, "Really, Trixie? Time travel?"

Trixie turned to her — and it was her, she could overlook her being miraculously young again, because it was certainly her, she hadn't the slightest doubt — and her smirk collapsed into an exaggerated pout. "Of course you figure it out instantly. You know, it's no fun making people guess when they get it right the first try."

It took her a second, blinking down at her, to organize her thoughts again. She'd forgotten how adorable Trixie had been when she'd been little.

("I would have gotten it eventually," Blaise said defensively.)

("Like hell you would have!" Trixie retorted.)

Then again, maybe she'd simply never noticed. She had been rather preoccupied by her own adorableness at the time.

"Hold that thought," she said, turning on her heel to go find the telephone. This called for a change of plans for the evening. If Aiden didn't like it, well, there was always a competent Assistant Vice President or two just itching to move up.

Five minutes later, Alex given the order to cancel everything, she wandered back into the kitchen.

"Mother, is this by chance Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Mira raised an eyebrow, glancing between the two of them, her gaze lingering on her...well, best friend was probably the most appropriate term, though it didn't quite seem sufficient. At age...thirteen, or thereabouts, "Bellatrix Black, I imagine."

Blaise grinned — a rare sight, that. "I knew it! You're such a bad liar!"

"No you didn't, you guessed six other people! And that's even knowing I was a time traveller!"

"If I might interrupt for a moment?" Mira interjected.

Trixie turned to her in a floof of curls. "What is it, Zee?"

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but what are you doing here, of all places?" She turned, popping herself up to sit on the counter a couple feet from Blaise. "And times? You did come from the past, didn't you?" As much as she did enjoy her, Mira did have a life she'd rather not see obliterated in Trixie's wake...
"Yep." Gods and powers, she still popped her 'p's at this age. So cute. "Nineteen Sixty-Three. And before you say it, don't worry, I came in on Lammas through one of the Black properties, the Department of Mysteries shouldn't even know I'm here. Nobody even knows I exist, which is actually kind of my problem."

"Nobody?" Mira repeated.

"Well, Meda, obviously, I stayed the last two nights at her house. Did you know my niece is a metamorph?"

"Yes, I did." In point of fact, she had made an effort to keep an eye on all of Trixie's family in her absence, writing them on the holidays and following their careers. Nymphadora was particularly impressive. Made her glad to have tracked down the Tonkses and invited them back to Britain when the war had subsided.

"Yeah, she's fun. Snuggles in her sleep even more than you do, though." She shrugged. "But anyway. I assume you also know what's happened to the House of Black in my absence."

Mira rolled her eyes. "Probably better than you do, if you've only been here two days."

"I know, I have so much catching up to do. But first, I hear you're a Director in the Ministry now. Can you get me papers? And get me into Hogwarts? I wasn't planning on it, but it looks like I'm going to have to take up residency in the Castle again."

She had also forgotten that at this age, other people, even Mira herself, had been very much means to ends for Trixie. Not that she had ever entirely grown out of that, but Mira liked to think that she, at least, had grown to hold a special place in what passed for the heart of Bellatrix Black.

"Of course," she agreed. Even though this very clearly wasn't her Trixie, she wasn't in the habit of refusing her favors. Or hadn't been, when last they'd spoken, at least, and theirs had never been the sort of friendship to deteriorate over time. Though she did have to ask, "Why?"

"Well," Trixie said, with a heavy, overly exaggerated sigh. "Much as you know I enjoyed Hogwarts for its own sake, I hear Sirius has escaped from Azkaban, and rumor has it he's headed to Hogwarts. I'm planning on fixing the House, so beating the little tit there and saving his soul from the dementors when he finally shows up seems like a logical first step. Did he grow up to be as annoying as he sounds?"

Mira had heard that rumor, too. The Ministry was a bloody sieve when it came to keeping secrets, so of course it had gotten out the same day his escape had made the Prophet. So far as she could tell, it was even true: the Dementors had been questioned by the Aurors, who had shared their findings with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Apparently Sirius had been muttering constantly to himself for the week or so before his escape: "He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts."


She jerked back to the present moment, hard enough she was sure she visibly twitched. "What? Oh, yes, unfortunately he did grow up to be rather irritatingly self-righteous. Though I suppose that's only to be expected of Gryffindors." Trixie gave her an odd look at that, not quite the irritation of a moment before, not sure how to read it. "And Hogwarts is as good a place to start looking for him as anywhere, though I'm not certain how much credence I'd give to the insane mutterings of a man who's been in Azkaban for the past twelve years. It will take a few weeks to grease the right palms, but it should be done well before the start of term. I'll just need to know your cover story..."
"Hmm," Trixie hummed. "I definitely want to be a Black."

Mira somehow managed to not roll her eyes — she wouldn't have expected anything else.

"I've been thinking maybe a 'muggleborn' descendent of one of the Squibs Who Did Not Exist. Marius would be good. I haven't decided on a name yet, though."

There was no way Mira was going to allow herself to be drawn into the black hole that was the Black Family History trying to find an appropriate pseudonym. "Well, figure it out, and let me know, but don't take too long about it," she said, then quickly cast about for a change of subject. (It was a little weird, Trixie being thirteen again, she was trying not to think about it too hard.)

Her son had been lounging quietly off to one side, watching their conversation with an avid interest, contributing nothing for quite some time now. He would do. "You look like you have questions, Blaise, dear."

"Just one," he said, a hint of a smirk playing around the corners of his lips.

"Well, what is it?" Trixie asked impatiently.

Blaise ignored her, holding Mira's eye, all the better to catch any momentary flash of reaction as he asked, "Were you fucking my godmother?"

"Godmother?" Trixie repeated.

"You, genius."

Well...she hadn't been expecting that to be his one question, but then, she had rather put him on the spot. "Yes, obviously." (That was, after all, the best part of why she was trying not to think about it too hard.)

Shooting her a rather doubtful sort of look, Trixie said, "Okay, now I've got a question. Why the hell would you name me as a godparent?"

Mira started to answer — Trixie had actually been very good with children, had raised Narcissa to be a formidable witch, at least — but she was almost immediately cut off.

"Wait, no. We were fucking? When did that happen?"

Mira had to think about it for a moment. Walpurgis of their third year would have been... "Spring of Nineteen Sixty-Four."

"Oh." Trixie looked flummoxed. Mira presumed she was trying to decide whether that would have happened in her own timeline, if she had stayed out the year. She was willing to bet yes, given Trixie's comment about Nymphadora's sleeping habits.

"Yes, oh. Honestly, I wasn't being subtle about my interest, even as early as the end of first year."

"You...weren't? Maybe it was different in my timeline."

Called it. It was...strangely reassuring, that she still knew her former lover so well after all these years. "I practically sat on your lap in the common room every evening, made you hold my hand through the halls, slept in your bed more often than mine. I kissed you goodbye when we got up in the morning! What did you think I was thinking?"

Trixie just blinked at her for a second, shrugged. "Okay, maybe it wasn't different, then. But why
would I possibly think that your touching me all the time and randomly deciding that my bed was more comfortable than yours meant you wanted to have sex with me?"

On the one hand, that comment was adorable in its innocence. On the other, it reminded Mira of exactly what experiences Trixie had had of sex at this point in her life, which was anything but adorable. She chose to let her face fall into a rueful smirk, rather than draw attention to the matter, however. Trixie had never been one to dwell on her father's abuse, after all.

Blaise snorted with half-suppressed laughter. "She's funny," he said, sounding somewhat surprised. "You're funny," he repeated to Trixie. "I can see why you two were friends."

Trixie was wearing the slightly frustrated, slightly irritated expression which meant she most likely thought Blaise was being sarcastic, but whatever she might have been about to say in response to his perceived mockery was interrupted by Mary's arrival.

It had been a bit of an adjustment, muggle servants. The Zabini family had always been relatively well off in their own right, with an elf to keep the house and make the meals, but this house had been Jonathan's before their marriage and his subsequent...demise. She hadn't even had to do much to kill her fourth husband: he'd very conveniently had a heart attack when she'd told him about magic. Well, more precisely, when she'd decided to demonstrate by levitating him into a somewhat adventurous sexual position which, quite frankly, he couldn't have maintained on his own. Perhaps when he'd been a younger man, but alas...

The muggle servants had come with the muggle mansion: the man who kept the grounds and his wife, who did the shopping and any other errands; a trio of girls who came in to clean weekly; and the man who maintained the house and Jonathan's fleet of absurdly expensive automobiles (which, as Mira didn't drive, had remained virtually untouched for nearly a decade, now). Those she had kept after ascertaining that none of them had a problem working around magic — it had come as a bit of a shock at first, but they'd all adjusted easily enough. But not the cook, he'd been a nightmare. French trained, thought his opinion of his food was the only one that mattered. She hadn't even considered telling him about magic. Mary, a middle-aged, second-generation Pakistani immigrant with a penchant for experimentation in the kitchen, had been a fixture for years now, arriving every day to whip up a quick lunch and staying throughout the afternoon to put together more elaborate suppers and breakfasts to be reheated in the morning.

The idea of muggle servants (or human servants in general, really) had struck her as odd at first, and it had taken some getting used to, but she didn't mind them at all now. She thought she might actually prefer them above elves. Humans did tend to be more creative — elves only rarely took initiative on anything — and they were certainly far more interesting to talk to. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that their company was one of the reasons she chose to spend the majority of her time here, rather than somewhere more convenient to work.

She did have to pay— Well, she didn't have to pay them at all, but the Ministry would probably take issue with her keeping bewitched muggle slaves. It had never been common, but some wizards had done that here and there, not even all that long ago, though she was all but certain it would be illegal under current muggle protection laws. In any case, she didn't have to pay them quite as much as she did — she'd done a bit of research as to how much people tended to make doing this kind of work, and had added a good ten to twenty per cent on top for good measure. She'd long ago noted employees were more generally pleasant if they liked their employer, and simply giving them more money was one of the easier ways to ensure they did.

And, well, it wasn't like she couldn't afford it.

Trixie cut off at the rear door swinging open, staring at Mary as she stepped inside. In her usual
jeans and brilliantly colorful knit jumper — Jonathan had insisted on the oddest uniforms for his people which Mira had never gotten used to, she didn't bother — long black plait disappearing behind her back, her familiar overlarge handbag slung over one shoulder, she jerked to a halt a couple steps into the room, blinking over at Trixie. She, of course, knew all of Blaise's friends by now, well enough to be thrown by an unfamiliar face. "Er..."

So Mira made quick introductions. Trixie raised an eyebrow at her when she explained, just for clarity's sake, that Mary was a muggle, but didn't comment. (Which was a little odd, but she wasn't complaining: she was all but certain her Trixie would have, and said comment would not have been complimentary.) Mary gave her an even stranger look when she explained Trixie was one of her old classmates having made her way here from three decades in the past, and would be staying with them for the foreseeable future, but she didn't comment either. (Presumably travelling forward in time was no stranger to Mary than any other piece of magic she had witnessed and brushed off in the past, though Mira herself was still somewhat thrown by it.)

Mary started digging through the cabinets, proceeding with her usual programme after the introductions had been made and pleasantries exchanged. Trixie stared at her back for a few seconds before finding her voice again. "So the Statute of Secrecy... It does still exist in this timeline, right?"

"Of course it does. I don't tell all the muggles I meet. It just makes things far simpler if some of them know." Mostly just the help, honestly. And since they had been live-in when she had married Jonathan and moved in with four-year-old Blaise in tow, they were — or would have been — considered exceptions to the Statute anyway. Co-residents of a dwelling with an underage mage were allowed to know, if only so the Ministry didn't have to waste resources constantly obligating them of any accidental magic they might witness. Technically they were supposed to have been obligating when they moved off-property, or at the latest when Blaise had started school, but she must have overlooked that niggling detail. Along with registering them as exceptions in the first place. Oops.

She had been wavering on whether she should bring Sam in, which would be a blatant violation of the Statute, but she hadn't made a decision one way or the other yet.

"And you meet that many muggles, do you?"

Blaise let out another snort, halfway between chuckling and scoffing. "She runs a muggle tech company. She spends more time around muggles than mages these days."

Mira didn't quite manage to fully suppress her wince. She'd rather Blaise hadn't brought that up, at least not so soon. Trixie could be a bit...odd, about muggles, though exactly how that odd looked had changed dramatically over the decades. The last few years, toward the end of the war, she'd swallowed perhaps a bit too much of her own propaganda, but when she'd been younger she'd just been...dismissive, was the word.

When Trixie had been this age, she had considered the only real value of a muggle to be their potential use as a ritual sacrifice. By and large, she had been completely apathetic to their existence. Not that she hadn't been equally apathetic toward mages with nothing to offer her, just. She supposed mages had, on the whole, had more things Trixie had wanted.

She expected this Trixie to kick up a fuss about it. Perhaps not as much of a fuss as her own, older Trixie would have, and not for the same reasons, but even at thirteen, she had had a tendency to point out any irrationality on Mira's part, and argue into the ground the pointlessness of such irrationality. Voluntarily associating with muggles would certainly qualify as a pointless exercise in the mind of even a young Trixie, and Mira would be hard-pressed to convince her otherwise, given
that she considered them worthless animals.

(She chose not to look too closely at the reasons she cared so much what Trixie thought of the rationality of her motivations.)

She knew, of course, that she would have had to tell Trixie eventually, assuming she stayed here in the present, but she would have preferred to wait until she'd had time to sound out Trixie's opinions on this sort of thing, she had no idea how she'd react.

But what was the worst that could happen? Mira did have something Trixie wanted, she reminded herself. And it wasn't as though she would be the first person to tell her she was turning her back on her own people, she'd been called a blood traitor more times than she could count, but from Trixie of all people it would be...

Trixie stared at Blaise for a few seconds, blinked twice. Then she turned to Mira, head tilting and single eyebrow cocking. "There good money in that? I thought you were planning to just marry a bunch of rich guys and kill them off for their fortunes."

Any relief that this Trixie was able to deduce some reason for Mira's muggle life was drowned out by shock that she'd so openly mentioned the Black Widow Plan. "Er..." Mira stuttered, shooting a glance at her cook. She really didn't want to have to obliviate her tonight.

"Pas devant les domestiques," Blaise hissed with a grin, quite loudly enough to be heard by everyone, including Mary.

Mary herself let out a snort of laughter, not even hesitating as she continued with whatever she was making. "Quite a coincidence with your luck, Mira."

Right, laugh it off as a joke, then. "Just because I married well doesn't mean I'm a murderess," she said in her most defensive, poshest tone. "Jonathan had a weak heart, and poor Jack, falling asleep at the wheel — he always did work too much." And then, before Mary could respond, she changed the subject: "In any case, yes, the money in technology is very good. With the yearly exchange caps the goblins impose, I can't transfer much of it to the magical economy, but it would work out to over six hundred thousand galleons, easily. I'm probably richer than the Malfoys by this point."

Frowning to herself a little, Trixie asked, "Do muggles even have that much money? No wait, that was a stupid question — there are more of them, obviously their economy is bigger."

Even if Mira were given time to respond, she'd have no idea how she should react to Trixie giving muggles even that much credit.

"In my time, there were a couple Blacks who were playing around with muggle real estate, but they never made nearly that much gold off of it. I suppose the possibility just never occurred to me. If it's working out for you, then, great, I guess." And she shrugged.

Shrugged.

Mira had been getting the feeling this Trixie was not quite the same person as the one she'd known. Very similar, of course, but not the same. But nothing she'd said so far was quite as jarring as that right there. It was disorienting.

She had absolutely no idea what to say.

Luckily, she didn't have to come up with anything. Her voice thick enough with exasperation the trace of an accent she'd inherited from her foreign-born parents was a little more noticeable, Mary
said, "Blaise, have you been doing magic in here?"

Blaise looked slightly irritated with the question. "I know which rooms I can't use magic in, Mary."

"Well, someone did." Mary prodded at the buttons on the stove again, but nothing happened. The timer had even gone blank.

Mira frowned, looking around the room. Now that she was paying attention, she saw the display on the microwave had gone dead as well, and the lights were dark. Of course, there were enough windows in here, squirreled into a back corner of the house as it was, that the lights weren't always necessary, so she hadn't thought twice about it. But it was also oddly...quiet. Tilting herself off the counter, she walked over to the refrigerator, yanked the door open.

Then immediately slammed it closed. "Damn it. Did you use any magic in here, Trixie?"

Trixie seemed entirely unaffected by the accusatory stares she was getting from all three of them — which came as no surprise, of course. She pointed at the pot of tea in front of her, a single eyebrow ticking up. "Obviously."

Mary let out an aggravated groan. "Why didn't you just use the hob?"

Eyes flicking around to the various muggle appliances in the room, sounding slightly annoyed, "Excuse me, I don't know how any of this stuff works."

"Well, they don't work now," Mary said, giving the buttons another demonstrative jab.

Trixie blinked. "Oh. So that's what all that sparking and popping was. Oops?"

Sending a baleful sort of look at the sizeable pile of dough she'd already managed to put together while the three of them had been talking, a long sigh escaped through Mary's teeth. She stood there in silence for a long moment, eyes closed, fingers of one hand rubbing at her forehead. (Meanwhile, Blaise stared at Trixie, and Trixie stared back, both visibly unamused with the other. Adorable.) Finally, Mary straightened, turned to Mira. "So... Thai, then?"

"Sure, go ahead and call it in. And give Aaron a call while you're at it, he'll be needing to order replacements. Oh, as long as you're in there, make sure everything in the office is still working too." While the muggle rooms were isolated from each other, the wards separating them weren't nearly as thorough as the ones isolating them from the rest of the house. A simple boiling charm shouldn't have done any damage over there, but it was possible. Especially since computer technology tended to be relatively sensitive. "I'll be in here seeing if anything's salvageable."

"Right." And Mary was gone, still shaking her head to herself.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize—"

"It's fine, Trixie." Of course, she didn't believe for a second Trixie actually was sorry — she could count the number of times she believed Trixie had honestly felt remorse for doing anything ever on the fingers of one hand — but it didn't really matter. Since they'd moved here Blaise had slipped plenty of times, and even she'd done it more than once. It wasn't like she couldn't afford to replace the things Trixie had inadvertently ruined, it was just slightly inconvenient. "Why don't you two go get acquainted while we're straightening everything out. Blaise, be a dear and point out the muggle rooms for her, hmm?"

"Sure, Mum." Blaise tipped down to his feet, giving Trixie a look. (Mira couldn't see what kind of look, since his back was to her at the moment.) "Come on then, Black. I think you've done enough
damage here for the day."

Trixie smirked, somewhere between doubtful and challenging. After all, Mira didn't believe Trixie thought there was such a thing as enough damage. But, with a last glance at Mira, she followed him out of the room.

By the time Mary returned a few minutes later, the face of the display on the stove was hanging half off, the food processor, the mixer, the blender, the toaster oven, and the dehydrator were laid out on the long central counter half-disassembled. Mira was standing in the middle of the mess, screwdriver held between her teeth, changing one of the lightbulbs in the fixture over the counter. (Only one of them had gone out, but for even that Trixie must have put far more into that boiling charm than necessary. It took quite a lot to burn out a bulb, especially when switched off.)

Warily watching her, Mary said, "I really wish you wouldn't do that, Mira. It makes me nervous."

Mira couldn't help smirking to herself a little (which was a little awkward, with a screwdriver in her mouth). She finished twisting in the bulb, pulled the thing out from between her teeth. "I know what I'm doing." Bending over to put a hand down on the edge of the counter, Mira hopped back down to the ground. Smirking at the younger woman, "And, really, even if I do hurt myself, one wave of my wand and I'm fine. What's the harm?"

Mary was giving her a look, one that very clearly said that's not the point, but she didn't bother saying it out loud. She knew by now there would be no point to it. "Sent out for Thai, it should be here in a half hour or so. And Aaron said he'll be in tomorrow."

"Right." Waving a hand over the appliances spread out over the counter, Mira said, "All of this is dead." Well, that wasn't entirely true: she could probably get the toaster oven working again without too much trouble. But she'd have to order parts. It just wasn't worth the effort. She walked over to the oven, flipping one of the knobs back and forth, one of the burners flaring to life before going out again. "The hob still works, but I'll need to get Sam in to fix this mess," with a disgusted wave at the display. She didn't bother checking the refrigerator or the microwave — they both knew from experience that, if anything else in the room had been affected, they'd both be total losses.

"You're bringing Sam in just to fix your oven?" Mary said it with a tone of shocked disapproval, but her face was showing clear amusement.

She shrugged. "Sure, why not? I am his boss." Only because Sam vastly preferred his lab job above management. He was a co-founder of the place, after all, he could have virtually any executive position he asked for — she'd even been concerned he would be made CEO after Jack's death before she could convince the Board to let her have it. But it wasn't what he wanted, it wasn't what made him happy, so he remained where he was, quite possibly the most highly-paid engineer in the industry.

Of course, asking him over to fix things for her was still odd, just not for that reason. Sam still wasn't entirely comfortable with her existence, and it got awkward sometimes. But, this neither surprised nor bothered her. Nobody would suggest marrying and later murdering someone's oldest and closest (practically only) friend shouldn't lead to an awkward moment here or there.

As it was, there wasn't much else she could do about all this at the moment. There really wasn't much else for Mary to do today, either. After putting a preserving charm on the dough she'd put together — stepping out the back door quick to cast it, of course — Mira sent her off home. With a last exasperated look out over the ruined electronics, she left to track down Blaise and Trixie.
That was still a strange thought, that Trixie was here, and suddenly thirteen again. She’d mostly managed to hold it in actually talking to her, but it was...

Anyway, it didn't take very long to find them. Blaise had apparently decided to hole up in the muggle parlor, which came as no surprise — he probably spent as much time in there as anywhere else, these days. She'd been intending to walk right in, announce herself with some joke about what trouble they'd been getting into without her.

But, without really thinking about it, she stopped just before the threshold. She could see them in there, talking. Blaise had laid himself out on one of the sofas, hands folded behind his head, Trixie sitting on the one next to it, leaning against the armrest with her feet folded under her. (Still wearing her boots, of course, couldn't expect her to avoid putting them on the furniture.) Half an ear to the conversation, it sounded like they were talking about timelines and such. Searching out the major differences between this world and the one Trixie had come from.

And Mira hesitated. She couldn't say exactly why.

They were just talking. She meant, they were talking, there was nothing really "just" about it. The subtle fascination on Blaise's face and voice was completely expected, but Trixie...

It should go without saying that Trixie had never really had much in the way of friends. Her patience for other people, outside of a handful of select individuals, had always been perilously thin. At Hogwarts, the other students had only ever been a means to an end for her, if she cared to notice them even that much. From what she'd seen, Mira was the only person her age Trixie had ever spoken to as though she were...a person.

And there was something about it, the way Trixie was looking at Blaise, the tone of her voice, that...

No, Mira wasn't going to go in there right now. Not while it was still...fragile, she guessed.

So instead she quietly padded away, squirrelling herself away with a pile of files. There was always reading to get through, after all.

She was only a few pages into a highly technical report on one of Sam's current pet projects, which she honestly couldn't begin to fully understand, when the pages were suddenly cast in flickering light. Very green light. Following the roaring of wind and the crackling of fire, she glanced up in time to catch Alex step out of the floo. The younger woman spotted her instantly, an annoyed grimace crossing her face. "There you are! I've been calling you for ten minutes now."

Mira ticked up a single eyebrow — really, she only had the one telephone, it wasn't like she could hear it all over the house. "I was under the impression we canceled all my appointments. Did something come up?"

And the annoyed grimace just got more annoyed. But that wasn't entirely new. While she had been gifted with a rather pretty face, and greater unconscious grace than muggleborns tended to have, Alex couldn't exactly be described as the personable sort. Which made her a perfect fit for her secretary, as far as Mira was concerned. After all, a not insignificant portion of her job was telling people to piss off.

Mostly, it was directed at the more annoying people making demands on Mira's time, but Alex's ire was sometimes directed at her as well. Working for her was hardly the life Alex had dreamed for herself when she’d learned of magic, but muggleborns didn't have the best prospects, even after the ineffectual reforms Dumbledore's people had been pushing this last decade. Mira had thought it
best to have someone who knew of and preferably could use magic, just for the sake of convenience, but few mages knew the first thing about...well, *anything* necessary to do the bloody job. It hadn't taken her long to find Alex. The tetchy woman could be rather irritating at times, though she didn't have a whole lot of reason to be — honestly, with the exchange rates being what they were, Mira was paying her *far* more than she could ever expect to make on the other side. But, despite how irrational it was, she mostly didn't let it bother her.

Alex was hardly the most difficult person to get on with she'd ever known. After so long playing nice with Death Eaters, anything Alex could do or say was really quite adorable.

"Yes," Alex said, the bite on her tone almost thick enough to be a proper snarl, "we had, but Aiden isn't taking no for an answer. He's been in your local office panicking ever since I told him. You really need to take care of it."

Mira let out a long sigh, her head falling back against the sofa. She'd expected Aiden would be uncomfortable hosting these particular clients on his own — they were probably their largest customer, after all — but she hadn't thought he would panic quite as much as he evidently was. He was new to executive management, promoted from within all the way from an assembly tech. He still wasn't used to this sort of thing.

Perhaps he hadn't been the best choice for the job. But, personally, Mira thought it only made sense for the VP of Operations to have intimate familiarity with...well, operations. And he *was* perfect with the day to day stuff. But dealing with customers and investors really wasn't his comfort zone.

Not that that sort of problem was at all unusual in the industry. Bloody nerds.

In any case, it appeared she'd have to talk him down herself. "All right. He's still in the office at the plant?"

"Should be." With hardly another word, Alex was disappearing back through the floo, Mira already up and making for the only telephone in the house. Which really was quite inconvenient sometimes, only having the one. But wiring and warding more rooms would be exceedingly complicated, it wasn't really worth it.

In barely a minute, she was flopping into the chair in front of her computer. She picked up the phone, dialed the proper number from memory. The first ring hadn't even finished when the receiver at the other end was snapped up. (Rather roughly, by the sound of it.) "Mira?"

At first, she was a bit annoyed with Aiden answering her phone like that, but after a second she put it together. Her calls usually went through Alex — how many people even had the number for the direct line? "Yes, Aiden, it's me. I hear you're having a touch of nerves."

Aiden practically exploded at that. The high, rapid-fire ramble went on for an impressively long time, in fact. Man clearly had decent lung capacity. And he wasn't slowing down at all, going on and on and on, voice somehow becoming both higher and louder as he went. She wouldn't be surprised if he hurt himself at this rate.

Or passed out, she guessed. Hopefully he wouldn't fall on anything. Couldn't exactly go throwing around repair charms over there.

Really, she shouldn't be surprised at all. This sort of thing wasn't close to anything like where most of Aiden's skillset lay. It was too... Oh, she wasn't sure of the word. Perhaps if it were any other client, she might be able to cajole him into dealing with it himself, but these nerdy types could get
a bit flustered when it came to anything at all to do with Big Blue.

It had to be a good two minutes before Aiden even stopped to take a breath. She marveled again at his lung capacity. Made her wonder what— No, Mira, behave. "Fine, fine, you win. I'll be there. I just had a minor family emergency to deal with, but it's fine."

That actually got Aiden to jerk to a halt, his relieved sigh cut off halfway through. "I... I didn't— I mean, is Blaise alright?"

"Yes, he's fine." She paused for thought, briefly enough someone as socially graceless as Aiden probably wouldn't even notice. "My niece just showed up on my doorstep. Doesn't have anywhere else to go, I'm afraid."

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry, I had no idea." To his credit, he actually did sound sorry. Enough to almost make her feel guilty for the lie.

Who was she kidding, of course it wasn't.

"I mean, if you need to be there, we can...reschedule, or something..."

She almost had to laugh at that. Reschedule? They were going back to California the day after tomorrow. There wasn't really anywhere left open in their timetable to shuffle things around. What would he propose? That they talk shop over elevenses? "No, it's fine. Everything's settled well enough Blaise can take care of her. I should be in in...oh, an hour or so, I suppose."

"... An hour? Where are you?"


The Statute of Secrecy really was a pain sometimes.

"Okay, so you already know about the kitchen. That's Mother's study," Zee's son pointed at a closed door. Apparently he actually planned to do as he had been instructed, showing her the "muggle" rooms. "I can't imagine you'll spend much time in there, but there's a computer, and they're even fussier than the kitchen appliances, so don't even think about using magic in there. This is the lounge," he continued, leading Bella into a large parlor. All of the furniture was oriented around a boxy device with a black glass panel built into the front. "That's a television," she was immediately informed. "They sometimes explode if you short them out, so no magic here, either. Basically, just don't use magic in this wing of the house anywhere."

Bella wasn't really listening. "I still can't believe Zee has a kid," she muttered. Out of all the unexpected things she'd learned about her best (okay, only) friend's future since arriving unceremoniously on her doorstep and discovering that she was keyed into the wards, that was the one that she couldn't really reconcile.

That she was somehow a Ministry Director and not doing a bad job of it? Almost expected, now that Bella had had time to get used to the idea. There had been hints, in hindsight, that Zee was going to be a political force to be reckoned with. They would probably have been running Slytherin by the end of fourth year, if Bella had stayed.

That she apparently lived half in the muggle world, with muggle servants and a muggle fortune? Not so strange: Zee had always been pragmatic. Money was money and power was power. Sure it was kinda weird that she had decided to go the muggle route, but maybe it was a matter of
opportunity. There really were a lot more muggles than mages.

That she had apparently decided to selectively forego the Statute of Secrecy and was (probably? She thought Blaise's *pas devant les domestiques* had been a cover-up) marrying and murdering men for their money was the least surprising, really. There was a reason she had been able to befriend Bella in the first place, and her lack of respect for rules, laws, and social expectations was a large part of it. (Even if she did inexplicably insist on pretending to be a kind and decent person.)

But there had never, ever been any suggestion that she might someday want to have a kid. In fact, Bella distinctly recalled Zee being noticeably uncomfortable interacting with Cissy on the few occasions she had visited Bella over hols. It had been all the more memorable because Zee was generally difficult to discomfit. She'd had the distinct impression that Zee simply didn't like kids.

"Seriously, were you an accident of some sort?" she asked Blaise.

This she had more than half expected to irritate him, she was still trying to work out his buttons, but he just grinned, flopping onto a sofa so gracefully it was difficult to believe he was really a thirteen-year-old boy. "More like a challenge. According to Mother, she met my sire in Spain while mourning the tragic loss of her second husband," he twisted his face into an overly exaggerated *sad* expression.

"Okay, wait, how many husbands has she had now?"

Blaise's tone changed abruptly, quieter, more serious. Businesslike, almost. "Six. Jonathan and Jack were muggles, the staff know about them. This house was Jonathan's, he was number four, died when I was four. She inherited the tech company from Jack — he died in Nineteen Ninety, number six. She's engaged to another wizard, now, from California. Wedding's over winter hols. Funeral's the summer after next. Invitation only, please R.S.V.P."

His delivery was delightfully deadpan, startling a genuine laugh from her. "I'll be there. So Spain?"

"Right, yes. So mother was in mourning, I imagine you can picture the scene." More dry, deadpan humor. She was beginning to recognize the spark in his eye that suggested sarcasm.

In point of fact, Bella had no idea what Zee might be like having just successfully murdered a man, but she knew her well enough to guess that her attitude had been more celebratory than mournful. "Go on."

"Well, Mother was minding her own business, mourning her husband, when a man approached her, looking to take advantage of a pretty, young, helpless widow."

Bella snorted at the idea of Zee being characterized as "helpless", especially if there was a man about. Even last year, most of the the male teachers had been putty in her hands as she flirted and charmed them, staying just on the right side of *too forward*. (There had been one or two notable exceptions, whom Zee had quickly concluded must be *wizards' wizards*.)

"Hey, she was only twenty-seven, that's still young. Anyway. This man seduces her over the course of a few days, finally convinces her to bring him back to her rooms, where she promptly turns the tables on him.

"See, this 'man' is actually an incubus, she could feel the dark magic in him from the first moment he turned on the charm, and she's been planning for the past few days to use an old spell to place a binding on him, because *no one* beats Mirabella Zabini at her own game.

"So they have sex and he tries to feed on her but she casts the binding on him, and he's trapped. Her
slave, the only conditions for release being her choice or his child. If he managed to get her pregnant, the binding would be broken, otherwise, she would have to grow bored of him and release him."

"Wait, your sire was an incubus? Aren't they supposed to be, you know, intangible, can't have children with mortals?"

"Technically he was only half incubus, but."

"That doesn't solve the problem, you realize."

Blaise gave her a liquid, thoroughly uninterested, one-shouldered shrug. "I did get this story from Mother, you realize. It could be a complete load of rubbish for all I know. Does it really matter?"

Bella actually had to think about this one for a moment. Did it actually matter? Maybe not. Though if it was somehow true, the fact that Zee's child was technically demon-spawn would go a long way toward explaining why she hadn't just got rid of it as soon as she realized it was there. Demon half-breeds were supposed to be impossible, after all. Making one would be an achievement of sorts. "Still think it's impossible, but fine, whatever."

"Oh, impossible, says the girl who travelled forward in time."

"That was an accident. Or if it was on purpose, it was Eris's doing, not mine. I meant to go back three decades. This is the opposite of what I was aiming for."

Blaise looked intrigued. "Eris? Like the goddess? Are you a black mage?"

"What?" Bella was somewhat startled. "Of course. Didn't Zee tell you? I can't imagine she doesn't know." Bella hadn't told her explicitly about her Patron yet, since admitting to being a Black Mage was tantamount to admitting to any number of Azkaban-worthy felonies, enacting Black rituals on a regular basis and all. But if they had really continued their association for years, she was sure it would have come up eventually.

Plus, Blaise had just claimed demon blood, and all but admitted that Zee was a murderer. It wasn't as though he had any room to judge.

"Shockingly enough, we don't talk about you much, seeing as you've been in Azkaban for yonks. What's it like, being dedicated to a Power?"

Bella made a dismissive pft sound. "Mostly like having this voice in the back of your head that never answers when you need them and otherwise hardly shuts up."

No response from Eris. That was odd. Maybe she was focusing on Other Bella. Bella gave a mental shrug. Not like her occasionally disappearing was unusual: case in point, more like.

Blaise looked rather nonplussed. "And it's her fault you're here? Your patron's."

Bella nodded. "Got us sucked into a different timeline. I'm still not sure where this one diverged from mine. I really need to find a few days to just catch up on history and see if I can narrow it down."

"I might be able to help with that," Blaise volunteered. "What have you found so far that's different?"
Bella sighed. She hadn't really been planning to do this right now, but she supposed it was as good a time as any. "Well, for one thing, my Transfiguration Professor is the Head of the Wizengamot? How? Why? He's just— It's even harder to see Dumbledore as the Chief Warlock than it is to see Riddle as a bloody Dark Lord, okay. And Professor Riddle would be a terrible Dark Lord. But Dumbledore has even less people skills! Why the fuck would he go into politics?"

"Riddle? I've never heard of a Dark Lord Riddle."

"He went by Voldemort, apparently."

"Wait. The Dark Lord was one of your professors? What did he teach?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts, obviously. He was pretty good, too. Not as good as Ciardha, but still pretty good."

"Ciardha?"

"Monroe. My tutor."

"The Ciardha Monroe was your tutor."

Bella shot him a flat stare. "Heir Presumptive of House Black."

"Oh, yes, how could I have forgotten. This is the same Ciardha Monroe who had all those adventures, and disappeared in the forties?"

"Well, no, obviously not. He was still around in the fifties and sixties in my timeline. Just saw him last week. But I think so? He did have some really wild stories, like the time he ran into a basilisk in some old Indian tomb and stole one of her eggs."

Blaise giggled.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Just, apparently anyone can take down a basilisk. There's a rumor Harry Potter killed Slytherin's just this past year."

"Oh, he didn't kill it, that's what makes the story so fantastic." Bella frowned. Harry Potter was certainly a person she ought to know more about, especially since he seemed to be somehow related to Professor Riddle's downfall, but they were getting far enough off track as it was. "Not important. Not right now, anyway. So Riddle and Ciardha and Dumbledore are all significantly different, but Dumbledore's the oldest, most likely to have been alive when the timeline diverged. What do you know about him? How did he get into politics?"

"Well, aside from what's on his Chocolate Frog card... As far as I know, it wasn't really his choice. Going into politics. Or, he could have said no, but the temptation of power was just too strong when it was offered up on a silver platter." This last was said in a rather mocking tone. "And he thinks Slytherins are easily corrupted!"

"Who was offering power on a silver platter? Oh, wait! That's another thing! I wasn't sure at first, but what the fuck is up with the way everyone talks about school houses here? I mean, sure, I make fun of Hufflepuff every now and again, but Meda and Nymphadora kept saying things about Slytherin and Gryffindor like they're, I don't know, really serious about it. Like school houses actually matter outside of it."
She got a rather odd look for that one, but Blaise answered the question easily enough. "If I had to guess, I'd say that's because the Dark Lord and well, mostly you, actually, used Slytherin as a major recruiting ground, so everyone else pretty much thinks we're all evil, now. Well, that and Dumbledore being Headmaster. He's not exactly subtle about his preference for Gryffindor. Just outright gave them the House Cup for the second year in a row."

"O...okay," Bella said, stretching the word out. She still wanted to know more about the House thing, but Blaise had just brought up Dumbledore again. And she supposed it wasn't that weird that he'd been made Headmaster, he had been a teacher for bloody ages, and who knew how the Board decided those things? But, "Aren't Headmaster and Chief Warlock both full time jobs?"

Blaise gave a derisive snort. "He's also the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation."

"The what?"

Her blank-faced confusion startled a laugh from Zee's son. "Oh, wait, you're serious?" Suddenly Blaise seemed equally confused.

"No, he's my cousin. Yes, I'm serious! What's this International Confederation thing?"

"It's...the international governing body that enforces the Statute of Secrecy?"

"You mean the European Council of the Accords?"

Blaise frowned intensely. "Yes? I mean, I think that's what they were called before, you know, Grindelwald killed off like, all the European noble houses."

Finally, familiar ground! "So Grindelwald existed, and it sounds like his war was way more successful than it was in my world?" That would put the point of divergence somewhere in the 1930s, if not earlier.

"Uh, yeah. Successful. You could say that. He outright killed most of the aristocracy, after all. I mean, most of his reforms so far as being rights and the regulation of magic are concerned were only accomplished after Dumbledore defeated him, and he's been trapped in his own prison for the past fifty years or so, but he pretty much broke Europe, so, yeah. I guess so."

Everything started to fall into place. Dumbledore going into politics — if he had been the one to defeat Grindelwald (she wasn't even going to dwell on why or how her Transfiguration professor had been going around defeating Dark Lords) it would have been harder to avoid political prestige than it would have been to leverage it into all sorts of ridiculous positions, like being the Lord of Hogwarts and the Chief Warlock at the same time. Professor Riddle becoming a Dark Lord, his weird fixation on muggles and muggleborns — It sounded like Grindelwald hadn't really gotten to Britain, but his populist rhetoric would have been a great threat for Professor Riddle to rally the ruling class of Britain against. (Murdering the majority of their Continental peers would have been quite threatening.) Even her own madness and the fall of the House of Black made sense in a universe where they had had their own Dark Lord on their doorstep, been intimately involved with his campaign — especially since he had apparently lost.

"Oh, okay then. So I basically ended up in a universe where things went the way I was planning to push them, if I had actually gone back in time. I guess that...kind of makes sense. Right. So about names, I was thinking maybe Meissa."

Blaise frowned. "Wait. That's it? Just, okay, that has to be the point of divergence, moving on?"
"Well, what else is there to say?"

"I don't know," he said with a shrug. "What's your world like? How is this one different, maybe, other than the Houses and Dumbledore and apparently Voldemort teaching Defense?"

Bella sighed. "Well, it's only Nineteen Sixty-Three there, so I'm not sure how much difference you'd see because of the time and how much because of the timeline. Grindelwald's war never really got off the ground in my timeline, so Europe is still ruled by the Nobles. It's not that different from the Twenties, or even the turn of the century, really. Dumbledore is Head of Gryffindor and my transfiguration professor. Riddle is Head of Slytherin and teaches defense. The Head of the Council of the Accords is some Frankish witch, I think her name starts with a 'C' but that's not really important. The political parties in Britain are basically Traditionalist and Progressive, but they're both about a hundred years out of date, since their leaders are pushing one-twenty. The Minister is pro-Ministry, which isn't exactly the same as Progressive, but definitely not Traditionalist. Mostly he and the Traditionalists and Progressives spend a lot of time arguing and sabotaging each other's attempts at legislation."

"That's the same here," Blaise informed her.

"Not surprised. What else... Oh, the Minister is muggleborn. That whole anti-muggle, pro-muggle protection, anti-muggleborn, muggleborn rights thing isn't nearly as big a deal in my timeline, probably because Grindelwald never got big." That was the impression she'd gotten, anyway, flipping through those Prophet articles. She was hardly an expert at this point, though.

"Of course." Blaise smirked sardonically. "No revolution means no counter-revolution."

Bella let an eyebrow tick upward at that. She hadn't credited Blaise with knowing anything, really, but maybe he was smarter than he looked. "Exactly. And no spark for the radicalization of the Traditionalists that Riddle seems to have militarized in this timeline. Tensions are building of course, because Grindelwald's war never happened, so the restructuring of Europe that you mentioned didn't happen, and everyone over there is pretty discontent with the Nobility, but the Wizengamot has been giving over more power to the Ministry to placate the masses, so we're more or less well out of it in Britain."

That was, in fact, the entire reason Bella had decided to go back in time in the first place: it was looking increasingly unlikely that Britain would ever overturn its status quo without some sort of outside influence. As a wealthy and privileged member of the ruling class, of course, she shouldn't be complaining, but the members of the ruling class who actually did the ruling were so out of touch and hide-bound... It was like a constant itch in the back of her mind, knowing that the world would continue as it was unless she went out and did something about it.

"Let's see... The Americas are pretty much ready to go to war with Europe over the Statute, but they'd have to get far more organized before they'd actually do it. Carthage was just taken over by another Dark Lord in Sixty-Two. China... No one ever really knows what's going on in China, they've been maintaining their isolationist policy since the end of the Opium Wars in Thirty-Nine. The Black Cloaks —"

"You still have Black Cloaks?" Blaise interrupted. "Grindelwald had all ours assassinated in the early Forties."

That made sense. If she were trying to destabilize the world political scene, she would have international agents of law and order like the Black Cloaks assassinated, too. "Yeah, they've been decommissioning since the muggle colonies are all more or less independent now, so they have their own local treaties about the Statute. Not completely, of course, but we're not enforcing it
anymore, just kind of monitoring the local situations."

"Hmm... I think most of that sounds the same," Blaise said. "The international stuff at least. As far as domestic politics go, we have the Traditionalists who are mostly Dark, and the Light, who are mostly Progressive, but not actually progressive like Mother, more like American Civil Rights-era progressive. Then there's the Neutral Bloc, for those like Mother who don't really agree with either of the major parties. Dumbledore leads the Light, of course, and they've been in ascendence since the downfall of Voldemort, since so many of the Dark, Traditionalist houses were openly or ideologically aligned with him, and oh! Mother! I didn't see you there."

Bella turned to the door. Zee was indeed there, fully clothed, now, and looking like a proper adult, albeit a muggle one. A skirt-suit, she thought that was called. It was terribly risqué by magical standards: the blouse dipped down practically to her navel, her breasts hidden only by the ruffles of the collar, framed by the jacket in such a way that the eye couldn't help but be drawn to it. She was wearing high-heeled shoes and her legs, clad in some sheer, skin-tight silky-looking material, were visible all the way from her ankles to up past her knees. Auntie Walburga would have had hysterics if she had seen it. Bella smiled at the thought.

"Dinner's here," Zee said, holding up a brown paper bag that Bella hadn't noticed.

"And you're going out," Blaise observed. "Don't forget to use a condom," he added, with the spark of mischief that signaled sarcasm in his eye.

Bella had to wonder what exactly a condom was.

"Blaise, it's a dinner meeting!"

"So pass them around like party favors. I like being an only child."

Some sort of contraception, then. A potion, maybe?

In any case, that question was far less interesting than watching the way Zee interacted with her son. They hardly seemed like parent and child at all, really. She had noted it earlier, when he had been asking about her sexual exploits with Bella's alter-ego. There was no sense of hierarchy in their relationship, no indication that Zee cared about Blaise's blatantly disrespectful attitude. It was fascinating. They really seemed more like cousins than mother and son, both more casual and more distant than immediate family. That was probably a large part of the reason the idea of Zee having a son was so odd: she really didn't act like a parent.

Case in point: she rolled her eyes and ignored him, rather than flying into a rage at his presumptuous comment. "I had told Alex to cancel, but she showed up twenty minutes ago begging me to take Aiden's call, and he insists that the deal will fall through if I'm not there to dazzle our guests, and you two seem to be getting along well...?" Her voice rose at the end, there, as though implying a question. Bella caught Blaise's eyes darting toward her own before he shrugged and nodded. "Good, I presume you can keep yourselves occupied for the rest of the evening. So yes, I am going out. Bella, we'll catch up tomorrow, yes?"

"Uh, yes? Sure?" It wasn't as though Bella had any other plans, she supposed.

Blaise sighed loudly. "Yes, yes, go on. But if you think we're saving your gaeng daeng for you, you are sadly mistaken."

"Her what?" Bella had to ask.

"It's this curry soup thing she always gets, it's delicious."
Zee sighed, handing over the bag with a longing, lingering look. Then she smirked. "I'll just have to console myself with outlandishly expensive Italian desserts. Ta, loves."

She was halfway out the door with a flutter of fingers before Bella could even think to respond with a farewell, so instead she turned to Blaise. "What's curry?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N

Return of the revenge of writer's block. Seriously, I've been so useless lately. People still waiting for Her Mother's Love are screwed, ha ha... —Lysandra

You think your readers are screwed... —Leigha

Anyway, yes, chapter. Now that things are settling in, we'll be moving along more quickly. (These three chapters occurred over the course of three days. Slow as hell pacing, when you think about it.) One chapter, one interlude, and we're off for Hogwarts already.

Nobody is prepared.

(All according to plan.)
Narcissa Malfoy (née Black) was a very busy woman. She was the de facto head of her political bloc, attended every single Wizengamot session, was a member of six different committees (and chairperson of two), and still found time to attend at least three weekly tea-gatherings and hostess at least one gala event per season. She even managed to spend an hour or two every day with her son, which was not something many ladies of her status could claim. Virtually every second of her day was spoken for, if she wanted even a moment of leisure time to herself she had to budget for it.

It was difficult to arrange for anything on short notice, was the point.

Of course, she knew that Mirabella Zabini was quite busy herself, what with her mysterious muggle business ventures — she was hardly an expert in the topic, Narcissa wasn't sure what absorbed so much of her attention exactly — and her ongoing pursuit of that American she'd been casually mentioning for ages, not to mention her own son. (Narcissa would never call Mirabella a bad mother, but she did rather tend to let Blaise fend for himself while she seduced her men.)

And then there was her work for the Department of Education. Granted, the Department's responsibilities were far more seasonal than that of most others, but the summer just so happened to be the time of the year they were most active. Unlike most previous Directors, Mirabella had a reputation for getting all her ducks in a row in the months before the school year ended, allowing them to get through their yearly revisions and relicensing with greater than usual efficiency. But that didn't mean unexpected problems didn't come up, and it didn't mean her attention wasn't still required.

That only made it all the more irritating when Mirabella suggested they do lunch, then refused to reorganize her schedule to fit with Narcissa's. Surely she knew the value of the time she was demanding. But she seemed to think that whatever 'great surprise' she had organized, the one Narcissa was 'going to love' was so spectacular that Narcissa should be pleased to find an opening in her schedule, when it was Mirabella making the request for a meeting!

And now, when Narcissa had finally made time for this surprise — it had been a week, but this was the earliest opportunity; it wasn't as though Narcissa could reschedule Wizengamot votes, and she had needed every lunch and tea prior to meet with other Lords and Ladies, assuring their cooperation — Mirabella was late.

Probably thought it fashionable.

Either that, or she thought she could get away with it since she had known Narcissa since she was three. She had been nearly as great a presence in Narcissa's life as Bella, her sister's best (and only) friend. Even after Bella had completely lost herself and practically paraded into Azkaban, Mirabella had made a point of keeping in contact. At first it had been very irritating — her constant letters asking how Narcissa was coping with everything that had surrounded the end of the war; her meddling insistence on writing to Tonks and recalling her from exile; the incessant invitations to teas, dinners, and balls; taking over Bella's place, as though Bella had ever been that sort of older sister — but by this point Narcissa was resigned. Zee was nearly family, or as close as Narcissa had, anymore.

But that didn't mean she could demand a highly inconvenient meeting, then fail to show up!
"Cissy, darling!" Mirabella's voice called from behind her. Narcissa covered an internal wince at the use of her childhood nickname and covertly checked the time. Nearly a quarter past.

She rose and turned to make her greeting, perhaps with a barbed comment about her tardiness, but all thought of time and propriety was driven from her mind by the sight of the girl Mirabella was shepherding before her through the restaurant.

She looked to be about Draco's age, though tall for thirteen and uncommonly graceful, moving between the chairs and tables with the deliberate sway of a trained duelist or dancer. Her dark hair was braided in the French style, but the wisps that had escaped attested to its curl. Her face — those eyes, those cheekbones, even the slope of her forehead — she had to be a Black.

"Mirabella," she said belatedly, distracted by the girl, unable, almost, to look away in order to give a proper nod, her gaze drawn again to eyes, so dark, like Bella's and their father's, and the tiny smirk, so like Sirius, so pleased with herself, with Narcissa's distraction.

Mirabella was smirking, too. "Cissy, this is Lyra." She even had a Black name — but how? "Lyra, my dear, meet Lady Narcissa Malfoy, née Black."

The rudeness of her greeting was enough to break the spell. Narcissa sniffed. "Lady Malfoy will do, thank you, Miss..." Damn, she hadn't caught the girl's House. Curse Zee and her penchant for informality! "...Lyra," she finished weakly.

"If you insist," the girl said, raising an eyebrow in an expression so terribly familiar— "So have you ordered yet? I'm famished."

"Yes, let's sit," Mirabella said, waving her apparent charge toward the table. She took the seat directly opposite Narcissa, leaving Mirabella to face the empty place. More rudeness, especially considering that Mirabella had arranged the luncheon to meet with Narcissa.

"So," she said, turning firmly to Mirabella, rather than stare at that disconcerting face. (All the while her mind whirling — the child had to be a Black, but that was impossible! There were no Blacks left! Maybe the daughter of one of her female cousins? But why would she be here, and with Zee of all people?) "Mirabella, what did you want to talk about?"

Mirabella laughed. "All business, Cissy?"

"Well, you did make it sound rather urgent, whatever it is."

The older witch grinned, gesturing toward the girl.

"Ta da," the girl said, fluttering her fingers to the sides of her face. "Lyra Black, the one and only. Mira told me she knew someone who might be a long lost relative of mine? I guess that'd be you."

Narcissa was rendered immediately and incoherently speechless. "But — what? How? You can't be... Is it true?" she asked finally, turning to Zee again, unable to conceal the hopeful expression she felt dawning on her face. Could it really be possible that the House isn't dead?

"Oh, yes," Zee confirmed, though any elaboration was interrupted by the arrival of the food Narcissa had indeed already ordered.

She had only expected Zee, however: the girl requested a menu, and for several minutes their conversation was overtaken by utterly mundane matters as she placed her own order. It was
entirely surreal, watching this girl, this living, breathing hope for her natal House, behaving as though she hadn't a care in the world, as though she cared nothing for the significance of her presence, here, before Narcissa.

When the waiter was gone, she managed to ask, "Where did you find her, Zee? How did you find her?"

Zee grinned. "I didn't, she found me. Came to my office at the Ministry looking for information on transferring schools. The second I saw her I knew you'd want to meet her."

Narcissa nodded absently. "Transferring schools?" she asked, to give herself time to process this revelation. It wasn't until after she spoke that the thought struck her: Why would a routine transfer be sent to the office of the Director? Mirabella was lying. But she kept the suspicion from her face, tucked the thought away to mull over later.

Lyra heaved a sigh. "Yeah. My great-grandmother was a witch and she was teaching me, but she caught the flu that went around last winter and died, so I need to get into a school at least until Competency exams are given, right?"

Mirabella nodded. "Three or four more years I should think, depending on how your education to this point compares to the Hogwarts curriculum. We tend to find that homeschooled transfer students are ahead of their peers in some areas, and behind in others, the school will test you to determine your class level."

"Your great-grandmother," Narcissa said, trying to hide her urgency. "Who was she?"

"Her name was Beth Black, Sanders before she married my great-grandfather. She was a muggleborn. He was a squib, and so were their kids and I think all of their grandkids, including my father."

"What was his name?"

"My dad? Leo. Why?"

"No, your great-grandfather." Narcissa struggled to recall the names of the Black squibs. (They didn't exist according to the adults of the family, but the children had passed their names down in horror stories from one generation to the next.) "Was it Deneb? Rigel?"

"Oh! Marius. I think his first name started with an 'R'. It might have been Rigel."

Regulus. It had been Regulus. But there was already a Regulus in that generation, so Marius, like his sister, Bellatrix Dorea, had been called by his second name before they burned him off the Tapestry. Polaris had told her about him when she'd been eight or nine — she had been terrified to think that there was a squib so close to herself in the family tree. How could she have forgotten him?

"It was Regulus. He was... He was a great uncle," she said, hesitating slightly over whether to claim him as kin, but if she wanted this girl for the Blacks...

The girl's food arrived. She and Mirabella began to eat. Narcissa simply couldn't. Not when there were so many questions still. "Your father, he's still alive? What about your mother? Do you have siblings?"

The girl shrugged. "Dad's alive, mum's not, she died when I was born. And I'm an only child. Gonna stay that way, too. Dad got cancer, see, he can't have any more kids. Why so many
questions?" She gave Narcissa a look which might have been meant to suggest that she found the intensity of Narcissa's interest somewhat off-putting.

"You didn't—? She doesn't know," she said, turning to Mirabella.

"Oh, no, I didn't tell her anything. I know better than to get involved in Black family matters," she said innocently, picking apart her salad.

That was a filthy lie. Narcissa couldn't remember a time when Zee wasn't 'involved in Black family matters'. But that wasn't the point.

She took a deep breath to center herself and began to explain, "You're probably not aware of this, Lyra, but the House of Black is an ancient magical family, its verifiable history stretching back more than fifteen hundred years. Legends of its founder go back far further — over two millennia..."

Introducing herself to Narcissa as Lyra had been a stroke of genius, Bella thought. Not only had it allowed them to test the viability of the cover story, but with Narcissa on their side, no one would even attempt to challenge her legitimacy. Her baby sister might have married out of the family, might have been an obvious bastard in the first place — she was blonde, how hard was it to figure out? — but she had been claimed and raised by the House and she was by far the most respectable person who had been associated with it for at least the past three decades. If she was willing to accept the 'muggleborn' Lyra's claim as a newfound scion of the House, who was anyone else to question it?

On the other hand, introducing herself to Narcissa as Lyra had been a gross miscalculation. Narcissa now insisted on being involved in every aspect of Lyra's 'introduction' to Magical Britain. She had scheduled an appointment at Gringotts and two different days for shopping. She had scheduled lunches and teas where she explained proper manners and decorum and what would be expected of Lyra as the Heir Apparent to House Black. She had tried to get Lyra to move in with her, but Bella had put her foot down at that. There was no way she could constantly keep up the facade of ignorance her backstory required.

Plus Zee was just...better company. And Blaise had warned her about Narcissa's son — she hadn't met him yet, it almost seemed like Narcissa was trying to keep her away from the Malfoys' manor, but apparently her nephew was an insufferable, stuck-up prat.

She had let Narcissa become her official guardian in Magical Britain, after Zee had pointed out that if she didn't appoint someone, Dumbledore would become her de facto guardian once she went to school. Not that she really had anything against Dumbledore personally — he had been massively biased against Slytherin students in his classes, but was otherwise a perfectly serviceable Transfiguration professor, she hadn't thought of him much at all beyond that — but Blaise's recounting of the past two years really hadn't painted a very flattering picture of him.

Zee had already had her papers forged — or possibly produced "in error" by the proper office, Bella didn't know or honestly care. They'd just had Aaron the Maintenance Muggle scrawl an illegible signature in the place where her father's name ought to have been, giving responsibility for 'his' daughter over to Narcissa whenever she was within the bounds of Magical Britain. Narcissa was already talking about arranging special permission to have her "home" from Hogwarts once a month to catch her up on all the lessons she'd "missed out on" growing up, which was rather odd — Bella had had lessons with Ciardha every weekend in Hogsmeade. No one had ever questioned her leaving campus so long as she came back before curfew.
If Bella had actually been muggleborn, she might have welcomed Cissy's proposal. As it was, the only reason she had agreed was for the excuse to leave campus at regular intervals. She could already foresee long, tedious Saturday afternoons reviewing family trees and lists of pureblood families she'd had memorized since she was six. Pretending ignorance was turning out to be much more difficult than she had expected.

Case in point: standing here next to Narcissa listening to her bloody well butcher the formal greetings to the goblin who would be taking them to the Black family vault. 'Lyra' had no reason to know how to speak Gobbledygook, it would be very, very out of character if she did, but Bella couldn't help but wince. It was a wonder the goblins hadn't thrown them out just to stop the travesty against their language.

She distracted herself by thinking about the contents of the Vault. It wasn't the gold or artifacts she was after but the family grimoires. The books documenting all the major magical workings which had, over the years, become the Family Magic. Narcissa, of course, thought they were only there to demonstrate that the wards on the Vault recognized her. It would be taken as a sign that the Family Magic accepted her — which of course it already had — and she would be as official a Black as anyone, with full access to the money and power their name entailed.

If she could get Cissy to stop treating her like a child for one powers-be-damned minute.

It was more irritating than having to pretend ignorance, even more irritating than Meda being such a mum. For one thing, Cissy was even younger, almost a decade Bella's junior. For another, while Meda had once been every bit the prissy pureblood princess, she had apparently grown out of it. She was a bit of a class traitor, to hear Zee talk about her, using her connections and her knowledge of the law to help half-bloods and muggleborns navigate Magical Britain.

Cissy very clearly hadn't. She was more of a prig and a stickler for protocol than Walburga, even. It was insufferable.

But Bella needed her.

Eris, entertain me, she demanded petulantly.

There was no response. Not that Bella had really expected one. Nothing interesting was happening, so Eris probably wasn't paying any attention to her at all. She'd been far more focused on Other Bellatrix since they'd arrived, presumably because attempting to reverse the damage Riddle had done to her mind was more urgent than observing the minutiae of Bella's establishment of her cover story, and not because she was preying on the insecurities of the Dementors of Azkaban to instigate a prison riot or mass break out or something.

Though... You'd better not be having fun without me!

That managed to raise a hint of amusement from the silent presence in the back of her mind, but not nearly enough to suggest that Eris really was off undermining the state prison of Magical Britain. It was something to consider, though, once they got Other Bella's mind working properly again. A few dozen murderers and anti-Statutarians on the loose would certainly shake up the establishment, not to mention the two hundred or so petty criminals serving shorter sentences at any given time.

Put it on the list, she decided, just as the goblin — she hadn't caught his name, too busy trying to ignore Cissy's mangled speech — turned to lead them down to the vault.

Right. Time to put her plan (such as it was) into action.
See, there was no reason for Lyra to want to read up on the Family Magic. For all Cissy knew, Lyra was basically a muggleborn, albeit a muggleborn who had been homeschooled in the basics of magic. It would be just as suspicious, if not more so, for Lyra to want to take home the Black Grimoires as it would be if she started correcting Cissy's pronunciation of Gobbledygook.

Therefore, Bella had developed a fool-proof strategy to ensure that Cissy didn't notice her slipping a few books into her magically expanded pockets as she explored the wonders and treasures of the vault 'for the first time.'

As the trolley began to roll forward, approaching the first big drop, Bella pulled her wand, directing it surreptitiously at her sister's abdomen, waiting for the appropriate moment. They picked up speed, blasting through the Thief's Downfall, entering a series of switches. These were followed by half a dozen smaller drops and quick turns to kill speed as they approached the Black Vault, which always made the cart jolt and rattle — loudly enough to cover the sound of her casting.

_Now! Naftía sto gi!_ she whispered, the strongest nauseating hex she knew.

By the time they jolted to a halt Narcissa was looking rather green. Perfect. She stumbled out of the cart and steadied herself against the wall of the tunnel. Like that would help.

"Circe, Morgen and Lilith," she complained. "It seems that hideous contraption becomes more tedious each year."

Bella suppressed a snigger. She exited slightly more gracefully, as the goblin traced his finger down the groove in the door. It dissolved into green vapor, verifying that nothing had been tampered with since the vault was last opened.

Bella began to walk forward, but before she could cross the threshold, Cissy grabbed her hand.

"You don't have to do this — that is if you..."

Bella couldn't quite parse the look on her face (fear? worry?), but she could think of only one reason that Cissy might hesitate now, as she was on the cusp of proving her viability as an heir of the house: If 'Lyra' wasn't really a Black, the wards would simply kill her. Or more likely, they would rather messily kill her. And if that were to happen, Cissy would lose her chance to revive the house.

It must be a bit of a gamble to allow her to be recognized by the Vault in Cissy's perspective. After all, while a potential heir recognized by the Family Magic would be far superior to an heir who was only socially and legally recognized, even Bella suspected that if she were really descended from a Black squib, well. Cissy could work with an 'unrecognized' heir. She couldn't work with a dead one.

Rather than attempt to come up with an appropriate response, Bella shook her hand free and stepped backward through the doorway with a smirk. The magic of the wards washed over her, cool and inviting, as she had known it would — the wards at Ancient House had been the same, welcoming her and embracing her with a speed and vehemence she would have called desperation, in a sentient being.

"What were you saying?"

"Nothing of importance," Cissy said, flushing slightly, clearly embarrassed by her lapse in confidence. "Now," she said, rallying slightly. "Now that you have been recognized by the wards, and Account Manager Saghoul has recorded the event," she turned a shadow of her usual
aristocratic sneer of expectation on the goblin — *Saqule, that was it* — who was glowering, Bella
thought, at the mispronunciation of his name.

Saqule stared back impudently.

Of course he did, she hadn't actually asked him a question. "Hey, Goblin Bob! You did write down
the whatever, witness the event, right? We're good? All legal and official and shit?"

The goblin glared at her — What? Would he rather she called him Plummets? — but ground out a
resentful "Yes, Miss Black," before muttering something under his breath that sounded rather a lot
like *what kind of human-raised witchling brat knows how to speak Gobbledygook?*

Oops. Fortunately, she was quite certain that Cissy's Gobbledygook wasn't good enough to have
catched that, but perhaps she shouldn't have translated the name at all. Oh well. Not much she could
do about it now.

And Cissy was still talking: "Now that the fact of your recognition is a matter of public record, we
should consider introducing you to some of your peers before you depart for Hogwarts. Though we
really will need to work on your sense of decorum a bit more first," she groaned, closing her eyes
and leaning her head back against the cavern wall, clearly still feeling the effects of Bella's spell —
it *was* supposed to get stronger the longer it was in effect.

Bella made a non-committal noise at the suggestion of more etiquette lessons from her baby sister
and changed the subject. "Anyway, now that we're here, I'm going to have a look around!" she
announced, nearly skipping away between the piles of treasure and artefacts collected by the
Family over the centuries. Behind her she could hear Cissy's weak warning against touching
anything — poor muggle-raised Lyra wouldn't be able to tell what was cursed and what wasn't,
after all.

Though really, she thought, looking around, there wasn't much that *wasn't* cursed. She could feel
the malevolent energy radiating off of jewelry and books all around her, had to fight to avoid
getting distracted examining them — Pater Arcturus had never let her have free reign in here,
probably for fear of what she might get up to with all the treasures of the House at her disposal.

But there was no Head of House to deny her access now, she could always come back later. And
mysterious attack of nausea aside, it was only a matter of time until Cissy decided she was taking
too long with her sightseeing and decided to follow her.

*If I were a family grimoire, where would I be...*

Oh, there, obviously.

At the very back of the vault there was a small bookcase, more of a lectern with shelves, really,
designed to display the knowledge and history of the family while studying or casting the ancient
spells. There had been a brief vogue a few centuries ago, soon after the advent of the Statute and
the outlawing of major ritual workings, to have these things in ritual rooms. It wasn't like most
Houses ever let outsiders into their ritual rooms back when they were used for actual rituals, but
for a few decades there, it had been a *thing* to show off the power and prestige of the House. Until
the Rowles' family seat had been broken into and all their grimoires stolen. For some reason that
whole fad had lost popularity soon after.

She ran her fingers over the volumes' spines, their covers cracking with age and the power they
contained, despite the enchantments laid on them when they were new. Every inch of every page
had been imbued with magic, tied to the wards of their various properties and the blood of their
line. There was a reason that the Blacks had used blood adoptions well after the process was linked to the proliferation of squibs in subsequent generations — anyone other than a Black, anyone not recognized by the wards, or more than three steps removed from the heart of the family, the Head of the House, would wish for death after coming into contact with any of the curses laid upon them.

They wouldn't die, of course, not until the Head of the House decided to bless them with that sweet release, but magic, mind, and body would turn against themselves and each other, twisted and corrupted well beyond the bounds of sanity.

Or so Bella had been warned, the first time she had been brought into the vault — she had been five steps from Pater Arcturus, and even Eris hadn't wanted to tangle with that kind of magic. Happily, however, the new Head of the House (if her elf was to be believed) was exactly three steps from herself, rendering her safe from those protections.

She smirked broadly to herself, slipping the first two volumes into her magically expanded pockets. She would have liked to take them all, but Cissy would doubtless notice the magic radiating off of them *en masse*. She had no way to conceal that kind of power, and no reasonable excuse to explain the suspicions it would inevitably raise.

*It's okay, I can always come back later,* she reminded herself, skipping off to find something sparkly to appear fascinated with as she heard her sister making her way into the Vault. It wasn't difficult.

*Ooh, Cromwell's peridots! I wonder if they still have any charge left...*

"Black? You mean, *the* Blacks?"

Bella shot the girl an exasperated glare. Honestly, she wished all of Blaise's guests had come at the same time — she'd already answered that question twice. "Yes, Tracey, the Blacks."

"I'm sorry, it's just, you know..." Tracey, a sharp-faced girl with messy dark hair cut short — to Bella's surprise, wearing clearly muggle-made jeans and tee shirt, she'd been under the impression the Davises were a strongly traditionalist family — drew in a hard wince, hand rubbing at the side of her neck. "Just, there aren't any Blacks anymore, are there? I thought there was just Sirius left."

She failed to hold in a sigh. And that was the *third time today* she'd heard someone say that, too. The second time it had been funny, by now it was just annoying.

It had been nearly a month now since Bella had found herself in 1993, and time was proceeding apace. She was still catching up a bit, so far as the history she had missed and the current climate in Britain was concerned, but she'd picked up enough she'd slowed down on that angle. Blaise had turned out to be a huge help there. Since they'd established where approximately their timelines had deviated, he was pretty good about guessing what exactly might be different here. Surprisingly, Narcissa had also proved helpful — most of her lessons were so tedious the word was insufficient, Bella had learned it all *ages* ago (and had honestly hated it even then), but the attitudes of the various Noble families, the alliances and enmities between them, she knew all of it with a level of breadth and detail Blaise simply couldn't match. And the political situation was different enough here most of it was at least a little unfamiliar. They didn't talk about politics often, but when they did Narcissa was a wellspring of information that never went dry.

From those talks, Bella was slowly getting the impression Narcissa was two steps away from running the entire damn country. So, apparently clearing that little affair for take off during Orion...
and Walburga's wedding had been a brilliant idea, then. All right.

Sometimes, when Narcissa was being especially annoying or condescending, Bella wanted to blurt out that she was literally responsible for her existence. Or, presumably Other Bella was, at least. (Somehow she couldn't see Druella fucking a Lovegood without Eris's interference.) But that was probably a bad idea.

She did have other projects, of course, but they'd mostly stalled. Eris hadn't gotten back to her about Other Bella yet — she should probably take that as a bad sign. The last thing her patron had said on the matter was a snippy comment about the difficulty of the task of restoring order to anything for a goddess of chaos. Well, other than the occasional tirade against Tom Fucking Riddle and mind magic in general.

She was chipping away at the Family Magic problem, but it was slow work. The Grimoires were complicated and...uncooperative. It was almost like the arseholes who wrote them in the first place didn't want their descendents to be able to figure out what they did. It might make more sense if she went back to Ancient House and accessed the keystone of the wards, but she really didn't have the extensive theoretical background she needed to analyze them. Or a solid understanding of the way they had been cast originally — coven magic hadn't been used for nearly seven centuries! Plus she was pretty sure that only the Head of House could manipulate the keystone. So she had to find Sirius first.

And Sirius was impressively difficult to find. There had been absolutely no sightings of him, anywhere. It'd belatedly occurred to her she should be able to just send an elf to grab him, but all Cherri could tell her was that he wasn't hiding on any of the Black properties. It seemed Sirius was clever enough and skilled enough to put up a paling against house elves and somehow tie it to his person. Good thinking, really. Annoying, but good.

Or the Family Magic was just that unstable at the moment, a prospect she'd rather not contemplate. Either way, there was nothing she could do about the Sirius situation right now. As far she or anyone else could guess — because it was just a guess, really — he was still headed to Hogwarts. Zee said the Ministry was convinced he was after the Potter kid specifically, now. When she asked Narcissa what the hell that was all about, Cissy had told her that the Potters had named Sirius as their son's godfather. Which made it even less likely that he would have joined the Dark Lord and betrayed them, but whatever.

Therefore she had concluded that to have the best chance of finding Sirius (or more realistically having him come to her), she needed to not only go to Hogwarts but also associate herself with Harry Potter. Theoretically, that should be relatively simple since they were in the same year. But in order to support her 'homeschooling' cover, she would have to be tested to determine which classes she would actually attend. She had skimmed through Blaise's notes from last year to ensure nothing had changed too drastically in the past thirty years and looked through the third year textbooks to figure out what she technically 'shouldn't' know yet. Which had only reminded her why she hadn't bothered paying attention in class herself. How could anyone possibly expect her to spend two whole weeks contemplating the difference between a color changing illusion and an equivalent glamour?

Beyond that? Not really a lot going on.

Bella had a very low tolerance for not a lot going on.

Most days recently she'd spent examining Zee's library and working on teaching herself Old High Elvish. Of course, there weren't really fae around anymore — though if she could find them and
convince them to come back to this dimension, well, that could certainly make life interesting. Their language, however, was a sort of lingua franca among demons and the more intelligent dark creatures. Most serious scholarship on extra planar travel and communication was written in Old High Elvish. Which was probably the only reason that a relatively large proportion of them survived compared to texts on the other Greater Dark Arts. There were almost certainly more necromancers and bio-alchemists and rune casters out there, but they were mostly human, and mostly wrote in French, English, or Latin. It was much easier for regulatory bodies to track down and destroy information if they could understand it.

So when Blaise had gotten the brilliant idea to introduce her to some of his contacts at Hogwarts, she had leapt at the opportunity. She had been resisting Cissy's efforts to introduce her to her peers, partly because she hated the sort of formal affairs that Cissy would certainly arrange, but mostly because she didn't want her introduction to Society to imply that she was operating under the patronage of House Malfoy, which Cissy organizing things certainly would. (Even more so than very obviously escorting her around Diagon Alley to buy clothes and school supplies had already done.)

That didn't change the fact that even if this were her timeline, she was a generation behind, none of the students amongst whom she needed to establish herself had even been born yet in her time. Meeting the people Blaise knew the best, the ones he spent most of his time at Hogwarts with, in a decidedly informal setting, would probably be her best opportunity to sound out the political situation she was about to enter without implying any position or alliances of her own and make an initial impression on "the cool kids" as Blaise liked to call them.

Not to mention "hanging out" with a few of the people Blaise found useful and entertaining would almost certainly be more interesting than taking tea with the children of Narcissa's strongest political allies.

According to Blaise, it wasn't uncommon for one or sometimes all of them to meet up at his place now and then, though most of them had been "on vacation" for part or all of the past few weeks. Bella was almost certain that he had deliberately avoided having them over while they worked out her backstory and established Lyra as a newly discovered Black, but was too...tactful to admit that he'd gone out of his way to make things easier for her.

But in any case, it had been simple enough for him to arrange a sort of casual gathering only a few days before the beginning of the term.

And so they had come, one after the other, through the floo in an upstairs drawing room. The first two to arrive, within a few minutes of each other, were Daphne Greengrass and Theo Nott. Even if she hadn't been told, she'd have been able to guess Daphne's house — she was the spitting image of Ailbhe Greengrass, the same round face, ice-blue eyes, curly blonde hair, probably her daughter. Theo was a tiny, quiet little thing, almost seeming to hide behind his shaggy brown hair. Bloke hardly ever seemed to open his mouth, but watched every interaction with sharp eyes and a near-permanent sardonic smirk.

He had opened it long enough to ask if she meant the Blacks. Daphne had asked the same thing. At least she hadn't gotten the same from Justin, a tall boy with a round face and curly brownish-blond hair. He'd been a little later than the other two, since transportation was a little harder for him to arrange, being a muggleborn and all. (He'd come in through the front door, actually, she wasn't certain how he'd even gotten here.) Bella hadn't been entirely sure what a muggleborn Hufflepuff of all people was doing socializing with wellborn purebloods. So, of course, she'd come right out and asked.
Before answering, Blaise had smirked, pointed out that she was technically a muggleborn too. Bella had just scowled at him.

Apparently Jonathan, the dead husband who'd left Zee the house, had been a friend of Justin's family. Blaise had actually met Justin before Hogwarts — in fact, Zee had noticed he was magical while his age had still been in the single digits, had taken it upon herself to inform them ahead of time.

Zee really didn't seem to have any respect for the Statute of Secrecy at all. Not that Bella had a problem with that, not even remotely, it just seemed a little risky.

Not that she had any right to judge. She was just saying.

Tracey had turned up after that whole conversation, by this point unfashionably late. And had immediately come out with the same question, for the third time today. "I mean, I don't mean anything by it. I just mean— Well, I didn't expect it is all. Blaise said they were putting someone up, but he neglected to mention she was a bloody Black." Tracey turned a glare on Blaise — with the intensity of it, with her dark hair and grey eyes, she almost looked like a Black herself for a second there. The face was wrong, but still.

Blaise smiled back at her. "That would have ruined the surprise."

"I hate you, Zabini."

"If lies make you happy."

It didn't take long for the conversation to turn to Hogwarts. There were no secrets in the Ministry — that hadn't changed between timelines, at least — so where Sirius was headed was practically common knowledge among the well-connected. Weirdly, none of them seemed that surprised by the thought of a supposed mass-murderer staking out the school. The fact that the Minister had apparently been given Emergency Powers (despite Narcissa's efforts to thwart the measure), and was using said Emergency Powers to set the dementors of Azkaban on Hogwarts (for the same reason Bella was headed there herself), was of much greater concern.

Personally, Bella thought it might be kind of interesting to see a dementor up close, she'd be lying if she said that wasn't a major factor in her interest in the demonology section of Zee's library (alongside attempting to verify whether it was actually possible for an incubus to impregnate a human). But other people were concerned. Even Blaise seemed a bit put out by the notion.

"I would say you picked a bad year to start at Hogwarts," Justin was saying, "but it doesn't seem to make a difference, does it? One disaster after another, that place."

"Has it really been that bad?" Blaise had given her a brief overview of the past two years, but he had mostly focused on the teachers and Dumbledore's administration of the school (or lack thereof) rather than any major disasters. She did vaguely remember him mentioning something about a basilisk, but she honestly hadn't been able to tell if he was being serious about that...

Tracey snorted. "If your name is Potter, it might as well be a warzone." She twitched a little, turned to slap the sliver of leg between her and Daphne. After they'd all gotten here, Blaise had laid himself across the whole length of a couch, smiling indolently up at the rest of them. So Daphne and Tracey had just sat on his legs. Tracey had ended up on his feet, and Blaise must have been wiggling his toes, she smacked him every couple minutes or so.

"There have been several... incidents during our tenure at the school," Daphne said, her voice
pitched a little softer, as though trying to reassure her, "but they never affect that many people. And mostly it is just Potter. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the older students just decided to hex him every once in a while — that would explain most of it. But then there was the troll first year. And last year, er..." Suddenly awkward, her eyes flicked to Justin.

He flicked a dismissive wave, shaking his head. "It's fine. The story was, a student was letting a basilisk loose into the school. A few muggleborns got petrified. Along with a cat and even a ghost, apparently."

"What? How the hell do you petrify a ghost? They're not even solid! There's nothing to petrify!"
The idea was fascinating, come to think of it...

Daphne and Tracey gave her weird looks — it occurred to her that was something a home-tutored muggleborn probably shouldn't know — but Justin didn't blink, shrugging. "I wouldn't know, I never saw it. Nick and I were knocked out in the same attack." His face fell, voice dropping into a grumble. "I missed months of school. Half of the professors didn't even bother giving me notes on what I'd missed, I had to ask friends to help me catch up. Thanks for letting me practice here, by the way, Blaise. Though, speaking of which..." he trailed off, giving Blaise a significant look.

Blaise groaned. "Fine. Though if you really wanted to thank me, that's not the best way to do it..."

Tracey and Daphne exchanged a confused look. Good, at least Bella wasn't the only one who had apparently missed something there.

"What?"

Blaise gave her a mischievous grin. "Well, the best way to thank me would obviously be — Hey! Daphne!"

"Yes, Blaise?" The blonde shifted her weight ever so slightly with a tiny smirk, suggesting that whatever she had done, she had done it intentionally.

"Ow?"

"Stop being a cad," Tracey advised him, then shrieked and jumped up to glare at him as he apparently wiggled his toes again.

Daphne moved a bit more, just enough to make him wince before asking, her tone saccharine sweet, "What was it you were saying, Blaise, about the best way to thank you?"

"Concert tickets! I was going to say muggle concert tickets!"

"Oh, concert tickets, eh?" Tracey said, grinning maniacally as Daphne rose to perch on the arm of the sofa, allowing him to sit up. "Not—"

"Not practicing dueling," Blaise informed them, still speaking slightly too quickly. "Though really, pretty much anything would be better thanks than that."

The girls looked at each other for half a second. Then Daphne announced, "I'm in."

"Yeah," Tracey nodded. "We don't get nearly enough opportunities to kick pretty boy's arse. Theo? Lyra?"

Theo nodded sharply, his sardonic expression briefly becoming something more predatory.
Bella considered the proposition. On the one hand, this was probably a bad idea. She wasn't sure she could participate and still keep her Lyra the Semi-Educated Muggleborn cover: Lyra probably shouldn't be all that good at dueling, and Bella wasn't sure she could bring herself to lose intentionally. But on the other hand, she wasn't sure how much of her facade was still intact anyway — she was getting the impression she'd made at least a few major missteps already — and it had been weeks since she'd had a good sparring match. Fuck it. "Sure, sounds like fun."

Blaise groaned. "Later, then. I can't fight now. I'm injured." (Daphne sniggered.) "And I'm not going to fight all of you!" he added defensively. "You can take out your barbaric urge to violence on each other."

Justin rolled his eyes, turning back to Bella, away from their byplay. "Well, now that that's settled, I was saying, I'm not sure I believe it was actually a basilisk. I don't remember what happened that well but, well, I read about basilisks, and they sound seriously bloody scary. If one of those was slithering around the halls, shouldn't have someone died at some point? Shouldn't I be dead? I do remember seeing its eyes, at least. And then there's the bit about Potter killing the thing, don't buy it."

"You're such a skeptic, Justin." Tracey lifted Blaise's feet to plop back down on the couch. "There's nothing at all impossible about a second year killing a millennium-old basilisk by shoving a sword up its nose. And he was a half-blood Gryffindor using Gryffindor's own sword to kill Slytherin's own muggleborn-hunting monstrosity! It's too perfect and poetic to not be real!"

"You're right, of course. I'm just thick-headed like that."

Bella opened her mouth, then closed it again, frowning to herself. It wasn't impossible. If it were any normal sword she might agree, but Gryffindor's was known to be goblin-forged. Goblin blades were perfectly sharp and were designed to ignore most magical defenses. (They'd be useless against wizards otherwise.) She didn't know if it'd ever been tested one way or the other, but she wouldn't be surprised if they cut through basilisk scale like butter — they worked just fine against dragons, after all. But anyone getting close enough to use one would still be unimaginably difficult, so it didn't really matter.

It was possible, but you'd have to be a bloody idiot of legendary scale to actually try it. A very short-lived legendary idiot.

"He is a parselmouth," Theo interjected. "That would probably help."

"So he says," Tracey quipped.

"I was there at the dueling meeting when he spoke it," Justin pointed out.

"But you're not a parselmouth. How do we know he wasn't just making nonsense noises and calling it parseltongue for the attention?"

"Or to distract Draco's snake and claim the glory of saving the poor, threatened Hufflepuff," Daphne suggested. "What is it with you and snakes, Justin?"

Justin shuddered, but any reply he might have made was lost in Blaise's quip: "Potter's always distracting Draco's snake..." and the accompanying laughter.

When the sniggers and innuendos about Malfoy's unacknowledged crush on the Gryffindor golden boy died off, Bella brought the conversation back to the issue at hand: "Potter isn't going around claiming to be some sort of Powers-be-damned fairy tale hero, is he?"
"He doesn't have to, Dumbledore does that for him," Daphne observed lightly.

But Blaise shrugged. "I don't know. Honestly, I've never talked to him."

"Why would you want to? When he's always hanging around Ronald bloody Weasley." The name was said with a scowl, and Tracey wasn't the only one — they all reacted like someone had dropped a dungbomb in the middle of the room, faces pinching with disgust.

"Yeah, fuck that kid."

"Weasley is a prat," Justin said, "but Potter's not actually that bad. I mean, he's a bit...prickly. The temper on that one, I swear, he'll bite your head off if you blink at him wrong. But he's not the one spreading the story around. He refused to talk about it at all, actually. Which, some people are just more convinced he was the Heir the whole time, but I can't see him doing anything to Granger. Did you see how miserable they both were after she was attacked?"

"I don't pay that much attention to Potter, honestly." Daphne made a tiny, elegant little shrug — this girl reminded her too much of Ailbhe sometimes, it was uncanny. "He just seems like a normal wizard to me. I'm certain that Boy Who Lived story is nonsense now."

Bella had been informed about that whole barrel of idiocy by now. The idea of an infant somehow deflecting the Killing Curse back at its caster was completely absurd — the idea any mundane magic could deflect the Killing Curse back at its caster beggared belief. Such a thing would almost certainly require high ritual of some kind. According to Zee, Lily Potter had been an exceptionally talented ritualist, especially for her age. Other Bella had apparently tried to recruit her to the Death Eaters at one point, she'd been that good. Bella's theory (not even an uncommon theory, it turned out) was that Lily had performed some sort of ritual to protect her son, probably with the sacrifice of her own life. That seemed far more likely to her.

Of course, that was assuming it had even happened at all. Maybe the Potters had simply beaten him, dying in the process. Far as she'd been able to find out, there weren't any witnesses — how did they know Riddle had been hit with his own Killing Curse bouncing off the baby back into his face? They didn't, that's how. She had no idea where the story had come from, there didn't seem to be any actual evidence for it. It was very strange.

But none of that really mattered right now. "As long as we're talking about Potter, you wouldn't happen to have any ideas how I could get close to him?"

Blaise gave her a thoughtful, considering look at that, but the others just looked at her with a mix of disbelief and disdain. Her voice thick with scorn, Tracey said, "Those books are shite, Lyra. Don't even bother trying to talk to him."

"What books?" And they were all staring at her again. "What?"

"What do you want with him, anyway?" Blaise was giving her a look, flat but hard. Smoothly changing the subject back on track. That "books" thing must just be a common knowledge thing she hadn't managed to pick up yet. She wondered if it something a muggleborn wouldn't know either.

Brushing off her confusion, she hesitated for a moment. She wasn't sure how to word this inconspicuously. Eh, fuck it. "The Ministry's convinced Sirius is trying to kill Potter." Which was shite, of course, but he might contact him anyway, being his godfather and all. "I need to talk to him. Sirius, I mean."
Tracey's eyes went wide. "Is he your father?"

"What?" That was just ridiculous. She remembered the little shite being born! She'd been in his parents' wedding!

"I was wondering about that." That was Justin, his eyes narrowed in thought, tapping at the side of his jaw. "I mean, there aren't that many Blacks, are there?" Aaand now we're four for four. "And showing up right after he broke out of Azkaban..."

"I— No! No, Sirius is my cousin, he's not my father." She was going to deal with people assuming that a lot, wasn't she? Powers, this was going to be tedious... Probably almost as tedious as you mean those Blacks? "I just, I need to get to him, preferably before the Ministry does. Family business, you know."

Bella noticed, with some annoyance, that none of them seemed particularly convinced, Tracey even giving her a knowing sort of smirk. Blaise probably wouldn't appreciate it if she went hexing his friends in the face. Thankfully, Daphne had the grace to move on. "I guess that depends on which house you end up in."

Great. House shite again. "Probably Slytherin." She had been in her own time, after all, she had no reason to expect it'd be any different here.

Tracey snorted. "Good luck, then."

"Oh, it's not impossible." Justin shrugged at her questioning eyebrow, said, "Most Gryffindors — and Hufflepuffs, for that matter — won't even talk to a Slytherin if they can help it, but not all of them. The Weasley girl, Ginny, I heard she's okay. For a Weasley, anyway. You could try her."

"Like that's any better. The rest of the Gryffindors practically shunned her all year, if you didn't notice."

"Well, it's the best I can think of. If she ends up a Ravenclaw she can get an in through Granger, but..."

Bella frowned to herself. She was starting to hope she wasn't Sorted into Slytherin again. With how Riddle's whole reign of terror had gone, it sounded like that would just make things...complicated. More difficult than they had to be, at least. And hey, if she got herself into Gryffindor, it wouldn't matter nearly so much whether she ended up in the same lessons as the other third-years.

Unfortunately, her mother wasn't still around (and had no idea who Bella was). The fit she would pitch at her daughter going into Gryffindor or, Powers forbid, Hufflepuff. It would have been a beautiful thing.

"Really, Blaise? Zeppelin again?"

"What's Zeppelin?"

Justin turned from Blaise, fiddling with the turntable in a corner, to stare at her. "But you're muggleborn."

"No shit, so are you. What does that have to do with anything?"

Okay, she was starting to get tired of those looks. What were they staring at, really now, come on. Well, Theo didn't seem to do anything but stare, but the rest of them — she was definitely missing
Blaise had finally decided that he was ready to get his arse kicked, as Tracey put it, but he had also
decided that music was required to make the whole process less miserable. By the way Daphne and
Theo sighed, this was a perfectly normal Blaise thing to do. Bella had never dueled to music
before, but she could see the appeal. She imagined it would probably make it more difficult to
make out your opponent's incantations.

They'd made for a larger room on the ground floor, one Zee had left mostly open for this purpose,
the tile floor barren of carpets or furniture, the walls plain wood panels. Multiple layers of wards
crackled in the air, thick enough with magic that Bella nearly felt she could reach out and touch it.

Blaise had gone for a turntable and a shelf thick with records in the corner without pausing —
Bella was distantly surprised to recognise the thing, she would have expected that to change at least
a little over the last thirty years. While the other kids bickered about who would be duelling whom
and whether it was appropriate to duel in one's undergarments (because Daphne's long robes would
certainly hinder her movement), Blaise finished up with his fiddling. The air rumbled with some
kind of low noise, Bella wasn't sure what that was supposed to be.

"Blaise, turn that down before—"

A sharp voice cut over Daphne before she could get the sentence all the way out, one phrase sung
odd and flat. She noticed Blaise was mouthing along. And then instrumentation was slamming her
in the face, sudden and loud and gritty and thick. Strange and mangled enough Bella couldn't even
tell what the hell it was. The percussion was vaguely familiar at least, but the rest was completely
foreign, messy and discordant and beautiful, so loud it was almost painful. She could feel the bass
notes vibrating in her chest and Eris's laughter at the back of her mind.

*Found an unexpected benefit to skipping a few decades, eh ducky?*

Yeah, you could say that.

The music cut off again, the singer's voice calling out alone. "Blaise! I can't even hear my—"

And then it was back, Blaise meeting Daphne's glare with a broad, toothy smirk. Tracey was
shouting something, the words lost under the noise, Justin chuckling and shaking his head. Even
Theo stopped staring at Bella to send him a glare. And Blaise just ignored them all, dipping and
writhing in time with the hard, thudding beat. Her head tilted as she watched, enthralled. His
dancing was almost as foreign as the music itself, and that sway he had going to his hips was
positively...*scandalous*.

Bella smiled. She *liked* scandalous.

After much badgering — or, more accurately, once most of the song was done anyway — Blaise
obligningly turned the volume down, and he and Justin outlined their usual duelling rules. The
longer they went on, the more Bella's forehead creased downward. Dark magic was almost
completely prohibited, anything that could even accidentally hurt someone too badly as well.
(They didn't have a healer on hand, Justin explained. Pansies.) They were pretty much limited to
defensive charms, basic shield-breakers and disarming hexes, and basic prank jinxes. Even proper
stunners and a solid *protego* would be pushing the limits of a normal thirteen-year-old's casting
ability.

Which, as she'd anticipated, was going to be a problem for her. Uncle Orion had taught her basic
charms and focusing exercises and the like, but by the time she got a tutor she'd had the power to
skip right to real magic. (Her Dedication, about a year earlier, might have had something to do with that.) Ciardha hadn't bothered with weak spells for babies, he'd just taught her what he thought was actually useful. And of course Professor Riddle was more inclined to make them invent defensive uses for common charms than to teach them any actual combat spells. He would much rather spend his lessons trying to teach them freeform magic. She knew some jinxes, of course — a few Ciardha said were effective as distractions, and she'd picked up some by observation at Hogwarts — but she didn't know enough to actually duel with them. In fact, she didn't think she'd ever used one in a real fight — when it came to dealing with Cygnus, she wasn't about to pull her punches.

She nearly asked Eris for help, but that was stupid. Maintaining her Lyra Black identity with a minimum of suspicious behavior was the exact opposite of what Eris would suggest she do. Never mind.

Maybe... Maybe she could get by without using combat spells at all. She just had to use basic charms. There were all kinds of basic charms that could be adapted for use in combat situations. If she kept herself to only spells taught in first- and second-year Charms she should be fine!

Except, well, she'd read through Blaise's Charms notes, but after establishing that she could do everything they'd be likely to test her on, she hadn't felt the need to memorize a list of all the charms they had actually learned. Yes, she had just taken her own second year exams a couple months ago, but it wasn't like she'd actually paid attention in class since...well, ever. They'd hardly learned anything first year, just basic physical effects — heating, cooling, levitation, making light and so on. They hadn't even covered summoning! She did remember that the practical for the last exam was to heat a cup of water and make it taste like tea. So she doubted there was anything really useful, anyway.

Just, okay, spells any random witch or wizard would know, that weren't at all dangerous, and were weak enough it wasn't too unusual a thirteen-year-old girl could cast them. She could do this, pretend she was in Defense or something, she just had to think about it for a second.

Oh, oh, she had it! Household charms! There were dozens of the things, and they were all comparatively simple. It wouldn't be unusual for her to know them either, everyone learned the things, it was perfectly mundane. And any spell could be adapted for combat, you just had to be creative. In fact, thinking about it, she was pretty sure a dusting charm could vanish living skin as easily as dead skin, and an overpowered flue-purging charm could probably be adapted into something like an entral expelling curse.

Not that she'd be using those, of course — casting that sort of magic on Blaise's people was probably a bad idea, and it wasn't like she could do that kind of arithmancy on the spot anyway. But she would keep them in mind for later. One day she might want to kill someone painfully without leaving traces of dark magic behind, you never know.

"Okay," Justin said, striding out into the center of the room and twirling his wand dramatically. "Who's first?"

"So eager to lose?" Tracey laughed. "I'll have a go." She meandered out to join him, stretching her arms and back as she went.

They took their positions and bowed to each other, the briefest nod of formality, and on Blaise's call ("Ready... Fight!") cast their first spells. Justin opened with expelliarmus, a poor choice since Tracey managed to cast lumax in about half the time, momentarily blinding all of them, even as she dodged his charm. Before the spots cleared from Bella's vision, she heard Tracey call out, "Rictusempra!"
Justin doubled over, laughing too hard to cast, which meant the duel was over.

It was quite possibly the shortest duel Bella had ever seen.

Theo cancelled Tracey's jinx, allowing Justin to catch his breath as Daphne chided her friend: "Trace, the whole point is for Justin to practice, you have to at least give him a chance!"

"Well, we wouldn't want to give him an overly inflated opinion of his own abilities, would we? I mean, if he's only been fighting Blaise..." 

"Hey, I'm not that bad!" Blaise objected.

"Well if that's so, you're up next," Tracey informed him with a grin.

"I hate you, Davis."

"If lies make you happy."

"Come on," Justin called, apparently recovered enough to have another go.

Blaise dragged his feet about it, but eventually made his way over to the other boy. They bowed, and Tracey called the start.

"Three...two...one... Go!"

"Lumax!" Justin stole her opening move, but Blaise seemed to be expecting it, casting a tripping jinx at him before Bella's vision cleared.

She growled under her breath, she should have seen that one coming herself, but she'd been distracted by Theo, who had moved on from staring at her to sidling over to stand...not beside her, exactly, but closer to her than anyone else. She pointedly ignored him.

Justin stumbled, but gave into the trip and rolled back to his feet, casting a spell Bella didn't recognize — nonaso. What it did, she didn't find out, because Blaise dodged it smoothly, casting a silencing jinx in response, the same tacitus she used to use all the time on Meda when she was being annoying.

"Astalch!" Justin snapped, a shield perhaps two feet in diameter appearing between himself and the incoming spell. It lingered for a moment, deflecting Blaise's attack before it faded away, but Justin was already retaliating: "Paga, paga, paga!"

Blaise was quick, and ridiculously graceful about it. He danced around every one of Justin's hexes, sending a stinging jinx at him in an attempt to break the constant barrage, but missed.

He tried again, and Justin elected to shield — the same small, immobile deflection charm as before, sending another spell around the side of it, possibly a sticking charm of some sort? Blaise side-stepped, casting a freezing jinx: "Upor!"

Justin's body sort of stuttered, halfway through another paga, perfectly still for only a moment, but long enough to break his concentration and ruin his balance. He stumbled, and Blaise finished him with another jinx Bella didn't recognize: Lokum Baglamak. Justin's jaws snapped together, and he had no recourse but to stand there impotently as Blaise disarmed him. Well, he could have dodged, she supposed, but that would only have prolonged the inevitable.

"Gotcha!" Blaise crowed, before reversing his spells.
Justin gave him a rueful grin. "Thought I had you that time. If you'd just bloody well stand still..."

"Blaise doesn't move too much," Tracey corrected him. "It's you that doesn't move enough. If you'd kept moving instead of stopping to cast your shield, you could have dodged that flash freeze."

Daphne nodded. "My tutors always say that keeping out of the way is your best defense at our age. Blaise might not be much of a duelist, but at least he knows that."

The Hufflepuff shot a look at Blaise, rubbing the back of his neck as though it was stiff, then turned back to the girls. "Uh, any other tips you guys want to share?"

Blaise looked like he wanted to object to their helping his opponent — they were far too evenly matched already, he couldn't be comfortable with Justin gaining an advantage — but he kept his mouth shut.

"You should try to start chaining your spells together," Theo volunteered. Everyone turned to him, just as surprised as Bella that he had said anything, let alone something helpful. If she had been inclined to give advice — which she really shouldn't anyway, but not the point — she probably would have said the same thing. "You too, Blaise," he added.

"What do you mean?"

Theo sighed. He looked like he rather regretted saying anything in the first place. "The wand motion for the stunning spell you were using, it's awkward to do it repeatedly. You need to find spells that flow into one another, like paga then maybe cadarma and stupefy. Then you could do paga again relatively quickly."

"But how are you supposed to actually cast that quickly?"

"Practice," Tracey answered as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. She wasn't wrong, but from the way she had been watching Theo's explanation, Bella thought there was a good chance she didn't know how to do it either.

"Care to give us a demonstration Theo?" Daphne was better than Tracey at pretending the idea wasn't new to her as well, but Bella thought it rather was. If only because she was apparently still at the level of 'just try not to get hit by anything' — spell chaining was a somewhat more advanced skill.

Theo shrugged as though he didn't care either way, but there was a sudden tension in his stance and an anticipatory gleam in his eye. "Blaise?" he suggested, walking to the center of the floor and waving the other boy over.

"Why meeew?" Blaise whined.

It was probably meant to be a rhetorical whine, but Theo answered anyway, with more confidence and possibly more words than Bella had yet to hear him use at one time. "Well, none of you can put up a decent fight, but you at least can dodge long enough for me to demonstrate the technique."

All four of the others seemed vaguely offended, though Justin at least sighed in acceptance after a moment. "Well, what are you waiting for?" he asked, as the duelists stood, sizing each other up.

Bella could already tell that Theo was correct in his assessment: Blaise, all tense and stiff, clearly knew he didn't stand a chance. The other boy, in sharp contrast, looked completely at ease, his wand held loosely at the ready.
"Generally someone says 'go'," Theo snarked.

Blaise took advantage of his momentary distraction to offer a Carthaginian opening: a sudden attack while his opponent's head was turned — in this case a surprise *stupefy*.

Theo seemed to be expecting it however, as he cast the same disposable shield Justin had used to tank the spell before moving directly onto the offensive, sidestepping to avoid Blaise's follow-up *cadarma*: "Astalch! Stupefy! Paga! Cadarma! Nonaso! Aspictus! Stupefy!"

It wasn't the worst chain he could have used, though Bella herself would probably have thrown in *tsimpísete* and *razrez* instead of *nonaso* and *aspictus*. Well, if they were dueling for real, and not just using stupid safe spells. Stinging jinxes were just...childish, and she still didn't know what that *nonaso* was supposed to do.

Blaise managed to throw up a *protego* shield after his attempted wand-dropping jinx, but it wasn't very good: it failed under the stunning hex and knockout jinx, and then he was back to dodging, spinning and ducking and weaving. It was somewhat impressive, actually. Bella wasn't sure she would have been able to duplicate it. But she was certain she would be able to get off more than just the occasional *paga* or *upor* to break her opponent's concentration. Theo didn't even bother to shield against these, simply sidestepping them while he continued to throw his five offensive spells at Blaise without pause.

Which, while a very good demonstration of circular spell chaining, was not a particularly good strategy: it made one too predictable. Plus, when you were absorbed in repeating a single chain, it could be hard to flip back to improvising if something happened to break your flow.

Blaise seemed to realize this as well, or perhaps he was just tired of dancing and constantly failing to connect, because after a couple of minutes, he reached into his pocket with his off hand, and then with a loud *crack* there was a tall, square-shouldered man standing between the two of them, his white shirt and smock covered with blood, his face covered with a mask that rather looked as though it had been sewn together from other people's faces, menacing Theo with a whirring, roaring...tool, of some sort.

Theo let out a rather girlish shriek (along with Justin and Daphne), but quickly recovered, managing to throw up his own *protego* in time to catch Blaise's attack. It shattered after four or five hits, but that was long enough for him to shout across the room, "Gods and Powers, Blaise, you cheating fucking cunt, why do you have your fucking boggart in your pocket!"

Bella laughed. She couldn't help it, it was just so...so *unexpected*, she was tickled — it wasn't often that Bella was taken by surprise, and it always delighted her. (Well, barring the occasions when Cygnus took her by surprise, but that was an entirely different definition of 'surprise'.) Just... *Pocket boggart*.

Of course, the Pocket Boggart cringed away from her giggles, even as the other spectators turned to look at her as though she'd lost her mind. Blaise glared at her for scaring his boggart, and Theo, taking advantage of his distraction, hit him with a *cadarma*. Blaise's wand fell from suddenly limp fingers, and he quickly followed it, taken down by a bright red *stupefy*.

The boggart, free from Blaise's control and influence, turned into an enormous green snake with glowing yellow eyes and began to advance on Justin. Who obviously had no idea what it was, or how to deal with it.

"Um, *guys?*" he said, voice quavering, backing away, his wand held in front of him as though he was going to stab the boggart with Gryffindor's goblin-wrought sword, rather than cast any sort of
spell to compel it to leave him alone. Which was also rather amusing, but sniggers at the misfortune of ignorant muggleborns didn't quite have the same effect on boggarts as delighted giggles.

"This isn't funny, Black!" Justin shouted, somewhat hysterically, still backing away. He was nearly at the wall before Daphne, Tracey, and Theo, who had presumably been discussing whether and how to save their Hufflepuff, finally reached the obvious conclusion.

"Ennervate," Daphne cast.

Blaise groaned and sat up, rubbing the back of his head. "Ow, Theo, fuck!"

"Blaise, get that thing back under control," Daphne demanded.

"What?"

"GUYS!"

"Oh." He hauled himself to his feet and pointed his wand at the boggart. "Riddiculus."

Crack!

Where the giant snake had been, a tiny black kitten now sat, glaring impotently at Blaise. He picked it up by the scruff of the neck, and raised it to eye level. "Bad Coco. I know he's easy prey, but we don't feed on Justin." And then he stuffed it back into his pocket.

"What do you feed it on?" Bella asked, before she could stop herself. It couldn't be feeding on Blaise, or not properly at least. There was only one reason for him to have it in the first place: to practice occlumency. And since Blaise was a legilimens, he'd probably mastered the level of control he needed to control his emotions relatively quickly. Which meant that it wasn't really scaring him, so much as he was manipulating it by associating different ideas and images with fear. Granted, a boggart could go for years between feeds — they were ambush hunters, after all — but they grew weaker and more lethargic the longer they went without a good infusion of fear. This one had changed ably enough, so it wasn't starving.

Fortunately, Justin had a question of his own, which rather overshadowed hers. "What is that thing?!!"

"It's a boggart, Justin," Daphne explained. "It's a shapeshifting fear demon, it turns into the thing you fear most, unless you use riddiculus to force it into a different form."

"Or if you can control your emotions, you can convince them to shift to a form you don't actually fear, or one you think someone else will fear," Blaise added helpfully.

"And you just...walk around with it in your pocket?!!" Tracey asked incredulously.

Blaise gave her a blank look. "Yes?"

"And call it Coco."

"Well, I had to call it something."

"But Coco?"

Blaise shrugged. "It seemed appropriate when I was five."
"So what, you just decided to adopt the monster under your bed as some kind of creepy pet?" Justin said, sounding a bit steadier, if even more incredulous than Tracey.

"Well, no, Mother summoned it for me, actually. Occlumency training."

Theo snorted. "Sometimes I think your mother is even crazier than my father."

"She probably is," Justin agreed, "giving a thing like that to a little kid."

Personally, Bella thought it seemed relatively reasonable to give a kid a boggart at five. She had started occlumency training at three, and the Blacks didn't fuck about with soft options like boggarts — Pater Arcturus had just subjected them all to repeated mental attacks until they could successfully repel his probes.

"Even when he was five, he was still Blaise," Daphne said drily.

Blaise ignored this. "Theo's dad's a Death Eater," he informed Justin (and Bella). "He's definitely crazier."

That was interesting. Bella knew that Zee hadn't been involved with the Death Eaters, even though she had apparently still been associating with Other Bella, who was one of their top leaders, throughout the course of the war. She'd have to find an excuse to question Theo about the organization, see what his father had let slip over the years.

"Anyway," Tracey declared, in an obvious bid to change the subject. "Enough of this. Are we dueling or not? Daphne?"

Daphne sighed. "Fine, but I'm not going to strip for you."

"Aw, but Daph," Blaise said teasingly.

Tracey ignored him. "Your choice. But don't think I'm going to go easy on you just because you're in bloody ankle-length robes."

Tracey won that bout, unsurprising given Daphne's clothing handicap. Though Bella was fairly certain that she would be the better of the two even if Daphne hadn't tripped over her hem at the end there. The Greengrass girl didn't seem to have the same disdain for dueling as Blaise, but Tracey was far more enthusiastic about it, and presumably practiced quite a lot more.

"I do still want to get a couple more bouts in, if anyone's up for it," Justin announced, in the wake of Daphne's loss.

"Hmm... What about you, Lyra?" Tracey suggested. "You've been awfully quiet. Want to give it a shot?"

Bella shrugged. It didn't seem entirely fair to send her against the muggleborn, but then, Tracey didn't know that. It was okay, though, she'd have to go easy on him if she was just using household charms. Pretty much all of them were intended for use on the environment, they wouldn't have much effect on a person. Surely even he could defend himself from floor polishing and air refreshing charms. "Sure. Justin?"

He joined her at the center of the room, nodding to her. She copied Daphne's elaborate, curtsey-esque bow, just for shiggles. And also because it left her in a very balanced position, ready to throw her weight in any direction as soon as Blaise called "Ready... Fight!"
Which really was a weird way to start a duel, she should ask him about that. Later.

Justin raised his wand, and Bella dove, rolling over one shoulder with her eyes closed, just in case he was planning on starting with another *lumax*.

"*Paga!*"

Oh, no? Well, nevermind. It missed, anyway, since she was already in motion. She popped herself back up and directed a spell at the floor beneath Justin's feet: "*Polio adeceraque!*"

Since Justin wasn't moving, he didn't notice at first. He was obviously confused, but that didn't stop him from trying to hit her with another *paga*, and then *cadarma*, as Theo had advised him. Too slowly to really take advantage of the upward flick of the knockout jinx leading into the curving downward swipe of the wand-dropping jinx, but he was clearly trying.

Not that it would help him at all.

She spun away to her left, timing her scouring charm so that the jet of water would fire toward the newly waxed floor just as she completed her turn. She followed up with an air refreshing charm, one that created a breeze to bring fresh air into the room, slightly overpowered, and directed at Justin's center of mass. She doubted he appreciated the fact that her *correabitur* and *neo aeraki* were chained together properly, but he certainly would have noticed that one followed the other so quickly that before he realized what was happening, he had been pushed off balance, and slipped to fall on his arse.

She waited until he managed to pull himself to his knees before hitting him with her next impromptu cleaning-dueling chain: "*Stat'sya negibkiy! Piegare! Scourgify!*" The pressing charm stiffened all of her opponent's clothing, sending him back to the slippery floor, the folding charm spun and flipped him to lie, disoriented, facing the ceiling as his shirt attempted to yank itself into some sort of order despite the fact that it was currently being worn, and her soaping spell took him directly in the mouth.

In all the choking and sputtering and flailing about, he dropped his wand. Quite understandable, really, if unforgivably stupid.

"*Nihil non colocent!*" The wide-area tidying charm whipped the wand away from him, sending it to lie neatly on the table beside Blaise's record player. And then, because she didn't want to slip herself as she walked over to him — and also because it would probably be a bad idea to drown one of Blaise's people — "*Finite!*"

All of the water condensed by her jet and soaping spells vanished, or rather, evaporated into a tiny fog bank before dissipating back into the air. Justin stopped flailing, just lying there, watching her, coughing and panting for air as she strode over to him. Careful not to get too close, lest he demonstrate some previously unseen physical combat skills, she aimed her wand at his face.

"You should yield," she advised him.

"Uh huh," he nodded weakly. "Yeah, um, I yield," he added, sitting up and rubbing at his tongue with his sleeve. She smirked. The soap wouldn't have vanished with the *finite*, and she knew from experience that it tasted awful.

"Your wand's on the table," she told him, then turned toward the others, already speaking: "Blaise, I can't really undo the waxing charm. Do you want me to do the rest of the floor to... *What?*" she trailed off as she noticed their expressions. Daphne and Tracey were staring at her open-mouthed.
Blaise had covered his face with a hand, shaking his head in a parody of despair, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. And Theo, a tiny, smug smirk in place, started clapping. Very slowly.

Tracey was the first to recover. "Are— Have you just been taking the piss, then?"

"Uh..."

"There's no way you're muggle raised," Justin said, joining the conversation, his wand back in his hand.

"Of course I am," Bella scoffed, using her best don't be ridiculous, Meda tone. "I did have a tutor, you know."

"And this tutor of yours, she taught you how to fight with household spells?" Daphne asked skeptically.

"She was a hundred and ten year old muggleborn. She thought cleaning charms were the best thing since the self-sharpening quill. As for using them for dueling, well... I'm just veryclever," she added with an air of outrageous confidence, goading a laugh from Blaise.

Justin glared at him. "Well, if you think it's so funny, you fight her."

"Yeah, Blaise, I'd like to see that," Tracey agreed, something about her tone hinting that she really just wanted to see Blaise utterly humiliated.

"What, no, I don't think—"

"Oh, go on, Blaise," Daphne urged him. "I'm sure she won't hurt you too badly, will you, Lyra."

Bella smirked. "I'm sure Blaise is more than capable of defending himself from little old me." A blatant lie, of course, she had already seen him fight.

He knew it, too, giving her a flat, unamused look.

"Come on," she added, "I'll be nice."

"Not sure you even know the meaning of that word," he grumbled. "All right, just let me switch to the B-side first." He took longer than she thought entirely necessary to flip over the record, but eventually made his way out to the center of the floor, using a sandblasting charm to fix the texture of the patch she had waxed. Huh. Well, that worked, she supposed.

"C'mon, Black, let's get this over with. And, do me a favor? Use real dueling spells, this time."

Bella joined him slowly, considering her strategy. She supposed she ought to be okay if she only used spells that the others had already demonstrated. Right, so just stick to stunners and shield charms, and maybe that freezing charm. Oh! And cadarma. That makes a nice little chain and should be enough to take him out without going overboard.

Of course, Blaise opened with lumax, which she couldn't shield, so she was immediately put on the defensive, holding a protego against his follow-up stunner, knock-out jinx, and disarming charm while her vision cleared. She was starting to think that that spell ought to be considered cheating. Seriously, if they had to have rules, that was one she would actually support. Fortunately, she hadn't seen any of them use the light burst more than once in a duel, it seemed to be commonly accepted that it was only useful once, as an initial ambush. Probably because they didn't want to close their eyes to avoid blinding themselves once spells were already flying.
When she could finally see him properly again, Blaise was balanced on his toes, ready to flee as soon as she began to retaliate, throwing spells at her shield in the hopes of keeping her pinned down.

Yeah, good luck with *that*.

The problem with *protego* was that in order to keep it up, you couldn't cast any other spells. Never mind the fact that they wouldn't be able to cross the shield, either, the shield would fall as soon as the caster stopped paying attention to it. So if you got pinned behind a *protego*, your only realistic option was to wait for an opening in your opponent's offence, drop your shield and attempt to cast an offensive hex of your own before their next spell hit.

If you had someone trapped under a *protego*, your best strategy was to cast as many debilitating spells as you could, as quickly as you could, preventing their escape and hammering away at their shield until it became too unstable and dropped.

Unfortunately for Blaise, Bella had far more experience keeping a shield charm stable than any thirteen-year-old should, and he couldn't cast quickly enough to stop her from escaping. She feinted to the right just as he cast another *stupefy*, leaping to the left as soon as it impacted, dropping her *protego* in favor of casting *upor*, which was the quickest to cast of the five spells she had decided to use.

She missed, of course, she hadn't really expected to hit him, more concerned with avoiding his knockout jinx — which passed within inches of her right arm — but followed up immediately with *stupefy* and *cadarma*, forcing Blaise to begin moving as well. Which, well...it was mostly just annoying.

If she'd had access to her full range of spells, she could easily use a broad area effect to knock him out, but with just three offensive spells and two shields, they were surprisingly well matched. She could cast faster and far more accurately, but he was quicker and more graceful, managing to avoid every one of her attacks. Of course, she could dodge all of his spells, too, but given his slower casting rate and poorer aim, her ability to avoid them was far less impressive. Even when she threw in the occasional *astalch* shield to deflect Blaise's spells and create ricochets in an attempt to throw him off, he still managed to dance around them.

It was bloody irritating, but he had to be feeling the pressure of her advance, because after nearly ten minutes of constant casting, he reached into his jeans and lobbed Coco the Pocket Boggart at her.

Being hit in the face with a boggart was an interesting experience. They were invisible, of course, until they took on a form, and it seemed Blaise was shielding against it to force it to draw on her for inspiration. But, well, Bella was a fucking cheater when it came to mind magic.

More accurately, *Eris* was a fucking cheater when it came to mind magic. She'd had to specifically allow the *Sorting Hat* to look at Bella. There was no way in any of the nine hells that a bloody *boggart* was going to be able to get into her head. Never mind the fact that Bella couldn't think of what it could possibly turn into to try to scare her.

So the boggart hit her in the face in its invisible, ectoplasmic form. It was vaguely, she thought, like being hit with some sort of pudding, cool, squishy and formless, and it fled almost immediately, apparently drawn to Justin, as, with another *crack!*, it turned into the same enormous green snake.

"AAAAH!"
While Bella was somewhat taken aback by having been hit in the face with a blob of ectoplasm, Blaise was far more stunned to see the boggart ignore her completely.

So of course, she stunned him. Seemed the obvious thing to do, really.

Theo looked around at the thump as Blaise's body hit the floor, then back to the boggart and the Hufflepuff, and over to Bella, who was doing her best to look as confused about the whole situation as everyone else.

After a moment he rolled his eyes and called, "Ennervate!"

Before Blaise had even managed to pick himself up, Daphne was looming over him, telling him off for releasing his pet monster on Justin not once, but twice in the same afternoon.

Blaise groaned. "That wasn't supposed to happen," he muttered. Before Daphne could comment on that sentiment, he stalked over to the corner where the Pocket Boggart had cornered Justin. "Coco! What did I just tell you about preying on Justin!" The giant snake stopped menacing the boy, coiling itself into a contrite looking pile, if snakes or boggarts could be said to look contrite. "Go!" Blaise commanded, pointing toward the door. "Trunk, now!"

After the demon had slunk off, apparently in disgrace, it occurred to Justin to ask, "Aren't there people around here? Muggles, I mean."

Blaise grinned. "They know better than to go in my room. Come on, who's next?"

There was a moment of silence before Tracey, rather hesitantly, said, "Well, Daph and I were just saying we could probably go two on one against Theo."

Theo smirked. "We'll see."

"Right, then maybe a doubles match with me and Justin?" The girls nodded. "Justin?"

"Uh, sure," Justin said, still sounding rather uncomfortable.

Bella elected not to volunteer herself to fight again. She'd probably already done enough damage to her Half-Educated Muggleborn Lyra persona already, she thought.

As it turned out, the girls did manage to take Theo down, though they seemed fairly tired after. This made their doubles match with Blaise and Justin far more of an equal contest than Bella would have expected. They won that one as well, of course, but it took a whole five minutes, when she wouldn't have given the boys two. Not only were Tracey and Daphne both better duelists than Blaise or Justin, but they also appeared to have far more experience coordinating their efforts. She wouldn't have been surprised if they had told her they were practicing to enter a public doubles tournament. Well, she would have, because that wasn't the sort of thing most noble houses would want their thirteen-year-old daughters doing, but hey, maybe that was different in this timeline and decade. If it was, she certainly wouldn't be complaining.

Still, after that, all four of them were clearly ready to quit for the day. They lingered in the dueling chamber for a bit, listening to Blaise's music and chatting about inconsequential matters, the four of them telling her about the professors at Hogwarts, and it quickly became obvious to Bella that no one else was planning to suggest another match.

"Shall we head back to the lounge?" Blaise eventually suggested, playing the good host. "Mary should be here by now, we can get tea and biscuits."
There were murmurs of ascent from the girls, but most unexpectedly, Theo said, "No."

"What?" Blaise asked, quite possibly legitimately uncertain whether he had heard the soft-spoken boy correctly. It was quite unexpected, after all, to refuse to be ushered around by the host. Even Bella understood that such a 'suggestion' was only rhetorical.

"I want one last bout," Theo said calmly.

Blaise's eyes narrowed, but he nodded.

"Two on one again?" Tracey asked.

Theo shook his head slowly, his gaze fixing on Bella, something like mischief glinting in their depths. "No, I don't think so. Black, are you up for it?"

There was an air of entrapment about the suggestion. If she dueled Theo, she would almost certainly have to use magic she 'shouldn't' know — well, if she didn't want to lose, and she hated losing. But it was too tempting to refuse: he was the only one of the four who was likely to give her a decent challenge, and he clearly already had some inkling that she was more than she claimed, so...

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Blaise said, throwing a look at her, probably trying to remind her to keep her cover story in mind.

But it would be far more fun if she didn't, and she hadn't honestly expected that she would be able to keep up a muggleborn facade among Slytherins, anyway. Her cover story, such as it was, was really only a convenient fiction for the administration. "No, I'll do it."

Theo gave her a quick smirk, almost a smile, but not quite, the sort of thing acknowledging that they both knew the reality of the situation, even though neither of them was going to say anything. "We go to knockout or yield, nothing you can't heal, and no unforgivables," he said — a standard far more to her liking than the rules Blaise and Justin had outlined.

Wait — no unforgivables? Bella grinned. If he thought that was something that needed to be specified, then this was going to be fun.

The second they'd taken their places in the center of the room, Bella's wand was up, snapping off a bludgeoning hex. She could have opened with something better, but this happened to be one of the spells she could get off silently — if this Theo kid wasn't serious about trying a real duel, it'd be better to knock him out early before he got hurt too badly. Even from a handful of meters away, she saw his eyes widen a sliver, clearly surprised, but a smooth half-step back had him leaning out of the way, deep orange light passing within an inch of his chest. And then he was casting, spell after spell in an unbroken chain. She spun out of the way of a yellow spellglow she didn't recognize, a numbing charm (clever), an overpowered stinging jinx.

Ducking low, Bella slipped under a stunner, hopped over the invisible curve of a cutting curse aimed at her legs. (Her legs, wha— Oh, no healer, right.) Before she'd even landed, he was on his next spell, she thought she'd caught foví in there. Her grin stretching so wide it was almost painful, she drew the necessary power up into her wrist with a practiced thought, released it with a flick. A thin band of deep red flame shot from the tip, hissing through the air toward Theo's chest.

The pale pink nightmare curse nailed Bella solid in the hip. And did absolutely nothing.

Eris hadn't just protected her mind from being read, after all. Blocking mind magic hadn't even been the original point — her gift to Bella at her dedication had been immunity from the imperius,
not legilimency. It simply also worked against legilimency, as well as a variety of other mind-influencing magics. Charms and curses and potions, everything from cheering charms to compulsions, even love potions. (She'd checked, just to be sure.) It didn't work on everything, and some things were only weakened instead of being neutralized completely, but it did work on a hell of a lot of things.

He clearly found the whole thing unnerving, but Ciardha had nonetheless helped her test out exactly what worked and what didn't. Fear-inducing magic in general simply didn't work at all.

Bella fired off more dancer's flame off at Theo, one after another and another, but none of them actually landed. He twisted out of the way of a couple, a quick little *contego* here or there taking care of the rest. And the whole while he stared at her, an odd, intense sort of look on his face. Not angry, not afraid, not even confused. Just...watching.

On second thought, perhaps letting herself be hit with that nightmare curse had been a bad idea. On top of the boggart completely ignoring her, there was no fucking way any of them would believe she was a normal person ever again. Oops?

Theo ducked under another arrow of flame, muttered an incantation too soft to hear, the sweep of his arm and the faint crackle of lightning the only warning she had. "*Sebeglas!*" Her wrist stung with the pull, but she'd gotten it in time. Even as the wide arc of shivering blue-white light, looking like nothing but an over-powered cutting curse made out of lightning, started racing across the room, a wall of brightly shimmering ice sprung out of the ground between them. Theo's impressively dangerous elemental spell dug halfway through the wall before lighting up, and the whole thing shattered, filling the air with steam and the ear-splitting clatter of a thousand shards dancing against the tile of the floor, Bella lightly pelted with cold, wet sharpnel.

Oh, being serious then, were they? Couldn't say Blaise hadn't warned him.

A quick glance around, picking out a few fist-sized bits of ice, she levitated them into the air around her with a single dispersed charm. Theo hadn't stayed still, piercing curses and a nasty-looking laceration hex falling in on her. She slipped around the first few, a quick incantation and a tap at her free hand binding her levitation charm, finishing in time to catch the laceration on a shield.

They traded spells back and forth for a short while, basic physical curses, bludgeoning and cutting and piercing, an occasional dark curse here and there, rather on the tame side, though she did nearly hit him with a weak flesh-eating curse at one point, that was probably against the rules. (For his part, Theo kept using fear curses, probably out of habit, forgetting they didn't work on her.) And it was a bit frustrating. The little cunt just wouldn't go down. The closest she'd gotten was when a blasting curse had gone off against the wards behind him once, nearly taking him off his feet, but he'd gotten a shield up before she could finish the job. She was more powerful, and she was faster, she could take him out in an instant in a real fight. But, well, she wasn't supposed to do anything she couldn't heal, and she was much better at causing harm than fixing it.

Not to mention she should avoid using anything too illegal. She did slip a couple times, but it was reflex, she couldn't help it. Honestly, she had trouble keeping track of which curses were illegal and which weren't.

Ciardha had specifically taught her dark incapacitating spells that would sail right on through most standard shields. But this asshole kept blocking them! One shield charm in silver and blue, another in black and purple, she knew exactly what those were. How the fuck did a thirteen-year-old kid know dark shielding charms?
Well, she did, obviously. But Bella didn't count.

During the whole long exchange, Bella took every free moment to fire spells at the shards of ice orbiting her. Transfiguring them and hardening them, charming them with whatever incapacitation magics she could think of, a few of them with blasting charms just for shiggles. Theo wasn't an idiot, he started throwing fire elemental spells into his rotation, but that was worse than useless. Bella was good with fire magics, he might as well be flinging spitballs at her.

Guided by flicks of fingers from her off hand, her charmed icy daggers started raining down on him, one at a time, in groups, in whatever formations struck her. She followed behind them at a half run, wand spitting every variant on stunning hexes and curses she could think of, as quickly as she could cast them. None of them got through — he had that damn shield up again, hidden behind a dark, sharp-angled heptagon. He'd bound the thing to his left hand, holding it between him and her curses, picking off the flying bits of ice with low-powered blasting curses. Which, okay, he was a damn good shot to pull that off, she was almost impressed. She tried a shield-breaker, but the bastard just tipped his shield out of the way for a second, at the perfect angle to catch a couple more daggers, let the crackling green light harmlessly splash against his stomach before putting the shield between them in time to catch her next curse.

Right. Fine, he was good. Not as good as she was — by the tension in his shoulders and his voice he was struggling to keep up, and she was still holding back quite a bit. (No use bringing the building down around their ears, after all.) But he was good, she could admit that.

Her forward charge brought her within a few feet of him, and she dove to the side, just under another of her flying bits of frozen death. She rolled over her shoulder, stopping herself hard when her foot came to tile again, turned on her knee, a stunning charm springing upon Theo's undefended back.

But it never got there. She'd felt an unfamiliar flash of magic prickle against her skin as she tumbled, and even as the spell left the tip of her wand, Theo's shield expanded. Like paper unfolding, triangles and pentagons and heptagons popping into existence one after another, coming to meet in an uneven seam, just in time to block it.

...What the fuck was that?!

At point-blank range, Bella fired off another bevy of spells, mostly a variety of stunning hexes and shield-breakers, spat out so quickly the few incantations she actually needed were an incomprehensible slur. There might have been a few less savoury curses in there, she didn't know, she was too frustrated to really pay attention. Not a single one actually hit, splashing off that damn multi-faceted shield, single panels occasionally shattering, only to be replaced with a new one. She was going too fast for him now, Theo couldn't get off a single little hex in retaliation, but she couldn't get through his damn shield, it just kept coming back, again and again and again and again—

A furious snarl pulling at her throat, Bella leapt directly toward him. The faint shadow of his figure she could see through the red-black panels of his shield twitched, his wand coming to touch one of the panels. In mid-air, Bella contorted herself to the side, even as that panel shivered, rippled, then stabbed outward, a dozen thin spears of dark magic shooting through where she'd been a second ago. There was a tug at her hip, a flash of cold, but she ignored it, it didn't matter.

Bella's open hand slammed to a halt against his unusually solid shield charm, the surface feeling hard and cold and slippery against her skin. Before Theo could blink, she pushed, forcing rage and destruction into the shield, shaping it into a freeform dispel, one of the strongest she had ever cast.
The fucking thing still didn't collapse completely, but it was enough. Hissing lines of static rushed through the surface, gaps the size of her head opening up here and there, more than wide enough for Bella to slip a bludgeoning hex through one of them. It took Theo in the shoulder with a wet snap, turning him away with a pained cry.

Now that his concentration was broken, the shield really did fail, dissolving into a snow of shimmering sparks. Bella stumbled through it, her hip flaring with pain. She blinked, pulled away her free hand, having clutched at the line of stinging heat without thinking.

Her fingers were wet, reddened. They weren't covered with it, it was just a little bit, but it was there.

Theo had actually managed to hit her.

Another hex had him tumbling to the ground, clutching his chest, yelling something that may or may not have been words, she wasn't paying attention. Her teeth were clenched hard, enough her jaw burned with a dull ache, her fingers shaking. Each breath was hot, the blood pounding in her ears, her wand on Theo, curled up helpless and in pain on the ground in front of her, a hundred horrible curses dancing on her tongue.

She remembered there were other people in the room at the last second.

Her voice a thin, unsteady gasp, she cast, "Stupefy." She wrenched her eyes away from the boy, brought her wand to her hip to heal the cut. And she waited for the urge to hurt him to drain away, slowly with each second, each breath forced mindfully through her tightened chest.

It was curious, really, just how angry she'd gotten. It was just a little scratch. Honestly, it wasn't like she'd never been cursed before. If she wasn't beaten and bloody by the end of one of their dueling lessons, Ciardha was having a very off day — he considered himself more a cursebreaker than a duelist, so those weren't very often, but he still kicked her arse without even trying. That was frustrating, of course, but she'd never gotten quite that angry in a play duel before. She had no idea what the hell that was about.

Once she was calm enough she was confident the rage was cleared from her face, the cut on her hip long healed by now, she turned back to her audience. "Well, that was fun and all, but—" She frowned, blinking back at the others. "What?"

They were all staring at her, if not with the same kind of stares — Daphne's looked to be a dull sort of disbelief, flat and cold with a single raised eyebrow, Tracey seemed a second away from bursting into laughter, Justin looking somewhere between amused and horrified. Not Blaise, though. His head was bowed forward, face hidden behind one of his hands again, slowly shifting back and forth. Even as Bella opened her mouth to say...well, something, she didn't know, Blaise beat her to it. "Honestly, Lyra, is the word 'subtle' even in your vocabulary?"

Bella hesitated for a moment, eyes flicking over Blaise's friends. Eh, they were always going to have to come up with a secondary cover story anyway. Blaise could probably manage any fallout, it'd be fine. "I'm guessing that muggleborn story isn't going to hold up to scrutiny, is it?"

The dam finally broke, the room ringing with Tracey's mocking cackles.

Chapter End Notes
Hey, look, a chapter! (I’m dead, I’ve got nothing. If you have questions, leave a review.) —Leigha

Yeah, she needs to get to bed. Has work in a few hours. Whoops.

Anyway, yes, we're still alive. We've both had serious writer's block issues lately, plus ridiculous work hours on her end and health problems on mine, not pretty. Very little writing for either of us went on there for months — not just this fic, in general. That first scene was written way back in August, the rest we did all in the last week or two. (Mostly Leigha, honestly, I have not been feeling well.) So, we may or may not be back. Only time will tell.
—Lysandra
In another universe, thirty years ago...

There were moments Arcturus felt the full weight of his ninety-one years. This cursed week was absolutely filled with them.

He was in his study one morning, taking a rare leisure moment to read something not immediately germane to anything to do with current business. A history of the development of modern magical Persia, interesting but otherwise inconsequential, the sort of pursuit he rarely had the time for. The elves knew not to bother him when he was thus occupied, so it came as some surprise when he was told one of his charges urgently requested his attention.

He knew of young Andromeda, of course — he knew of all the children of his House, had had some (usually small) involvement in all of their lives. That said, he couldn't claim to know all that much about her. She was the idiot Cygnus's second daughter and, therefore, Bellatrix's younger sister. If it weren't for that, he would have had even less to do with the girl than he did.

More than perhaps anyone else living, his youngest brother's eponymous grandson had given him the greatest headaches. He'd always been an annoying, pompous little prick — in all honesty, Arcturus hadn't been impressed with any of his brothers' sons, and the grandsons weren't an improvement — but Arcturus's opinion of him had only fallen again and again over the last few years. Ever since Cygnus had brought to him his suspicions that Bellatrix had made the Choice.

That on its own would have been horrifying enough, but the evidence he had was all the more damning: Bellatrix, he'd said, shrugged off his _imperius_ like it weren't even there. His _imperius_ — Powers save him, he still couldn't understand how his idiot grand-nephew could _possibly_ have thought using the _imperius_ on his daughter could _ever_ have been justified. And the man had just shrugged it off as though it were of no consequence, as though he couldn't even _comprehend_ why Arcturus should have a problem with it!

He hadn't wanted to know the details, and had honestly been a little relieved when Bellatrix hadn't seemed inclined to describe _what_ she'd been made to do at all. (The frequent use of the _imperius_ itself was all it had taken to drive Bellatrix into the arms of Discord, she'd been focused on that more than anything else.) In their _negotiations_, the only real concession Bellatrix had wanted from him — besides not expelling her from the House or intervening in her feud with Cygnus, of course — was to help shield Andromeda from their father. Which, considering the man had _apparently_ seen fit to regularly punish his eldest with something that involved casting the _imperius_ on her, had seemed eminently reasonable. Inserting Walburga into their household as a buffer between them had seemed the obvious and convenient solution.

And it prevented him from having to involve himself directly. He hadn't wanted to know the details, he _really_ hadn't.

A few had filtered their way to him over the years anyway. But he ignored what he suspected was going on in that household as well as he could. As much as he might otherwise like to, there was little he could do to truly resolve the issue without drawing attention from outside the House, and that would raise far too many uncomfortable questions — their House had been painted with too
many scandals over the last couple generations, he would avoid bringing about another if he could help it. In any case, changed as she was by her Patron, Bellatrix could more than take care of herself. So long as the worst of Cygnus and Druella's abuses were focused on her, Arcturus would let them work it out on their own. He didn't want to be involved.

He only hoped that, when Bellatrix finally did kill his idiot nephew, she'd do it quietly.

Beside her connection to Bellatrix, Arcturus knew little about Andromeda at all. She was starting Hogwarts in a few days, he knew, but beyond that? He had very little to do with most of the children of his House. Honestly, he found it difficult to care. He simply didn't have the energy to invest himself in their lives, he didn't bother.

But, that only piqued his interest. He'd had little interaction with Andromeda over her life, so if she were to turn up, he doubted it would be over a matter of no consequence. No, if she'd taken the opportunity to sneak away from her guardians to speak with him, he had no choice but to at least listen.

The look of the girl as she wandered into his study — downcast eyes reddened from tears, shadowed from lack of sleep, young face drawn and all too pale — put him instantly on high alert. For even an eleven-year-old Black to be this obviously distraught, it could not be good. He wasn't going to like this, he could already tell.

After the proper niceties were observed, the girl settled herself in the chair across from him easily enough, squirming minutely in place. She was uncomfortable, clearly — and why not, Arcturus could count on the fingers of one hand how many times they'd directly spoken to each other. When she didn't speak immediately, he prompted her. (He did, after all, have things to do today.) "What exactly did you wish to speak with me about, Andromeda?"

The girl flinched a little, her eyes flicking up to his for an instant before falling back to her knees. Her fingers were playing with the cloth of her robes, clenching and unclenching. Which was odd — he vaguely remembered Walburga telling him Andromeda was taking to her comportment lessons satisfactorily, was more than prepared for Hogwarts. She must be especially uncomfortable, to fidget this badly. "It's about Bella."

Arcturus kept the grimace from his face — of course it was, he wouldn't expect anything else. His voice heavy with exhaustion, he said, "What has she done this time?"

"Bella didn't do anything!" He started, taken aback by the sudden vehemence on her young voice. Andromeda seemed to catch herself after a second, the pinched glare fading away in a blink. "I didn't— I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I'm sorry."

Normally, he might have chastised her for losing control like that. But he was starting to get seriously worried. "No matter. What happened?"

"I think..." The girl took in a long, slow breath, through her nose, coming out slightly shaky despite all her desperate attempts at self-control. "She's gone. I think, I think he killed her. Father."

The beginnings of a horrified chill started to drip down his spine, but even as the words penetrated he couldn't bring himself to really be surprised. He didn't think Cygnus was capable of surprising him anymore. "How do you know? Did you see it yourself? Could she not simply be somewhere else? With the Zabini girl, perhaps."

A shadow of her previous glare returned, not so much angry as resolute. "No, she wouldn't leave. She promised, she wouldn't leave me with them. She promised."
As much as Arcturus doubted the word of a Black dedicated to Chaos really meant anything, he couldn't bring himself to believe Andromeda didn't have the right of it. So far as Arcturus could tell, Andromeda was the only thing in the world Bellatrix truly cared about anymore — her affection for her little sister seemed to be the only shred of her former humanity Eris had left to her. In anything else, Arcturus would have difficulty taking Bellatrix at her word, but if she had promised Andromeda she wouldn't abandon her to their parents he believed her.

And for her to disappear only a few days before the next term at Hogwarts began... Well, that was suspicious timing all its own.

Slowly, he muttered, "When did you last see her?"

The girl fidgeted again, avoiding his eyes.

"Andromeda?"

She flinched a little, pulling into herself, glancing up at him almost sheepishly. "Er, Lammas?"

Arcturus frowned, the expression sending the girl deeper into her chair. "Lammas was almost a month ago."

"I wasn't sure anything had happened!" Her voice was loud again, defensive, but it only took a few more words before it faltered again, weakened by the tears appearing in her eyes. "I thought she'd just run off for a bit, gone to Zee's, with Monroe, or... doing whatever it is she does. I didn't think about it, she's gone a lot sometimes, I just thought... But she didn't come back! I waited, and waited, and she didn't come back, and I'm scared, and I asked Father, and—" The girl broke off, wincing.

"What did he say?"

"I... don't remember, really. It's not important." Seemingly without realising she was doing it, Andromeda pulled her feet onto the chair, hugging her knees to her chest. Normally, he might chastise her for that, but... "He didn't admit it, if that's what you're asking."

He felt a soft clenching at his stomach — weak still, only suspicion. "What did he do to you when you asked?"

The girl's eyes flicked away, latching onto the low-burning hearth. "Nothing bad," she muttered, voice gone so thin and small he barely heard it. "Not like Bella."

The frown creased his face before he could stop it. He supposed hardly anything at all would be considered 'bad', if one were using Cygnus's treatment of Bella as a benchmark. Part of him didn't want to ask, he really didn't want to know the details. But, if Andromeda was right, if the worst had happened, he should have asked a long time ago. "What does he do to her?"

It took a little bit of convincing, but in the end Andromeda told him all of it, everything she knew. And what she knew was far, far too much.

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Arcturus had lived for what sometimes felt like forever, and time had long since started to grow unkind to him. At his age, a healthy wizard could still expect to see at least fifty more years — perhaps over a hundred, if he were lucky — but he doubted he'd live near that long. Just going on, day after day after day, was an interminable burden, one that had not lightened in decades, showed no sign of easing. Sometimes, more often than not, it took great effort just to force himself to rise in
the morning.

One day, he knew, he simply wouldn't be able to summon the will to bother. And that would be that.

So it was a little gratifying to know he could still get the drop on a man half his age.

Cygnus had stormed his way into Arcturus's study, that same moody glare he never seemed to go without narrowing his face. Before his brother's grandson could even blink, his wand went flipping across the room into Arcturus's hand, a few more quick charms binding his wrists together, forcing him into the chair opposite the desk, and sticking him there. He didn't go quietly, of course, he was yelling some kind of protest, his eyes afire with fury. But Arcturus wasn't listening, and he cut off almost immediately anyway.

It could have been the heavy glare Arcturus was giving him, but it was more likely what he was doing with the idiot's wand. It was held in his open hand, his own wand turned toward it, the tip hovering only an inch from the wood. Cygnus would have to be more of an idiot than he was to miss that message.

Arcturus was not fucking around.

His voice low, but a cold whisper, he asked, "Where is she?"

A sneer flickered across Cygnus's face, just for a second, repressed with what looked to be considerable effort. "What are you talking about?"

"Bellatrix. Where is she?"

"How should I know where that demon has run off to?"

On the one hand, Arcturus couldn't entirely disagree with the sentiment — Bellatrix was alternately unsettling and frightening, far more than a child her age should be capable of. But on the other, how his eldest daughter had turned out was entirely Cygnus's fault. In light of the seriousness of his own crimes, casting aspersions on her as he did so often stank of hypocrisy. "Are you sure that is the way you want to play this, Cygnus? I warn you, my patience is already stretched perilously thin." Perilous for Cygnus, of course.

Cygnus's lip curled at the less-than-subtle threat. Clearly, he wasn't taking it seriously. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about. Whatever nuisance she's made of herself, I have no knowledge of it. I haven't even seen the girl in I don't know how long."

"That's the thing, you see: nobody has." The unconcerned look on his idiot nephew's face just made Arcturus angrier, dark magic sloshing frigid through his veins. "Andromeda came to see me a week ago. Imagine my surprise to learn a daughter of my House had gone missing, had been missing for weeks. And the parents of this child never saw fit to inform me. Curious, wouldn't you say?"

"Nobody has seen her. The Monroes, the Zabinis, the Rosiers, the Malfoys, the Notts, the Greengrasses, the Inghams, the Parkinsons, the Crabbes, the Scrimgeours, the Burkes, on and on and on, I asked everyone I could think of. I even asked the Potters and the Boneses, just in case, but no, nobody."

"Fearing the worst, I even checked with Saint Mungo's, and with the Ministry. Nothing. I asked a few contacts of mine across Europe to look into it. Nothing. Yesterday I got a letter from Professor Slughorn asking after her — I'm told she did not show up at Hogwarts — but there was nothing I
could tell him. Nobody has seen her. In over a month. Nobody. Even the elves can't find her. So far as the Family Magics are concerned, she no longer exists.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Cygnus had the nerve to look surprised, almost offended. "You think I had something to do with it? If that little monster decided to run off, I fail to see how that's my problem."

Gently setting his nephew's wand on his desk, Arcturus let out a long sigh. "Crucio."

He released the curse after a handful of seconds — damaging Cygnus too badly would just be counter-productive. And besides, his wailing was already giving Arcturus a headache. Cygnus was left gasping and shuddering, the sticking charm holding him in place probably the only reason he hadn't flopped boneless out of his chair. Even the short exposure had him flushed and sweating, his breaths coming thin and rasping.

"Generally speaking," Arcturus said, low and even, "it is little business of mine what goes on within our House. I have responsibilities enough without taking it upon myself to personally manage the affairs of every Black household. I had not thought it necessary to take an active hand. Surely, I thought to myself, you can all manage your own families' affairs. You were all children once, after all, you all had parents. You're familiar with the concept. You all have sense enough to deal with any issues on your own.

"Clearly, I was mistaken."

"The girl..." His nephew forced out a thick cough, phlegm worked free from the screaming blocking his voice. "I did what I had to to—"

"Crucio." After the curse was lifted, he paused a short moment, waiting for Cygnus to recover enough to hear him. "Do not lie to me. Bellatrix was always a willful child, yes, but that is not unusual — she's a Black, what did you expect? Discipline is necessary to enforce at least a minimum standard of decorum, yes, but nothing — nothing — she was capable of could ever justify your response."

Andromeda had had horrifying stories by the handful, but one in particular had disturbed and enraged him. For the first time in what felt like decades, he'd been swept away by a happy memory — faded with age and with tragedy, but happy all the same. Dora had been twelve, her first night back from her first year at Hogwarts. She'd been a bright child, and gifted, and enthusiastic. She'd regaled them with tales of her classmates and her professors, whispering and giggling over the less respectable of their escapades, pulling out her wand to conjure illusions to entertain Sedha, hardly more than a toddler at the time. Excited and beautiful and happy. The memory was bittersweet, knowing as he did how it would all end, but sweet all the same.

On Bellatrix's first night back... Andromeda hadn't seen it, she'd well learned to avoid her father's wrath by then, but she'd heard more than enough.

But Arcturus could imagine it well. He could see it, as clearly as though he'd been in the room, a formless observer helpless to act. But, in the picture his infuriated mind provided him, it wasn't Bellatrix he saw raped. Instead it was Dora. His ears rang with her screams, with her cries, it was her eyes that stared back at him, accusing tears cutting into him.

Because it was his fault, he knew that. He'd known something was wrong, he'd known, but he hadn't wanted to know. He hadn't cared enough, he hadn't done enough, and his vile, idiot nephew...
Arcturus didn't intend to cast the unforgivable again. He didn't even notice until Cygnus's screams finally pierced his rage.

While waiting for whatever semblance of sanity his nephew had ever possessed to return, Arcturus turned away, staring blankly at his own wand hand. Even with his little episode broken, he was still feeling, a cold, overwhelming rage, his chest as hard and cold as ice, he felt he could barely breathe. It was almost too much, the sheer power of it filling him with a familiar giddy madness, all too familiar. The kind that jeered him into deadly motion, brought with it blood and fire.

He'd forgotten what it was like. His heart had been burned out of him so long ago, he'd forgotten what it felt like to feel. He wasn't sure he liked it.

He hadn't realised he remembered what Dora had looked like.

He couldn't understand. He simply couldn't. What Cygnus was willing to do to his own children, it didn't make any sense. It simply didn't. It was no shock Arcturus hadn't realised what was happening in that house, he couldn't imagine it. And the intensity of his anger, the depth of his own hatred, it surprised him. He remembered his girls, with a clarity he'd thought he'd lost, and he knew what Cygnus was, and he hated him, he was afire with it, he was inches from losing control.

The last person he'd hated anything near this much, Arcturus had seared a bloody swath through a country at war to reach him, to tear out his heart as he'd done his own, to watch that knowledge enter his eyes, that he'd made a fatal mistake, that he was going to die in agony because of it. And to watch that light fade, the chilling cloak of vengeance satisfied falling over Arcturus's shoulders.

Cygnus should feel fortunate old age had tempered him somewhat.

With no small effort, Arcturus dragged himself back to the present moment, still shivering with the echoes of rage long ago sated. "There are limits to what is acceptable, even for us. People talk, surely you realise this. Ordinary discipline, a little corporal punishment, there is nothing wrong with that. But raping your own daughters, that, that people will talk about. Not to our faces, of course, but should Bellatrix or Andromeda speak of it to anyone, you can be sure everyone who matters will know within the week. And that does our family harm, Cygnus, what you have done. Not just your children, but our House as a whole, perhaps more than you can imagine. Why should they have anything to do with us, if that is how we treat our own?

"Let's say I believe you, that you had nothing to do with Bellatrix's disappearance — which I don't, by the way. I have seen and heard enough to believe you finally lost control and did away with her." Cygnus whimpered with protest at that, but it wasn't coherent English, and Arcturus wasn't going to pause to listen to him anyway. "But, in the end, it doesn't matter. Even were she still alive, your handling of her has created a serious liability. Having a black witch in so prominent a position in the House would be bad enough. But what she could say, truthfully, about what it was, what it truly was, for her to be a child of the House of Black... She could ruin us, taint our House with scandal for a generation, with but a word in the wrong ear. But now that she is dead...

"You have endangered the House of Black, Cygnus. And what is it we do to threats to our family?"

Another horrified whimper was the only response. He must have held that cruciatus longer than he'd realised, Cygnus only really seemed half-conscious. Oh well.

"But it's worse than all that. I fear our misfortune has only just begun." Raping and murdering his own daughter would be bad enough. Should anyone find out — and he didn't doubt someone would find out, who knew what Bellatrix had told that Zabini girl — they would be crippled for a generation or two, but the House would, ultimately, survive. It would take a fair bit
of work on his part, and likely that of his successor, to repair their image in the eyes of their peers. And weed out any other...problematic elements within their own family as well, that would be wise. It would be difficult, it would take time, but they would survive.

It was who the daughter was that turned this into a potentially existential threat.

For going on five hundred years now, the House of Black had had a unique relationship with the Dark. The Covenant made by Onyx and Mela was, to his knowledge, unique, and his ancestors had maintained Their favour and Their blessing in the intervening centuries. His family were dark mages among dark mages, had power others did not. Far too often for it to be coincidence, their family had seen events fall their way. There had been close calls — Cromwell had taken Henry's opposition personally, had done her level best to wipe the Blacks off the face of the earth — but they had come out of every contest and every tragedy on top, one way or the other. No, they'd been too successful for it to be chance.

But Bellatrix had been sworn to Eris. That...could be a problem. There were reasons he'd nearly expelled Bellatrix from the House when he'd first found out. Even compared to the other Dark Powers, Eris was particularly...capricious. And worse, She was known to be possessive of her dedicants, jealous. He'd spoken to Eris all of once, through Bellatrix — and if that hadn't been a nerve-wracking conversation — and, unless he was much mistaken, She even favoured Bellatrix quite a lot (so far as any of the Powers were capable of playing favourites). If it were most any other Power he wouldn't be so concerned, but Eris? He wouldn't put it past Her to be angry. For failing to uphold their duty toward Her favourite, he wouldn't put it past Her to hold a grudge against their whole House.

This was no joking matter. When Eris held a grudge, people tended to die by the hundreds. The Greeks had literally written tragedies about Her starting wars over minor snubs.

Their House could survive a scandal. He wasn't sure it could survive the wrath of Discord.

"You aren't going to die today, Cygnus." His nephew, who seemed to be slowly recovering, glanced up at him, a more relieved-sounding whimper working its way out of his shaking throat. "As much as it would personally please me, I must be mindful of what is in the best interests of this family. It is not my decision to make.

"Your fate, nephew, belongs to Eris alone."

Cygnus had but an instant to stare back at Arcturus in horror before the stunning charm took him.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, an update already. What the fuck, I know.

By the way, Arcturus's wife and kids were killed by a rising Dark Lord and Spain, and he proceeded to go on a roaring rampage of revenge. This was, like, five or six decades ago, but Arcturus clearly still got issues.
Who knows when the next update will be. It could be years. We'll never know.
"So, I think if you disillusion me while I hold the transparency charm, I should be more or less invisible."

Blaise frowned slightly. "One problem: I can't cast the Disillusionment yet, not well enough to let you eavesdrop on the rest of the train. It would probably actually get you more attention, being half-visible. What about a notice-me-not?"

Well, bugger. Bella had been really curious whether that would actually work. "Erm… Maybe? We could try it. But in that case I should probably use disillusionment instead of the transparency charm."

"Well, go on, then," Blaise said, nodding sharply toward her wand.

She cast the charm, tapping herself on the top of the head a bit harder than she'd intended. The sensation of some cool, viscous liquid running over her scalp made her shudder every time. It would be worth it, though, if it got her a chance to listen in on the various cliques throughout the train, as they traded gossip and re-established their acquaintances.

Blaise had been able to tell her surprisingly little about individual students outside of Slytherin — most of them seemed to be beneath his notice. Which, she had to admit, was probably the conclusion she would draw from her reconnaissance as well, but she was attempting to get sorted into Gryffindor. (It seemed the best place to be, both to keep an eye on the Potter kid, and because their current head of house was apparently even less concerned about keeping her students in line than Riddle.) Only having basic intel on the Slytherins wouldn't really help her much there. Not to mention it was always easier to create chaos when she knew where the lines of power and discord lay.

So, her plan for the train ride was to lurk in various compartments, eavesdropping on the other students, and conveniently avoiding having the same 'I'm Lyra Black; I'm a transfer; yes, those Blacks; no, Sirius Black is not my father' conversation sixty billion times.

"Unbemerkt!" Blaise's notice-me-not swept over her, warm and thick, settling into her skin and robes like a physical thing. Less uncomfortable than disillusionment, but not by much. Fortunately the sensation faded after a few seconds.

She shook her head to clear it, then asked, "Did it work?"

"Well, the disillusionment did, and the notice-me-not doesn't seem to be interfering with it, but I cast it, so obviously it wouldn't affect me."

"Right, so we need a test subject."

As though the Powers were listening, the compartment door rattled. "Blaise, why did you lock the door?" Tracey's voice. She would work perfectly. "Come on, open up, we know you're in there!"

Blaise unlocked the door and slid it open, revealing not only Tracey, but Theo, Daphne, and Justin as well. Unlike the last time she had seen them, all of them were in proper robes — albeit the Hogwarts uniform on Justin's part, and Theo looked almost like a different person, his hair cut and
styled out of his face, an expression of bored disinterest, rather than fascinated observation, plastered across his features. Daphne looked exactly the same, if a bit more closed off than she had lounging around Blaise's sitting room. Not surprising, Daphne was clearly one of those girls who made a point of maintaining the image of propriety at all times, even relaxing over the summer. Bella, like Tracey and the boys, had dressed up a bit for the first day back to school, but since she was pretending to be muggleborn, at least superficially, she was wearing a muggle dress under her open school robes. Not that anyone could see her at the moment, anyway.

"Who were you talking to?" Tracey asked at once, after a quick glance showed her that Blaise was apparently alone.

Blaise smirked. It really did seem to be his default expression. "Just Coco," he lied, patting an empty pocket. "Come in, have a seat."

The four of them started filing in, eating up the empty space in the compartment. Bella carefully circled around Tracey, stepped onto one of the benches to let Justin pass.

"That thing can talk?" Justin exclaimed.

"More to the point, why are you bringing it to school?" Daphne gave him a look of disapproval that made her look uncannily like Auntie Walburga, despite the dissimilarity of their features.

Bella gently slipped back to the floor behind Theo, putting her back to the wall just to the side of the door, across the compartment from Tracey. Daphne was still waiting at the door for everyone else to find their seats, she was probably going to take that spot next to Tracey. Theo had glanced in her general direction once, but she was pretty sure she'd managed to get by them all quietly enough nobody had noticed a thing.

"I told Malfoy I'd teach him to play Timore this year, and yes, Justin. I've recently been developing a fear of holding fascinating conversations about magical theory with gorgeous, scantily clad witches."

Justin and Tracey laughed — Bella herself barely held in a snort — while Daphne's disapproving glare intensified. Theo just raised an eyebrow at him. "Very specific, that fear," he said drily.

"Yes, well, the challenge is what makes it fun. What are you all up to?"

"Where's Black?" Justin asked, his tone not quite accusatory. Maybe cautious?

"She's around somewhere. Why?"

Daphne finally slid the door closed, engaging the lock with a definitive snap, her stare unbroken on Blaise even as she floated down to sit with impeccable grace. (Honestly, this girl, she was inhuman sometimes.) "You've been ignoring my owls," she said. That was definitely accusatory. "And I'm not the only one. Theo said he sent you two, and tried to Floo you."

Blaise shrugged. "I've been busy. Besides, we just saw each other three days ago." He had, of course, been purposefully ignoring their attempts to contact him, specifically in order to force this exact confrontation. It was apparently part of his plan to fix the mess Bella had made of her backstory, what with all the showing off she'd done in her duel with Theo. He was fixing it, and she wasn't even allowed to know what he was going to do ahead of time, because she was, in his estimation, hopeless at anything resembling deceit.

Which, well… Much as she liked to claim she could do anything, he wasn't entirely wrong. It had perhaps been slightly ambitious to expect that she could pretend to be quite so mundane as her
official backstory claimed, but, in her defense, she had absolutely no experience pretending to be anything less than she was. It wasn't exactly a useful skill for the First Daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

"Yes, it was very memorable." Theo's right hand twitched toward his left shoulder. Bella smirked invisibly from her corner.

"All right," Justin interrupted. "Bloody Slytherins, always dancing around the point. Who is she really, Blaise?"

"Lyra?"

"Yes, Lyra, if that's even her real name," Tracey snapped.

"And don't try to tell us she's just some muggleborn," Daphne said preemptively.

A grin stretched itself across Blaise's face as he looked from one of them to the next, all glaring at him as he lounged in his seat. "Well, she's not just any muggleborn."

"She's not muggleborn at all," Theo noted, more calmly than the others.

"Oh?"

"The way she moves? The way she fights? She could probably take my father in a duel, you realize? That kind of training, that kind of practice... She wasn't raised by muggles."

Bella frowned to herself. Theo thought she could take his father? Wasn't he supposed to be one of Riddle's Death Eaters? She'd have thought they'd be more dangerous than that. Granted, Bella was damn bloody dangerous, but she was only thirteen, and she hardly had that sort of experience yet. She'd expect Riddle's people to at least be a challenge. Eh, maybe Nott wasn't combat-focused — revolutions needed all sorts, after all.

"Not to mention she said the best thing since the self-sharpening quill," Justin said. "And didn't know Led Zeppelin, or even what a bloody zeppelin was in general. Q.E.D. she's not muggleborn."

"You really want to know?"

"Yes," Daphne said stubbornly.

"This goes no further than us," Blaise demanded.

The other students muttered their assent. "Get on with it!" Tracey, again, so impatient. (As though Bella had any room to talk.)

"And I will expect your assistance with this issue in exchange for bringing you in on it."

"Agreed."

"Ugh, fine."

"Of course, why wouldn't we help you?"

"Because we're Slytherins, Justin," Daphne reminded him. "Though I should think that we're well beyond keeping track of who owes whom, Blaise."

Blaise nodded to her, his face briefly solemn. Huh. Bella would have to remember to ask him about
"All right, then." Blaise sighed, drawing his wand to start casting privacy charms at the door and the walls of their compartment. After a few minutes, Bella rolled her eyes and made a get on with it gesture. His wand returned up his sleeve, he leaned forward to simulate intimacy, his grin back in place. "You really want to know?"

A chorus of impatience.

Blaise caught her eye briefly. "She's a time traveller sent to us by the Powers Themselves in order to lead us in a dark and glorious revolution."

"Gods and Powers, be serious, Blaise!"

Bella had to bite her fist to keep from laughing. None of the others seemed to be any more convinced of the actual truth than Daphne.

"All right, all right. Listen, I don't know the whole story, but no, she's not muggleborn, or muggle raised. That was just a story to get her papers and get her into Hogwarts."

"Well, obviously," Tracey interjected. Justin nodded, looking smug.

"As far as I know, she really is a Black. I mean, have you seen her? And Narcissa Malfoy took her to the Black vaults a couple weeks ago, so that's not in question. Apparently her mother was disowned and she was born out of wedlock, so there's a possibility she's actually a half-blood, but she said she was raised by a 'travelling cursebreaker'." Blaise smirked. The other purebloods sniggered.

Justin just looked confused. "What?"

"'Travelling cursebreaker' is usually code for adventure-seeking thief," Blaise explained.

"And occasionally mercenary," Theo added, nodding, obviously thinking that did explain her knowledge base rather effectively.

It was even mostly true. After all, Ciardha actually was a freelance cursebreaker-adventurer (one of the few people she'd heard of for whom the term wasn't euphemistic), and she'd spent about five times as many hours with him over the past five years as she had with her actual parents.

Blaise nodded. "Obviously she's not going to tell us who he was, but she told me that he died recently. She claims she was on her own until she heard that Black escaped, and now she's obviously trying to meet up with him. Not sure she really has a plan beyond that, she's implied that she doesn't intend to stick around for long. I assume she's just out to see if there's anything she can get out of the House of Black."

"Fits, if she was raised by a travelling cursebreaker," Daphne noted.

"And what's your role in this not-plan?" Tracey asked.

"Yeah, I've never known you to go around helping orphans out of the goodness of your heart."

Blaise pulled his face into a comical expression of wounded dignity. "Why Justin, I'm offended that you would even imply such a thing! But think about it. There is no heir to the House of Black. If we convince her to stick around, revive the House, take it over, I think we'll be in a good position for a little quid pro quo, don't you?"
The other Slytherins shrugged and nodded, apparently accepting this as a logical reason for the Zabinis to support her. It was the actual reason Cissy was supporting her, so obviously it couldn't be entirely stupid. Though it wasn't like she'd given anyone any guarantees or promises about what she'd do when she finally had the House back. She did intend to repay those who helped her, of course — such trading of favors was simply how things were done between houses who desired to have any sort of respectability among the nobility at all — but she was a little surprised neither Zee nor Cissy had asked of her anything in particular. She would have expected something, but she wasn't exactly complaining. Fewer obligations to keep track of this way.

"Hmm…" Justin stared at Blaise for a long moment, eyes narrowed, then said, "Daphne, you've known him longest, is he telling the truth?"

Everyone turned to look at Daphne. She tapped a single long, perfectly manicured finger against her lips as she considered. "Well, his eyes didn't do that scrunchy thing they do when he knows a secret and you don't, but that could just mean he's getting better at lying…" She hesitated, obviously thinking back over the conversation. "I…think he's telling the truth," she eventually decided.

Blaise glared at her. "Thanks ever so much for that ringing endorsement, Daph."

She smirked. "He's definitely not telling us everything, though."

"Well, yeah, even I know that," Justin scoffed.

"You don't need to know everything. Just keep the real story to yourselves, and help me cover for her. Can't have Dumbles or the professors getting too suspicious, after all. Mother sold the muggleborn story to the Ministry, so if the truth gets out, it'll come back on us, not just Lyra." That last bit carried a hint of darkness, an implied threat.

None of the others seemed concerned, though. Theo and Daphne just nodded. Tracey threw out a dismissive, "Yeah, yeah, whatever." Justin rolled his eyes, probably thinking that they'd already promised to help. He was a Hufflepuff, after all.

Right, then. It looked like they'd bought it. And now they had a second layer of background in place, for when the first inevitably failed, a layer for people to discover 'accidentally' and think they'd found the truth. Really, it was just as well she'd completely muffed the muggleborn impersonation right out of the gate. Now they had allies.

Also, apparently the notice-me-not worked just fine.

The plan as a whole, unfortunately, worked somewhat less well than the notice-me-not.

Not that she wasn't able to sneak around and lurk in a number of different compartments, listening to upper year Hufflepuffs discussing their back-to-school party and half a dozen Ravenclaws debating an article from Arithmancy Quarterly — something about using predictive arithmancy to estimate when the Democratic Expansionists would finally get the majority they needed to reform the Magical British government. Which was somewhat interesting — there were no Democratic Expansionists in Bella's timeline — but not exactly news. By Cissy's estimation, unless something drastic happened in the next few years, there would be commoners in the Wizengamot by 2005. Apparently she was very seriously considering taking the Allied Dark in a more muggleborn-inclusive direction as an attempt to get out in front of it, it was a whole thing.

But the vast majority of the conversations she happened to overhear were exceedingly dull,
centering on holidays abroad and the upcoming school year.

Blaise had mentioned at one point that there was some sort of curse on the Defense Against the Dark Arts position — no one had managed to teach it for more than a year since the sixties. Apparently people died, went insane, had their memories obviated. There had been pedophiles and thieves and frauds who had no idea how to teach the class. The best case scenario seemed to be a professor who was harmless, but also completely useless, which just seemed absurd.

Why not just leave the position vacant? Replace the class with something equivalent, but called something else on paper? Contextual curses built into wards, as this had to be, were shockingly easy to get around if you just used your bloody head.

So it was not surprising that there was a great deal of speculation about the identity and nature of their next DADA prof, ranging from another hack who simply read aloud from the textbook, to a bloody vampire or a Miskatonic researcher in disguise. She had also found a compartment full of seventh-year Slytherins, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs organizing an inter-house study group to prepare for their NEWTs, on the assumption that regardless of how terrible the new professor was, they probably wouldn't learn anything in class.

Apparently the Care of Magical Creatures professor had retired at the end of the previous year, which was of interest to Bella because she had signed up for that class as well as Muggle Studies — to get a better idea of how the muggle world had changed in this time and timeline — and Divination — because even though it seemed like the softest of soft options, scrying spells were incredibly useful, not to mention that the practice of scrying was about the only wandless magic taught at this Hogwarts. (Which made sense if Dumbledore was in charge; he had really, really hated Riddle trying to teach them all freeform magic, she still wasn't sure why.) She had caught a few Gryffindors, maybe fourth- or fifth-years, speculating on who the replacement for that class would be. One of them said that the gamekeeper, of all people, had applied. Strangely enough, the others seemed to think that he actually had a decent chance of getting the spot.

There were a few Gryffindors speculating about the Heir of Slytherin and the girl who had supposedly been kidnapped by him at the end of the previous year. A loud, obnoxious boy claimed it was the youngest Weasley, the one Justin had suggested could be her in with the Gryffindors, on the basis that she was the only person they could tell had been unaccounted for in the lockdown after they had found some message from the Heir about the kidnapping. Well, the only one missing besides Potter and the penultimate Weasley, the one everyone seemed to despise. (His own housemates didn't seem to have good things to say about him, even if they didn't disparage him as openly as Blaise's people had done.) The Weasley twins and the Weasley Prefect (How many Powers-bedamned Weasleys were there, anyway?!) had also been called out of class, which also suggested that their family was somehow involved.

A handful of third- and fourth-year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students were discussing the five third-year electives and their professors, which was...somewhat disheartening. It sounded like the Muggle Studies and Divination professors were among the worst in the school. Bella might end up being just as bored and frustrated in their classes as she would revising elementary level runes and trying to talk about arithmancy in a way that made sense to anyone who...wasn't her. (Or Professor Riddle. He had advised her not to take the class last year, and she couldn't see any reason that advice wouldn't still be valid in this timeline.) She was particularly concerned about the Divs professor, characterized by one of the older Hufflepuffs as a wine-soaked old fraud. A Hufflepuff.

There was a certain degree of chatter throughout the train about Sirius's escape from Azkaban (and the dementors which were supposed to be showing up at Hogwarts at some point); the new Black heiress Narcissa Malfoy had been escorting around Diagon Alley for the past month (a pale, pointy
Malfy who had to be Cissy's son had been telling his friends that all those rumors were a load of rubbish — his mother surely would have mentioned it to him if they were true, and Bella was somewhat surprised that she hadn't, honestly); and the whereabouts of a man named Remus Lupin, who was supposed to have been friends with Sirius in school and who was now missing, according to the Prophet.

There was more chatter about Magical Britain's successful bid to host the Quidditch World Cup the next summer, and the notoriously poor Weasleys winning some Ministry lottery drawing; the new shops opening in Hogsmeade; and the latest exploits of Fenrir Greyback, a notorious werewolf radical (whom Bella had only heard of last week) — all topics the paper had chosen to focus on once it became clear that there was and had been no progress in the manhunt for Sirius.

She managed to find the "missing" Remus Lupin in the very last compartment, along with a boy who had to be the famous Potter kid, a bushy-haired, buck-toothed girl — Granger? — and a gangly boy with orange hair who seemed to be dominating their conversation (undoubtedly the wildly unpopular Penultimate Weasley). Or, at least, she thought he was probably the man in question. He was asleep, his robes were tattered and patched, and it was rather odd that he would be on the Hogwarts Express, but the case in the rack above him — held together with string, despite Lupin ostensibly being a wizard — had the name RJ Lupin embossed on it. The only other explanation was that he was some hobo who had stolen Lupin's luggage, so.

Much as she wanted to stay and spy on the Potter kid, their compartment door was closed, and she was fairly certain that Blaise's notice-me-not wouldn't stand up to her just going ahead and opening it. Since she couldn't really hear much from the corridor anyway, she decided to head back up the train in search of something more interesting.

The corridor was growing increasingly crowded, as more students decided to wander about, looking for friends and housemates who hadn't joined them when the train departed. While Bella normally would have approved of this, since it meant new groups to observe and new conversations to overhear, it was becoming rather difficult to navigate. There was no point at all in being invisible if one simply walked into other people, and the corridor wasn't that wide. After narrowly avoiding a small group which had glommed together, blocking the whole bloody way, to place bets on the Sorting of the incoming students — that at least was exactly the same as in Bella's time — she decided to get out of the throng.

The prefects' compartment was deserted, or so she thought, but no sooner had she entered it than a dreamy voice spoke. "You know, I always find that putting a notice-me-not on something only makes it more curious."

Bella spun around to face the voice. It belonged to a waifish blonde with very large silver eyes. She was wearing a muggle jumper — bright yellow — and stretchy-looking pink trousers, with what appeared to be the sleeves of a second, eye-wateringly green jumper bunched around her ankles. Her feet were bare, pulled up on the bench — she was sitting with her back to the wall of the train — to create an easel of her legs, upon which was placed a pad of paper. She was sketching with a lump of charcoal, her wand tucked behind her ear…which appeared to have jewelry made of…dirigible plums?...suspended from it.

It wasn't often that Bella thought someone looked odd, but this girl, who continued sketching, apparently uninterested in whether there was any response to her apparently-offhand comment to the empty compartment, definitely qualified.

Who the bloody hell thought that a notice-me-not charm made things more interesting?

Well, obviously someone bloody interesting, that was who.
Bella cast a dispel, cancelling her charms, then crossed her arms and smirked at the girl, who stared up at her, wide-eyed with shock. "That's quite the opposite of the point," she noted, flopping down on the bench beside her and peering over her knees at the picture — some sort of amorphous creature which seemed to be made of insubstantial tentacles. It wasn't animated, but it almost seemed to shift before her eyes, the lines blurred and twisted around each other. "What is it?"

The girl's shocked expression didn't shift an inch. "It's an illustration for the Quibbler," she explained, then added, with a decidedly amused expression, "It's certainly not a twillk."

"Twillk?" Bella repeated.

"Normally they're invisible, and much smaller than this. They crawl into your ears and make you want to run away and see the world."

Did— Did she mean a tweelk? As in, the parasite elves claimed caused some of them to want freedom? Bella hadn't thought those were actually real. She grinned. "What's your name?"

"Luna," she said simply, going back to her drawing.

"House name," she specified.

The girl looked up again, examining her more closely, taking in her muggle dress under her plain black robes, her unadorned neck and wrists, her hair piled atop her head, held in place with her favorite I'm not even trying today hairstyling spell. She cocked her head to the side, as though trying to make sense of the picture Bella presented, and eventually said, "Lovegood."

Which, well, kind of explained everything. The Lovegoods were notoriously weird, even for mages. There was a reason Dru would never have fucked one without Eris's intervention. Though clearly the weirdness was a product of their upbringing, rather than a blood trait — Narcissa was the very antithesis of weird.

"I had a dream about you," Luna said, rather than asking Bella to introduce herself. "There's someone you should meet," she added, flipping her sketchbook closed. She stood, shaking out her school robes, which she had been using as a bolster, and tying the arms together around her neck like a cape. She slung her bookbag over one shoulder and, still barefoot, led the way out of the compartment, not even looking back to see if Bella was following, peering into every third compartment as they passed.

She was following, because Luna Lovegood was the most interesting person she'd seen all day, but it was still rather odd.

Halfway down the train, she stopped at a compartment with an open door. It was filled with Gryffindors, a handful of loud, obnoxious boys who looked to be fifth or sixth-years, and one small, sullen girl, maybe a second-year, sitting in the corner with a book open on her lap.

After standing in the doorway for several minutes, one of the boys finished up an amusing story involving a bludger, a budgerigar, and an inopportune switching spell, and happened to notice them. "Oi! What's this, then?"

"Lovegood!" a pair of identical, red-headed twins chorused in welcome. "Long time," "no see!" they added, doing that irritating soul-bonded twin-speak thing.

"Hello George, Fred," Bella's guide said, nodding to one, then the other. "Lee, Jimmy."

"What's up, blondie?"
Luna gave the boy — Jimmy — a tiny smirk. "The sky. The clouds, today. The rain, but not for long." It was raining, Bella hadn't even noticed it start, but it had grown more noticeable as the afternoon wore on and the train travelled further to the north. "Ginevra," she called, apparently addressing the girl, who closed her book with a snap and glared at her.

"It's Gin, Luna."

Luna ignored this. "There's someone you should meet," she said in the same dreamy tone she seemed to say everything. Then she turned on her heel and brushed past Bella, leading the two of them back to the empty prefects' compartment. Gin followed as easily as Bella had, though she suspected for other reasons than herself, since the red-head looked exasperated, rather than intrigued.

Upon reaching the compartment, Luna resumed her seat and opened her sketchbook, though she watched them covertly from behind her knees rather than resume her drawing.

After a long moment of staring at the blonde, clearly failing to comprehend the situation, and Bella, who was more than pleased to just watch and see how things unfolded from here, she gave an irritated little huff. "Hi, I'm Gin Weasley. Who're you? And why does Luna think we need to meet?"

"Lyra Black," she introduced herself, then added, smirking, "And I have no idea."

"You're like puzzle pieces," Luna piped up. "Complements. You make more sense together," she added after a moment, her head cocked to the side again, before nodding to herself, and flipping over a page.

Gin shrugged helplessly, muttering something which sounded awfully like, "Bloody mad," under her breath, before asking, more loudly, "You're not a firstie, but I...don't think I've seen you around. Are you in Ravenclaw with Luna?"

"Nope," Bella said, taking a seat and settling in for the dreaded 'I'm Lyra Black, I'm new; yes, those Blacks; no, Sirius is not my father' conversation. "I'm new. Homeschooled. My teacher died last year, so I'm transferring in."

Gin nodded, and the conversation stalled, the other girl hovering closer and closer to the door, clearly inclined to leave.

"So, did you get kidnapped by the Heir of Slytherin last year?" Bella asked.

The Weasley sat down very quickly. "Where did you hear that?" she asked, her face very pale. Bella decided to take that as confirmation.

"Around," she said with a shrug. "Who was it? What happened to him?"

"I - I'm not going to talk about it," Gin said, voice quavering. "I - I can't."

"You should," Luna said, without looking up.

"You mind your own business, Looney! She's crazy, you know," she said, directing this last comment at Bella.

Which, "Well, yeah, obviously. Pretty sure tweelks are some kind of weird metaphor, not actually a thing, by the way. But what does that have to do with anything?"
Now Gin just looked confused. "What? What's a twillk?"

Luna sighed, flipping through her sketch pad. "They look like this, but much smaller. And invisible."

"But. If they're invisible…" Gin said, as though trying to reason her way through something incredibly illogical, "...how do you know what they look like?"

"They're only invisible if you look with your eyes," Luna answered blandly, but the look she gave Bella as she said it was very pointed.

Almost as though she was implying that Bella should be looking at something with something other than her eyes. Presumably her magic. And since the only other thing she had really told Bella was that she should meet Gin, presumably the thing she should be looking at was the Gryffindor girl.

And, okay, yeah, looking at Gin, or rather, sensing the texture of her aura, was definitely interesting. Much darker than Bella would have expected for the average, what, second-year? But weirdly superficial, as though the darkness wasn't really hers, but something which had left a lasting impression from outside, seeping into the texture of her own soul.

"What is that?" she asked Luna.

Silver eyes met her own, one very pale eyebrow raised. "What's what?"

Bella rolled her eyes. Fine, pretend ignorance, but I know you know. "Did you get cursed or something?" she asked Gin. It would have had to be a hell of a curse to affect the girl's own magic like that, but…

Well, it was definitely interesting.

"What did you do?" the girl asked, suddenly fearful, hugging her arms tightly around herself. "What do you know?"

Bella grinned. "You're a bit of a mystery, aren't you, Ginevra," she observed.

Gin shuddered at the sound of her name, throwing her a look that— Was that longing or fear? You'd think they'd be easier to tell apart, but… Okay, probably fear, since she turned from Bella and started to leave, eyes wide, hands clutching at each other to keep from shaking. But then, before she could go two steps, all the lights went out, the train lurching as it abruptly began to slow. Good timing, that.

There was a tiny eep from Luna in the corner.

"What did you do? Stop it!" Gin demanded. "I said stop it, Black! I mean it!"

Bella snorted. "You think I have the ability to stop the Powers-bedamned train? I didn't do anything," she admitted, though she did try to cast a light charm.

Much to her irritation, something seemed to be blocking it from taking effect: not a single globe of light appeared. She had felt the magic as she cast, but then…nothing. Fine, something simpler, then. Lumos! "Lumos!" she tried again, aloud, after the most basic of all possible light charms failed her.

"Tine fionnuar! Incendio!"
Nothing. The train shuddered to a halt.

Bella growled under her breath. That was just— What the fuck could stop her from casting spells?

"No, no, stop, don't, you're not real, you're dead, this isn't real," Gin muttered, even as Luna said, confusion and pain in her tone, "It's so cold."

Which, now that she mentioned it, it was. As a rule, Bella didn't tend to notice dark magic being used around her, but there was definitely something creeping into the compartment, invisible but decidedly present, chilling the air even as it dispersed to block her spells, like trying to set a fog bank on fire. There was a lightning strike outside, illuminating the spread of frost across the windows.

Well, fine then.

"Κάλεσα τι φοτιά τον νεκρόν!" she cast, sending a jet of necromancer's fire to engulf one of the cushions on the bench opposite Luna, sucking in heat, but giving off much needed light.

Granted, it was a rather eerie blue light that seemed to emphasize the darkness, rather than illuminate their surroundings (Luna cringed away from it, hugging her legs to her chest, her eyes closed, rocking slightly) but at least it worked.

She'd have been more than a bit concerned if it hadn't. Seriously, if fire didn't work, and anti-fire didn't work, what the hell was left? Fiendfyre? Yeah, probably a bad idea to cast that on the school train.

"No, no, Tom, please no, I can't, no, no..." Gin devolved from begging to incomprehensible muttering and tears.

And then a dark figure appeared in the doorway, tall and hooded, a grey, mottled hand protruding from its dark cloak, bending and reaching out toward Gin, closest to the door. She didn't even seem to notice as it seized her wrist, pulling her upward. Her eyes were open, but she clearly wasn't seeing the compartment and the dementor — it had to be a dementor, it was just too improbable that some other dark creatures had stopped the train en route to Hogwarts — that was raising her head to the level of its own, apparently inspecting… Well, Bella rather fancied it was inspecting the weird infusion of dark magic in her soul, but she didn't really know.

"Hey," she said sharply, "I saw her first!"

It dropped Gin and turned to her, drawing in a deep, rattling breath as though scenting the air around it. Right, she recalled. They don't have eyes.

"What are you even doing here?" she snapped.

The dementor didn't answer. Not surprising, she didn't think their mouths were really suited to English. She thought it understood her, but it could just be moving toward her because it sensed something weird about the fact that she was standing here talking to it rather than…doing whatever normal people did when faced with dementors. Curling up into a ball and crying?

She glared at it, then, realizing that probably wouldn't make any sort of impression on a creature that couldn't see her, flared her aura, pushing magic into the air around her. Lightning blue and violet flames danced over her, just for a moment, to make her ire clear.

It paused.
"Fuck off, we were in the middle of something."

The dementor stubbornly stayed exactly where it was, radiating dark magic over her in progressively stronger waves. She could feel it tugging at her, ground her teeth. She was quite certain Eris wouldn't just let this creature into her head, but she wasn't positive that Eris's protection extended to preventing her soul from being pulled from her body. That wasn't exactly the sort of thing she and Ciardha could test.

And it was bloody annoying, her command being ignored as though she weren't worthy of the thing's respect, though she clearly warranted its notice. She spared a quick glance for the other girls in the compartment. Neither one seemed to be in any state to pay attention to her at the moment. So it was probably safe to break character, just a little bit.

"Go away or I will set you on fire," she said, in High Elvish, pointing her wand at the creature, just in case it had a way to sense it. Her High Elvish hadn't progressed that significantly in the past few weeks — she kept getting distracted by other things, like Blaise — but she had at least managed to get down a few essential phrases.

The dark magic radiating from the dementor dropped off almost immediately. Whether that was because it actually believed her threat — which it should, she had found at least one (anti-)fire spell that worked, and had a whole arsenal of blatantly dark fire spells she still hadn't tried — or because any human who spoke any High Elvish at all was a human worthy of consideration. It wasn't exactly a common skill, after all, and most human mages who could speak it were far more dangerous than Bella.

A few more seconds passed before it apparently reached a decision, turning and gliding toward the door. Its power ebbed from the room slowly after it had gone, until a painfully light spell raced through the corridor, dispelling its aura entirely and presumably chasing the creatures away. The lights came back, and Bella banished her necro-flame. The cushion she had cast it on was frozen nearly solid, but it would almost certainly recover on its own.

Several minutes after that, the train began to move again, and Luna and Gin began to stir.

"What was that?" Gin asked shakily.

Acutely aware that she was supposed to be a muggleborn, Bella shrugged. "No idea."

"That was a dementor, Ginevra," Luna said, giving Bella a queer look.

"No, not that — you said something," she said, turning to Bella, who shrugged back at her. "I heard you say something," she insisted. "What language was that?"

Seriously?! She was all but catatonic! But now she needed to come up with an answer. "Erm… Greek," she said, judging that to be the least popular human language she actually knew how to speak, and thus the one the others were least likely to be familiar with. Then, when Gin continued to stare skeptically, she added, "It's a well known fact that most dark demonic entities speak Greek."

"You are a very strange girl," Luna said, in High Elvish.

Bella just barely managed to stop herself doing a double take. Fuck.

"What did you just say?" Gin asked. "And since when do you speak Greek?"

Luna hesitated, so Bella jumped in. "She said I'm weird, which, just. Really?"
Gin sniggered, obviously as amused as Bella was by the idea that Luna should think anyone was weird.

Sensing a chance to change the topic, she turned to face the red-head more directly. "So who's Tom, Ginevra?"

The Gryffindor devolved into hysteric tears, barely recovering herself by the time the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station, and effectively avoiding any further questioning.

Annoying.

And meeting a dementor? Not nearly as interesting as she had hoped.

Chapter End Notes

Dementors, how dull.

Yes, it took forever for us to post this, I know. We haven't updated since 2018. Sorry about that, life happens, you know how it is. —Lysandra

In case anyone had any doubts at this point, Bella is a really bad liar. Blaise, however, is really good, so she'll just be delegating the lying to him. Along with any social interaction she actually wants to go smoothly. (Way to traumatize Ginny, Bella.) — Leigha
Off to a Lovely Start

Bella claimed a seat in the first wave of thestral-drawn carriages, alongside Luna, Gin, and a much older Hufflepuff boy who had apparently gotten separated from his pack, then joined the growing crowd milling around the entrance hall. Just as in her own Hogwarts, there seemed to have been little thought given to organizing the return of the students. About three prefects seemed to be attempting to keep order, theoretically shepherding the student body into the Great Hall to take their seats, but no one seemed to be paying them any attention.

After several minutes of simply standing around, basking in the chaos, Bella heard her name shouted over the dull roar that was the other students. She turned to see the face of the tall, stern junior Transfiguration professor, thirty years older and even stiffer in her bearing than Bella recalled, now wearing the red-trimmed robes of the Head of Gryffindor House, glaring out at the crowd from the top of the stairs. Potter and Granger were standing beside her, the former looking slightly stunned, leaning on the latter for support.

"Miss Black! Please report to the Marble Staircase!" McGonagall repeated, her lips growing thin with irritation. Tempting as it was to see what the Transfiguration professor would do if she didn't show up, she did rather want to get her Sorting over with, so she wound her way through the crowd — very few of whom had bothered to look up at the professor's announcement. She caught a flurry of whispers and none-too-discreet pointing as she slipped between and around clumps of students, but not nearly as many as the announcement of the existence of a heretofore unknown Black might be expected to produce.

"Finally," McGonagall muttered as she traipsed up the stairs. "Come along, then," she added more audibly, "Mr. Potter, we'll be dropping you at the Hospital Wing on our way up to the Headmaster's Office."

"I'm fine, really, Professor," Potter said. His claim would have held more weight if he hadn't been leaning quite so heavily on his girlfriend. McGonagall didn't even dignify it with a response.

"Miss Black, you will be Sorted in the Headmaster's office, in accordance with our transfer student protocol, after which Miss Granger will escort you back to the Great Hall to join your housemates for the Sorting of the incoming first-years."

"Uh-huh," Bella said, barely paying attention as McGonagall led the way to Dippett's — now Dumbledore's — office. There were more suits of armor and medieval weapons on display than she recalled, and several portraits had been replaced or moved, but otherwise the halls of Hogwarts seemed much the same.

"Black," Potter said suddenly, "Is that like Sirius Black?"

"Not now, Harry," Granger shushed him.

Bella sighed. "Yes. And no, he's not my father." Maybe she ought to start keeping a tally. (Counting Blaise's people, Potter made six, out of the eight people she'd been introduced to. Granger didn't count, since she'd been here when Potter had asked, and in any case hadn't addressed Bella directly at all yet.) "What's wrong with you?" she asked. Not that she cared, but she'd rather not talk about Sirius just now, in front of one of her least favorite professors and another student she hadn't yet spoken to.

"Nothing, I'm fine," he lied unconvincingly.
"The dementors," Granger explained. She sounded somewhat out of breath. "He— Well, he didn't react well to their searching the train."

"Ah. Right. Dementors. Rather...bad, weren't they."

Granger gave her a look suggesting that this was not as casual and uninteresting a comment to make regarding the dementors as she had thought. Fortunately they were reaching the second floor already, cutting short the conversation and hopefully distracting Potter's girlfriend.

"Hospital Wing, Potter," McGonagall said, pausing slightly on the appropriate landing, allowing the three of them to catch up.

Granger looked over (and slightly down) at the boy she was all but carrying. "Er, I'll catch you up, Professor?" she suggested.

"Very well, Miss Granger. The password is pecan turtles." She said the phrase pecan turtles as though they were cockroach clusters. Not a fan of nuts?

And then they were off again. McGonagall picked up the pace significantly, now that they were no longer hindered by the ailing Potter.

"Are we running late?" Bella groused. It had been months since she had climbed this many stairs.

McGonagall harrumphed at her. "The sooner we get you Sorted, the sooner we can get on with the other children and the Feast."

"Right, so I'm holding everyone up."

The professor gave her a sharp look, but said nothing. Bella took that to be an unspoken yes, and I resent you horribly for putting off my timetable. She grinned. Looked like she was off to a lovely start.

She was still grinning as the spiral staircase carried them up to the Office of the Head. Dumbledore, much as he had never liked her or any of her housemates, had a sense of style that she found rather delightful. His robes, a dark and shimmering blue, speckled with glimmering stars, were rather sedate today — generally he dressed more like Luna Lovegood, all bright, clashing colors and patterns — but his office... She liked what he'd done with the place. There were dozens of spindly tables and plush conjured chairs scattered about with no sense of order, enchanted artefacts and knick-knacks covering every horizontal surface, toys and framed letters and photographs. She could see a half-assembled artefact and the requisite enchanter's tools littering his desk amid the piles of scrolls, sheaves of parchment, and mislaid quills. Professor McGonagall looked at the mess with an expression somewhere between despair and disdain, which only made Bella like it more.

There was a golden owl-perch behind his desk, the bird itself absent, and nearly half the portraits of former headmasters were snoring in odd positions. One of them, Phineas Nigellus (her great-great-grandfather), was watching the proceedings with extreme interest, but most chattered amongst themselves, paying no mind to the occupants of the room. The Sorting Hat, which in Dippett's time had lived on a small golden pedestal, now sat on a globe of the moon, hovering over a spindly table near one of the windows.

A part-goblin wizard and a dumpy, grandmotherly witch — the Head of Ravenclaw and the Head of Hufflepuff, judging by the trim on their robes — sat beside this table, while Dumbledore himself — not a trace of red left in his hair and beard — meandered aimlessly around the room.
"Ah, good, Minerva, you're here. And this must be Miss Black."

"Yes, Albus. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other business..."

"Yes, yes, of course. Feel free to rejoin us when Miss Granger is settled," he said, a knowing twinkle in his eye. "Now then," he turned to Bella. "I trust you've been informed about the Sorting process? We just pop the Hat on your head, and it tells us all where you belong," he explained, ignoring her nod. Which was a terrible oversimplification of everything the Sorting Hat was, she had met the thing before, but okay.

"Now then, just have a seat here," the Head of Hufflepuff said, patting the chair beside herself. "We'll be done in a jif!"

Bella ignored her, taking a chair roughly equidistant from the two Heads. The part-goblin (and wouldn't she love to know the story behind him) gave her a grin which was...probably meant to be reassuring. His sharp, goblin-esque teeth rather detracted from the human gesture.

"Very well, then," Dumbledore said, lifting the Hat ceremoniously off its globe. "Without any further ado—"

"Oh, just get on with it, Albus!" the Hat said techily. "We've got a Sorting to get to!"

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well, then." And without further ado, he dropped the Hat onto Bella's head. It fit rather better now than it had the first time she was Sorted, no longer quite covering her eyes. She closed them to better focus on the Hat, rather than the expectant adults hovering around her.

Just as she recalled from her first Sorting, the Hat began to whisper at the edges of her mind almost immediately. "Well, well... What do we have here? Another black mage? Or...perhaps not," it hummed.

Right in one, Bella thought at it. Or at least half-right in one. I don't know, do you persist across dimensions?

The Hat ignored her question. "Unless I am very much mistaken, it has been some time, has it not, Bella Black?"

Indeed. I'd like to give Gryffindor a go this time, if you don't mind.

"You know, I find I do, rather," the Hat objected. "I do have a policy not to re-sort students unless it's truly warranted."

You get enough time travellers through here that you have a policy about this situation? Bella thought, trying not to laugh.

"You'd be surprised," the Hat said drily. "In any case, I will not sort you anywhere at all until I've had a look at your memories."

Eris! Bella thought, mentally prodding at the connection to her Patron.

"I still don't like this hat," the goddess said, looking in briefly. She sounded distracted.

Yes, yes, I know, you're a jealous goddess, Bella thought, recalling the previous argument between her Patron and the Hat. And there's no bloody reason for possessed hats to be poking around in my mind.
"Who thought it was a good idea to tie a demonic entity to a hat anyway?"

"Godric Gryffindor," the Hat inserted. "And much as I would prefer to have hands, there's no need for that snide tone, Lady Chaos!"

Bella now ignored the Hat in turn. *I know, the process is ridiculous and archaic, and yet I still need to be Sorted, so...*

"Fine, but make it quick," Eris demanded, much as she had (eventually) the last time, shifting herself within Bella's mind to allow the Hat access to her memories.

"Oh! I see," it exclaimed after a moment. "Not quite the same after all, are we, then. Well. It seems I still sorted you into Slytherin before, though."

Yes, because I'm a survivor, and it's rather ambitious to want to change the world. And because I asked. And this time I'm asking for Gryffindor.

The Hat chuckled softly. "Your reasons for wishing to join Godric's house are quite Slytherin, you realize."

Yes. And? If I recall correctly, you said I was too straightforward for Slytherin and too impulsive, and more brilliant than cunning. Just say 'Gryffindor', Hat!

"Well, you are still a survivor above all else, and more brilliant than cunning. And while ambition is a defining feature of Slytherin House, it does not hold a monopoly on the trait. The differences between Slytherin and Gryffindor were never so great as these latest generations seem to think, you know. Hmm... That devious streak and penchant for troublemaking would make you a disruption to any House, not least Gryffindor. Though I suppose it is a rather noble goal to attempt to salvage what's left of your House..."

Hmm, yes, I suppose it is, rather. **Gryffindor**.

"Though if the Slytherin's perspective is in any way accurate, it might do his house good to bring in new blood..."

*If you think I can't shake up Slytherin from the outside, you drastically underestimate me,* Bella thought, rather amused. *And if you're taking 'the Slytherin's' opinion into account, you should know that Professor Riddle spent the last two years telling me I'm an embarrassment to Slytherin House. I think he might have tried to set your counterpart on fire for sending me there.*

"I'm very fireproof," The Hat assured her, then sighed. "Very well then, if you insist, you may go to GRYFFINDOR."

Finally, Bella thought as she opened her eyes and lifted the Hat off her head.

The Heads of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff exchanged a look which Bella interpreted as "this is bad." The Hat chuckled.

"So, what now?" Bella asked the room at large.

"Now, my dear, we have a feast to attend," Dumbledore said, smiling at her as though completely unconcerned with this turn of events, despite the reaction of the other Professors.

Just then, McGonagall returned, Granger following behind her, looking very much as though she was trying not to grin.
"Another young Lion for you, Minerva!" Dumbledore said jovially.

McGonagall's features froze, though only for a moment before she managed to say, "Congratulations, Miss Black. Miss Granger, would you be so kind as to show Miss Black up to the dormitory after the Feast?"

"Of course, Professor!"

After a brief, expectant pause, McGonagall said, "You are dismissed, Miss Granger, Miss Black."

"Oh! Right! Come on, we can see if Madam Pomfrey will let Harry come to the Feast on our way back down. Sorry, I didn't catch your first name, by the way. Mine's Hermione."

Madam Pomfrey, the matronly Healer who had apparently taken the position from Kitty Turner at some point in the past thirty years, was rather reluctant to let the Potter kid out of her sight, but the boy himself was all too eager to join them. She relented after nearly ten minutes of very boring debate, when Potter argued that it would do him good to eat something other than chocolate and spend some time with his friends.

Apparently the effect of dementors was counteracted by chocolate, which explained why there were plates of bonbons on the tables when they finally arrived in the Great Hall.

Not that the bonbons were the first thing Bella noticed. That honor went to her nephew, who stood and began pantomiming something as she, Potter, and Granger entered the hall. The Slytherins around him broke into open laughter in a very un-Slytherin way, shooting the occasional look in their direction, as though to make sure their display was being appreciated by the intended audience.

"What is he even supposed to be— Is that— That kid over there, is he swooning?"

Potter scowled.

"Ignore him, Harry," Granger said, in a tone she probably meant to sound soothing. By the way Potter's scowl deepened, it sounded just as patronizing and annoying to him as it did to Bella.

"Am I missing something?"

Potter pulled away from Granger, stalking over to the Penultimate Weasley and taking a seat as Granger explained, "It's just well, when the dementors came on the train, Harry, er...fainted. A bit."

Ah, that made sense, then. Draco's snake being distracted and all. Obviously just trying to get Potter's attention by annoying him.

"Everyone, this is Lyra," Hermione said as they reached the table.

"Saved you a seat," a pudgy boy said, ducking his head shyly and scooting a bit further from Potter and the Penultimate Weasley to allow them to sit.

"Lyra, this is Neville, Ron, and Seamus and Dean, on the other side of the table, they're all in our year. That's Colin Creevey, Samantha Barrie, and Ginny Weasley, Ron's sister. They're second-years."

"I met Ginny on the train," she told Hermione, giving the younger girl a jaunty wave. Gin shuddered slightly, suddenly very interested in the chocolates off to her left.
"Oh, good. Just between you and me, she could use a few more friends," she said quietly, and then louder again: "Percy Weasley, just there, is Head Boy this year. That's the quidditch team over there, Fred and George are the twins — pranksters, be warned. Oliver, Katie, Alicia, and Angelina. Harry's on the team as well, seeker. Let's see... Oh, it looks like Melody Morris is a prefect now! That's her, about six places down on your left, across the table, and the other girls in our year are on her other side, but you'll meet them later, I'm sure."

"Breathe," Ermione," the Penultimate Weasley (Ron), said, his mouth full of chocolate.

The girl glared at him. "I'm sure talking with your mouth full is making a wonderful first impression, Ronald."

"Has she met your cat yet?"

"Hi Lyra," Neville said, distracting her from the argument brewing to her left.

"Oh for God's sake, Hermione, switch seats with me!" Potter demanded, apparently annoyed to be sitting in the middle of his friends' spat.

After awkwardly disentangling himself from the bench and his neighbors' robes, he resettled himself between Granger and Bella herself. "Lyra, was it?" he said, "I'm Harry. Harry Potter."

"Yeah, Lyra Black, as in Sirius. We met earlier."

The boy flushed slightly. "Er, yeah, sorry, I was a bit out of it. Um. Do you know him? Black?"

Bella shrugged. "Apparently he's my cousin. We've never met."

"I didn't think there were any other Blacks," Neville said, passing her a plate of bonbons. Seven.

"My great-grandfather was a squib. His wife was muggleborn, she was teaching me, but she died. I didn't find out there was a whole House of Black until I was trying to get in here."

"Oh." The boy looked rather taken aback. "I— I'm Neville Longbottom."

Ah, yes, the Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom. Hmm... Hadn't her alter ego tortured a couple of Longbottoms into insanity? There couldn't be many left, Cissy had hardly mentioned them in her discussions of the political landscape. She shrugged. "Never heard of them. You can call me Lyra."

"Neville," he replied, as she would expect. Even the stuffiest of nobles didn't tend to stand on ceremony with their year-mates.

"Neville," she nodded.

"Lyra," he grinned.

Potter looked at them in confusion. Had he never seen anyone introduce themselves before? "Yes, Lyra...Neville...Harry," he said, pointing to each of them in turn. "I think we all know who we are, now."

Apparently not.

Neville rolled his eyes slightly as Bella tried not to laugh. "So I should call you Harry, then?"

"Uh...yes?" he answered, as though he suspected this was some sort of trick.
"Just checking."

Neville snorted.

"What?" Harry asked aggressively, apparently aware that he was the butt of the joke, even if he didn't get the joke itself.

"Nothing, nothing," Neville said, still laughing.

Before Harry could press the issue, McGonagall, who was apparently the Deputy Head as well as the Head of Gryffindor, led the procession of firsties into the hall. Silence fell as she gave a short speech about the Sorting and its significance. Utterly superfluous, since all of them had already been Sorted, but whatever.

Then the Hat was set on an ancient three-legged stool, and a rip near the brim opened. And it began to sing. Badly. Which was, well. Unexpected. It didn't use to sing. But then, that seemed like the sort of thing Dippett would have discouraged, he was a much more dignified Headmaster than Dumbledore.

When the Hat finally shut up, after explaining (in poorly rhyming verse) the basic nature of the four houses, McGonagall called the firsties up to try it on. None of them took more than a minute or so to Sort, but there were about four score of them, so by the time Wright, Christine, was called, patience was running thin, the older students muttering amongst themselves rather than paying attention to the ceremony. And they had run out of bonbons sometime around Piltdown, Alexander.

Thankfully, Dumbledore seemed to realize this. He kept his pre-supper remarks much shorter than Dippett ever had, warning them not to fuck with the dementors (there had been a pointed comment about invisibility cloaks, she'd have to try to figure out who had brought one to school) and introducing two new professors — Lupin (or possibly the Hobo Impersonating Lupin) for DADA, and an inhumanly large man called Hagrid (the gamekeeper) for COMC. The latter appointment garnered much applause, especially from the Gryffindors. 'Lyra' joined in wholeheartedly: there was little to no chance that she'd be bored in a practical class taught by a half-giant. According to Ciardha, giant hybrids tended to have a rather different idea of what qualified as safe and reasonable. Specifically, a more fun idea.

After that, the elves were finally allowed to send up the food, which the students fell upon like a plague of pixies.

"Should've known Hagrid would be teaching Care," Harry said. "He sent me a copy of the book for my birthday. Still haven't figured out how to get it open."

"I threatened to set it on fire," Bella told him.

"Did that work?" Neville asked from her other side.

"Well, the covers are a bit singed now, but yes, eventually." Actually it had taken a combination of fire whipping and bribing the cursed book with live mice, but she more or less had the thing trained, now. It had only tried to bite Blaise once while they were packing.

Harry laughed. "What other classes are you taking?"

"Muggle Studies and Divs."

"Why are you taking muggle studies? Aren't you muggleborn?"
"Well, yeah, but..." Bella stalled, trying to think of a reasonable explanation for that decision, other than that she wanted to see more of how the muggle world had changed in the past thirty years. "Easy O?"

"That's what everyone says, but I heard Burbage gives nearly as many essays as Snape," Harry told her.

"Professor Snape," Hermione corrected him. Bella hadn't even realized she was listening.

Blaise had told her a bit about all the professors, of course, but she should probably make an effort to have some explicable basis for her knowledge. With that in mind, she asked, "He teaches Potions, right?"

"Yeah, but more importantly," the Penultimate Weasley said, leaning forward to peer past Hermione, "He's head of Slytherin. He hates us."

"Well, he might like you better if you didn't spend all your time talking instead of doing your work," Hermione muttered, not quite under her breath.

"He doesn't like you, either, and you're the swottiest swot in our year," the Weasley shot back. Hermione's face went rather pink as she stabbed a carrot with unwarranted vehemence.

"I can't wait until I can drop his class," Neville sighed.

"Buck up, Nev," Harry said. "Only three more years."

"And there's only the one teacher for each subject?" Bella still couldn't quite wrap her head around that one. There had been two or three for each subject in the sixties, or at least in her sixties.

Neville nodded. "It's not so bad for our class, there's only forty of us. But you saw this year, there's almost twice as many. My Gran's on the Board, she says they're talking about hiring more teachers because it's not safe to have so many students in Charms or Potions at once."

"Really?" Hermione exclaimed. "I hadn't heard that!"

"Hey, maybe they'll get a new Potions prof, and we won't have to deal with Snape anymore," Harry said, his tone terribly optimistic.

The Penultimate Weasley frowned. "I wouldn't get my hopes up, sounds too good to be true."

"It probably wouldn't happen for another two years, at least," Neville admitted. "It takes forever to get things like that changed."

"Bugger. Hate it when I'm right."

"Good thing it happens so rarely, then," Hermione sniped. Harry, Neville, and Bella herself laughed, though the Weasley didn't seem all that amused.

Bella had another question, though, that was more interesting than the obvious fault line between Potter's girlfriend and apparent best mate. "Nev, you said your grandmother's on the Board? They actually approved a half-giant as a teacher?"

Because that was weird. She could see the part-goblin Head of Ravenclaw — goblins were actually very intelligent, despite their reputation in Magical Britain — but giants were notoriously...simple. And violent. She was kind of surprised he was allowed to work at the school at all, even as the
"Half-giant?" Harry said, looking at the high table as though he hadn't even considered that Hagrid might not be fully human.

"Isn't that obvious?" Bella asked Neville. He shrugged, which she took to mean he had known it, too. "How tall do you think humans get?" she asked Harry. Not to mention the new professor's proportions were all wrong for a normal person.

"Well, I don't know," the boy sputtered. "It's just, he never mentioned it, that's all."

"Well, he wouldn't, would he?" Neville said. "I mean, there's a lot of prejudice, and, well... It's kind of, um, really illegal, human/non-human hybrids. Not to be one," he added quickly, looking over Bella's shoulder at either Harry or Hermione, who had cut off her argument with Weasley to listen in. "But, well, you have to use blood magic, or dark alchemy, to make it, you know, work. Flitwick doesn't talk about being half-goblin, either," he added, blushing slightly, though whether at the attention from his peers or the topic of conversation, Bella wasn't sure.

"Blimey," Weasley said. "I always thought he'd got hit by a bad Engorgement charm as a kid or something."

That assumption was too stupid to dignify with a response. "Why would you expect the gamekeeper to tell you about his parentage, anyway?"

"He's a friend," the boy said defensively. "He was the one who told me about Hogwarts."

Powers, it was almost too easy to find his buttons. Bella rolled her eyes. "Whatever, still surprised the Board approved him."

Neville shrugged. "Gran didn't say anything about it, just that we'd still be following the same syllabus Kettleburn used."

Maybe that explained it, then — the course itself wouldn't be changing, they'd just have a professor who was better able to contend with (and protect the students from) the more dangerous creatures. It would take a hell of a fuck up for a half-giant to lose a bloody limb to a creature attack, like the last professor apparently had.

Harry changed the subject, then. "I can't wait for Lupin's class."

"I thought the Defense professor was always terrible," Bella noted.

"He really knows his stuff," the Harry insisted. "Chased that dementor off the train like it was nothing."

Neville, however looked slightly suspicious. "Where did you hear that?"

"Oh," Bella thought quickly, trying to recall exactly what was public knowledge about her persona. "Well, I ran into Mirabella Zabini at the Ministry when I was looking into transferring. She introduced me to Narcissa Malfoy, they helped me get my school things and such." That should be safe enough: people had seen her with Narcissa in Diagon, after all.

Neville made a vague, acknowledging sort of noise. Harry started to say something, then hesitated, looking torn, giving Weasley an opening.

"So you've been hanging out with the slimy Slytherins?" he said, leaning over Hermione again.
Bella was beginning to see exactly why Blaise's people had been so overwhelmingly disdainful of him.

"Get off me, Ronald!" Hermione snapped. "I'm surprised Malfoy's mother was even willing to talk to you, Lyra. You did say your parents were muggles, didn't you?"

Bella shrugged. She had certainly implied it. "Yeah, but they're not in the picture. It's complicated. Anyway, I got the impression she'd play nice with Hagrid up there if he could claim descent from the House of Black."

"Not surprised," Neville volunteered from behind her. "She was a Black before she married Lucius Malfoy, and they've always been a bit mad about, well...the House of Black." (As though the Longbottoms and every other Noble House wouldn't be exactly the same if their future was on the line.)

And then Harry started sniggering. "Hey, Ron, can you imagine the look on her face when she finds out Lyra here got into Gryffindor?"

Personally, Bella couldn't believe she'd be that surprised — it wasn't as though she'd really made a point of acting the reserved, self-important Slytherin with her. Zee wouldn't be surprised at all, she'd agreed that it would be more effective for Bella to aim for this House. It would be more difficult for her to keep in contact with Blaise, if his portrayal of current interhouse relations was accurate, but she was confident that wouldn't be a problem: she'd never given a fuck about social expectations before, no reason to start now.

Weasley laughed so hard he inhaled a bit of pie, then coughed crumbs across half the table. Fortunately, almost everyone else was already done eating. Dumbledore rose a few moments later to dismiss the lot of them, the hall immediately erupting into chaos as four hundred students rose to their feet. The boys took off at once, Neville giving Bella and Hermione a polite nod as he went.

Hermione led her out into the entry hall, sighing in relief as they cleared the crowd. "Would you rather head up right away? Or I can show you where the classrooms are, and by the time we get up to the Tower, the firsties should be all settled in."

"Are we going to miss the introductory speech?" Not that it made much of a difference. Bella didn't particularly care if she missed McGonagall going over the rules of her House. It wasn't as though she was planning on paying them any mind anyway.

"What introductory speech?"

Huh. Apparently Blaise wasn't kidding when he said the Head of Gryffindor couldn't give a rat's arse about her students and what they got up to. Okay, then. Made breaking the rules a bit less fun, but she was sure she could find other ways to entertain herself.

"What the hell, might as well show me around."

The third-year Gryffindor girls' dorm was a large semicircular room, one half of the third floor of Gryffindor Tower, which had been enchanted into rectangularity. The spiral stair and the bathroom were located at one of the short ends, the remainder of the space filled with beds, armoires, and personal study desks, offset so that each desk sat between a pair of beds. Those on the outside wall had windows above them. Those on the inside wall were topped with tapestries depicting the Hogwarts crest, a griffin rampant, and a dragon in flight. The drapes on both the windows and the beds were a garish, vibrant scarlet, the wood a warm golden oak, or possibly maple.
Bella hated it.

She couldn't care less about the color of the fixtures and the banal artwork — well, she would have chosen darker reds and browns, if it had been up to her, but that was hardly important — there were no actual portraits and the beds and desks themselves were pretty much exactly the same as in Slytherin. She could deal with the disconcerting effects of space warping enchantments and the fact that there was only one shower-bath for the six of them.

Far more irritating was the fact that she would apparently be expected to share the sleeping space with the other five girls in her year.

The last time Bella had shared a room with anyone for more than a night or two, it had been Meda, and she had been seven. She couldn't imagine sleeping in a room with half a dozen perfect strangers, let alone living with no privacy to speak of for the foreseeable future.

Not being able to put a solid door between herself and the still-prattling Granger, for instance, was liable to drive her mad inside of a week. She hadn't realized when she agreed to a tour that the bushy-haired muggleborn was going to drag her around half the bloody castle quoting *Hogwarts: A History* all the while.

Eventually they reached the seventh-floor entrance to Gryffindor Tower, a portrait of a fat lady in a pink gown whose frame swung forward at the words *Fortuna Major*, revealing a hole through which they had had to clamber in order to reach the Gryffindor commons. That room had been stretched to accommodate what seemed to be most of the House. A party seemed to be developing before Bella's very eyes, but Hermione didn't pause for long, leading her up a spiral staircase on their left, away from her raucous housemates almost immediately.

The other girls had clearly already been and gone, or else the elves just assigned trunks to beds at random. Bella's was sitting at the end of the bed nearest the door, which, she thought, simply wouldn't do. Not only was the bed by the bathroom *obviously* the least desirable — she, at least, had no desire to be constantly awoken by her dorm mates traipsing by in the middle of the night, or distracted by their comings and goings while she studied — but it was also the least effective spot from which to enact what she considered the obvious solution to the privacy problem.

Ignoring Granger's explanation of the breakfast routine and class schedules and the most opportune times to disrupt everyone else's morning by tying up the bathroom, she levitated her trunk, moving it to the far end of the room.

"Erm... Lyra, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"It looks like you're stealing my bed, new girl." The angry voice belonged to a blonde girl wearing too many fashion glamours and a spoilt pout.

"Lyra Black," she introduced herself, still moving the other girl's trunk back toward the door.

"And who might you be?"

"Put that back!"

"What's going on?" Another voice called from behind Spoilt Bitch. "Lavender, why did you stop?"

"Tch," Spoilt Bitch — Lavender, apparently — clucked, moving aside to allow a small posse to follow her into the room. "The new girl's trying to steal my bed!"
"Uh, Lyra, this is Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, Sophie Roper, and Fay Dunbar," Granger introduced them, suddenly far meeker in tone and temperament than she had been only moments ago, lecturing pedantically about efficiency. Interesting. "Everyone, this is Lyra Black."

"Hi, Lyra," one of the girls, possibly Sophie, said brightly. "Nice to meet you!"

Lavender glared at her, before turning back to Bella. "If you know what's good for you, new girl, you'll put that back, right now."

Bella dropped the trunk and gave her the most saccharine smile she could manage. "If you know what's good for you, you'll let me have the bed on the end."

"Oh, that is so not going to happen," Lavender snapped, stomping past her and levitating her trunk back to its initial position, sending Bella's flying haphazardly back down the room.

Fay followed her, going to the third bed while Parvati flounced back down to the second.

"Erm, sorry," Sophie said as she sidled past. "But this is the way it's been forever." As though two years was a lifetime. "Lavender and Parvati get the best spots, then Fay, then me, then Granger." Was it Bella's imagination, or was there a bit of disdain in the way she said the muggleborn's name? Though she supposed it made sense, if this girl was the second to last in their little hierarchy, for her to do her best to distance herself from the only one lower than herself. Apparently Gryffindor really wasn't that different from Slytherin after all.

"What about you?" she demanded, turning to Hermione.

The girl looked rather like a kicked house elf — more hurt by the betrayal than the physical punishment — as she moved her trunk to the bed nearest the door, acknowledging 'Lyra' as her superior. Bella nodded at her. Then, as the other four dug through their trunks, moving clothes to their armoires, and chattering about the party and what they wanted to wear to it, she began to cast a paling, whispering the incantations to avoid their notice.

A wall of shimmering force took shape, cutting the four 'best' beds off from the rest of the room, including the door and the loo. But, well, that wasn't really Bella's problem. She had warned them, after all.

It wasn't her best work, Ciardha would probably consider it nothing more than a weak approximation of a proper paling, it would hardly last the night. But she was tired, and she could always set up something better when she had more time, and could carve proper runes into the floor and walls. She was just tying off the spell when Fay noticed what she was doing.

"Hey! Wait! What are you—" she began, approaching the barrier and poking it with her wand.

"Hey! Let us out!"

"What?" Parvati reappeared from behind her wardrobe door.

"It's— Black, she's, she's put up a ward, or something! Damn it, Black, let us out!"

Bella tried to put on a considering expression, but she was fairly certain her persistent smirk ruined it. "Hmm...or how about not. And it's a paling, by the way, not a ward. But good guess."

She twiddled her fingers at the trapped girls, then added an element to make the wall opaque.
All four of them were shouting in outrage, now, but that was quickly solved as well: a one way sound barrier should do it...there.

Silence fell abruptly in the remaining third of the dorm. She turned to Hermione, the other girl's eyes very wide, caught somewhere between terror and wonder, she thought, and gave her an impish grin. "So, what should we wear to the party?" she asked, purposefully mocking Lavender's vapid tone. They could still hear her, after all.

"Bu— Wha— How did you do that?"

Bella shrugged. "That would be telling. I was joking, by the way, I'm unpacking and going to bed." It had been a very long day, and she'd had quite enough small talk for one evening in the Great Hall. "Touch my trunk, and I'll set you on fire," she added as she walked into the bathroom.

She didn't need to look back to know that the girl believed her.
The first conscious thought Hermione had on waking was that it was unusually quiet. She was
distantly confused, but only for a moment. She sat up, shuffled to the edge of her bed, stuck a
finger into the curtains to pull them open a sliver.

A couple feet away stood a wall of greyish, shimmering not-light, half of the room sealed away
behind it.

Hermione had absolutely no idea what to think.

After allowing herself far too many seconds to just stare at the thing in wary wonder, she shook
herself out of her distraction, slipped out of bed. Lyra was already gone, she noticed at a quick
glance. Her bed was a mess of tangled sheets, textbooks and rolls of parchment laid out at random
over her desk, her dress from yesterday carelessly hanging over the back of the chair. Shaking her
head to herself, Hermione gathered up her clothes for the day, set out for the bathroom.

She jumped a second after walking through the door. Lyra hadn't left already — she was at the
sinks in the bathroom. Doing her hair, by the look of it. "Oh. Hi."

The girl's peculiar grey-purple eyes flicked to her, just for a second, before returning to the mirror.
"Hey." Lyra ran the tip of her wand down the length of hair she'd pulled away. Her hair dried as
the wand passed over it, instantly, from root to tip, that one lock springing into its previous thick
waviness. She separated out another handful, and in a blink that one was dried too.

Hermione somehow managed to keep from staring. She'd tried using the standard drying charm on
her hair before, of course, but it always ended very, very badly. Puffed up something terrible, it
was worse than nothing. She suspected the other girls had some trick they were using, but she
hadn't been able to figure it out on her own, and they certainly weren't about to volunteer the
information. She'd gotten into the habit of showering in the evening, just so she wouldn't have to
deal with it.

She still went off into one of the stalls, but that was just so she could change without Lyra standing
right there.

When she returned to the sinks to wrangle her hair into a state it would consent to being tied out of
her face, Lyra was still there, nearly finished plaiting her hair down to the end. She'd pulled it over
her shoulder so she could see what he was doing, though Hermione would think trying to get it
right while holding her wand in her hand would just be annoying. But, after a couple seconds
watching, she noticed Lyra was actually using her wand — every few turns, she would hold the
plait still with her left hand, bringing the tip of her wand to her hair with the other before moving
on again. She was casting the charm silently, so Hermione couldn't tell what it was, but it was
obviously supposed to do something.

Hermione caught herself staring at Lyra again, but it had little to do with the cosmetic charms she
was using. Hermione had never managed to track down anywhere. (Not that she'd tried that long,
she'd decided early to spitefully ignore the entire subject.) No, Hermione was still trying to decide
what to think about Lyra Black.
Ignore for a moment the suspicious coincidence of her transferring in so soon after Sirius Black had broken out of Azkaban. And it was suspicious — for how ubiquitous they were in Magical British history there really weren't any Blacks left. But, setting that aside, Lyra herself was just...odd.

For all that mages claimed to be so very different from ordinary people, they really weren't. Hermione had developed over her primary years a few boxes to put her classmates in, categories to help predict their behaviour, know whether she should avoid them or not. Magic kids fit into the same boxes. Even Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies were perfectly predictable — they were no different than any other privileged little snouts who thought their wealth and their family name made them intrinsically better than anyone else, in a way they worthless plebs could never overcome, no matter how hard they tried.

Granted, the handful of snobby rich kids she'd met before weren't genocidally racist, but she wrote that down to cultural and historical differences. Her Britain had developed past that sort of thing by now. Er, mostly.

Usually it didn't take her very long after meeting someone to put them in the appropriate boxes, but she was having trouble with Lyra. She claimed to be a muggleborn — of relatively modest means, at that — a few generations removed from magical nobility through an exiled squib. (For all that Noble Houses tended to pretend their precious pureblood families were squib-free, there were plenty out there.) But Hermione wasn't so sure about that. She'd noticed long ago that kids from the Noble Houses had a particular way of walking, of sitting, like they'd been trained to be still and composed and graceful from the bloody cradle. (Which, according to Neville, they had been.) The way they talked too, they tended to be far more careful in their words, more indirect. The major exception was Malfoy, but he was just an idiot. Most of them even had the same accent, posh and vaguely Irish-sounding — not exactly, it wasn't quite like any British accent she'd heard before, but it did clearly lean more toward Celtic. Which made sense, historically.

Lyra had the walk, it was bloody obvious. Even more suspicious, she had the accent. The characteristically magical accent. There was no way she was raised outside the magical world, just no way. Granted, she didn't talk exactly like the kids from the mages' stupid archaic aristocracy — just a second ago, saying "hey" like that, that wasn't something they did. For the most part, they were meticulously proper. Lyra's word choice was too casual and...slang-y. But how the words were pronounced, even if the words themselves were wrong, was one hundred per cent rich pureblood.

She'd even done that giving-permission-to-use-first-names thing the purebloods did! It couldn't be more obvious.

She might be more closely connected to the magical nobility than she was pretending to be, but, as far as Hermione could tell, she didn't hold to their prejudices. She didn't seem to care about blood purity at all — not only had she hardly blinked at the muggleborns in Gryffindor, she was claiming to be one herself! While she had come off a bit disdainful toward Ronald, she hadn't seemed to have the same problem with Ginny, so it couldn't be that whole classist thing they had going on informing her opinion. (She disliked Ron because he was Ron, not just for being a Weasley — which, honestly, Hermione understood perfectly.)

Hermione had misread one thing at first: when Lyra had asked Neville why the Board of Governors had allowed a half-giant a teaching position. (Setting aside for now the revelation that Hagrid was apparently a bloody half-giant.) She'd initially thought Lyra was expressing the same disapproval of "half-breeds" other purebloods foamed at the mouth with, but no, that wasn't it at all. After a second to think about it, Hermione was convinced Lyra had asked because she understood the prejudice existed, independent of her personal opinion. If anything, she'd
looked *eager* to have a half-giant as one of her professors, a light in her eyes and a crooked grin on her face.

Honestly, Lyra seemed to be better about this sort of stuff than any other pureblood she'd met. Even Ron, who was so far from the noble class they might as well be in a different country. Neville wasn't cruel about it, no, but it was clear he... "Pity" was probably too strong a word. Even among the more progressive mages, a strain of chauvinism was almost universal, those poor, stupid muggles and their hard, empty lives. Even the nice ones didn't think much of people without magic, thought them simple or stupid — Ron had certainly implied as much countless times. And, the idea that Hagrid might be a half-giant had *clearly* made Ron at least a little uncomfortable, and he knew Hagrid, had known him for years! Lyra had come off as *aware* of people's heritage or their social status, but it didn't seem to make a difference to her. Just a part of who they were, like their hair colour or something.

In the overwhelmingly race- and class-obsessed society that was Magical Britain, Hermione found the very thought of someone just *not caring* curiously refreshing.

But, see, it wasn't *quite* that simple. She would *expect* someone seemingly free of the prejudices that plagued the rest of the culture to be...well, nice? And, Hermione had only known Lyra for less than a day, so she couldn't say this with any real certainty. But she'd gotten the niggling impression that Lyra was...not. In fact, she rather felt Lyra might be a bit cruel.

It was little things, mostly. The sharpness in some of her smirks, the coldness of her glares. Laughing at Hermione's comment about Ron so rarely being right about anything. (Sure, Hermione thought it was funny, she had been the one to say it — even *Harry* had laughed! — but it was funny because she knew Ron. Lyra couldn't say the same.) A snarky comment here or there. 

*Lips still curled with a smile, odd eyes bright with laughter, "Touch my trunk and I'll set you on fire."*

Hermione shivered.

And, just, now greeting her with that far too casual *hey*, standing there, doing her bloody hair, like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. As though she hadn't locked four other girls in a small room overnight. Due to what was a rather minor disagreement, in the scheme of things. She'd, just, put up that paling — *far* too strong and long-lasting, there was no way she should be able to cast something like that — then turned around like it was nothing.

There was no bathroom in there, there was no— How were they going to get out? She meant, they did have to eat and get to classes. Hermione could try to bring it down, but she wasn't certain she could — even after lasting through the whole night, she'd still felt the magic in the air, it would be a challenge. (They hadn't covered palings in any real detail in Charms yet, she didn't have the experience to deal with them properly.) And Lyra was just, just leaving it there! She didn't even seem to care!

Hermione knew she *should* do something about it. She should convince Lyra to take it down or, hell, go get a prefect or McGonagall. Locking their dormmates in their room had to be against a rule somewhere. She *should*, but...

But she really didn't want to. Those girls were *horrible* to her, always had been, since the first week of first year. She wouldn't have chosen to do something like this herself, of course. But now that Lyra had, she— It was *satisfying*, sickly satisfying. Part of her, some vindictive part of her she tried to pretend she didn't know existed, had watched Lyra put the paling up, heard the girls on the other side panicking and yelling at her, and hadn't quite been able to hold in a smile.
Part of her wished she could do things like that. Just, *do it,* and not care about the consequences. Not care about what the other girls thought, not care about what other of the students might think, or the professors. She wished she could just do what she wanted, and *not even care.*

And besides, she'd let Hermione stay on this side of the paling, hadn't she? It wasn't like her cruelty was *entirely* indiscriminate. She didn't doubt that if she hadn't buckled under Lyra's demand to take the 'worst' bed she would have ended up on the other side too, but at least she had given Hermione the opportunity to pick a side before doing it. She hadn't been *nice* about it, but she hadn't tarred Hermione with the same brush she had the others. That had to count for something.

Lyra didn't fit in her boxes. She was cruel, but precise in her cruelty, so far only striking back at those who, in her mind, deserved it. And, well, that shameful part of Hermione honestly thought she was also kind of brilliant sometimes.

Lyra was incredibly confusing. Hermione had absolutely no idea what to think about her.

And it was only the *first bloody day.*

She was distracted enough with her own thoughts, Hermione almost missed Lyra wrapping up and leaving the room. Haphazardly tying her hair up out of her face, Hermione scrambled after her, catching up to find her already in her school robes, checking through her bag. "Shouldn't we do something about them?"

Lyra's head tilted a little to the side, glancing up to frown at her. "About who?"

Hermione nodded toward the paling. It didn't look any weaker than it had last night, which it *really* should. Had Lyra renewed it before Hermione had woken up?

"Oh, them. Nah, they'll be fine."

"But, when they don't show up to class..." And they *would* starve to death in there eventually...

Lyra grinned at her. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure the castle has already put another staircase in there. It's fine."

She opened her mouth to argue, before abruptly realizing Lyra was absolutely correct. The castle *would* do that eventually, that was how it worked. The students in the dorms needed to be able to get places, and if they *couldn't* get places, the castle would change itself to ensure they could. Everyone knew the castle changed, she just hadn't realized it worked quite that quickly.

...*Did* it work that quickly? How would Lyra know that? She'd never even been to Hogwarts before.

"So...you're just going to leave the paling there. For the whole term."

"Would you rather be stuck in a room with them?" Lyra shrugged.

And then she turned and walked out.

For several, long seconds, Hermione could just stare after her, dumbfounded. She had absolutely no idea what to think of Lyra Black.

Hermione was starting to wish she'd gone to Arithmancy first, as she'd originally planned. Divination was turning out to be an awful introduction to the term.
The class was held in a tiny, crowded room at the top of a tower at the far corner of the castle, stifling hot from the fire crackling in the hearth, incense so thick her eyes burned and her throat itched. And she already knew for a fact she wasn't sensitive to it or anything, there was just too damn much. (God forbid a kid with asthma decide to take Divination!) Quite nearly all available floor space was filled with tiny low tables and fuzzy armchairs or poufs, they'd needed to carefully place their steps to get through the chaotic tangle. The shelves were stocked with a slew of stereotypes — Hermione had barely held in an audible groan when she'd caught the disordered array of crystal balls — packed so tight she was amazed they fit at all. The chips and cracks all over the gaudy little tea sets suggested they didn't quite.

And the professor, god the professor. Hermione did try to give authority figures in the magical side of Britain the same benefit of the doubt she had her own, but it was gradually becoming more and more difficult as time wore on. The Hogwarts staff were, quite simply, incompetent. She didn't want to think that, she felt a little bad stringing the words together just in the privacy of her own head, but after the events of the last couple years — forget the big scandals, just the normal day-to-day routine — any respect she showed the staff increasingly felt like a lie. If the recent escape of Sirius Black, and the clumsy stumbling of the Ministry depicted in the Prophet ever since, were any indication at all the magical government couldn't be any better either.

But Professor Trelawney was the icing on the cake. Take any absolutely terrible, lazy depiction of a fortune teller in any medium over the last couple centuries. Invariably a woman, wild, kinked hair, ridiculous bangled jewelry, loose and brightly clashing clothes, a low, wavering, irritatingly melodramatic voice. Trelawney nailed the muggle stereotype with such perfection Hermione couldn't imagine it was an accident.

It could be worse, but not by much. If she'd introduced herself with an obviously fake Romani name, Hermione would have stood up and walked right out the door.

And it only went downhill from there. Her silly, wishy-washy description of her own subject, throwing out tragic predictions at this or that member of the class, all in this condescendingly knowing voice. After her absolutely absurd performance piece, they were directed to split up into pairs, drink some tea, and search the dregs for portents of the future.

Seriously. There was no magic involved, no real instruction at all. Just look at it! Because, clearly it is echoes of the past and future that determine how bits of tea leaves will settle at the bottom of a cup, and certainly not something so mundane as Brownian motion. Don't be silly.

They were essentially being told to cloud gaze, and use the meaningless shapes they convinced themselves they saw to predict future events. Hermione had no words.

Ron obviously intended to monopolise Harry again, but Hermione had expected that by now. Besides, the entire reason she'd switched her schedule around was to keep an eye on Lyra for a little longer, while how confusing the other girl was was still on her mind. When she shuffled her stupid little armchair a little closer to her, there was a moment she thought Lyra was giving her a little, mocking smirk, but it disappeared a second later. "I'll get the tea," she said, smiling, and was gone.

By the time Hermione had her text opened to the appropriate page, she was startled out of her skimming by the tinkling of shattered china. Sure enough, Neville was standing there holding a now empty tray, the remains of pot and cup scattered at his feet. (Of course Neville would drop something after Trelawney told him he was going to, he got clumsy when he was nervous.) Lyra circled him, shooting the hovering professor a sharp look, the tray steady on one hand as she
picked her way back through the tables to Hermione.

As they'd been instructed, Hermione poured one cup, handing it to Lyra, then Lyra poured another, handing it to her. That the person who was to be doing the reading had to handle the cup before the person being read ever touched it implied there was *supposed* to be some kind of magic going on here, but they hadn't been told anything of the like. The book, she decided after a quick check through the introduction to tasseography, wasn't much more help. Blathering on about the mixing of auras and such nonsense.

Hermione had learned before she'd even set foot in Hogwarts that mages didn't use the word "aura" in the same way new age spiritualists did. Much as did all physical substances, magic produced a form of radiation — the energy released into the environment by a person's body and magic was called an aura. That's all it was, random bits of magic escaping into the air. It could be coloured somewhat by the sort of magic a person used most regularly, but it didn't *mean* anything. One might as well say there was inherent meaning in the exact shade being emitted by a lightbulb. It was ridiculous.

Her expectations for this class were quickly whittling down to nothing.

As soon as she had her tea, Lyra tossed her head back, and downed the whole thing all at once. It was a tiny little cup, but *still*. She set it back down, her face twisted into a grimace. "Blech. This shit is *awful*.

Not wrong about that. Hermione had the distinct impression someone had left the bag sitting on a shelf too long. A *moldy* shelf. Somehow resisting the urge to pinch her nose shut, she drained her own tea, in a handful of quick quaffs. Slamming the cup back down, Hermione shuddered. The bitter, sour taste of it was still plastered to her tongue, disgusting.

She thought she understood why Crookshanks kept licking her jumpers now.

Hermione looked down into Lyra's cup, trying to not appear too obviously frustrated. It just looked like a bunch of black mush to her. Because, well, it *was* just a bunch of black mush. The entire suggestion it could be anything else was ridiculous. "How exactly does one go about *opening their Inner Eye* anyway?"

"No bloody clue." Lyra's queer eyes flicked back up to hers, lips tilting in a smirk. "How do Inner Eyes even see anything? Wouldn't your skull get in the way?"

The giggle bubbled its way out of her before she could stop it. She clapped her hand over her mouth, glanced around the room, but nobody seemed to have noticed, too busy leaning over cups and flipping through their texts.

Ridiculous.

"Maybe you're supposed to..." Lyra's eyes narrowed, frowning down at Hermione's cup. After a few seconds of silent glaring, there was an odd *snap*, one more felt than heard, like a shiver of thunder roiling across the air. Lyra started, nearly dropping the cup, one hand jumping to her forehead. Wincing and rubbing at her temple, she sucked in a long, hissing breath. "Ouch, *damn*. Okay, bad idea."

"Are you okay? What was that?"

"A very creative way to give yourself a migraine."

That wasn't an answer, but she could tell by the moody glaring she wasn't going to get one.
Of course, a moment later, Trelawney had to show up, moaning on about feeling Lyra reaching into the Beyond! sounding like even more of a charlatan than she had before, the rattling of her beads and bangles making Hermione's teeth ache. And, she smelled rather a lot like... Was that sherry? Who the hell actually drank sherry? That sounded disgusting, honestly.

"Professor, about the only thing I see right now is me tracking down a pain potion after class."

Hermione managed to choke back a laugh, but only just. Trelawney floated off a moment later, hovering over Lavender and Parvati. She leaned over the table a bit. "You're lucky she didn't take off points for that one."

"Couldn't have that." Lyra sounded remarkably apathetic about the prospect. Before Hermione could think of anything to say to that — not that she was sure what she could say, she almost respected just not caring in a way — Lyra threw the cup onto the table, slumping back in her seat with a sigh. "Well, this is a waste of time. Honestly, we could be learning something useful, like scrying magics or identification spells, but nooo, we must cast ourselves out into the Beyond..."

Hermione frowned. "Identification spells?" She'd heard of the former before — "scrying" was one of the primary branches of Divination, involving any kind of observation from a distance (excluding a small set of charms designed to imitate the effects) — but the latter was new to her.

"Spells that provide information about the target. How old something is, where it's from. Its name, if it has one. That sort of thing. Mostly done through runes or wards, but supposedly there are direct spells for it too." Lyra trailed off, glancing to the side, brow knitting slightly. "Now that I think about it, those might only work freeform. Makes sense Dumbledore would pick a professor who doesn't teach it, then. He hates freeform magic, for some stupid reason."

"Freeform magic?"

Lyra's lips pulled into a toothy smirk. "I'm sure it's nothing you would find interesting."

That was just mean. Hermione tried not to pout at her — she had some dignity.

She also tried not to let it bother her. It'd been a long time since anyone her age knew more than her about... well, anything academic, really. Not only was Lyra at least somewhat informed about an entire branch of magics she wasn't, but now she was implying she even knew an entire discipline Hermione had never even heard of before. She meant, just by the word, she assumed "freeform magic" was a method of casting spells without any sort of focus at all, but as far as she knew that was impossible. Even so-called "wandless" magic was done by producing the form of a wanded spell directly, which would seem to contradict the use of the word "freeform", she didn't think there was any—

No, wait, she was being an idiot. Hermione had been casting true wandless magic since she was a toddler, before she even knew proper spells were a thing. Obviously it was possible. She hadn't done it since she'd gotten a wand because... well, she had a wand now, she didn't need to. She wasn't even sure she remembered how to do it anymore.

That was a curious thought, actually...

Tucking that realization away for a time she'd have the opportunity to consider it in depth (and research "accidental" magic), Hermione set down her cup, giving it up as bad job. Flat not doing the work a professor had assigned went against her very nature, but this was clearly nonsense. Though, she had to admit to herself, if someone else hadn't done it first, she'd probably be trying to fake it like everyone else in this stuffy bloody room. "I should have known Divination
would be a non-starter. Honestly, if seeing the future were actually possible, magical society and
government would work completely differently."

"Oh, Seeing does actually work. It's just a crapshoot."

Hermione blinked. "What?"

Lounging back in her chair, one knee propped up against the edge of the table, Lyra smirked back
at her. "You're thinking about time wrong, Hermione. Time flows, but it isn't a river. It's an ocean.
We may be being pulled around by a current, but it isn't the only current around."

The idea itself was interesting enough she could ignore the condescending tone it was delivered in.
"You... You mean multiverse theory? As far as I know, physicists haven't been able to confirm that
yet." Though, even having heard of multiverse theory before did suggest Lyra might have had
more to do with the non-magical world than the average purebl—

"I wouldn't know about that," Lyra said, shrugging, "but magical researchers confirmed the
existence of parallel realities ages ago."

Or not.

"Of course, travelling between them requires power such that no mortal person could possibly
accomplish it outside of high ritual. And even then, the sacrifice the Powers demand
is...significant. Usually, anyway," she muttered, rolling her eyes. That was...odd. "But see, if time
is an ocean, Divination is reading the waves and the ripples cast on the surface. They might be
coming from anywhere — the things Seers See do happen, but not necessarily in our universe.
Some have better aim than others, but it's still a crapshoot." Lyra's smile tilted, eyes bright with
laughter. "Gotta be careful where you look, though. Here be dragons. The nameless things in the
deep don't like being ogled at, I hear."

Hermione was completely incapable of deciding if Lyra were being serious or not.

She didn't have much time to consider the implications, though. The class turned into a complete
circus only a few seconds later. It was completely frustrating and idiotic, Hermione held back the
urge to scream at everyone for being so stupid and gullible by a hair.

It didn't help that Lyra had apparently decided to take the opportunity provided by a death omen to
reverse her position on the reliability of fortune telling entirely. And she was smiling as she did it. It
was subtle — more in her eyes than on her lips, a gleeful eagerness mostly hidden — but it was
there. All through their Divination class exploding to a halt, through Transfiguration, even during
lunch, arguing to Harry's face that such a thing couldn't wisely be dismissed, prophecy was always
fulfilled one way or another. Pretending to be solemn and concerned, but the whole time with her
strange eyes aglow, seeming to love every minute of it. Hermione didn't understand Lyra Black.
She simply didn't.

But she couldn't shake the part of her that thought she was sort of brilliant anyway.

So far, Bella was not impressed. Granted, she had only attended two classes so far, but
McGonagall's lectures had not grown any more dynamic or entertaining in the past three decades.
She'd only taken the time to have Bella perform a simple mouse-to-snuffbox transfiguration after
class and declared her skills sufficient to continue with the third-years. Not unexpected, since
she had been the professor for Bella's first and second years as well, albeit thirty years ago in
another universe. As for Trelawney, well...
Okay, so Trelawney had potential. Not her class, that was obviously a load of rubbish. Bella would be surprised if anyone managed to learn anything about proper divination from the old lush. But a delicious idea had occurred to her right around the time Neville broke his first teacup. The so-called professor was such a blatantly obvious fraud, it would be just hilarious if, in a mysterious development Bella would certainly know nothing about, all of the "prophecies" she made over the course of the year came true.

Plus it would give Bella something to do during class, planning ways to move the hand of fate as Trelawney decreed. She made her own fun.

I do so enjoy it when dedicates take the initiative, Eris sighed, her delight at the idea impossible to ignore, buoying Bella's mood so much that she couldn't really bring herself to care about the complete lack of real scrying in the class, and the fact that the pain potion she had taken at lunch hadn't entirely eliminated her headache. (Yeah, trying to extend her magic into the tea leaves? Bad idea.) She was still practically skipping as the Gryffindors made their way across the grounds for Care of Magical Creatures.

As soon as she'd had the idea, Bella had been determined to enact it, if only for her own amusement, but her Patron's approval was nothing if not encouraging. She couldn't wait to see what effects would follow from her little prank — Eris wouldn't have said anything if this particular decision wasn't going to result in a much greater degree of chaos than the consternation of a single worthless professor. (The fact that the eventual revelation of her prank would undermine the very idea of Fate probably didn't hurt, either.)

Bella couldn't see how it could spiral into something Eris would find so entertaining as she felt, but that was the nature of chaos, when it came down to it. It wouldn't be any fun if she knew exactly how it would turn out from the beginning.

Of course, she would need to get informants in every divination class to keep track of the "prophecies" she wasn't there to personally witness, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. Even if she missed a few from the first lessons, the whole thing should be more than sufficiently unnerving for the target and the inevitable ignorant bystanders.

"So, Lyra," Harry said awkwardly, edging slightly further from his girlfriend and his best mate — they'd been having an argument since they'd left the Divs classroom, Bella had been too preoccupied with her plotting to do much more than occasionally prod at them about how totally serious death omens were. "Erm. What do you think of Gryffindor so far?"

Bella shrugged. "Haven't seen much of it, really. I mean, I already know my roommates are a bit dense — barring Hermione, of course. But other than that?" She shrugged again.

"Er," the boy said, then subsided into silence, apparently unable to think of anything else.

A few long moments later, he groaned. "We're with the Slytherins?"

"Huh?" Apparently that 'conversation' wasn't over.

"Up there, Malfoy and his goons, Crabbe and Goyle. Why are they even in this class?"

"Why shouldn't they be?"

Harry gave her a very flat look. "They ruin everything, just watch."

The half-giant was waiting for them near a very large thatched hut, presumably his home. He looked rather impatient. Sure enough, as soon as they were within earshot, he called, "C'mon now,
get a move on! Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

Then he was striding away, along the edge of the forest, leading them out of sight of the castle. After about five minutes, they arrived at a large paddock, enclosing a small clearing and a slightly larger chunk of trees and impenetrable undergrowth.

"Everyone gather 'round the fence here! That's it, make sure yeh can see, now. Firs' thing yeh'll want ter do is open yer books—"

As Bella retrieved her book, she heard a whiny voice come from somewhere off to her left. "How?"

"Eh?"

"How do we open our books?" Malfoy asked, pushing closer to the professor and pulling his book from his bag. It appeared to be tied shut with a length of rope.

Bella was hard-pressed not to laugh as she realized that no one else seemed to have their book trained, either. Harry's was belted closed, while Hermione seemed to have used about ten meters of shiny, translucent tape to bind the covers of hers together. Neville's had been shoved into a bag too tight to allow it to escape.

Really? Had no one else ever read an animated book before? Fuck, she hadn't expected that. Granted, the Monster Book of Monsters was a bit more...feral than any of the tomes in the Black library, but so far as curses went, biting books were fairly pedestrian. Bella tucked her book under her arm to conceal the fact that it wasn't bound shut.

"Hasn'— Hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" Hagrid asked, looking terribly disappointed in them all.

Several students shook their heads, murmuring denials.

"Yeh've got ter stroke 'em," he said, motioning for Hermione to hand over her book. "Look," he added, tearing off the tape with an offended glare. The book tried to bite him, but he ran an enormous finger down the spine, immediately disarming the enchantment. Which admittedly was far easier than training the thing not to snap, would have been nice if someone had told her, or the staff at Flourish and Blotts, who'd had no idea what to do with them.

"Oh, how silly we've all been!" Narcissa's son sneered. "We should have stroked them! Why didn't we guess!"

"I thought they were funny," the half-giant said.

Bella grinned, ignoring her nephew's further dissatisfied muttering. Yeah, this class was definitely going to be fun.

"Righ' then," the professor said, attempting to recapture the class's attention. "So— So yeh've got yer books, an'...an' now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I'll go an' get 'em. Hang on." He strode deeper into the paddock, disappearing into the trees.

Malfoy took advantage of his absence to immediately complain. "Gods, this place is going to the dogs. That oaf teaching classes, my father'll have a fit when I tell him."

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said, glaring weakly.
"Careful, Potter, there's a dementor behind you," Draco said scornfully. Bella snorted slightly. She wasn't quite certain, but given that Blaise had said something about teaching her nephew to play Timore (implying that he couldn't even manipulate a boggart properly), she would pay good money to see him face down a dementor himself.

"What are you laughing at, Black?"

"Oh, I just saw this little blond twat pretending to be a bloody warlock," she said with a grin, daring him to take a shot at her.

He didn't. He gaped for a few seconds, but before he could think of a rejoinder, Hagrid returned, leading— Oh, that was fantastic.

Hippogriffs. A whole herd of them, picking their way toward the students with a strange rolling gait, their taloned forelegs poorly suited to walking. Despite their awkwardness on the ground, they still managed to look majestic and proud, from their eagle-esque heads to their equine tails, their folded wings emphasising the long line of their backs, feathers ruffled by the breeze. The effect was only slightly marred by the thick leather collars Hagrid had fixed around their necks.

Awesome.

It was only when Harry elbowed her, giving her what she thought was a concerned look, that she realized she was giggling under her breath.

"What? They walk funny," she said. Apparently this was an acceptable response, since he turned away from her again.

Either that, or he was just distracted by Hagrid announcing, "Hippogriffs! Beau'iful, aren' they?"

They really were, the fierce orange eyes and steely beaks, talons like knife blades contrasted with tiny, soft feathers fading smoothly into sleek horsehair in every possible shade: snowy white, grey, chestnut, black — there was even a dappled sort of roan there at the back.

"So, if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer..."

Bella stepped forward at once, resting her chin on the top bar of the paddock fence. The half-giant nodded at her. "Black, was it?"

"Yep. Can I touch one?"

There was a gasp behind her. She turned to see that no one else had come forward. Most of them were muttering to each other and shooting her sidelong looks, or simply staring at her like she was insane. Which was arguably true, ran in the family, but she couldn't bring herself to care. They were bloody hippogriffs, come on!

"What? I always wanted a pony," she said with a grin before turning back to the professor.

Even he looked slightly taken aback, but he collected himself after a moment. "Righ' well. Firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud. Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, cause it might be the last thing yeh do."

Harry, Hermione and Weasley crept forward as the professor spoke, until they had joined her at the fence, though they still looked rather uncertain.

"Yeh always wait fer the Hippogryff ter make the firs' move. It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him,
an' yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, cause those talons hurt.

"Righ', Black, come on in."

Before he was even finished speaking Bella had slipped through the fence, practically bouncing in excitement. The Hippogriffs were nearly as agitated, tossing their heads and flexing their wings, clearly displeased to be tethered.

"Righ' then — let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak." He separated the grey from the rest of the herd, slipping off its leather collar. The hippogriff reared and flexed its claws, skittering a few steps from the half-giant, clearly wary of being recaptured, before fixing Bella with a single fiery eye.

"Easy, now, Black," Hagrid said quietly. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink, hippogriffs don' trust yeh if yeh blink too much..."

In that case, she probably shouldn't break eye contact in order to bow. Which meant the gesture wasn't so much about submission as mutual respect, strength recognizing strength.

She sank into a curtsey without being told, tipping her head to the side and nodding slightly, rather than drop her eyes and expose the back of her neck.

The hippogriff seemed to be evaluating her. (As though there was any question that she was worthy of its presence.) She stared coolly back at it. After a second or two, it bent its knees, dipping its head in an unmistakable bow.

"Well done!" the professor cheered, ecstatic. "Righ' — now yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!"

Bella grinned, gliding over to the hippogriff, careful not to make any overly-abrupt movements — acknowledged or not, she still didn't want to startle it. The beak was smooth, faintly warm, and softer than she had expected. Not that it wasn't cruelly sharp, but the material itself felt more like horn or claw than the bone-like beak of an owl. She stroked it several times, exploring the join between beak and feathers as her parents' owls had always seemed to enjoy. It closed its eyes, leaning into her hand.

There was a smattering of applause behind her. She had completely forgotten she had an audience.

"Righ' then, Black," the half-giant said. "I reckon he migh' let yeh ride him!"

That was far more than she had expected. Clearly this class was going to be even more fun than she'd thought. "All right, what do I do?" she asked, trying not to giggle.

"Jus' climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint — mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers..."

The hippogriff seemed to realize what she was trying to do as she came around behind his wing. He bent his knees again to allow her a leg up. Hippogriffs were proportioned slightly differently to pegasus, their backs shorter, the wings closer to the hindquarters. In order to assume a proper bareback riding position, with her knees tucked under the wing joint, and avoid slipping off its rear end, she had to lean forward quite a lot, until she was practically lying flat atop the beast's back. Which was just as well — there was no mane to wrap her hands in, so the lower her center of gravity was, the better.

She tightened her legs around the hippogriff's body just as Hagrid roared, "Go on, then!" and slapped its hindquarters.
The wings each had to be twelve feet if they were an inch. They swept out and down in the space of a heartbeat — Bella was quite glad she'd had some experience riding before, because otherwise she'd likely have fallen off at the launch, powerful equine legs pushing the much lighter torso up almost vertically, rather than the much smoother canter-gallop-leap into flight of a pegasus.

But once they were up, oh, it was glorious. Riding a broom was fine, provided you just wanted to get from one place to the next, but it was just so much less than the feeling of a creature surging and soaring beneath you. She could feel the wind unravelling her plait, her robes pulled tight against her from the force of their speed, the thrill of freedom in flight, with only the animal's wings between herself and a very sudden, painful death.

It was over all too soon, just once around the paddock, and they were touching down, a rougher landing than a true winged horse, but she had anticipated that, gripping tighter with her thighs and leaning into the landing. With a few final hops, the hippogriff came to a halt, bowing again to let her climb down.

"Good work, Black!" Hagrid shouted. The other Gryffindors were cheering. "Who else wants a go? Harry? Ron?"

Apparently reassured by the fact that the hippogriff hadn't torn Bella to ribbons, most of the class made their way cautiously into the paddock. The professor distributed the creatures among them, and soon they were bowing nervously all around her.

She was watching Neville bow (very submissively) to the roan and repeatedly back away in terror as it eyed him without bowing back, when a petulant voice addressed her from behind. "Just who do you think you are, anyway, Black?"

Draco. Lovely. Perhaps he'd finally thought of a comeback. She turned on her heel to face him. "You've just said it, Malfoy: I'm Lyra Black."

He sneered. "Like that name means anything anymore. You're just some up-jumped mudblood who doesn't know her place," he said, circling around her, trying to trap her between himself and his goons, it was obvious. Though she wasn't sure exactly what they would do then — it wasn't as though Crabbe and Goyle were going to curse her in the middle of a class, with six other Gryffindors and a professor as witnesses.

Before she could find out, Malfoy strayed too close to Buckbeak, stepping directly between herself and the hippogriff, apparently unconcerned for any offence it might take to his turning his back on it before he'd even been introduced. A capital mistake.

In the split second between the hippogriff's feathers ruffling in annoyance and its wings fluttering just slightly, just enough to raise its front legs (and talons) to a height to make a slash at her nephew's unprotected back, she considered whether it might just be easier to let it kill him. Certainly would be less annoying, though that would probably result in the half-giant — already easily her favorite professor — being sacked on his very first day. Also, Cissy would probably disapprove. She'd be insufferable for weeks.

There was nothing else for it. As the claws came down, an angry screech rending the air, she reached out, taking hold of the front of her nephew's robes — he'd come too close, trying to intimidate her (would've worked better if he were more than an inch taller than her, or looked less like a French prostitute) — and yanked.

Caught off balance, Malfoy stumbled past her, falling to the ground screeching like a banshee.
Caught off balance, the hippogriff couldn't halt its strike in time to avoid tearing a long gash in Bella's left forearm, extended to keep her balance as she threw the idiot behind her.

It pulled her forward, almost throwing her to the ground as well, but she recovered in time to catch the creature's eye again, gritting her teeth against a scream and standing firmly between it and the object of its ire. Hagrid was right: those claws bloody hurt. It wasn't the worst injury she'd ever had, she knew that even without bothering to look — she could still feel her fingers, at least — but it still felt like taking a cutting curse down to the fucking bone, there was definitely blood dripping off her fingertips. She ignored the pain, pushing it away to maintain her composure, quite certain that if she looked away from the beast, it would consider her weakness cause to strike again.

Hagrid came running, even as the hippogriff attempted to lunge around her to get to Draco. She sidestepped to stay in front of it, still staring it down, daring it to push its way past her. It hesitated, just long enough for Hagrid to clap an enormous hand around the back of its neck, forcing it back into a collar. He pulled it away, tying it to the fence before running to her side, apparently ready to throw her over his shoulder and dash off with her to the Hospital Wing.

"Black! Are yeh alrigh'?! Did he get yeh?!

Bella was already inspecting the slash. Yeah, that was going to take a few days to heal. She could stop the bleeding now, though. "It's fine," she assured the professor, directing her wand at the wound. "Ferula!" She winced as conjured bandages wrapped themselves tightly around her arm, holding the sides of the cut together.

Right, numbing charm. She should use one. The bandages were growing red at a rather alarming rate, maybe a bit worse than she thought — what was the tourniquet spell again? Iremoto lower her blood pressure and slow her heart rate, that should help at least. Vanish the bandages— Arto rivulos, that was it! Siphon the blood away, vanish that — can't just leave blood lying around, not that anyone here would know how to use it against her, but it was the principle of the thing, and habit — confervetur to knit together all the blood vessels and veins she could see sundered in the depths of the wound — not quite to the bone, but nearly (okay, definitely worse than she thought) — and again to pull together the deepest layers of muscle around them— What was that moron nattering about? His hair? Silence that. And again, a second layer of muscle — why were arms so bloody complicated? And...that would probably do it, for the time being, she knew from experience that healing magic always went better if you let the body rest between sessions. Ferula again to re-wrap it, tergeo to pull all the blood out of her robes — damn, she was going to have to find an elf to get that sleeve fixed — and the grass, then vanish all of that, just to be safe, and...

Bella looked up (head spinning slightly, should probably grab a blood replenishing potion at some point), to see that half the class was staring at her in horror. Weasley looked like he was about to be ill. Pansy Parkinson had apparently fainted, drawing Hagrid's attention along with several of her housemates, so good on her.

Draco, still silenced and red with fury, fists clenched, shaking slightly in his rage, glared at her as though he could suddenly develop the powers of a basilisk and kill her on sight.

Half of his hair was plastered to his head with what appeared to be hippogriff dung.

Bella smirked. "You've got something on your face, Malfoy, did you know?"

Only Hermione broke into hysterical laughter. Well, Bella thought she was funny. The rest of them clearly just didn't appreciate good comedy.
She looked around, from the professor kneeling beside the unconscious Slytherin and her wary housemates to the white faced Gryffindors to Hermione, apparently unable to stop laughing. It appeared class was over for the day.

"Right then, Professor, was there homework?"

The first Potions lesson of the year was held on Thursday, a double period with Slytherin. Bella's arm wasn't entirely healed by that point — she judged it would need another week or two before her hand was back to full strength, chopping ingredients was going to be a pain — but she only needed one hand to stir a cauldron. And besides, this was the first lesson she'd have a chance to talk to Blaise in. There was no way she was going to skip it. She needed to ask him to spy on Trelawney for her.

Due to a minor confrontation with McGonagall as she was leaving the Great Hall after breakfast — resolved by treating the idea that she, a third-year student, could possibly have erected a paling in her dorm room, let alone found a way to sustain it for the better part of a week, as utter absurdity — Bella was the last student to arrive in the third-years' potion lab. As it had been in Slughorn's day, the room was filled with two-person tables. Every seat was already occupied.

She wasn't late, but the professor was already standing at the front of the room, glaring at the doorway when she walked in. The portal closed itself behind her with a resounding thud. Was that — Did he just use a freeform spell?

"So good of you to join us, Miss Black," Snape drawled. Then, after half a beat, snapped, "What are you waiting for, find a table."

Bella shrugged, wandered over to the table Blaise was sharing with Theo (the middle one on the left side of the room), and dropped her bag on the floor. "Hey, guys."

Theo's eyes grew very wide, as he looked from her to the professor and back again. Blaise just nodded, taking her decision to abandon her housemates in stride. "Black."

"So, can I have a stool?" The professor ignored her question, still staring. As was, she noticed, every other person in the classroom. She snapped off a tempus charm. "I'm not late. Class doesn't actually start for another two minutes."

She hadn't thought Snape's glare could intensify, but it did. He conjured a stool for her and hissed, "Sit."

"Thank you, professor," she smiled at him, saccharine sweet.

He spun around, his robes flaring dramatically, and stalked over to his desk, straightening a few papers before turning back to the class.

"Today we will be brewing the Shrinking Solution, a simple task which any second year ought to be able to accomplish, in order to determine the exact degree to which your — I hesitate to call them 'skills' — have atrophied over the past two months. What does the Shrinking Solution do?"

Bella sighed, rising to answer the question. "Well, it shrinks things?" she drawled, smirking broadly. As he opened his mouth to tell her she was wrong, she added, "It's actually a de-aging serum designed to be used on non-sapient animals. Which tend to grow over the course of their aging process, thus they do actually shrink as the potion takes effect."
"On animals? The Blefuscuc Draught is the only practical option — all the others call for cryana or Sterculica khasiana, and both of those are extinct. The human variation is the Lilliput." Not that just shrinking a living creature was in any way simple, at least with potions. It was far easier with transfiguration. She'd definitely use a spell if she needed to shrink, well...anything.

"And inanimate objects?"

"There's at least twelve. Do you want them listed alphabetically or chronologically?"

The professor sneered at her. "Unnecessary," he snapped, then added, "You may be accustomed to addressing your private tutors informally, Miss Black, but here at Hogwarts, you will refer to your instructors as 'professor' or 'sir'."

Bella felt a grin stretching across her face. She really couldn't help what she said next, he'd set himself up so nicely. "Oh, well, if we're going to be formal, I could hardly address the Lord Governor of Slytherin House by such a lowly title. I most humbly beg your pardon, your Honor."

"Sit down, Black!"

"Yes, your Honor." Bella sat, trying not to smirk, and failing miserably. She was vaguely aware of Blaise burying his face in his hand off to her left. The professor looked like he truly wanted to curse her, or take fifty points from Gryffindor, but she hadn't technically done anything wrong. Much more amusing than the last time she'd used that line. (Professor Riddle had just insisted that everyone call him "your Honor" for the better part of a month.)

With no other recourse, Snape spun on his heel again, striding over to the back of the Gryffindor side of the room. "Potter! What is the key ingredient in the Shrinking Solution, and under what conditions must it be collected?"

Potter was staring at Bella, open mouthed. He clearly hadn't expected to be put on the spot. "Er. A shrivel fig? Uh, sir."

"And?" Snape loomed over him, glaring down his rather long, hooked nose.

After a brief moment of very obvious panic, Potter sighed. "I don't know, sir."

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for failing to open a book this summer! Weasley?"

"Uh, I don't know either. Sir."

"Powers preserve us all from lazy, ignorant Gryffindors. Malfoy."

"The shrivel fig does not need to be harvested under any particular conditions, but it needs to be dried for three months, and skinned before use."

"At least some of you dunderheads have retained some semblance of memory over the holiday! Instructions are on the board," he snapped, as a piece of chalk levitated itself and began to scribble across the slate.

That was... She had no idea how he was doing that. It couldn't possibly be a freeform effect, too controlled. But she hadn't seen him use his wand, either. Neat.

"Note the requisite quantities of each ingredient. Contrary to popular belief, these have been
extensively tested and verified by countless potioneers. You need not include extra cat spleens or
caterpillars, a single dash of leech juice will be sufficient, and if any of you include more
than one shrivel fig, well... Do try not to waste any more of the common stores than required to
demonstrate your proficiency, or, as I suspect is more likely, the lack thereof. Each of you will
brew your own potion today, no collaboration. You may begin."

And that appeared to be all he had to say, as he took a seat at his desk and proceeded to begin
marking an essay.

"So how has your week been?" Bella asked Blaise, unpacking her bag and setting up her cauldron.

"Not nearly so interesting as yours, if rumors are to be believed," he murmured.

"Hmm, that depends what the rumors are," she noted, positioning the ceramic fire pot under the
center of her cauldron stand, though she waited to cast a flame into it — heating an empty pewter
cauldron was just asking for it to melt through.

"You trapped half the Gryffindors in their dorms the very first night you were here."

"Only four of them." She smirked, nodding slightly toward the table to her left and the one in front
of it. "Just had a little chat with McGonagall about that, actually," she mused, wondering which of
the kittens had complained to their Head of House. Lavender Brown was studiously ignoring her.
Roper, her table-mate, twitched nervously as she noticed Bella's expression and its direction, but
she seemed too timid to have done it.

The chalk finished scribbling out the instructions with a sharp tap, drawing her attention back to
the slate. Nothing too onerous, she thought, though she was pretty sure Slughorn hadn't covered
anything quite this complex in her second year.

"I'll get the ingredients," Theo volunteered, already moving toward the store cupboards.

"Brought up the Dark Lord in Muggle Studies?"

"Technically, I asked how the war had affected muggle-magical relations. Burbage went off on the
Death Eaters on her own."

"Uh huh. Rode a hippogriff in Care?"

"It was awesome."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Completely derailed the first Defense lesson to give an impromptu lecture
on boggarts?"

Bella frowned. "We haven't had Defense yet."

"Oh, wait, that was me."

So smug. Bella giggled. "Did you really? Thanks, Theo," she added as he returned with an armload
of ingredients and began to divvy them up between the three of them.

"Did he what?" Theo asked.

"Defense," Blaise explained, nodding with an impish grin. "New prof's not bad, though. Let's see,
what else is floating around... Did you really get attacked by a rampaging hippogriff, then conduct
battlefield surgery on yourself to reattach your own arm?"
Bella laughed. "Is that really what people are saying? No, I saved Malfoy's pasty arse from getting slashed to ribbons, got cut in the process. Yes, I did heal it myself, but it wasn't even bad enough to go to the Hospital Wing over."

"There was the one about the dementor," Theo said, slicing his dandelion roots so carefully Bella hadn't been sure he was even listening.

"Dementor?"

"Ah, yes, apparently they don't affect you, and you can speak their language." The accompanying disapproving grimace suggested he believed that one was true. Which wasn't really surprising, seeing as he had seen a boggart entirely ignore her. Speaking of which, she'd have to figure out what to do about the one she was due to confront in defense, Gryffindor had their first lesson after lunch.

"Ah. Wonder who started that one." Theo looked up long enough to raise an eyebrow at her. "No, I don't speak dementor." Still raised, still staring. "Ugh, fine," she admitted, leaning in and lowering her voice considerably. "I might have told it to sod off in Old High Elvish. And then told Ginevra Weasley that it was Greek."

Blaise started sniggering uncontrollably.

"Because that's so much less suspicious."

"You're fucking terrible at this, Black," Blaise managed to choke out.

"Miss Black. Mister Zabini. I do recall saying specifically that there would be no collaboration in this lesson." Bella started slightly. She hadn't noticed the professor leave his desk, let alone come up to loom behind them.

"We weren't collaborating, sir."

Bella did a double take at the sudden shift in Blaise's tone, suddenly entirely sober and serious, when he'd barely been able to speak a moment ago.

"Then what, precisely, may I ask is the topic of this conversation?"

"Plotting world domination, your Honor," Bella said, simply for the chance to annoy him again with the overly formal title.

Again with the sneer. "Detention, Black! Saturday, after lunch, my office."

"Yes, your Honor." Bella said, then bit the inside of her lower lip, trying not to laugh at the wizard's heavily — but not entirely — concealed irritation.

As soon as he turned to leave, she caught Blaise's eye and whispered, "Greek," precipitating another fit of sniggering, expertly disguised as a coughing fit.

The professor whirled around immediately. Bella put on her most innocently bored expression, as though she'd had nothing to do with anything. Of course, he didn't buy it. "If you persist in causing disruptions in my class, Miss Black, you will be removed."

Which, while not exactly a punishment per se, would interfere with her plan to ask Blaise to spy on Trelawney for her, she still hadn't gotten around to that. "Yes, your Honor," she said again, in a far more subdued tone.
After another second or two of glaring, the professor stalked away to menace Neville.

Bella's table brewed in silence for the remainder of the period. She scribbled a note to Blaise about the spying, which resulted in a quizzical look, a tiny shrug, and an even smaller nod.

All went well until they reached the point where the potion had to simmer for a quarter of an hour. Snape gave them permission to begin packing up and began berating Hermione for helping Neville with his potion. (Fairly, in Bella's opinion, given that the point of the exercise was to see where each of them was, not whether Hermione could compensate for Neville's shortcomings as a potioneer.) That was when Draco took the opportunity to swagger over to Bella's table, a superior smirk plastered across his pointy face.

"See the Prophet this morning, Black? Seems your father's been spotted. By a muggle, at that. Only a matter of time, now, until they catch him. I bet they give him the Kiss, what do you think?"

Well, her first thought was confusion, because Cygnus was dead in this timeline. It took her a moment to realize he was talking about Sirius. She had, in fact, seen that article, hadn't given much credence to the so-called witness. It seemed more likely that the Ministry or the Prophet were manufacturing progress in their manhunt. She was going to write Zee and Narcissa asking them to look into the claim, but she wasn't holding out much hope — it would be far too easy if Siri were to show up in the next few days, she could just drop out of school and be done with this whole farce.

"Well, Sirius isn't my father, but there is a Kiss-on-sight order out for him, so yes, that would seem to be the obvious conclusion. Are you just making conversation, or was there a point to this?"

Before Malfoy could respond, Blaise asked, "Is it true you hexed Malfoy in the back, tripping him into a pile of hippogriff shite?"

"Shut up, Zabini!"

"Is that what you're telling people?" Bella asked, lowering her voice to avoid the professor's notice. "I saved your stupid arse from getting filleted, and you're saying I hexed you in the back. Because you happened to fall in a pile of shite. While not getting filleted."

"You silenced me, you, you bitch!"

"I was in the middle of something, and you were distracting me."

Blaise smirked broadly. "You silenced him," he repeated.

Bella nodded. "You know I was wondering why Narcissa wrote me to ask about that lesson in particular. I thought it was just because of the professor, or because she'd heard about my arm, but you actually wrote your parents, didn't you? What did you think they would do?"

Draco flushed at the question, his pale face growing very pink. "That doesn't matter! And you'd do well to show some respect for your betters, Black!"

What? Oh, she'd called Cissy by her given name. Oops. Still, easy enough to 'misinterpret' that one. "And you're supposed to be my better, Malfoy?"

The boy sneered at her, a pale impression of his Head of House. "The fact that you even need to ask betrays your muddy upbringing, Black!"

"Oh, see, and here I was under the impression the House of Black was ancient and venerated, one of the Seventeen Founders of the Wizengamot, and the House of Malfoy only came to this country,
what, three generations ago? Fleeing from Grindelwald's war like a bunch of cowardly crups?"

"The House of Black is dead, mudblood. It's just you and that madman left, and soon he'll be Kissed, and you're not worthy of the name! My father—"

Bella silenced the brat again with a negligent wave of her wand, before the professor could wrap up the demonstration he was giving with Neville's toad and intervene. "Yes, Blaise, I silenced him. If he's going to act like a petulant child, I will treat him as such." Honestly, so much whining over a simple *tacitus*, even Meda could throw *that* off, and she wasn't even in school yet.

Well, the Meda *now* was... Never mind.

Draco looked like he wanted to hit her. Blaise looked like he wanted to kiss her. (Uncanny, how much he looked like his mother sometimes.) Theo rolled his eyes at their little drama.

"The potion is ready, by the way," he said quietly, then cancelled Bella's silencing jinx with a silent *finite*. "You should see to yours, too, Malfoy."

"You..." the blonde hissed. "You just wait!" he said, stomping back to his table, the first one in their row.

"*Must* you antagonize him, Black? It only makes him more insufferable to live with, you know."

"Unfortunately, Theo, I must. Now, refresh my memory on the honor duel code. Just the basics, pretty sure Snape's going to let us go in a minute." He was taking Hermione to task again, which must mean the demonstration was over.

Blaise gave her an evil grin. "Oh, I can't wait to see this."

Chapter End Notes

*Hermione, you think too much. You're enabling my chronic rambler's disease.* — Lysandra

*Psh, Lyra, always having to be the center of attention. Harry only volunteered to approach Buckbeak in canon because he didn't want Hagrid's first class to be a flop. If someone else had stepped up, I think he would have been rather relieved. And obviously we gave the hippogriff injury to Lyra so that she can disconcert more of her housemates, and also because the whole hippogriff plot line is silly and we don't like it.*

*Warlock: in the context of the wizengamot, someone with the power to break contracts and blood feuds between houses. In this context, a macho monster hunter/untrustworthy adventurer stereotype, the sort of wizard who carries a staff because it's more manly and wouldn't look entirely out of place in a biker bar.*

*And yes, Hermione is laughing at the end of the COMC scene because Lyra just unintentionally quoted the exact thing she said to Ron on the train in first year. Legitimately unintentionally, I didn't plan that.* — Leigha

*Next chapter will probably be in a day or two. It's entirely written by Leigha, and stars Snape. Leigha's Snape is great, it's fun.* — Lysandra
It wasn’t often that Severus Snape genuinely regretted a decision. He had made plenty of choices over the course of his life that he wished he hadn't (and wished he hadn't had to), but that was hardly the same thing. After all, being forced to make choices which were merely bad when all other options were suicidally terrible was quite different from choosing a poor option when there were better alternatives available.

But he was beginning to think that it had been a poor decision to give Lyra Black detention on the very first Saturday of the term.

The problem was twofold. Firstly, he had just finished restocking the stores over the summer — the inventory didn't need to be verified, there was no menial (and preferably disgusting) rendering to be done, and there hadn't yet been any particularly noxious explosions, requiring hours of cleaning to resolve.

The girl had demonstrated sufficient knowledge in class — true shrinking potions were an OWL-level topic — that it would doubtless be a waste of time to have her copy a chapter from her textbook. Not that he had a problem wasting her time, that was the part of (other professors') detentions which most students considered the actual punishment, but he preferred his students do something useful, or at least learn something while they were being punished. It made him feel as though he were wasting less of his time supervising them.

Secondly, and more importantly, the Black girl hadn’t done anything particularly wrong other than bloody annoy him. If he gave detentions to every student who annoyed him, he would literally do nothing but supervise detentions. And in any case, Minerva (the Deputy Head and therefore nominally in charge of discipline) had long since forbidden him to do so. Yes, the girl had been distracting other students, but Severus knew better than to command the impossible — talking was not explicitly forbidden during lab practicals. He had been well aware that she and Zabini weren’t collaborating, they hadn’t even started brewing when he had intervened. He might have been willing to claim that as the reason for her detention regardless, but he hadn’t given Longbottom and Granger detentions over their collaborating, so had he done so to the Black girl, he would almost certainly have had to deal with accusations of bias from Dumbledore.

The fact that she was a Black, and a Gryffindor Black at that, really had little to do with his ire. She had openly mocked him in her very first lesson, more than sufficient reason to dislike her without even considering his...history with her House. He was a bloody adult, and despite the implications advanced by several of his colleagues, more than capable of separating his hatred of Sirius Black from his still-forming opinion of this girl.

Which was not (primarily) that she was a cheeky little bint who was shaping up to be more annoying than Potter and Granger put together (though that was certainly true). No, Severus's overwhelming impression of the girl thus far was that she was not who she claimed to be. Which was...interesting. Suspicious. Potentially concerning, though more because she was an unknown variable, than because she was a clear threat to Potter or the school.

Her transfer papers had claimed that she was a muggleborn from a squib line, tutored by a distant relative who had recently passed away. Blatantly false.
Everything about her, from her dragonhide boots to her hairstyling charms screamed *magic-raised*. Severus had only interacted with her the once, but there were certain signs which were impossible to miss. She moved with a degree of precision he'd only *ever* seen in children raised in the noble Houses. (The contrast between Black and Granger arriving in the Great Hall was stark, even when Black seemed to be half asleep.) There wasn't a trace of a muggle accent in her speech — Severus himself hadn't entirely managed that, and he'd been actively attempting to emulate the purebloods since he was eleven. She'd stood to answer his bloody questions — he hadn't seen a muggleborn stand to recite answers since...well, since Narcissa had told Lily that she ought to, back in first year. (Even the children of noble houses generally fell out of that habit by the end of their first term.) She used the bloody *tempus* charm rather than wear a watch. He really had to wonder if she was even *trying* to seem muggle-raised.

If she was, she was doing a piss-poor job of it.

Even the students, hardly renowned for their reasoning abilities, didn't believe her.

But then again, perhaps she *wasn't* trying. Hogwarts was a sieve for gossip, Slytherin no less than any other House. If even half the stories Severus had heard held any basis in fact, it tested the bounds of credulity to believe she was making any attempt whatsoever to hide her abilities.

And several did: Hagrid and Charity had confirmed her antics in their first classes, and Minerva had mentioned a complaint from the other third-year Gryffindor girls regarding a paling Black had apparently set up to divide their dorm room. (Not that Minerva had actually investigated the "ludicrous" accusation, but Severus doubted the Dunbar girl would be so stupid as to lie about something so easily verified.) Others, like the claim that she could speak to dementors, were obviously false. (Not surprising, since that particular rumor appeared to have started with the Lovegood girl.) But there seemed to be a consensus on the fact that Lyra Black could not *possibly* be muggleborn, no matter what she might claim.

Severus had heard at least half a dozen rumors suggesting different parentages for her. The only one he gave any credence to was that Sirius Black might be her father — he'd certainly fucked around enough as a student, it'd be a minor miracle if he didn't have spawn running around somewhere. Though that failed to address the questions of where she had been raised, and by whom. The only theory providing a suggestion in that arena was that she had been raised by a travelling cursebreaker.

Also blatantly false: no 'travelling cursebreaker' Severus had ever met — and he'd met more than a few, during the War — would be able to ape nobility, let alone train a child in their ways.

That rumor, so far as Severus could determine, had been started by Zabini. Given that Zabini was generally far too aloof to bother with rumor mongering, and the two seemed to know each other already (Had Severus ever before seen that boy laughing *with* his peers, rather than at them? He didn't think he had...), he would be willing to bet that the 'travelling cursebreaker' story was intended to account for the more...advanced and somewhat esoteric skills the girl had already demonstrated. Why he was attempting to cover for her abject inability to pretend to be muggleborn, Severus couldn't fathom, especially since she appeared unconcerned herself.

It was widely known that Narcissa had taken the girl under her wing, shepherding her about Diagon Alley buying school supplies and robes, setting up a meeting at Gringotts for her, and so on. That suggested that the girl was a genuine Black, and she must be newly discovered, or else newly arrived in Magical Britain, because he could hardly believe that Narcissa would never have mentioned an extant Heir to her natal house at any point in the past ten years.

Draco hadn't seemed to know of her or be on good terms with her, though. Severus hadn't missed
the confrontation between them at the end of their Potions lesson. Taken with the fact that she *did* seem to know the Zabini boy, this suggested that Lady Zabini was her primary contact within Magical Britain. Which would explain how her 'transfer' was approved without question. But the only Black who had ever been closely associated with Mirabella Zabini was Bellatrix. And Bellatrix had definitely *not* been pregnant during the war — glamours could only do so much, and she had hardly left the front lines after 1978. (There were, of course, ways around that, but Severus simply couldn't imagine that she would have gone to the necessary effort, especially at that point in the war. If he recalled correctly, she’d been a bit preoccupied with the Dark Lord losing his mind.)

Which left him precisely nowhere in attempting to deduce the actual origin and identity of Lyra Black — a rather frustrating state of affairs, and on the whole, far more irritating than her resemblance to his least favorite members of her family. (Clearly it was too much to ask that the newly discovered Black would take after Regulus, or even Andromeda Tonks.)

Since he could not officially give her a detention, and taking back the punishment he had set before an entire class of third-years was obviously out of the question, he had informed Minerva that he would administer the girl's placement exam during the time in which she believed herself to be in detention.

Which was in and of itself mildly annoying — he'd been planning on simply declaring her skills to be sufficient to continue with the third-years based on her performance in her first lesson, which he knew for a fact was what Minerva and Filius had done, and probably all of the others, too.

Not that formulating the exam was a problem. Over the summer, he had been asked to design a submission for the ICW Basic Competency Examination (the international equivalent of the OWL) to be added to the annual rotation. As the Basic Competencies were designed to test all the skills a student ought to have learned up to that point, it should be a simple matter to observe the girl's technique and judge her level from her attempt to brew the potion.

(If he were given the power to set his own curriculum, Severus would use something similar to assess all of his incoming students, to determine their strengths and weaknesses, but alas, Dumbledore had determined the concept too complex for first years. Which was complete dragon shite, Slughorn had given them all a very similar exam testing first and second year skills when *he* had begun his own studies at Hogwarts, but Dumbledore simply *lived* to make Severus’s life difficult.)

No, it was just irritating that he'd had to drag out all the ingredients and supplies, and would spend the next three hours making careful note of her mistakes and working on the grading scheme for the exam — the potion itself had been done for weeks. Now he just had to outline every potential mistake (and every combination of compounding errors) and the reactions which would be expected as a result thereof, throughout the entire brewing process. And assign marks based on the skills demonstrated. Then simplify it all to something which could be administered and judged by a non-expert proctor.

There was a reason few Potions Masters were willing to design a new Potions Competency Exam, despite the undeniable honor that it was to be asked.

The girl arrived promptly at one, quite a lot more promptly than Severus had expected, given her attitude in class. So promptly, in fact, that he wasn't quite done fetching the necessary ingredients.

"Woah. What's all this, your Honor?"

Severus glared at her. Apparently she intended to keep up that ridiculous form of address even without a crowd to pander to. "What does it look like, Miss Black?"
She moved to the lab bench he had isolated in the center of the room, unrolled the instruction scroll, raised an eyebrow. "It looks like you forgot the translation charm, your Honor."

Bugger, he knew he'd forgotten something. He'd written the exam in French for the ICW, but apparently this wasn't an issue, as she further unrolled the scroll, her gaze flicking down the list, face impassive.

"Blaise said the end of year exam was a Forgetfulness Potion, your Honor," she said, her tone faintly accusatory.

"And what good would it do to test your ability to produce a potion you had prepared to concoct ahead of time?"

"Well, yeah, I guess," she said, comparing the first few instructions with the highly expansive collection of ingredients and equipment he had provided. "But, what is this, a bloody mastery exam?" She finished unrolling the scroll, and smirked. "You seem to have left off a bit at the end, your Honor."

Of course, Severus knew exactly what she was referring to, even if it was rather suspicious that she did. The International Society of Potioneers' Licensing Exam was moderately infamous for concluding with a challenge, potentially deadly, if the applicant was incompetent or overconfident: Draw and bottle two single-dram vials. Vanish the remainder. Provide one vial to the Examiner. The other, drink.

Licensing exams were, in some ways, very similar to Competency exams. Far longer and more complex, of course, with far less detail and explication in the instructions, and every licensing potion was designed so that, if it was properly brewed, the resultant would be inert, indistinguishable from pure water in every relevant way. This was not a requirement for the Competency exam. And licensing exam instructions began with a standing order to proceed directly to the final step if the process was interrupted in any way, which meant that any step in the process might need to be adjusted on the fly to maintain a non-fatal resultant throughout the brewing, not to mention modifying and delaying certain other steps so as to be able to rest at some point in the days-long trial.

"For some reason, the Headmaster frowns on my ordering students to poison themselves, but if you have such confidence in your own abilities, then by all means, l'autre boire." Before she could raise any additional objections, he turned on his heel, stepping into the supply cupboard to fetch the last few ingredients.

When he returned, she had stripped off her outer robes — leaving her in a long, sleeveless underrobe, a garment Severus was certain no muggleborn had ever worn with her school robes — and was in the process of pinning up her hair with a pair of stirring rods, apparently having dismissed the charms holding it in place.

Well. That was...unexpected. Extraneous magic in the brewing area wouldn't affect this particular potion, but it was moderately gratifying that she was taking it seriously enough to account for that possibility.

He double checked the materials he had provided, then flicked his wand, conjuring a timer. "You have three hours, you may begin."

She set two liters of water to boiling in a copper cauldron and re-read the instructions, quill in hand, apparently marking out a timeline. The potion was a three-part draught: two of the required additives for the main concoction required brewing themselves. One of these required over an hour
of simmering, which meant that, in order to complete the final potion in the allotted time, it needed to be started immediately. Its instructions, of course, did not appear in the directions for the main potion until such time as it was required, a little surprise for anyone who neglected to read through the entire exam before beginning.

Severus could tell when she reached that point: she looked up at the timer, frowned slightly, and set up a pewter cauldron before continuing her revision. Severus noted that, along with her hairstyling charms, she had apparently dismissed her cosmetic charms — her eyes were a much darker color than they generally appeared, and there were scars scattered across her arms and shoulders. Most he recognized as damage from cutting curses or burns. One, long and vivid, clearly only half healed, looked more like a claw mark, torn unevenly down her left forearm — was that...?

Hagrid had said she suffered a minor injury from her encounter with the hippogriff! Someone was going to have to have a talk with him about what should be considered 'minor' and 'serious' damage to the human children in his classes (and unfortunately that person was probably going to be Severus). Quite frankly, he was surprised Poppy hadn't already asked him to do so.

The only possible explanation was that the girl hadn't gone to the Hospital Wing at all, suggesting a degree of healing experience which, along with the curse scars, actually lent some credence to the 'travelling cursebreaker' story. Certainly someone had taught her how to fight, and how to heal the injuries which would inevitably occur in the course of such training.

She made her first mistake with the potion about twenty minutes in. Severus would have been surprised if she had known that it was standard practice to add three drops of valerian oil per gram of dried ephedra — herbal stimulants weren't covered until the end of the fourth-year curriculum. Of course, there was no way for her to know that she was headed off on the wrong track — he had not included checkpoint descriptions in the instructions — so despite the fact that it was technically possible to reverse the error, there was effectively no chance that she would be able to do so.

From that point, the potion proceeded to grow more and more volatile. Half an hour after the error, she put the mess under stasis and flipped over the instruction scroll, apparently trying to work out exactly where she'd gone wrong. He hovered behind her, peering over her shoulder as she cast analysis charms at the cauldron and ingredients remaining, and scribbled down the results.

"Care to explain yourself, Miss Black?"

The girl frowned at him. "Well, I must have done something wrong, your Honor, because the exam says to add three salamander eggs to this, and I'm pretty sure if I actually do that, it will explode."

She wasn't wrong. The magnitude of the explosion wouldn't be great enough to cause any damage to the laboratory, though the...concoction would have rather unpleasant biological effects if it was to come into contact with human skin at this point. He should probably alter the exam slightly to avoid such an event in an actual testing scenario — any proctor who wasn't a Potions Master probably wouldn't be able to reverse the effects quickly enough to avoid permanent damage.

"And now you are...?"

"Oh! I'm trying to figure out the properties of the potion and the remaining ingredients so I can salvage the base and keep going."

Severus raised an eyebrow, peering more closely at her notes. She continued to scribble, apparently unconcerned by his observation. Personally, he had never seen the benefit of using arithmancy to describe potions, though Lily had insisted it was, in fact, useful. (For other people, who were good
at arithmancy.) It certainly wasn't the sort of thing a third-year student ought to think to attempt, and judging by her progress, she hadn't been taught the proper method for this sort of analysis: She appeared to be doing the arithmancy backwards, or rather, in oddly inverted and juxtaposed chunks, and had listed at least thirteen different potential variables, when only nine were relevant to this particular potion.

After several minutes, she began crossing out variables and entire sections of the analysis, consolidating the two halves of her description down to something recognizable, isolating the properties needed to balance the potion, and moving on to the available ingredients, attempting to cancel out all of the properties, both of the current potion and the additives.

Fifteen minutes later, she muttered, "Well, bugger," threw down her quill, and vanished the mess in her cauldron.

Severus glared forbiddingly, though if he had been in her position, he would have done the same thing, rather than spend six hours and five galleons worth of materials attempting to fix it. Even the reclamation trough wouldn't have been able to extract much of anything useful at this point.

"Explain," he demanded succinctly.

She sighed, looking up to meet his eyes and folding her arms before herself, leaning casually on the lab bench. "There was no combination of available ingredients which would have allowed me to salvage the potion, and still complete it as directed. Plus, I'm pretty sure I would have run out of time anyway. And I forgot to stasis the first additive combination, so I'd have to re-do that, and again, not enough knotgrass. And then there wasn't really any reason to leave that mess sitting around, so... Do I pass, your Honor?"

Given that she had demonstrated more respect for lab procedure than half of his OWL students, and at least ninety percent of the skills which the third-years would be expected to perform in their final exam, he was forced to say, "Your performance was adequate. You will continue with the third-year class. No remedial lessons will be necessary."

"'Kay. So... I'll see you in class, then, your Honor," she responded, edging toward the door.

"Not so fast, Miss Black." Severus gave her an evil grin. "You appear to have left somewhat of a mess on your lab bench. You will clean all of the equipment thoroughly, and properly, without magic, return all unused ingredients to the store cupboards, and then if any time remains in your testing period, you will write a short report attempting to determine where, precisely, you went wrong in the brewing of the exam potion."

The girl scowled. "Bugger."

"Stick around after dinner if you want to see something funny," Bella advised Hermione, Harry, and Neville, just before Dumbledore stood to make announcements and dismiss the hall.

Hermione just gave her that odd look, she'd been wearing it more and more often as the week had gone on, slightly scared but more than a little intrigued. Harry leaned in closer to whisper, "What are you going to do?"

Oh, just something that was almost guaranteed to make Theo roll his eyes at her. It would be amusing, though, and after two whole weeks of just going to class, she really felt it necessary to blow off some steam. And if Blaise got snarky with her afterward, she would just point out that she had resisted blowing up half the school in her potions placement exam last weekend — really, had...
"I'm going to challenge Malfoy to a duel."

It had been over a week since Malfoy had insulted her in their first Potions lesson of the term. Bella had decided then that she would have to teach him a lesson, though if he had been even slightly less irritating in the week that followed, she might have gone a bit easier on him than she was currently planning.

But no, he'd managed to call her a jumped-up mudblood twice since then, called Sirius a pathetic madman, and implied that she was an idiot to think that even with the Black fortune at her command, anyone of any importance in Society would take squib-spawn seriously. How he still managed to think the first cover story was accurate was beyond Bella, no one else seemed to. Well, Weasley, but honestly, she was hardly even trying anymore. And he still didn't seem to believe the rumors that she had been out in the Alley with his own mother, which, just. How? She didn't get it.

But in any case, she had thought of the perfect way to utterly humiliate the little blond ponce. It had taken her most of the week to tweak the key spell to make it perfect, but her nephew hadn't managed to do anything in that time to convince her that this wasn't a perfectly appropriate degree of retaliation.

Harry gave her an almost pitying look. "Tried that first year, me and Ron. Didn't go well, there was this three-headed dog, see..."

She quirked an eyebrow at him. He was going to have to tell her that story sometime. "No, it'll be great, just watch."

As people started rising from their benches, the noise level climbing back to a dull roar, she hopped up on the table, casting an amplifying spell on her own voice. "Excuse me, can I have your attention, please?"

About half the hall stopped and turned to look at her. She thought she heard Hermione mutter, "Oh, no," down by her left foot.

"Hey, listen up, I have an announcement to make!" Right, that seemed to be most of them. Most importantly, Parkinson grabbed Malfoy, whispering something to him and then pointing at Bella. He turned to look, a dark glare falling across his features as he realized who was speaking. (Blaise, slightly to their left, was smirking, eyes dancing with malicious glee.)

According to Theo, the dueling laws in this time were quite a bit stricter than in her own world. Anything too lethal was prohibited, and though there were broader boundaries than for everyday use out on the street, quite a lot of spell classes were completely illegal. Her little practice bout with Theo had been far beyond anything she could use in a public honor duel, here and now. (Though admittedly, that fight would have been pushing the boundaries of acceptability at home, too.) Really, the whole structure of the thing sounded more like a tournament duel than a proper honor duel. But the point wasn't really to grind Malfoy into a bloodstain on the floor of the Great Hall — Cissy would, after all, be insufferable — just to completely and utterly humiliate him, rendering him incapable of even thinking of annoying her further in the future, so that was fine.

And the traditional phrases and formulae to start the thing were virtually identical to those she had memorized when she was five. "I speak as the Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, claiming insult on behalf of my House!"
The hall went silent for the space of a heartbeat, before Dumbledore intervened. "Miss Black, here at Hogwarts, students are expected to bring any grievance to the proper authorities for resolution," he said sternly, which, well, wasn't the correct response at all.

"Speak your claim, Black," Snape called, watching her closely, eyes narrowed in suspicion. He probably already knew she wasn't muggleborn, but this would definitely have confirmed it. Oops. Dumbledore shot him a dirtier glare than she'd thought him capable of, though it was gone in an instant.

"Draco Malfoy, Heir of the Noble House of Malfoy, has offered insult to my person and my House, an offence which cannot be allowed to go unaddressed!"

Snape appeared to be having a very heated discussion with Dumbledore behind silencing wards, but the thing was already under way. One of the Slytherin prefects took up the next line: "Draco — you arse — what say you to this claim?"

Well, that was less than entirely appropriate. She approved.

If Malfoy was smart, he would offer a public retraction of his insult, or even an apology. But then, if Malfoy was smart, he would never have insulted the House of Black in the first place. His face began to pink with rage, hands balled into petulant fists. "I stand by my words! The House of Black is dead, and you're not worthy of the name, Lyra!"

Bella felt herself grin. This was going to be fun. "If you truly stand by your words, Malfoy, you will defend them with your wand! I challenge you to fight for the honor of your House, as I do for mine!"

"Miss Black!" Snape was back in his seat, arms crossed, looking for all the world like a pouting child, and Dumbledore was glaring out across the Hall again, his words magically augmented. "I will not have—"

"Oh, let them have a go of it, Albus," Flitwick interrupted, his squeaky voice magnified to a similar degree. "You know as well as I do that allowing such a disagreement to fester only worsens the conflict in the end."

Was it Bella's imagination, or did his gaze flick down to Harry at that?

Dumbledore looked at his Charms professor as though the half-goblin had betrayed him to Professor Riddle. "I will not be held party to such an antiquated and barbaric ritual," he said shortly. "Minerva?"

The Head of Gryffindor looked torn. She engaged the silencing wards again to say something which caused Dumbledore to glower heavily. And then, shockingly, he turned on his heel and left the Hall.

Bella smirked at his back. Apparently Blaise had been right, when he had assured her there was nothing in the school rules against settling disagreements between students with an honor duel. (They had been written in an earlier and 'more barbaric' time, after all.)

"Well, Malfoy?" she called across the hall. "Are you going to defend yourself, or should we all assume that the Malfoys are honorless cowards, whose word means nothing?"

There was nothing Draco could really say to that, not if he didn't want to damage the reputation of his entire house. Honor in and of itself wasn't really important, but gaining a reputation as a liar who made false accusations and was too cowardly to defend his position, well... That was the sort
of thing Cissy (and presumably Lucius as well) would take a very dim view of. Especially if the House of Malfoy had political ambitions.

Which of course it did, what Noble House didn't?

But allies to forward those ambitions could become very thin on the ground if the Heir of the House proved himself to be an unworthy successor to his parents. No one wanted to make a long-term alliance that was doomed to fail within the next generation, and that was exactly the sort of relationship on which the entire fabric of Magical Britain was built.

Draco might be an idiot, but even he knew that losing spectacularly would be a better alternative than refusing the challenge.

"Fine," he acquiesced gracelessly. "I'll do it."

Good boy. "As the offended party, I am entitled to name the time and place. Here and now, Malfoy, let's get this over with."

"I want Professor Snape to be the referee!" Draco demanded, his voice quavering slightly.

Arbiter, not referee — poor little snakeling, he clearly had no idea what he was doing. But she had no objection to that, or to Snape standing as the official judge of the contest. He had, after all, supported her proposal in the first place, even if, as she suspected, he had only done so to annoy Dumbledore. (They seemed to get on just about as well as Dumbledore and Riddle, maybe even worse.) "Agreed. Your Honor?"

"Very well," Snape agreed, though he didn't seem entirely pleased about the prospect. "Let us, as you say, get this over with. Filius, would you draw the circle?"

"Certainly, certainly." The tiny Charms master chuckled, ushering students out of the way and sending the long tables to the sides of the hall, clearing a space to construct an impromptu dueling arena.

It took a lot to impress Bella when it came to warding and enchanting — with Ciardha as her primary example of an expert in the field, almost everyone else seemed sloppy in comparison. But Flitwick was good. Really good. Not only were the palings he set up to neutralize stray curses comparable in strength to the wards on a proper dueling platform, but he placed them in a matter of minutes.

Between fending off commentary from the other Gryffindors, she barely had enough time to assure Harry and Neville that she knew what she was doing (and Hermione that she wouldn't hurt Malfoy too badly) before Snape was calling her into the makeshift arena to review the rules.

They bowed — Bella with an overly exaggerated, mocking flourish, Draco barely nodding — and Snape called the start, watching her closely.

Well, he could watch all he liked: her strategy was foolproof, and absolutely legal, even by the ridiculous standards of this universe.

Since she had ascertained that the second-year Charms curriculum had focused mostly on glamour and illusion — Flitwick had spent most of the last two weeks revising the topic, she would never have guessed from his class that he was such an impressive wardcrafter — she had decided that she would utterly destroy Malfoy using nothing but illusions.

Partly because pretty much all illusions were legal and permitted in duels, even the really fun ones.
But mostly because when everyone realized what she'd done, it would be even more humiliating for the little snot than simply being publically defeated — as she'd told the Gryffindors, it was going to be hilarious.

She didn't bother blocking or responding to the first five or six spells Draco threw at her, just laughing and dancing out of the way as she cast a visual illusion of slow, creeping white fog, closing in on them from the boundary of the warded circle. While she was distracted, he conjured a snake to attack her, which meant deviating from her plan long enough to lure it into the wards with an illusory mouse, causing the summoning spell he had used to revert.

Bella positively cackled at the consternation on her nephew's face, prompting a renewed bout of fury. He wasn't fast enough to hit her, though — she avoided his spells, adding the sensation of cold to the fog now swirling around her feet.

"You wanted to fight! So stop dodging and fight, Black! *Aspictus*!"

Well, if he insisted.

As part of her plan to realize her idea, she had spent every evening for the past week working out how to tweak the nightmare curse Theo had used on her to be invisible as it was cast. The effects it produced were external manipulation of the senses to induce hallucinations and affect the emotions — technically only an illusion, by the strictest definition — and the sense of fear and dread it was supposed to produce sounded like *exactly* the sort of thing dementors did to normal people (based on what Harry and the Mediwitch had said on that very first night).

She hadn't tested it on an actual person, yet, of course — rather difficult to get anyone to volunteer for that sort of thing, and even if she did get, say, Blaise to agree, it would absolutely *ruin* the surprise.

She threw a chain of illusory spellglows at him. He dropped his shield in panic when the first illusion ghosted right through it, narrowly missing his left shoulder. His scramble to avoid the others gave her the perfect opening to slip the nightmare curse past his guard. She followed it up with a few more illusion-stunners, to give it time to take hold. Then, laughing as she avoided his pathetic, panicked attempt at retaliation, she cast the *pièce de résistance*: a billowing black cloak fluttering around herself, a rotten hand reaching out toward him, the rattle of soul-sucking breath — Malfoy scrambled away from the illusory dementor, screaming like a babe and tripping over his own robes.

"No, no — help! Help me!" he squealed, scrabbling away across the floor. "Nooo! Professor! Someone — anyone, *help*!"

Snape wouldn't intervene, though, she hadn't broken the rules, and Malfoy hadn't properly yielded.

Bella had to bite her fist to stop herself giggling and giving away the game. She ducked out from behind her light show, casting more illusory fog in front of herself to hide her movement, then came around behind the boy and hit him with the nightmare curse a couple more times, just for good measure.

Malfoy collapsed entirely, curled in on himself, shaking in terror and making a high-pitched keening noise, apparently no longer able even to speak. She dismissed all of her spells, leaving him huddled before her for all to see.

It was a simple matter to reach down and gently tug his wand out of his hand — she wasn't sure he even realized what she was doing, but he did look up when she said his name. "Draco, darling, a
"word of advice, are you listening?" He didn't answer, but that didn't matter, really. She was sure he could hear her. "I may be just some up-jumped mudblood, Malfoy, but so was the Lady Protector." She giggled. She'd been waiting for ten days to use that line. "You'd do well to remember that."

She grinned at him, then she stood and turned to face the professor, who was watching her with a completely blank expression. "Is the matter settled to your satisfaction, Miss Black?"

"Yes. Malfoy may petition me for the return of his wand...whenever he recovers sufficiently to speak," she informed him.

"Very well," Snape said coolly. "Filius?"

The Charms professor nodded solemnly and dismissed his palings. His expression Bella recognized — fear, and just a hint of anger. It was mirrored on the faces of most of the students, though her fellow Gryffindors, for the most part, lacked the anger, and McGonagall was pure rage, her lips so thin Bella could hardly see them. She must be absolutely fuming that Bella hadn't technically done anything she could be punished for.

She sighed. No sense of humor, any of them. At least Blaise was amused, though he was shaking his head as though he couldn't quite believe she'd just done that.

"Right. Well. That concludes this evening's entertainment," she announced, for lack of anything better to say, and headed for the door. "Hermione, did you finish the Transfiguration essay yet?"

Severus watched the girl closely as she bowed to Draco, obviously over-doing it, mocking him in much the same way she insisted upon calling Severus himself 'your Honor.'

If everything up to this point hadn't convinced him that he was dealing with some noble brat in disguise, her challenge would have. There was simply no way that anyone outside of the nobility of Magical Britain would have taught her the ritual phrases to incite an honor duel, not those ones in particular at least.

He would have to take tea with Narcissa tomorrow, he decided.

If anyone knew who this girl really was, it would be the woman who had spent the better part of a month escorting her around Magical Britain. She might even be willing to tell him, depending on how badly the girl hurt her son in the course of the next few minutes.

And then the duel began in earnest, the girl laughing and dodging, clearly unthreatened by Draco's hexes and curses. (Fucking Blacks — they were all like that in a fight, every single bloody one of them.)

Playing with him.

Were those—? Yes, she was casting sodding illusions, possibly the most useless spell class she could choose, probably trying to drive home exactly how pathetic Draco's dueling abilities were.

The boy was, so far as Severus knew, fairly average with offensive magics. Perhaps less developed than one might expect of the heir to a noble house, if his performance at the one and only dueling club meeting of the previous year was any indication.

Cissa was a rather formidable duelist herself — she had been trained by Bellatrix, and Severus was fairly certain that the Death Eaters' standards had been equal to the Hit Wizards', at least. But he seemed to recall Lucius telling him that she refused to bring up their son so cruelly as she had been.
The boy had been *well educated* before Hogwarts, insofar as academic subjects were concerned, but his abilities with occlumency, dueling, and politics were obviously lacking (at least in comparison to his fellow Slytherins).

Draco didn't stand a chance, if only because Severus was quite certain that, impulsive Gryffindor or not, the girl was sufficiently intelligent to avoid making public challenges she couldn't uphold.

She began with simple visual deceptions, still avoiding Draco's spells, but quickly moved on to the physical. Why would she make it *cold*?

Draco was clearly growing impatient with his inability to hit her. "You wanted to fight! So stop dodging and fight, Black! *Aspictus!*"

The girl smirked — gods and Powers, how Severus hated that smirk — and let loose a torrent of illusory attacks. Was she planning *only* to use illusions in this duel? What precisely was she playing at?

And then she cast an emotional manipulation, hidden among the illusions of stunners and disarming charms.

Fog, cold, now hallucinations and an aura of fear... She couldn't really mean to—?

Apparently she could, as she quickly conjured the image of a bloody *dementor*, right on top of herself, creeping out from behind it as Draco begged for help that Severus could not give him. She was clearly trying not to laugh, grinning like a madwoman— No.

Not like *a* madwoman.

Like *the* madwoman.

Like the fucking Blackheart herself, the fog swirling around her obscuring her form and features just enough that for a moment it was 1979 again, and she was standing there before him.

He blinked and it was gone, but the suspicion remained. She was the only Black who had ever been allied with Lady Zabini, and the way the girl fought, the way she did arithmancy, the color of her eyes, even—

*Impossible*, he thought, but then, he knew better than anyone that Bellatrix Black was the queen of the fucking impossible. She led raids that would have left anyone else dead on the ground, came back without a scratch, every time. Faced down werewolves, engineered a *fucking goblin rebellion*, walked into Azkaban voluntarily. She had *invented* stable *bloody* time travel, for fuck's sake. And she made it look *easy*.

Was it really so absurd to think that she could somehow have escaped from Azkaban, de-aged herself, and infiltrated Hogwarts disguised as a previously unknown heiress to the House of Black?

There was only one way to know for certain.

She tugged Draco's wand from limp fingers, grinning again — What had she said to him? He was shaking even worse now than before, with the false dementor — and turned to face him.

It was clear she had won, no judgment required on his part. He recited his line, even as he reached out with the gentlest of legilimency probes, just enough to brush against the shape of her mind. He'd gotten out of the habit at some point in the past decade, but there had been a time when he did this reflexively, to everyone he encountered, just to ensure they were who they appeared to be.
And he knew this mind. Oh, he knew it well. No one had occlumency shields like that, her mind smoothly impenetrable, her defense inhumanly perfect, flawless. It took every ounce of composure for him to answer her directive that Draco petition her for the return of his wand. To request Filius remove the dueling wards.

*She's in Azkaban, someone would have noticed if she weren't, it can't be her. It simply. Can. Not.***

But it was.

_Fuck._

_Oh fuck._

That word seemed insufficient, but Severus's vocabulary, normally quite extensive, seemed to have abandoned him.

This was— This was not good. Very not good, even.

What in the name of all the thrice-cursed gods and Powers was _Bellatrix FUCKING Black_ doing _here_?

And _why_?

How was she a bloody _third-year_?

Why hadn't she approached him? (Not that he wanted her to.) Had she lost her memory along with the years?

_No, Severus, keep it simple: Stick to the first question._

Severus was suddenly struck with a very urgent desire to be in Azkaban, a place he'd never actually _wanted_ to be in his life, simply to verify that — as was the _best_ case scenario — he had gone _mad_, and that the girl _wasn't actually Bellatrix_.

Even though he was certain that he wasn't mad, and she was, in fact, the woman he hated above all others. The woman who had spent years torturing him for fun, using him as a test subject for her mad experiments, coerced and bribed him into her little army.

(The woman who had taught him to fight, who had led him into battle, given him an outlet for his teenage rage, saved his life more than once.)

"Right. Well. That concludes this evening's entertainment. Hermione, did you finish the Transfiguration essay yet?" Bellatrix asked (now he'd seen it, he couldn't _un-see_ it), walking away as though she _hadn't_ just reduced a fellow student — her nephew? — to a state of near catatonia. As though she _hadn't_ just made a joke out of the very real soul sucking monsters surrounding the school. As though she simply _didn't care_ — or worse, as though she was amused by her own cleverness.

The Granger girl looked around at the crowd fearfully, as though she rather wanted one of them to intervene, but no one did, not even Potter. After a brief delay, she scurried off after the teenaged Death Eater, who had stopped to wait at the doorway. "Erm, no. No, I haven't."

"I found another reference, could be relevant. You should look at it..." Bellatrix's voice faded away as she led her fellow Gryffindor — how the ever loving _fuck_ was Bellatrix Black a _Gryffindor_? — away from the hall.
Severus didn't sleep that night.

At the break of dawn he flew to the edge of the school wards and apparated north, to the salt-blasted cliff-face called Dunnet Head. There was a lighthouse there, a muggle tourist spot. Invisible to the muggles, behind wards designed to repel them, there was also a small hut with an attached broom-shed.

Five miles out to sea, barely visible in the haze, was the Island of Azkaban. It was protected by sheer cliff faces, much like Dunnet Head, but some mad wizard once upon a time had covered these in iron plates and hollowed out rooms in the rock, transforming the island into a fortress unassailable by boat. There were wards against portkey travel and apparition, and the five miles of salt water made travel by darker methods — fumation, shadow walking, and invocation — damnably difficult. The Dark Lord might have been able to manage it, but certainly no one else Severus had ever met.

And then there were the dementors. No wizard left unprotected in their company for more than a few hours would be capable of casting the meaneast of charms, let alone making an escape attempt — assuming, of course, that they could somehow acquire a wand. There weren't any on the island, save on the rare occasion that an official party happened to visit: Dementors didn't need them.

Or, rather there had been dementors. Now they — most of them — were at Hogwarts, lesser numbers of them scouring the length and breadth of the island, hunting for Sirius Black.

Last time Severus had been here, nearly seven years ago, the broom shed had been manned by a single, unlucky rookie from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Visitors were expected to apply for an official escort and stop there to surrender their wands, trusting the aurors to protect their souls. (Not that most wizards could cast any spell which could repel dementors, anyway, so perhaps they found the idea of giving up their wands less terrifying than Severus.)

This time, the shed had been expanded into a proper barracks. Assuming they hadn't magically expanded the interior space, Severus estimated that there was space for over a dozen people, likely including Aurors or Hit Wizards, a few garden-variety DMLE officers, and their support staff. And enough new wards had been constructed around the island prison that Severus could feel them from here.

Severus had (unfortunately) had the opportunity to examine the magical defenses of the prison from both sides in the wake of the war. Most of them had been designed to keep the dementors in, not the human prisoners (the dementors took care of that). He had, in fact, theorized that it would be possible to enter the prison simply by bringing his own broom and flying across, keeping his own wand in order to fend off the dementors. Not that he had ever tried. No sane man would.

Severus wasn't feeling particularly sane at the moment, but in any case, there was no chance of simply flying to the island now.

Which meant there was also no chance of interrogating Bellatrix with any sort of privacy. Assuming she was still in her cell, which she had to be. With actual human guards patrolling the prison, someone would have noticed if she had disappeared.

Still, if he could just see her face to face he could touch her mind, assure himself that she was where she was supposed to be, not having a lie in up in Gryffindor tower. That would have to be enough.

Muttering invective under his breath — he hated Aurors nearly as much as he hated dementors —
he slammed through the doorway of the shed with a burst of freeform magic. The door wasn't warded, barred, or even locked to keep out intruders. Sloppy. Very sloppy.

It cracked loudly against the wall. Severus could feel his cloak fluttering dramatically around his ankles as he strode into the room. Four aurors, sitting around a card table, picking at scrambled eggs and complaining about the coffee looked up, startled. One even yelped, spilling her coffee across the table. Even if her hair hadn't been pink, that alone would have been enough to identify his favorite Hufflepuff to have left Hogwarts in the past five years, at least.

"Shit! Sorry! I'll clean that up! Tergeo! Sorry! Uh. Professor Snape? What are you doing here?"

"Miss Tonks."

"What are you doing here, Snape?" The scarred and battle-worn Senior Auror known to friend and foe alike as Mad-Eye Moody glowered at him, his bright blue, enchanted eye spinning wildly in its socket. The better question was what he was doing here, surrounded by rookies at the arse end of nowhere.

"Moody. Don't tell me they're letting you babysit the new recruits."

"Hey!" Tonks objected. "I'm not a new recruit! And the S.A. asked you a question," she added, wilting slightly under his and Moody's combined scrutiny.

"I suddenly find myself in need of a conversation with your dearest auntie, Nymphadora."

She scowled at the use of her given name, but snapped off a rejoinder without missing a beat: "Canada's about three thousand miles that-a-way, I'll tell Aunt Maggie to expect you."

"What do you want with Lestrange, Snape?" Moody asked.

(One of the other rookie aurors did a double take, looking at Tonks with an expression of horror. "You're related to the Lestranges?" he hissed at her.)

("Shut up, Penderghast.")

"Specifically?"

"Yes, specifically."

"Well if you really must know, I'm here to question her about her daughter." That sounded much less insane than I'm here to make sure you haven't misplaced her. 'Dumbledore's orders," he added. The old goat's name ought to hold some weight with Moody. Severus would, of course, have to explain his trip when word finally got back to the Headmaster, but he somehow doubted that Dumbledore would mind his looking more closely into the history and identity of 'Lyra' Black.

"You know as well as I do that Lestrange never had a daughter," Moody said, frowning slightly, his tone suspicious, but not appreciably more so than usual.

Tonks, on the other hand, very nearly dropped her coffee cup again. "You mean, er...Lyra?"

Moody shifted his glare to his apprentice for a brief moment, before looking back to Severus. He appeared to be considering whether he wanted to spend enough time in Severus's presence to find out what was going on. Apparently the answer was "no" (or perhaps he just wasn't properly awake yet), because after a moment he turned back to Tonks. "This sounds like a family matter, Tonks. I'll"
let you take him over."

The girl stuck her tongue out at him. "She's no family of mine. But fine," she added, dragging herself to her feet. "C'mon, Severus."

"I don't recall inviting you to be informal, Nymphadora." Severus did have an admitted soft spot for the snarky misfits of Hogwarts, even the ones with a distinct penchant for destroying any glassware within a three-meter radius of themselves. But that didn't mean they could call him Severus. Especially not in front of Moody. "Feeling emboldened by our new career, are we?"

The pink-haired trainee auror let out a tiny *eep*. "No, sir. Forget I said anything, sir." In a blink, she dropped the frightened student act. "Boat's this way."

"I expect a full report!" Moody called after them as she led him out of the one-time shack.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll write it up!"

"Leave your wand, Sna—" *Bugger*, he'd been hoping they'd overlook that minor detail. The old bastard's words were cut off by the closing of the door, but it was already too late.

Tonks halted, flushing slightly at her oversight. "Oh, right, hand it over."

"Really, Miss Tonks?" he said in his most condescending tone.

"Auror Tonks, Snape. And yes, really. It's protocol. And there's not even dementors over there anymore. What do you think is going to happen? I'm not going to shove you in a cell and leave you."

Severus felt his eyes narrow as he pulled his wand from its holster. That *wasn't* an unreasonable concern, given his history. If it was Moody escorting him, he'd definitely consider 'accidentally' being left in a cell a distinct possibility. Tonks he could probably overpower with mind magic, if necessary, however, and he *needed* to determine whether Bellatrix was still on the island. That didn't mean he was happy to give up the security of his wand.

Tonks looked somewhat surprised that he had caved so easily, but wisely chose not to comment, instead returning to the barracks to leave it with her superior officer.

Severus let the enchanted vessel carry them halfway across the channel before he asked, "So tell me, Miss Tonks. What do you know about 'er...Lyra'?"

"Nothing much. I met her over the summer. She showed up at Mum's offices asking about family law, and when it turned out she was a Black, Mum invited her to stay over for a few days. Dunno where she went after that, Mum didn't say, and I didn't ask."

Severus raised an eyebrow at her. He might have actually believed that if he *weren't* a legilimens. He wouldn't casually invade her mind — contrary to popular belief, most legilimens actually didn't want to know what most people were thinking (nine times out of ten it was tedious or sexual or both) — but her intention to deceive him was clearly projected, as obvious as if she had shouted it. "I see the Aurors have managed to improve your skill at dissembling. Your occlumency, however, remains dismal."

"My occlumency is fine, you're just a freak of nature, Snape."

This coming from a *metamorph*. Severus smirked. "The truth, if you please, Miss Tonks."
She pressed her lips firmly together, shaking her head. "I can't. Mum would kill me. Lyra would kill me. You know how purebloods are about their Family Secrets."

"So she's a pureblood, is she?"

"Dammit, stop that!"

Severus smiled slightly, despite himself. "I will have it out of you, one way or another, Miss Tonks."

The girl pouted at him for a moment, her features becoming softer and more childish, a blatant attempt to play on his emotions.

"I'm waiting, Miss Tonks."

"Ugh, fine! But you can't tell anyone I told you!"

Severus rolled his eyes. "As though I would admit to associating with you outside of school."

"Point. Well, you know about metamorphs, right? And how we can kind of, basically, well...live forever?"

"Yes, Miss Tonks, I am familiar with the concept of metamorphmagi."

"Well, you know how it kinda runs in families?"

"Get to the point, Miss Tonks."

"Well, the last metamorph in the House of Black was Cassiopeia. She was born in Nineteen Oh Five and 'disappeared' a few decades ago. Everyone kind of assumed she went off to be someone else for a while, like we tend to do. But now Lyra shows up out of nowhere, talking about reviving the House... Pretty simple arithmancy if you ask me."

That...actually sounded plausible. Far more plausible than Bellatrix having escaped from Azkaban, de-aged herself, and disguised herself as a third-year Gryffindor for no conceivable reason. But it didn't explain the fact that 'Lyra's' mind was undeniably Bellatrix's.

"We shall see," he murmured as they approached the portcullis guarding the cave which was the only viable landing site on the island.

The girl shivered, her hair growing dull and lank, all the color seeping out of her. "I hate this place."

Really, the lack of dementors did wonders for the ambiance. "The feeling is mutual. Come, Tonks." Severus strode away toward the staircase which led to the cells.

"Hey! I'm supposed to be escorting you! Snape, wait!"

She caught up at the foot of the stair, the door to which was now chained shut, locked and warded against intrusion or escapees. "Nothing like locking the cupboards after the niffler's got the silver, is there?"

"Oh, shut up." She laid her hand upon the door, wincing as the wards recognized her. The chains fell away, dissolving into rust. Tonks shuddered. "Have I mentioned I hate this place?"

"Well then, hurry up. The sooner I'm done here, the sooner we can leave."
"Right." She hesitated. "Um. Do you know where we're going?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "You don't?"

"We've only been on this rotation for a week, and it's not like I've made visiting Bellatrix Lestrange a top priority, Snape."

He rolled his eyes at her, then turned on his heel and stalked away. "Wonderful escort I've been assigned. Do try to keep up. It's rather easy to get...lost in here."

Tonks followed him quietly as they made their way through the prison, past bored, anxious-looking guards and prisoners begging for release, floor after floor. Severus recognized a fair few of them. They didn't seem to recognize him, though. Even here, on the lower levels, the aura of the dementors was sufficient to drive most men mad in the space of a year.

Bellatrix's cell was on the very top level, where the dementors were normally thickest. When Severus reached the landing, he paused, waiting for Tonks to catch up. It appeared she'd stopped to make a few...adjustments.

"What are you doing?"

The face of Lyra Black blinked innocently up at him, her red auror robes transfigured to a plain, sedate blue. "You know she hates me, right? Like, the whole idea of me? Mum told me all the time growing up that she wanted to kill us all because she, Mum, left to be with Dad. And I'm pretty much living proof of that. I'm not letting her see my face if I can help it. Which I can. So, can we get this over with?"

Severus couldn't think of an objection. It wasn't as though it was a terrible assumption, that Bellatrix would want to kill Andromeda and her entire family. Though he was fairly certain she normally pretended Andromeda had never existed. Narcissa certainly never mentioned her. Draco might not even know he had a second aunt.

And besides, bringing Bellatrix face to face with...the other Bellatrix might actually push her into revealing something she otherwise wouldn't have. Assuming she was still here.

He only barely managed to restrain a sigh of relief as they came within sight of her cell. She was lying in the middle of the floor with her eyes closed, her dark hair a tangled halo around her head, thinner than he remembered, but not nearly as emaciated as most of the prisoners here. A light brush against her mind assured Severus that she was, in fact, herself.

On the one hand, it was somewhat reassuring that she was still here, in prison, but on the other hand, her presence seemed to imply that there were two of them.

He hadn't seriously considered this outcome, despite the fact that it was the only potential alternative to an escaped and de-aged Bellatrix.

"Who's there?" she asked, eyes still closed.

Tonks apparently was not expecting this, and tripped over her own feet, grabbing his arm to steady herself. "Fuck! Sorry."

"Look and see."

"Hallo, Sev."
"Bellatrix."

"Hey, crazy bitch. What's up?"

Severus turned to stare at Tonks, as did the crazy bitch herself. Her eyes flicked over the girl, then settled on Severus. "What's with the cheap knock off? She fall off the back of a truck?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tonks scowled, crossing her arms over 'Lyra' Black's chest.

Bellatrix smirked at her, then turned back to Severus, in what he would be willing to bet was a bid to annoy her. "It looks like me, and it sounds like me, even tries to act like me, but it's not me."

Well, that was one question confirmed. 'Lyra' definitely was Bellatrix. She had confirmed it herself. But how?

"What gave it away?"

Bellatrix finally met the eyes of her 'younger self'. "You mean besides the fact that I wouldn't apologize for...pretty much anything, and I'd never be so clumsy as to trip over my own feet?" Tonks flushed slightly. Bellatrix grinned. "I don't blush, either. I don't know why you brought her, Sev, but next time you get someone to impersonate me, find a proper dark witch."

Ah, yes. She would be able to feel Tonks's aura. She didn't make any real effort to contain herself, and her magic was several degrees lighter than Bellatrix's. Severus wouldn't call her a light witch, precisely, none of the Aurors were truly light — one had to learn the Dark Arts to combat them effectively — but she hadn't been raised in the Dark.

"Actually, I don't know why you're here at all. What year is it?"

"Nineteen ninety-three. September."

"And why are you here? Not that I don't appreciate the change of scenery. It's been even more boring than usual around here lately. They took away my dementors, just when I was starting to get the hang of their past tenses. And of course the Aurors are too scared of me to come chat. But it's been seven years, give or take a few weeks. You must have had a reason for coming, and bringing your little potions experiment with you."

"Potions experiment?" Tonks repeated, her tone somewhere between confusion and outrage.

Severus just raised an eyebrow at the prisoner. "Can't an old friend drop by to say hello every once in a very great while?"

Bellatrix laughed. "We were never that sort of friends, Sev. And you." She pointed toward Tonks. "You could be a metamorph, I suppose. It's been some time now, there could be more in Britain now than back in the eighties. But you would have had to have met me to mimic me that closely, and you're definitely not Cassiopeia, too light. Besides, it's far more likely that Sev here managed to find a way to combine Polyjuice and a de-aging potion without killing you horribly. Would've had to have a piece of me, but I assume he made it his business to collect and save a few useful specimens over the course of the war."

He had, of course. One of her hairs and a few flakes of dried blood were carefully preserved in a vial at the very back of his private store cupboard. A bit of insurance he'd never needed. Though he hadn't realized she knew (or suspected) that he had them.

"What other option is there? Faffing about with alternate universes and timelines does, admittedly,
seem like the sort of thing I would have done when I was that age, but I would have had to have lived a drastically different life to not have dedicated myself to Eris, and I doubt I would have gotten far without her guidance."

Severus went cold. An alternate timeline. An alternate universe.

They were the whole reason truly travelling forward in time was theoretically impossible. (Though the Fitzhowe incident had inspired a few new theories in that direction.) There was no way of knowing which of the possible futures "you" ought to belong in. Travelling between them was supposed to be just as impossible, but...it was Bellatrix FUCKING Black they were talking about.

And there were undeniably two of them.

It was insane, but it would explain everything.

Some other dimension must have... misplaced its Bellatrix.

It was the only thing that made sense.

FUCK.

If the girl at Hogwarts, this new mystery Black, was truly a misplaced Bellatrix, it stood to reason that her home universe would be significantly different from their own in several ways. She didn't seem to have the same obsession with blood purity and the Dark Lord's rhetoric as the Bellatrix before him did. Which only made sense, she would have been displaced from the 1960s, and the war hadn't even really begun by then—

"You're a black mage?!!"

—but she had said she wouldn't likely have successfully explored dimension hopping without her Patron's help, which at least strongly implied that the misplaced Bellatrix was also dedicated to Eris.

Focus, Severus.

It had been years since he'd had to so thoroughly conceal his thoughts, maintaining an entirely separate conversation with no hint of deception, but it was a skill one never truly lost. Allowing Bellatrix to see the depth to which he had been shaken was entirely outside the realm of sanity: If he managed to sufficiently catch her interest, she might decide to leave this gods-forsaken rock, and then they'd truly be fucked. (One Bellatrix on the loose was already one too many, even if it was a younger and therefore presumably less dangerous Bellatrix.)

With this in mind, he threw out a glib comment in response to Tonks's astonished exclamation. "Of course she is, though I have to say, the smart money was always on the Destructive Power."

"Mmm, no, I serve Chaos and the Dark Lord. Destruction can be fun, but not an end in and of itself."

—Eris. Of all the goddesses she could have chosen to serve, it had to be Discord. Explained why the younger one was such an annoying little twit, at least. But it truly wouldn't do to make any rash movements against her. Eris was well known to be a petty, jealous, vengeful goddess. (Par for the course for the Greek pantheon, really.) To draw her attention, especially by disrupting her Dedicate and her plans, would be a potentially fatal mistake.

But to leave her to her own devices—
"So your penchant for inflicting pain on all those around you is simply common mortal sadism, then."

"You find this surprising? I was hardly the only one to amuse myself with a spot of torture now and again." She gave him a very pointed look. "Don't be a hypocrite, Sevvie-poo."

—He ignored the horrid pet name. It was the only way to deal with her, denying her the joy of forcing a reaction. She would get bored eventually (that was probably the only reason he'd survived 1980), move on to tormenting someone else—

"Oh, no, couldn't have that, Bella, dear."

—There was every chance that the younger version, lacking the Dark Lord's influence, was more stable than this one. She had deteriorated as He had, after all, but she had always been an impulsive psychopath, even when she had been effectively running the entire organization for the Dark Lord. (That was probably the best case scenario, now, regarding the misplaced one.)

No wonder she and Zabini got on—

"You never did get around to telling me why you're here," Bellatrix pointed out, then nodded at Tonks. "Or why she's here."

(At the moment, it appeared Tonks was here entirely to stare, wide eyed, at the two of them trading barbs.)

"Nor will I. Suffice to say I've gotten what I came for.” Not that it was something he wanted to have gotten. This trip was only ever going to have provided bad news, regardless of the specific outcome.

"You know I'll figure it out eventually."

"Something to entertain you through your long, dementor-less nights."

"Do you know how he escaped?" Tonks asked suddenly, as though reminded by the lack of dementors exactly why they were gone. "Sirius?"

—From a practical perspective, it didn't really matter whether the misplaced Bellatrix was more or less insane than her native counterpart. Given that she was almost certainly dedicated to bloody Eris, he could not risk moving against her, lest the goddess make his life a priority in her designs—

Bellatrix just stared at the girl, as though she could not comprehend the question. "I presume he just walked out. Dementors aren't exactly sterling examples of physical prowess, and they're pretty bad at tracking people. It would be simple enough to overpower the one who brought his food and make a run for it."

—He most assuredly could not tell Dumbledore. The old goat did not hold with the Powers, couldn't possibly conceive of the complete mess Chaos could make of their lives, Magical Britain, maybe even the entire ICW, if they angered Eris sufficiently. Of course, it was likely that Bellatrix herself would attempt to sow some degree of chaos, or else bring it naturally in her wake, but as a rule, it was often best to simply stay out of the way when it came to the Powers and their Plans—

"Erm."

"Bellatrix is a soulless bitch, and therefore biased," Severus informed the Auror. "Dementors are
actually very effective at tracking people, she just doesn't count as a person." Probably came of being a black mage, come to think of it.

Bellatrix shrugged, smirking in such a way as to suggest that she had been perfectly aware of that fact. Probably had never intended to give Tonks a serious answer.

—The best thing to do would probably be to wait and keep an eye on the misplaced Bellatrix, see how things developed. Perhaps attempt to mitigate the damage her attempts at spreading chaos caused, but anything more would be courting disaster—

"Any news of the Dark Lord?" she asked, likely with the expectation that Severus would answer just as seriously as she had addressed Tonks's question. There was an unknown witness present, after all, and she had never entirely trusted him, in any case.

"He tried and failed to steal the Philosopher's Stone from Hogwarts a couple of years ago."

Bellatrix laughed. "Yes, killed the Defense professor while he was at it, too, I'm sure. Nothing, then?"

"Not a trace."

A troubled expression passed over her face, but she said nothing further on the subject, her right hand straying to her left forearm, her thumb running over the spot where her Mark lay hidden by her sleeve. "He's not dead. He will come back."

Not if Severus had anything to say about it. But then, he expected he would be rather distracted, given the sudden appearance of a bloody dimension-hopping Bellatrix Black in his bloody school.

FUCK. (He thought it bore repeating.)

"Who are you trying to convince, Bellatrix? It's been twelve years."

"He will return, Snape." Bellatrix lunged at the bars of her cell. "He will return, and those of us who waited will be rewarded, and those who abandoned him, who forswore themselves, you traitors who betrayed the cause and fled to the Light, you will all be punished for your lack of faith!"

Severus snorted. "As though a cause and its leader are one and the same. You may have been obsessed with the madman, but I fought for the Dark. The Dark Lord was a liability by the end, you know it as well as anyone!"

It felt good to say that aloud. And if she had already branded him a traitor in her mind, there was little harm in speaking the truth. He didn't think there were any Death Eaters, by the end, who didn't think they'd be better off without the Dark Lord.

Except for Bellatrix, of course.

There was a wordless scream of rage, and then Tonks was pulling him out of the way, as the madwoman threw a wandless gout of flame into the corridor. "You insult our Lord?! I'll kill you! Take it back! Take it back, Snape!"

"In case you were under the mistaken impression that the crazy bitch might be less mad than you'd heard," he observed to the girl, who was staring at her aunt with an expression akin to horror. It looked entirely out of place on Bellatrix's features. "Come, we have places to be."
"Like anywhere else," she muttered, clearly shaken.

Like back at Hogwarts, keeping an eye on the other Bellatrix.

"Indeed."

(FUCK!)

Chapter End Notes

A little later than I intended. We're trying to keep a buffer, and I feel behind, because writer's block is a thing. Blame me for slowing up the posts, thank Leigha for Snapey fun. —Lysandra
So, I'm a time traveler now? Neat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bella waited a moment, just in case Hermione had forgotten something. Once she was sure Hermione would be in the shower, she dropped her quill, made straight for the proper drawer set into Hermione's desk. It was locked and warded — a simple one against unlocking charms, by the feel of it — which she could crack easily if she wanted to. But picking it open with a hairpin was faster.

There, atop a couple muggle-printed novels, was a wooden box, the edges traced with silver, the air around it tingling with protective enchantments. Bella pulled it out, closed the drawer again. She set herself up on her bed, a sheet of parchment and a self-inking quill at her side, and started with her first detection charms. Maybe twenty minutes before Hermione got back, should be enough.

There had to be some benefits to having a famous cursebreaker for a tutor, after all.

Hermione, she'd noticed, was taking all five OWL electives. This in itself was not unusual — people had done it in her time, it wasn't unheard of for the occasional exceptional student to get Outstanding OWLs in every available subject. But, arranging such a thing was far simpler in her time. Likely due to the numerous wars they'd had over the last century, wars which had disproportionately affected the segments of the population the school drew its students from, this Hogwarts had far fewer students than hers had. Somewhere between a half and a third, she hadn't run the numbers exactly. In her Hogwarts, every subject had had two, sometimes three professors; depending on which elective, there could be anywhere between five and eight different sessions available. Shuffling schedules so everyone could get to every class wasn't that complicated.

Here, though, there were only two sessions of every elective. The fifth years, she heard, only had one session of Arithmancy. With the more limited options they had, she wasn't sure it was possible for third years to make every class. According to Blaise, it would be possible next year — there were enough second-years they were planning on extra sessions for electives and maybe even hiring new professors. But this year? Not so much.

For that reason, Bella had assumed Hermione was covering whatever electives she couldn't make it to through some kind of directed independent study. Professors in her time would do that sort of thing with promising students, after all — mostly in topics not covered by the Hogwarts curriculum at all, but still — and there was no denying that Hermione was especially gifted. Not as talented as Bella herself, of course, but she was quite good.

But then Blaise had mentioned that Hermione had never missed one Arithmancy class. According to a Hufflepuff friend of Justin's she never missed Muggle Studies either. And Bella could confirm she was always in Divination, they partnered for everything, it'd be hard not to notice.

The problem? Those three sessions were held at the same time.

Obviously, during limited windows throughout the day, Hermione was in as many as three places at once. Just as obviously, the only practical solution to this problem was that she was exploiting stable time loops. Nothing else made any sense.

Not that she had known before that that was possible. Well, theoretically possible, of course,
but practically? Back in her 1963, the feasibility of time travel and the stability of the time loops established by short-distance hops had been experimentally verified, but it had still been limited to high ritual. Researchers at Miskatonic theorized it was possible to enchant a self-contained device to do it directly, but it had never even been attempted yet.

Things were clearly different in 1993. She'd even caught Hermione at it once. After Divs one day, she'd quick disillusioned herself and tracked Hermione. She'd slipped into a corner, pulled a sparkling golden device out from under her robes, fiddled with it for a moment, then disappeared. Further observation revealed Hermione put the thing in this little box before bathing or sleeping. This wasn't the first time Bella had gotten her hands on it — last time the risk of immediate discovery was too great to crack the protections.

But this shouldn't take long. With each charm, she sketched out her guess at the structure of the enchantment on the box. It was more complex than a simple ward against unlocking charms — there were several spells to protect the box and its contents, but the important bit was one keyed to Hermione, unsealing the box at her touch. The identification string worked through...blood magic, really? Wasn't that illegal in this timeline? Eh. She didn't need to fool the identification — which was fortunate, subverting blood wards was really difficult — she just had to find a formant that would trip the active string. Shouldn't be hard.

In fact, after about twelve minutes fiddling with the arithmancy, she'd whittled it down to the proper trigger charm. A wave of her wand had the box flipping open. Inside was an hourglass surrounded by a cage of narrow rings, a long chain threaded through a loop at the end, the whole thing glinting gold. Picking the thing up, she peered into the hourglass, obviously the functional part of the miniature time machine. There was something that looked like sand in there, sparkling silver and blue in the light like shattered quartz, but it didn't shift as she tilted it around. She cast a narrow detection charm, focused as well as she could on the sand itself.

When the results came back, she gaped — someone had managed to transfigure time? How the hell did they pull off that one? Damn. Color her impressed.

"This is going to be so much fun."

The near-giddiness in her sense of Eris's voice had her grinning to herself. Not that she disagreed, there were so many opportunities that opened up when she had a time machine on hand. If she had the first idea how to go about it, she might even have invented one herself. Transfiguring time, honestly.

Eris's giggling resonated through her mind, pulling her grin wider. "But you did invent it, ducky. Or, the you of this timeline did, back in the seventies. The Department of Mysteries got their hands on her work late in the war, reverse-engineered it."

You're joking. Seriously?

"Yes. But she was too lost by then, she never did use it to its full potential. Something we'll have to remedy, don't you think?"

Oh, definitely. Exploiting time loops is the best idea I've ever had.

Eris's agreement was a pleasant tingle running down her neck, distracting enough she fudged her next detection charm.

Unfortunately, her charmwork revealed the thing was absolutely buried in enchantments. It was too much of a mess for her to pick apart how to operate the thing without working through the
script by hand. This was also keyed to Hermione, but that operator right there looked like soul magic. Which made sense when she thought about it — blood wards were much harder to work on metal — but that didn't mean it wasn't annoying. Soul magic wards were almost impossible to fool. She could figure it out eventually, but she'd need to take apart the script for the entire damn thing. Considering she had no idea how the actual time travel part worked, yeah, that might take a while.

But she didn't think that would be necessary. She just had to convince Hermione to take her along from now on. No problem.

Bella could be very convincing when she wanted to be.

A couple minutes later, Hermione wandered back into the room, pink-faced from the heat of the water, her hair darker and flatter, collapsing against her back from the added weight. It took a couple seconds for her eyes to find Bella, instantly freezing. Bella was still sitting cross-legged on her bed, her scratchwork still at her side. Slouching back, one hand behind her propping her up, she had the chain of the time machine wrapped a couple times around her wrist. She flicked her wrist, releasing the core, sending it spinning around her finger, caught it as it came back around. Then she flicked her wrist around the other way, spin, catch. Flick, spin, catch.

Hermione seemingly couldn't find her voice, staring at Bella with eyes wide in horror. "So," Bella said, grinning, "looks like someone has been keeping a secret. And here I thought we were friends, I might cry."

The other girl scowled at that — couldn't blame her, Bella hadn't been capable of crying since she was seven. (Not for real, anyway, and nobody believed it for a second when she tried to fake it.) Not that Hermione knew that, but she'd learned people who had much contact with her often came to scorn the idea that Bellatrix Black could possibly have normal person feelings like everyone else, even without knowing why. Anyway, the scowl only lasted for a second, switching straight into anger. "Were you going through my things?"

Flick, spin, catch. "Nah, I just took this, didn't touch anything else." Honestly, she doubted Hermione owned anything interesting enough for Bella to bother snooping around.

"Oh, and that makes it better, does it?"

"Do you expect me to not go for a bloody time machine when I know where one is?" Hermione paled, probably realizing just now Bella knew exactly what this thing was. Her grin stretched wider. Flick-spin-catch. "Honestly, Hermione, I'm only human." Sort of.

Hermione hesitated for a moment too long, before finally starting on what was obviously going to be a denial. And not even a very convincing one. "A time machine, really?" Flick-spin-catch — Hermione flinched at the slap of the thing hitting her palm. "Be reasonable, Lyra, time travel is impossible—"

"Do you think I'm an idiot, Hermione?" Flick-spin-catch.

That shut her up instantly. Hermione might not like her very much, but she definitely didn't think Bella was stupid. Hell, she was the only real competition for top of the class Hermione had in most of their subjects.

"Give me some credit, then." Flick-spin-catch. "I have friends in Slytherin and Hufflepuff, and they confirmed for me that you're going to multiple classes at the same time. The obvious solution is stable time loops." Flick-spin-catch.
Hermione gaped. "That's the obvious solution?"

"Well, yeah."

Bella shrugged — was immediately jumping to time travel weird? She'd long ago lost track of what was considered a normal thing to think. It was possible she had a bias here. Hermione's apparent short-hop time travel was pedestrian in comparison to Bella jumping three decades into the future, that was supposed to be impossible. (Not that the Powers really cared what humans considered to be possible or not.)

"So," Bella said, letting a slightly pedantic tone leak into her voice, "this is where you negotiate with me to get—" (Flick-spin-catch.) "—your time machine back."

"You can't just keep it! I need it to get to classes!" Hermione's voice had gone abruptly high, more than a little panicky.

"Hmm, that sounds like your problem. And, let's not play around here, don't go thinking you can just steal it back from me. Even if you could," flick-spin-catch, "I'd just take it again." Bella scooped up the box it had been sealed in, tossed it toward Hermione.

Hermione fumbled it for a second, managed to catch it before it tumbled to the ground. "It's... It's not broken. How did you get it open?"

She smirked. "Trade secret."

"I could just never take it off..." Even Hermione didn't sound particularly convinced of the viability of that idea, longing eyes fixed on the time machine as Bella spun it around again.

"Have to sleep sometime. Besides, that's assuming you could even get it back from me," flick-spin-catch, "which you can't. You saw what I did to my dear cousin — there's a lot more where that came from."

Hermione mustered a defiant glare, but she could only hold it for a moment. She let out a long sigh, her shoulders drooping, face abruptly a picture of exhausted dejection. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing much," Bella said, trying to keep any hint of gloating off her voice. Possibly failing, but she was trying, at least. "I just want you to bring me back with you."

 Apparently Hermione hadn't seen that request coming — her mouth and eyes had gone wide again, just staring for a long moment before finding her voice. "But I can't! It's only designed for one person!"

Bella rolled her eyes. She flicked-spun-caught the time machine one last time, shifted slightly to lean back on both hands — that one wrist holding her weight was starting to hurt. "Was that what they told you? The energy required to travel through time is determined by the displacement. There is a term for the mass to be displaced, but it's a tiny fraction of the total, small enough to be negligible at this scale. Check the arithmancy if you don't believe me."

"They never gave me any of the arithmancy on it." There was a clear challenging note there, wondering how exactly Bella knew that.

Not that Bella could tell the truth there — possessing any literature published by Miskatonic was even more illegal here than it'd been in her Britain. "The theory is well-established, I'm sure there're books on it in the library. Probably in the Restricted Section, though."
"Anyway, getting off topic here. I really don't think my price is unreasonable. When you consider just how valuable this little trinket is, I'm not asking for much." Of course, Hermione's family probably couldn't afford to pay anywhere close to what it was actually worth. There were plenty of muggles who had that kind of wealth, but she doubted the Grangers were among them.

"McGonagall told me to not let anyone know..."

"That cat's out of the bag, isn't it? I won't tell anyone. I just want to use it too, that's all."

As hard as it was for her to believe, Hermione pouted at her. Really, the lips and the eyes and everything, it was bloody weird. The only people to ever look at her like that, as though they thought they could at all change her mind with begging alone, were Meda and Zee. "Lyra, please, can't you just..."

"No, I'm afraid I can't just." Bella leaned forward, looped the chain around her neck, dropped the hourglass down the front of her shirt. "If you decide you want to be reasonable, I'll be waiting."

Hermione didn't bring it up again the rest of the night, but that didn't mean it wasn't on her mind. She was quiet, and broody, sitting at her desk but not actually working, glaring at Bella the whole time. Even when she was turning in for the night, Hermione was still staring at her, chewing her lip, clearly deep in thought. She'd break. Bella gave it a day, at most.

Bella drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face.

Harry was getting the feeling something was going on between Hermione and Lyra.

Not that Hermione having disagreements with her dorm mates was unusual — they really didn't seem to get along. Which, that had never really made sense, to him. Sure, Lavender and Parvati were irritating, but Fay was fine, and Sophie... He didn't think he'd ever heard Sophie speak, actually. Honestly, he'd always thought the problem there was Hermione, not that he would ever tell her that. She was one of his best friends, but he could admit that Hermione could be a bit...much. He could understand why other people might not be able to get along with her.

Hell, these days Ron couldn't get along with her either. That was just as much his fault as hers, but still.

He'd never come out and asked, but it seemed like Hermione and Lyra were...well, if not friends, at least capable of putting up with each other. Lyra usually sat next to her at lunch, they partnered up in Divs. And, he didn't think he'd ever heard Hermione complain about her yet. Hermione complained about everyone, even him and Ron. (Sometimes especially him and Ron.) He'd been a bit relieved she had someone else to talk to, what with how she and Ron couldn't be within a few meters of each other for five minutes without arguing anymore.

But, something had clearly happened. Breakfast was even more tense than Hermione and Ron being around always made things these days. Not the everyone sniping at each other constantly sort of tense, their segment of the table was actually more quiet than usual. Lyra had ended up between him and Neville, but Hermione hadn't squeezed herself in next to her like she usually did. She was on the opposite side of the table, a few seats down. Just...glaring at Lyra, distractedly stabbing at eggs and mushrooms. Not an angry glare, exactly, but a thinking glare. Like, the glare she would give an especially uncooperative textbook, or the chessboard the few times she'd tried playing Ron. (Chess and flying were pretty much the only things Harry knew Hermione was bad at, even he did pretty well against her.) He didn't think she'd said a word, just sitting there silently staring. Keep that up too long, she'd probably chew through her lip or something.
With her mulling over whatever was going on with Lyra, it was just... Honestly, Harry had never had any idea just how much Hermione talked until he realized how quiet it felt when she and Ron weren't speaking. She and Lyra blabbing on about their incomprehensible smart person stuff at least filled the uncomfortable silence.

Pitching his voice in a whisper that hopefully wouldn't carry too far, Harry said, "Did something happen with you and Hermione?"

Lyra turned a crooked grin on him. "Oh, it's nothing. Hermione's just being stubborn. She'll get over it."

Harry winced — Lyra hadn't bothered lowering her voice, Hermione probably heard that. By the way her eyes had narrowed even further, stabbing a mushroom with a bit more viciousness than necessary, looked like she had. "Ah...okay." He was tempted to ask what exactly she was being so stubborn about, but he decided it wouldn't make any difference. If it was important one of them would probably tell him.

Er, Hermione would probably tell him, he didn't really know Lyra at all. She was smart — like, Hermione smart — she really liked Hagrid, she was friends with both pureblood Slytherins and muggleborn Hufflepuffs, she hated Malfoy — which made up for liking Zabini, he thought — and she was very...odd, sometimes. Ron was convinced she was completely mad, but, well, Harry was of the opinion that madness was relative. (Plenty of people thought he was mad too, after all.) That was pretty much everything he knew about her.

Well, not quite. Sirius Black was apparently her cousin, and she was quite literally the very first magical person ever who'd never seemed to care at all about that Boy Who Lived stuff. Even Ron and Hermione had made a big deal about it the first time they'd met. He didn't really know what to think about either of those.

"So, I was going to go see Hagrid after lunch."

Harry started, blinked over at Lyra. "Huh?"

Lyra rolled her distractingly strange eyes. (Was that magic somehow? Harry was pretty sure people weren't supposed to have purple eyes.) "Very articulate there, Potter. Anyway, yeah, Hagrid said he'd show me where he keeps the hippogriffs. Wanna come? We'd be back before Herbology. Not that I'd mind skipping Herbology, myself."

Before Harry could figure out what to say to that, Ron leaned around him, his voice thick with incredulity and toast. "Are you mad? One of those things near took your arm off, and you wanna go looking for them?"

"Sure," she said, shoulders flicking in a light shrug. "Not like he was aiming for me. I mean, who hasn't wanted to make Malfoy bleed from time to time?"

Ron coughed out a laugh, Neville on Lyra's opposite side clapped a hand over his mouth to keep in an almost girlish giggle. Smiling himself, Harry said, "Well, I guess, but... Hey, why did you protect him anyway?" She'd ended up reducing him to a weeping mess in a duel not long later...

"I didn't fancy the idea of my favorite professor being sacked on the first day. Lord Malfoy's on the Board of Governors, you know? Darling Draco would have written his daddy, and Hagrid would have been packing his bags by dinner."

He would never have thought of that. Especially not while it was happening, it was always so fast,
there was never time to actually think about that kind of thing. "And you thought of that at the time?"

"Of course." Lyra met his disbelieving look with another shrug. "Are you coming or not?"

"Sure, why not." He'd never considered actually doing things while visiting Hagrid which, when he thought about it, was sort of stupid. Okay, Hagrid was the bloody gamekeeper, he had to know about all kinds of things around the grounds, and he'd never asked? He couldn't imagine sitting around drinking tea was Hagrid's favorite thing to do with his time either. Idiot.

Double Potions that morning was, quite possibly, the easiest time he'd ever had in a Potions class before. Not because it had suddenly gotten easier or anything, no, the subject was still just as opaque and meaningless as it'd always been. It was just oddly calm. Malfoy hardly so much as looked at anyone, still nursing his wounds over...whatever Lyra had done to him last week. Even Snape was less of an arse than usual, more silently glaring and less whisper-yelling. It was strange.

Not that he was complaining. He'd take what he could get.

Instead of actually staying for lunch, Lyra picked up a plate, loaded it with sandwiches, handed it to Harry, then filled a second plate. Before Harry could think of anything to say, she'd hooked him by the elbow, started dragging him out of the Hall. They were halfway to the door before anyone else caught him.

"You're not really going out, are you?"

Harry winced, glanced behind them to see Hermione, loaded down with her bulky bookbag, standing there and glaring at them. Or, Lyra, mostly — something was definitely going on with them. During Potions, Harry had talked to Ron about it for a little bit, had even nearly asked him along. The whole thing was Lyra's idea, though, he doubted she would appreciate him bringing someone else without asking her first. (Besides, Ron and Lyra really didn't like each other.) Thankfully, he'd hesitated long enough Ron had had time to say something about not understanding why he'd want to go near those things if he didn't have to, have fun without him. Hermione would have heard Lyra invite him at breakfast, but they hadn't had an opportunity to talk since then.

Again, before he could get his thoughts together, Lyra was beating him to it. At least she'd stopped dragging him around long enough to answer her properly. "Sure, why not?"

"But, Harry, you..." Hermione's eyes flicked downward — lingering, for just an instant, where Lyra still had his arm trapped in hers.

For reasons he couldn't quite explain, he felt his own face warm.

"You shouldn't be going out right now. I mean, with..." Hermione hesitated, glancing toward Lyra again.

The sudden flash of anger came before he could stop it, but he mostly managed to swallow it down, it shouldn't be on his voice at all. "Honestly, Hermione, do you think Black is going to appear while I'm walking across the grounds and murder me in broad daylight?"

"Well, he could! It was 'broad daylight' when he murdered all those people in Edinburgh, you know! It doesn't make a—"

"But he won't show up when there are a dozen other third-years around." Lyra's flat voice had Hermione stopping in her tracks, blinking at her in surprise. "I mean, that's what you're saying, right?"
"That's not the point, you—"

"Sirius will pop out of nowhere to do Harry in when it's just the two of us and Hagrid, but not when we're in Care. Or going to and from Herbology, for that matter, why doesn't he just blow us all up then?"

Harry frowned — he'd never actually thought of that before. He honestly hadn't been that concerned about Black, not so much as everyone else was making it out he should be. But Lyra made a really good point. They went all over the grounds in Care, and it wasn't like a few third-years or Hagrid, who couldn't really cast much magic at all, would be a threat to anyone who could kill thirteen people with a single curse. Going out on his own or with a few other people shouldn't be any more dangerous, not significantly, than going to Hagrid's class a few times a week. And nobody had a problem with him doing that.

"It'll be fine, Hermione." Harry shrugged at the look Hermione gave him. "You worry too much sometimes."

In a low mutter, quiet enough he almost didn't hear it over the chatter filling the Hall, Hermione said, "Someone around here has to."

Lyra, as usual, grinned. "Honestly, you'd get so much more out of life if you get that stick out of your arse. Give it a try sometime. Come on, Harry." And then she was dragging him off again.

Before they were out of sight, Harry sent back the most apologetic, helpless look he could summon.

So he caught the mix of irritation, thoughtfulness, and uncertainty on Hermione's face as she stared at Lyra's retreating back.

Once they passed through the outer doors, stepping out into summer's last gasp, Lyra dropped his arm. "That girl sometimes. Why do I even bother?"

Harry held back a wince. He knew other people really didn't like Hermione, and he could see why, at least some of the time. Her more irritating moods even bothered him, and she was one of his best friends. But even so, he wasn't about to go saying unkind things about her behind her back, even the thought made him uncomfortable. "She means well."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Lyra scoffed, shaking her head. "She always means well. She's trying to be a good person so hard it's honestly a bit nauseating."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Lyra scoffed, shaking her head. "She always means well. She's trying to be a good person so hard it's honestly a bit nauseating."

And that made him even more uncomfortable. He'd figured out by now Lyra was a less than perfectly nice person. Some of the things she said went a bit over the line, and that duel with Malfoy had been a bit...much. But, Harry couldn't judge too harshly — he was a less than perfectly nice person himself. He thought her jokes were funny, in a dark, guilty sort of way, and he'd definitely enjoyed seeing Malfoy getting slapped down like the empty bully he was. (Even if it had been a bit much.) So, it was a little complicated.

Not to mention, Lyra was literally the first person ever to not even comment on the Boy Who Lived stuff, and just now was going out of her way to hang out with him when she was under no particular obligation to. If anyone else had said something like that, he might have wondered if they were a secret member of the Junior Death Eater Brigade, but...

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be a good person."

Lyra rolled her eyes. "Sure, if you like letting other people tell you what to do and what to think.
For all the preaching about right and wrong, and morality, and justice, and blah blah, at the end of the day, being a good person means you're a slave. A boring, boring slave."

... Harry had absolutely no idea what to say.

"Why is Hermione so convinced Sirius is after you anyway?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, I do know why — I overheard Mister Weasely talking about it. But I don't know why Sirius wants to kill me so much, is what I meant. Because of Voldemort, I imagine."

Slightly to his surprise, Lyra didn't even blink at the name. It only took a couple years around mages for muggleborns to start doing it too. "What about him?"

"Well, because... Because I 'defeated' him, I guess."

Lyra snorted. "You didn't do shite. Your mother took out the Dark Lord, you just sat there."

Harry opened his mouth, then hesitated. "Ah, yeah, actually, that's exactly what happened."

Dumbledore had said it himself, after all, way back in first year, that his mother sacrificing her life for him was what defeated Voldemort, not anything special about Harry. (Well, he talked about it like that was special, but mothers were supposed to love their children, that was normal.) "How did you know that? I mean, everyone else seems to think I must have superpowers or something."

"You do have superpowers, Harry. We all do. It's called magic."

That shocked a short laugh out of him. "You know, I never thought of it that way."

"That's because I'm smarter than you," Lyra said, the grin taking the edge off. (Though she wasn't wrong.) "Anyway, everyone knows Lily Potter had a talent for high ritual. I just assumed she'd done something. A life for a life is a fundamental sacrificial exchange."

Harry was distracted enough by the thought he wasn't paying proper attention to his feet, nearly spilling the sandwiches all over the ground. "What? My mother did ritual magic?"

Lyra looked up at him with a confused frown. "Er, yeah? I thought everyone knew that, anyway."

"But isn't ritual magic, like, really dark?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, of course it's not. People do ritual magic all the time. High ritual is 'dark' in the sense that it's against the law, but that doesn't mean it's actually dark. People ban things for all kinds of reasons, and half the time they have no idea what they're talking about. I mean, high ritual invoking the Light Powers is sort of the opposite of dark, isn't it?"

"Oh." Harry did have to admit that the rules in magical Britain didn't always make sense. He wasn't willing to extend that to the banning of dangerous magics but, well, Lyra knew more about it than he did, he wasn't going to start an argument about it. And he only had a vague idea of what the "Powers" even were — magic religion stuff, far as he could tell.

"Anyway, why is the Ministry so certain Sirius wants to kill you? I mean, I doubt he was sharing his murder fantasies with anyone who stopped by."

"How should I know? Nobody ever told me anything." Which was a subject of some irritation, actually. Most everything he'd learned about Sirius Black, his escape and vendetta against Harry, he'd learned either from the paper or by eavesdropping. Considering he was the target of a mass-
murdering psycho, how little anyone had seen fit to tell him anything about anything was really quite annoying. "Mister Weasley said, back in Azkaban, he kept muttering 'he's at Hogwarts' all the time. That's all I know."

"That's all? Just, 'he's at Hogwarts', nothing about what he means to do to the 'he' that's at Hogwarts?"

"Um...no?"

Lyra snorted. "Gods and Powers, people are such fucking idiots sometimes." At Harry's questioning look, Lyra rolled her eyes. "Think about it. He's at Hogwarts — no name, just a vague 'he'. They are assuming he meant you, and assuming that he means to kill you. And the only reason they have to think that is because twelve years ago they decided he was a Death Eater without a trial and threw him into Azkaban to rot."

"There wasn't a trial?!"

Unfortunately, he'd run out of time to interrogate Lyra about that. (They just locked people up, with dementors, for the rest of their lives, without even having a trial to make sure they got the right bloody person? But this was Britain!) They'd gotten close enough to Hagrid's hut for him to see them coming, and he came bounding out to meet them with Fang at his heels. They started off for the hippogriff paddock, splitting the sandwiches between them on the way — one plate was apparently all for Hagrid, he and Lyra shared the other one.

Lyra even produced bottles of butterbeer from her pockets, two normal-sized ones for them and a much larger one for Hagrid. Where had she even gotten those? Couldn't order them by owl, Hogwarts blocked that somehow. Weird.

Again, not that he was complaining — turned out butterbeer was pretty damn good. If this stuff was available, he couldn't understand why people kept drinking pumpkin juice. Blech.

To be honest, he did think the hippogriffs were a little... Well, they were just a bit intimidating, weren't they? Huge bloody things, with their claws and their beaks, their hard, unblinking eyes. They had nothing on the basilisk, of course — by this point, Harry thought his definition of "scary" had become very different from other people his age — but they still made him uneasy.

At least compared to Lyra they did, anyway. For all the care she seemed to show, skipping ahead up to the paddock, they might as well all be tiny, adorable kittens. She more or less treated them like kittens too (after the curtsy as she neared, anyway), all patting and scratching and giggling. Really, giggling, it was weird. She even went up on one again, out of sight for a few minutes this time before they reappeared.

Which Harry couldn't personally understand. He tried it once this time, but thankfully it was a very short flight. It was just... He'd take his broom any day, that was all. He certainly wouldn't want to do it again, Lyra was weird.

The talking to Hagrid part was far more interesting, he thought. Most of the time, when they went to Hagrid's, they ended up talking about...well, whatever was going on with the three of them at the time. Sometimes Hagrid would mention something to do with something on the grounds, but it wasn't very common. And usually just when it was something horrible enough Hagrid was preoccupied.

Lyra, though, had all kinds of questions about what other creatures there were in the forest, where they were, what contact Hagrid had with them. Some of it wasn't news to Harry — Lyra looked
particularly surprised by the news that there were acromantulas in the forest, said something about not knowing they could survive the Scottish winter — but a lot of it was. There were centaurs, which he’d known about, but he hadn't known there were actually three separate clans, who constantly feuded with each other. All kinds of creatures, augureys and pixies and thestrals and fairies and jarveys. And the lake too, apparently there were grindylows and merpeople by the dozens and even a clan of kelpies living in the lake. (Harry made a mental note to never go in there if he didn't have to.)

There was even some truth to the rumors of werewolves in the forest, though a bit off on the details. There were wolves out there, but they weren't werewolves — they were a tribe of wilderfolk, which was apparently a kind of being Harry had never heard of before. According to Hagrid, they tried to protect the unicorns as best they could, intervened in some centaurs' disagreements before they broke out into real violence, and hunted down the acromantulas when they wandered too far from their nest. (Hagrid spoke of that as though it were a bad thing, but Harry was on their side.)

Most of their time out, Harry just listened to Hagrid and Lyra talk. She clearly knew more about this magical creature stuff, so she actually had things to talk about, Harry too clueless to even know which questions to ask would have interesting answers. So he just stood there, idly patting at one of the hippogriffs. He didn't mind, though. Honestly, most of the conversations that ever went on around him, he had little to say about any of it. And this one was interesting to listen to, at least.

When it was starting to get close to time they had to go back to the castle, Lyra asked if they could do this again sometime, but go out to meet the wolves instead. Hagrid seemed at once enthusiastic and reluctant about the idea — he did always like other people taking interest in things to do with the grounds and everything that lived here, but the wolves were apparently a complicated topic. He didn't think they'd be happy with him if he just showed up with strangers in tow. But, after a moment hemming and hawing, he promised to ask if anyone in the tribe would like to come out and meet them. There'd probably be at least one, so. He'd get back to them on that, but it could be as long as a couple months, they could be hard to track down sometimes.

Then Hagrid led them back to the edge of the forest, and he and Lyra set back off across the grounds toward the greenhouses. A quick glance at his watch confirmed they'd be almost exactly on time for class, assuming they didn't get distracted on the way. Luckily they didn't need books or anything for Herbology because they really didn't have time to go all the way up to the tower.

"By the way, no, there wasn't a trial."

Harry blinked, took a second to figure out what she was talking about — apparently she'd skipped right back to when Hagrid had interrupted them. "That's... They can do that?"

Shrugging a little, Lyra said, "Normally, no, they can't. The Wizengamot granted the D.L.E. emergency powers back in the war. Well, not real emergency powers — if they declared an emergency, they'd have to select a Lord Protector, and they're not gonna do that — but they passed a law to expand the Director's discretion where Death Eater suspects are concerned, in certain situations. As far as they were concerned, they'd caught Sirius red-handed, case closed."

"Well, they did have some reason to suspect he'd done it." Lyra shot her a doubtful look at that. "I mean, I heard he was just...laughing, when they got there, standing there laughing."

Lyra let out a short laugh. Turning a bright grin on him, one crooked and sharp and slightly scary-looking, she drawled, "I don't know about you, Harry, but if I'd just murdered thirteen people, I wouldn't be standing there laughing. I'd be getting the hell out of there."
Harry had absolutely no idea what to say to that.

Thankfully, Lyra just smiled at him for a second before moving on. "That he'd apparently lost his bloody mind makes it less likely he's guilty, not more. Remember, Lord Potter had just died a few days previously. From what I heard, Sirius loved that man, practically betrayed the Family for him. It's not surprising he'd crack.

"Besides, a Black elf I talked to is positive he's innocent. And she rather dislikes him, so I'm willing to take her word on it."

There were multiple things there he could have decided to ask about. That Sirius had "loved" Harry's father, who "Lord Potter" was probably supposed to be, was news to him. He'd heard they'd known each other at Hogwarts, but. That bit about betraying his family, if that was true nobody ever talked about that, they only talked about the rest of the family so much as to say they should have suspected he was Dark all along because he was Black, and they all were. (Which Harry had always found suspect — he and the Dursleys were related, but that didn't mean they were the same.) Then there was the bit about the Black house-elf. There weren't any Blacks left (besides Lyra), and they still had house-elves? Did they just... What happened to house-elves if all the family were dead? Why was this elf so sure Sirius was innocent?

But, the thing he ended up sticking on was, "Wait, Lord Potter? You mean my dad was one of those magical lord people?"

Lyra shot him a faintly confused look. "Well, yeah? I mean, obviously, where else would you inherit it from? It's not like there are any other Potters out there."

Without really meaning to, Harry jerked to a stop. He felt oddly dizzy, just for a second, like his body had gone a few steps further than his brain had. At least he managed to not fall over. "What are you talking about?"

That just seemed to make Lyra even more confused. She stared back at him for a long moment, as still and silent as he was. "You didn't know you're a Lord of the Wizengamot."

"No!" The words almost burned in his ears, Lord of the Wizengamot, burning through his head and deep into his own memories. Memories mostly involving Number Four, Privet Drive. "No, nobody told me anything about that!"

"Nobody told you—" Lyra let out a hard sigh, hands coming up to rub at her face. She muttered to herself for a little while, low and hissing, in a language that definitely didn't sound like English. Eventually her hands dropped, and she looked up to pin Harry with a hard, cold stare.

He tried not to flinch, and mostly succeeded.

"That's unacceptable. I'll be putting you in contact with my—" Her voice caught. "—with a friend of mine, she'll help you sort this out. I'll write her today or tomorrow, you should hear from her next week." And then she turned on her heel, stalking off toward the greenhouses, her steps falling hard and stiff and angry.

Harry trailed after her, trying not to fidget. Despite himself he felt oddly...guilty, which was just ridiculous. It's not like it was his fault nobody had ever told him anything about anything. (Though, it was a bit hard to believe that nobody had thought to mention at any point, hey, your family happens to be one of those silly magic noble families, and what the hell had he been doing with the Dursleys in a cupboard, this was ridiculous.) After a few minutes walking in awkward silence, he managed to find his voice again. "I'm sorry."
"What for? Sounds like someone seriously neglected your education, that's not your fault. Honestly, what the fuck were they thinking, not even telling you about the Potters..." Lyra shook her head once, hard. "That's just fucking criminal. I'll make sure it's straightened out."

"Er, okay." The odd, dizzy feeling slowly slid away, Privet Drive fading away again. He frowned at Lyra's back, turning the whole thing over in his head. He didn't really understand all this family stuff mages got so obsessed over. Especially the noble families, he hardly even knew anyone from any of them, but what he'd picked up was just entirely foreign. It was just... It was weird, to think that his dad was one of those people, that it was his now.

Honestly, the thought was sort of making him a little angry.

But that wasn't really what was bothering him. They were a couple minutes away from the greenhouses when he couldn't suppress the thought anymore, he had to ask. "Why do you care?"

He really wasn't sure what was going on with Lyra. It was...weird. It was a confusing mix of nice and not nice at the same time. She did call people stupid a lot — which didn't really bother him, she was basically a more direct Hermione. She could have just disarmed Malfoy, she obviously the better duellist, completely traumatizing him with a fake dementor was a little over the top. (Though Harry couldn't help but feel it was a sort of poetic justice.) But, on the other hand...

Well, people didn't talk to him very much. Other than Ron and Hermione and the quidditch team, he meant. And everyone always had a reason for talking to him. The quidditch team, it was always about quidditch, they hardly ever talked about anything else, he wasn't really friends with them. Anyone else... Most of the time, when people talked to him, it was very obvious they were aware they were talking to the Boy Who bloody Lived, it was all over the way they looked at him, how they said what they said. It was irritating. Everyone only cared about that, he could count on his fingers the people who talked to him like...well, like a person.

Even the muggleborns, who shouldn't care as much! The most annoying person about it was Creevey!

It hadn't escaped his notice, how Ron had reacted to his name, back on the train in first year. How Ron had gone nuts over his scar. He tried not to let it bother him, it was more than that now, but it was still... Even Hermione had lost her head the first time they'd met, everyone did, it annoyed him more and more as the years went on, it never bloody stopped.

Except Lyra. She hadn't mentioned it, at all. That Hallowe'en had even come up today, and she'd said the whole thing had been his mum (which it had). She didn't seem to think he was anything special at all.

But she was still going out of her way to talk to him. It was...weird. He didn't get it.

At his flat question, she stopped again, turning back to raise an eyebrow at him. "You're not a very subtle person are you, Harry?"

He felt a smile twitch at his lips. "Yes, well, neither are you."

"Nope," she said, popping the 'p' a little. She just grinned at him for a second, then shrugged. "Well, you're half a Black yourself, aren't you? I guess I just feel like it."

He blinked. "Huh?"

With another shrug, she drawled, "See, your grandmother was a Black, she was Sirius's godmother,
and Sirius is your godfather, so... Since Sirius is technically Lord Black now, I just figured, close enough." And then she turned on her heel, started walking again.

It took Harry long seconds, staring blankly after her, for his legs to kick into motion again. He'd had no idea... What that even... He didn't...

What the hell was he supposed to do with that?

Hermione grabbed Lyra by the sleeve of her robes, started dragging her off toward a nearby classroom. For the first few steps, Lyra resisted, half-stumbling, but then she got her balance again, pacing Hermione at her side, a noticeable bounce in her step.

That just made Hermione more annoyed.

Hermione pulled Lyra inside, slammed the door behind them. A glance around showed this one had been long out of use — the desks, design rather archaic even compared to the normal Hogwarts furnishings, covered in a thick film of dust. It didn't look like anyone had been here in years, and they were certainly alone now.

Her arms crossed over her chest, she turned to face Lyra. She didn't bother trying to keep the frustration out of her voice. "Do you have it on you?"

A smirk spreading across her face, Lyra reached into a pocket, and pulled out the golden cage and chain of the time turner. Wrapping the chain around her wrist — probably so she couldn't grab at it, but after seeing Lyra duel Malfoy she'd have to be an idiot to think she had a chance — she cocked a single eyebrow. "Does this mean you're ready to be reasonable?"

"Reasonable! You—" Hermione bit her lip to cut herself off, hard enough it hurt, she winced. She took a long breath, forcing the anger back down her throat. "You won't... You'll be careful, right? If we get caught..." Hermione felt a little dirty even saying that much.

Sometimes, she didn't like what Hogwarts was doing to her. Well, okay, it wasn't fair to blame it on Hogwarts. She'd just... She hadn't used to do things like this. Ever since she'd gotten mixed up with Harry and Ron, but it wasn't really their fault, either. It hadn't been Ron's idea to set Snape on fire. She'd used a spell that couldn't actually hurt him, but still. It hadn't been Harry's idea to brew polyjuice in the bathroom. That whole thing had been her scheme, she'd even failed to mention that it was illegal to use it to impersonate someone without their consent. Not against school rules, illegal. And sometimes, these days, she just felt so...

At some level, she couldn't believe she was considering this. She'd been very strictly warned not to let anyone even know about it, much less bring them along! But she had to get to her classes — a quick glance at her watch confirmed she had fifteen minutes left or she'd be late to Runes this morning. And she couldn't take it from Lyra, she was too... She had to, she didn't have a choice!

But that wasn't really all of it, getting to classes wasn't the only reason she wanted this settled. She just... She'd managed to forget, that Ron wasn't talking to her these days. And if Ron wasn't talking to her that meant Harry was basically not talking to her either. It'd been less than a day, but even then...

She did like Lyra. Sometimes she felt she shouldn't, but she did anyway. She could be a little terrifying sometimes — that duel with Malfoy... — and she got the feeling Lyra tried to frustrate her on purpose. But... Well, she was interesting, and clever, and she knew more than Hermione about almost everything magic-related — especially where non-academic topics were concerned,
like magics not taught at Hogwarts, or culture or history things — which, yes, that was a little
irritating, but they could actually talk about magic, or whatever, Harry and Ron could never keep
up, and she just...

It'd been less than a day, and she already missed her. Not so much Lyra herself as, just, having
someone to talk to, anyone. She felt a bit pathetic even admitting it to herself in her own head, but
there it was.

Besides, Lyra wasn't an idiot. She could handle this time travel thing without getting into too much
trouble. Right?

That gleeful smirk on Lyra's face wasn't giving her much in the way of confidence. "Don't worry,
Hermione. I won't get you in trouble."

Something about the emphasis she put on the words, the way she was smiling at her, had Hermione
blushing, from anger or embarrassment, she couldn't tell.

"Anyway, it's in my best interest to not get caught either. If they take this little pretty—" Lyra spun
the time turner around her hand again. "—away from you, that means I miss out on time travel too.
I doubt you'd just trust me to keep to any demands you might have on what I do with my extra time,
but I think you can give me enough credit to believe I wouldn't throw away the opportunity for no
good reason."

...Hermione wouldn't have put it quite like that, but Lyra wasn't entirely wrong. "Right. Fine.
Whatever. Just... Okay." Trying to shake off the guilt writhing in her stomach, Hermione started
running down her schedule, when she turned and how far back.

She hadn't even finished explaining Mondays when Lyra interrupted her. "You're joking, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"You can have as much time as you want, and you're just stealing a few hours here and there? Gods
and Powers, Hermione, I thought you were clever! This thing is wasted on you."

"I-- But--" Hermione forced out something between a huff and a sigh. "We're not supposed to--
We're only supposed to use it to get to classes!"

Lyra rolled her eyes. "So?"

... "So?"

"Really, Hermione, you've been carrying around a time machine in your pocket for two weeks now,
which you can use whenever you want without permission, and you never thought to actually use it
to the full?" Her smirk tilting, a laugh on her voice, "Shit, I'm shocked you didn't read your way
through the entire bloody library in the first week."

"I..." Well, she'd just... McGonagall had implied she was being observed but, well, if she were she
certainly hadn't noticed. She'd even been assured it would last far more than she'd need for the term —
why would McGonagall tell her that if she hadn't expected Hermione to use it more than the
bare minimum necessary? "I, ah, I couldn't have done that. There can only be three versions of the
time turner in existence at once, and it only goes back eight hours, at the most."

Lyra blinked. "Oh. Well, that's still plenty of time. Piss on just taking a few hours here and there —
go back twice every eight hours, that'd give a whole two extra days to do whatever you like with."
"I think someone would notice if we did that."

"Not if you don't get caught."

Hermione scoffed, shaking her head to herself. "Think about it, Lyra: two whole extra days over nine months means we'd age an extra year and a half. People would notice that, eventually."
Especially around their age — shooting the rest of the way through puberty in the span of a couple months would be pretty conspicuous.

"Er, no we wouldn't."

"Yes, we would."

"No, we wouldn't."

"Lyra, it's basic math—"

"Hermione," she sang, adopting a higher-pitched, pedantic tone, "it's basic arithmancy. Haven't you read up on the theory of closed time loops yet? You're not actually creating more time, you're just experiencing the same span of time more than once. You'll age at the same rate, no matter how long you spend in the loop. Well," shrugging, "you do age a little faster than normal, but it's a tiny difference. It wouldn't be noticeable with three loops over the course of a year. I'd have to do the arithmancy to say exactly, but it's not very much, something like a couple days."

She did her best not to pout — she had tried to look into the theory of time travel, but there wasn't really anything in the Hogwarts library at all. McGonagall had been less than informative, she was just operating on basic logic. It was a bit silly, in retrospect, to assume time travel would work on basic logic. She meant, nothing else in the magical world did. "That's still a bit...risky. I mean, we'd have to be careful no one notices we're in more than one place at once, if we slip we could collapse the loop, where are we supposed to sleep..."

Lyra shrugged. "Well, obviously, we'd sleep for one turn every eight hours — we just use our own beds. They wouldn't overlap, and it's not like we have to worry about our roommates noticing."

Well. True.

"I think you're underestimating the self-reinforcing nature of a stable time loop. Just, don't overthink it, and you'll be fine. About people noticing, honestly," her voice sinking into a drawl, smirk tilting wider, "Hermione, how much attention do you think people pay you? There could be two of you sitting in the Hall at breakfast, and most people will be too absorbed in their own concerns to even notice."

"Please tell you don't plan on actually doing that."

"No, of course not — you're far more quiet than I am, they'd notice two of me."

She almost had to laugh at that one.

"I'm just saying. It's not nearly as much of a risk as you think it is." Lyra's smirk evened out a bit, but not into something warm, more suggestive, teasing. "Besides, think of what you could get done with an extra forty-eight hours a day. All the books you could read, all the magic you could practice on your own. Doesn't that seem like a far better use of this thing than just stealing a few hours here and there?"

Hermione frowned a little, biting at her lip. That did sound nice. She'd thought to herself before,
frequently since getting to Hogwarts, that she wished she had more time to read. There was so much she didn't know, an entirely new world with its own history and peoples and sciences. And the Hogwarts curriculum was, to be brutally honest, inadequate to properly inform someone about the world. The history class was a joke. Where were the classes about other magical cultures, other magical beings? How about languages, or literature? Even when it came to magic, Flitwick and McGonagall were fine, but there was a lot even they didn't cover, and the other courses...

For all that British mages liked to proclaim it the best in the world, Hermione was increasingly coming to the belief that Hogwarts was, in fact, an objectively terrible educational institution.

"Fine. Just, fine." Part of her still felt guilty for agreeing, for going so far outside how McGonagall had told her to use the time turner. Part of her was still angry at Lyra for doing this to her, bullying her into doing things her way. But... Well, Lyra did have a point, didn't she? She hadn't been using the opportunity to its fullest. She wasn't even certain how many rules this would be breaking, but as long as they didn't get caught...

After all, it wasn't as though Hermione had never done anything wrong at Hogwarts before.

She sighed, glanced at her watch again. Lyra was smirking at her, probably about to say something gleefully smug, but Hermione didn't want to hear it. "Can I have it back now? If we don't turn back in the next five minutes I'm going to be late."

"How gullible do you think I am?" Lyra huffed, shaking her head. "No, I'll be holding onto this little beauty for us. Just so you don't go getting any ideas."

"Lyra, you said—"

"I never said I'd give it back. I'm keeping it. You'll get to use it, but only if you bring me back with you." Lyra turned it in her hand, peering at the hourglass in the middle of the rings. "How does this thing work, anyway?"

Hermione ground her teeth for a moment, glaring over at Lyra, before letting out a long sigh. Honestly, with how suspicious she was sometimes, Hermione had to wonder if the Hat had originally suggested she go to Slytherin. (Though, she did act rather...well, Gryffindor-ish, still.) "Fine, be that way. Just, don't forget to find me every time."

"Hey, it's not like I can go back without you."

That was true...

"Until I crack the enchantments on this thing, anyway."

She gaped. "Lyra, don't you dare—"

"Relax, Hermione," Lyra said, smirking again. "I'm not going to try. There's no reason to, when my tinkering might break it and you're bringing me with anyway."

With a last huff of frustration, Hermione drew her wand, cast a pair of notice-me-not charms over them. This room had probably been empty eight hours ago, but there was no need to take any chances with it. For a moment, there was an odd fuzzy feeling in her head, her eyes going unusually twitchy for a second, automatically trying to look away, but she'd already known Lyra was there so the charm couldn't take hold on her, the uncomfortable distractedness fading after a brief moment.

Annoyingly, Lyra hadn't seemed disoriented at all.
Taking a few hesitant steps closer, Hermione said, "Right, so, we'll have to put the chain around our necks."

One of Lyra's eyebrows ticked up a little. "Both of us?"

"Yeah, it might be a little..." Hermione caught her own fingers fidgeting, forced them to stop. "...er, tight."

And Lyra was smirking again. "All right. Come on, then." With a single flick of her wrist, the entire length unwrapped from around her hand, dangling next to her knee. Closing the distance between them so quickly Hermione thought for a second she was going to plough right into her, Lyra threw the chain over her head, then Hermione's. Holding the hourglass in the narrow space between the two, she gave it a little shake, the chain tinkling against the rings.

Trying to ignore the discomfort making her fingers twitch, Hermione took it. The chain wasn't really long enough to comfortably accommodate two people — Lyra had come to stand face-to-face bare inches away from her, angled slightly so there was enough space between them to handle the hourglass. Holding the thing with both hands, her right arm was brushing against Lyra's robes over her shoulder, she consciously angled her elbow at a slightly unnatural angle so the back of her forearm wouldn't be against her chest. Lyra was a little shorter than her, putting Hermione's nose at about her hairline, but she had to lean down and around a little too see what she was doing, their cheeks ended up only an inch or two apart.

And Lyra was right there, awkwardly close, it was hard not to notice. Hermione was an only child, okay, and she'd always been a bit of a loner. (Honestly, she wasn't certain she'd ever had a girl friend before Lyra, and that if describing them as friends wasn't a bit generous to begin with.) She'd never gotten had opportunity to get used to, well, physical closeness, with people. She wasn't used to the boys yet, squeezing under that damn invisibility cloak, and she'd known them a lot longer. But they were boys, she'd think it would be less awkward with another girl, but she still felt uncomfortably twitchy, nerves wriggling in her stomach, warm enough she was certain she'd be physically pinking.

Luckily, Lyra was looking down at the hourglass, so probably didn't notice. Hermione unlocked the hourglass with a flick, started turning it around, carefully counting under her breath. She didn't normally have to count out loud, but she'd never turned more than two or three times, and she was a bit distracted at the moment.

There was something very strange about Lyra's eyes. She meant, people weren't supposed to have purple eyes. It was possible for very dark blue or grey eyes to appear violet, but only under certain light conditions, and even then it was a dark, muted sort of color, not very distinct. But Lyra's were a deep, vibrant, obvious purple, which shouldn't be possible. In fact, it wasn't possible — this close, Hermione caught the slightest distortion just over the surface, a faint pinkish haze over her iris only noticeable from an angle. It was a glamour, Lyra charmed her eyes to make them look purple. (Or, perhaps, bring out the hint of violet from natural blue or grey, it was impossible to tell.) Hermione had never noticed before, she must cast it very early every morning. Which just seemed really vain, really, but Lyra was like that, it was peculiar how she could be nearly as, well, nerdy as Hermione and at the same time put so much effort into—

Lyra glanced up at Hermione.

With a start, hopefully small enough to go unnoticed, Hermione locked the hourglass in place. For a brief moment they flew back through time, her stomach dropping out of her and her head spinning as they went, the classroom around them a whirl of light and color. The only thing constant was herself and Lyra, solid objects in a smearing soup.
Then everything stopped, abruptly yet smoothly, settling them in the same room virtually unchanged by the eight hours that had un-passed. Lyra was smiling at her (too close), one bright and eager, nearly glowing with excitement. "So, I guess I'm a time traveler now. Neat."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione grabbed the chain. For a moment, she considered whipping it off Lyra's head and making a break for it, but she knew that would be pointless, Lyra would have her wand on her in an instant. Once she was free, she cleared her throat, searching for her voice again. "Right, so, I'll see you in eight hours."

"At the base of the Astronomy tower, around the corner from Charms? Around three?"

As flustered as she was, it took Hermione a second to figure out exactly what she was talking about. "Oh! Oh, sure, that'll be fine." She frowned. "Wait, why three? Eight hours would be at five..."

"I was just thinking long-term." Lyra tucked the time turner under her robes, patting her chest as though assuring it was settled in place. "I like seven, three, and eleven for our schedule. Well, ten or fifteen to, so we don't miss classes at three. Agreed?"

"Right, yes, fine. Bye." Hermione turned on her heel and walked, putting Lyra behind her as quickly as possible. Certainly not because she could still feel the blush on her face.

The way Lyra giggled at her back wasn't helping it go away faster.

Chapter End Notes

And now a chapter written entirely by me. I know, Leigha's was better. —Lysandra

By the way, forgot to mention the potions exam from last chapter was inspired by something similar in one of the Jen Black fics by Dr. Silently Watches. —Leigha

Yes, Jen Black is great. Everyone go read the shit out of that. —Lysandra
Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch (Again)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The knife drew across Cygnus's throat, the supernaturally sharp blade slicing deep through skin and flesh. Blood welled from the gaping wound, but slower than it rightly should, oozing and bubbling instead of spurting, crawling down his chest in thick rivers. Cygnus's eyes were on his, watery with pain and shaky with panic, mouth working breathlessly.

Arcturus dropped the knife, took a step back, glancing down to make sure he'd crossed the edge of the circle. And he waited.

He didn't have to wait long. Even as he stepped away, an absent wind wafted over him, the roaring and hissing obvious in his ears yet not shifting his robes or his hair. There was a single instant of emerging shadow, blackness shifting in the center of the circle, but in less than a second it was gone, replaced by a woman.

Something that looked like a woman, anyway — it quite clearly wasn't. The proper shape, yes, the proper proportions, but she certainly couldn't be mistaken for ordinary. The brief, archaic continental-style robe in strident purples and reds and oranges, that could be mistaken for rather eccentric dress. Her short hair, a twisted spiking thing a black as solid as the darkest night, could have been accomplished with a couple simple charms. (Though why someone would want their hair so messy and asymmetrical was beyond him.) The vibrant, sharply angled tattoos switchbacking across her face were unusual, but not entirely inhuman. It was the unnatural paleness of her skin, the black on her fingertips, reflections shimmering like oil, the shadows and colors shifting and mixing between each other in her eyes, the narrow points of the teeth shown in a too-wide grin, no, she couldn't possibly be an ordinary woman.

But then, he hadn't been intending to summon an ordinary woman.

"Is this for me?" Her voice hung heavier in the air than it should, magic thick on every syllable, yet at once sounding light and bouncing to the ear, halfway between speech and song. A hand buried itself into Cygnus's hair — he jerked, tried to lean away, but he was tied to the chair, he had nowhere to go. "Why, Arcturus, I'm touched. And here I didn't bring anything for you."

Arcturus had absolutely no idea how to respond to that, so he said nothing at all.

Her grin stretching wider — an expression sharp, joyous, and bloody — the goddess turned her head a bit, meeting Cygnus's wide, horrified eyes. And Cygnus started screaming.

Even after Eris had straightened, taking a few gliding steps toward him, Cygnus was still screaming, thrashing in his chair, trying to cringe away from something unseen, and screaming, and screaming, and screaming. And Eris just grinned at him, looking for anything as though she were on the edge of laughter.

His mouth going a little dry, Arcturus sank into the chair he'd prepared beforehand. Despite the unpleasant tingling at the back of his neck, he fixed his eyes steadily on Eris, doing his best to ignore the results of...whatever she'd done to his nephew. "As long as I have you here, my lady, I was hoping we could talk."

"Yes, you do think you have me, don't you." Eris came to a halt, her slow pace having put her just
at the end of the circle of runes Arcturus had drawn. She glanced downward for a second, then back up at him, a derisive sort of amusement quirking her lips. "Is this supposed to be a binding circle, Arcturus? And here I thought you would know better. This magic works on demons, not—"

In a blink, she was gone.

Arcturus twitched, glanced around the empty ritual room, got halfway to standing before he froze. An icy wind on the back of his neck, black magic heavy on the air pinching at his skin, a voice whispered an inch from his ear. "—things like me."

And then she was in front of him again, appearing without a sound or a flicker of magic, just there. One foot coming up onto the edge of the armrest, parting the layers of her skirts, she leaned forward, planting one hand on the back just over his right shoulder, her face coming too close, too close, he pressed himself back into his chair as far as he could but she was still too close, inchoate eyes only inches from his own, black breath caressing his face.

"You think to contain me, with chalk and blood and mortal magic? The arrogance doesn't surprise me, not really — it is only human to have an overinflated sense of your own power and importance, don't you think? But I do have to wonder…" Her grin shifted into a smirk again, unnaturally sharpened teeth glinting in the wan light. "You called me in hopes to stay my wrath against you and yours, and you open your negotiation by attempting to confine me against my will? And here I thought you were supposed to be a politician."

It took a few seconds for Arcturus to find his voice again — the way Eris was smiling at him and the sound of Cygnus still screaming really were not helping. "I, I meant no offense, my lady. That circle was simply included in the description of the ritual I found. I didn't intend to—"

"No, I suppose you didn't." Eris turned, plopped down to a seat on one armrest, her second foot rising to join the first. Elbow against the rim of the backrest, she propped her face up against a fist, and she smirked down at him, the tattoos on her face twisting. "Mind of a politician, yes, it was clever of you. See, Cygnus means nothing to you. You would have found some way to eliminate him anyway, for his crimes against a child of the House of Black."

"But, since that child was my bellatrice, you fear my anger — and rightly so," she whispered, soft and amused, blood in her eyes and black magic oppressive on the air, his skin tingling and his blood singing and his stomach roiling. "You think, you can give him to me, and my vengeance will be sated. But Cygnus is not the only one who wronged her. His crimes were only possible because you, Lord Black, failed to uphold your responsibilities to your family."

"I know." The words came remarkably level, Arcturus thought, considering. He could count on the fingers of one hand the occasions in his life he'd been in the presence of a direct manifestation of one of the Powers, and still have fingers left over, and it was a bit… Well, it was a bit much, magic so thick around him he could taste it, blood and grass on his tongue, energizing him, making him feel younger, more powerful, more alive. But, at the same time, he could feel Eris was angry with him, and…

She wasn't even wrong, he had failed. And not just his most irritating nephew's children either: he'd done a bit of poking around the last weeks and found a few other...questionable situations throughout the House. No one had gone quite so far as to murder their own daughter, but that didn't mean there weren't still serious issues to deal with. He'd taken it upon himself to intervene more directly than he ever had, moving the vulnerable around to other households, punishing offenders as he saw fit. He was even weighing the pros and cons of turning one of his cousins from a minor branch of the family into the DLE, whether the opportunity to rebrand himself and his House in the eyes of society would be worth the scandal.
He just didn't understand it. That was part of the problem, he just couldn't imagine that anyone would...do these sorts of things. He simply didn't understand. He'd loved his girls, more than anything, he'd never... The thought was what had woken him up. He'd been more dead than alive, these last decades. The greater part of him had died with Lysa and the girls, he'd been less than a full person for decades, it had taken Cygnus to wake up, what Andromeda had told him. And he didn't understand it, he didn't, he couldn't...

Whenever he thought about it, Bellatrix and the other children of his House whose suffering he'd failed to prevent, he saw their faces, floating ghostly behind his eyes. He'd thought he'd forgotten what they'd looked like, but there they were, Dora and Sedha and Charis. And that rage was back, rage that he thought had long burned itself out, and despair so thick it choked him, they were dead, and he hadn't been there, it was his fault, his fault...

It was his fault. He hadn't been there for Bellatrix. And now she was dead, and it was his fault.

Eris's smile had lost some of its teeth, going slightly softer. Her off hand came up, fingers trailing lightly against his cheek; a thrill shot through him, his blood sang, he tried to suppress the shiver. "You should know, Arcturus Black, that you have Bellatrix to thank for your life, for your House enduring unhindered as long as it has. You taught her well, before I got to her. Even after Cygnus, her loyalty to the House of Black was too strong, too central to her understanding of who and what she was, for me to strip it from her. That, and her love for little Meda, is all that has kept you safe these years. I would not...entertain myself with you and yours while it would harm her, no matter how much I wish to. But now she is gone, and I am free to do as I will.

"But I don't think that will be a problem, hmm? You understand the weight of what you've done, don't you? You mean to make amends for your crimes, and, just perhaps, you are willing to sacrifice enough. So, my little Lord..." Lifting her hand from his face with a last little tap at his nose, Eris leaned back a bit, smiling turning a little crooked. "...let us see how this goes. What will you offer me to buy my peace?"

Arcturus hesitated — that was a trap if he'd ever heard one. From what he understood of everything he'd ever read involving the Dark Powers, Eris could be...well, Eris. It was quite possible that no matter what he offered her she'd take offense, claim something of such little value was an insult, and then they'd be fucked. She wouldn't seek to destroy the House entirely — Arcturus would wager the Covenant was valuable enough to the Dark that would never happen — but she could certainly make the current generation suffer.

Of course, he could just... There were risks, of course, he couldn't know what she'd ask, it might be...

Swallowing his doubts, Arcturus forced his voice as level, as respectful as possible. "I would be glad offer you whatever you think is fair, my Lady."

Eris grinned.

The goddess hopped off the chair, freeing Arcturus from the overwhelming presence of blackest magic, sauntered over toward Cygnus. He was weakening, finally, his screams reduced to wheezing, burbling moans, the river of blood draining from his throat thinning. Eris contemplated him for a moment, that eager grin still stretched across her face.

Finally, when Cygnus's extended suffering seemed near to an end, Eris spoke. "Five hundred years ago, we formed a pact with your ancestors. That was long ago. The circumstances have changed, both for the House of Black and for us, for the world, in those five hundred years." She turned back to smile at him, her eyes so bright they were as a rainbow in the night. "Perhaps it is time we make
a new Covenant."

His words failing him utterly, Arcturus could only gape back.

Chapter End Notes

Tiny short chapter, woo. Meant to post over the weekend, but distractions happened.

We've been distracted by things lately. We're going to flee to France...probably next year, so we've both been studying French like crazy people — not to mention my health/brain stuff not getting better, that doesn't help — so we've been stalling a little on the next chapter. Work is getting done, but I can't say when the next update will be. —Lysandra
Bella hated tea. Not the drink, though that was annoyingly, distastefully bland. It was the whole proper, sitting making small talk, pretending not to hate your nominal peers and being polite and demure and well-mannered socializing thing that went along with it. At least in divs you could charm the shitty, mouldy leaf water to taste like something better. That was (as she had discovered at the age of nine) considered very impolite when one was taking tea with other people, along with a slew of other behaviors and topics of conversation and basically anything interesting.

The whole point of tea was to pretend to be nice, which was, so far as Bella was concerned, the bland leaf water of personae. It paired perfectly with the actual tea. It was just terrible.

But it was occasionally unavoidable.

Such as when one agreed to attend etiquette lessons once a month in exchange for permission to leave Hogwarts for one day every weekend. (Neither Narcissa nor McGonagall was aware of the discrepancy in the schedule they had agreed upon. They really ought to have known better than to use Bella as an intermediary in their negotiations.) Of course, she was fairly certain that she could sneak in and out of the school, but it would be less suspicious if she was expected to be gone every Saturday than if she just disappeared on the regular.

Of course, now that she had Hermione's pretty little time machine in her pocket, that wasn't strictly necessary — she could almost certainly sneak out while another her was conspicuously present in the castle. But she hadn't known about that potential development when she'd made the tea arrangement.

So for the sake of her cover story — which was already in tatters, of course, she'd lost track of who had been told what in the first week — she had to go take tea with Narcissa and sit through one of her interminable lectures on proper pureblood princess behavior.

Bella was already bored, and she hadn't even left Hogwarts yet.

Preemptively bored.

And McGonagall was droning on about making sure she was back by curfew and the grate she should use to return (the one in the Office of the Deputy Head) and blah, blah, blah.

"Right, so can I go, then?" she interrupted, casting a tempus charm. "Because I was supposed to be there fifteen minutes ago."

McGonagall glared at her, but after a moment, nodded. "Very well then. You have used the floo, before?"

Bella rolled her eyes. The professor hadn't thought to ask that any time in the past ten minutes? She took a pinch of powder from the pot on the chimneypiece and threw it into the fire. When the flames turned green, she offered a quick, "Yeah, bye," and ducked into the grate. "Malfoy Manor!"

No one was waiting in the Malfoys' floo vestibule, which was odd. Normally she would expect an elf to be assigned to take her over-robe and guide her to the intended meeting. If Narcissa was being particularly hospitable, she'd be here herself. Of course, Bella was significantly later now
than she'd intended to be, so perhaps Narcissa had come to the conclusion that she wasn't coming, and ordered the elf elsewhere. She had already had to reschedule once due to Snape's evaluation/detention, and then Narcissa had had meetings all last weekend, but she'd been very clear that she was clearing her schedule this afternoon.

Bella shrugged to herself. Not like it was important. She was clearly expected, since the wards hadn't stopped her entry. Being 'muggle raised' (or brought up by a travelling cursebreaker, whatever) meant that if she didn't get properly dressed up for things, her lapse would be excused as ignorance, so she hadn't worn a cloak or over-robe — she had, in fact, worn dueling clothes, simply because it would annoy Narcissa — and she doubted the manor had changed significantly since the last time she'd been here. She could just wander around until she found her.

Ten minutes later, she realized that the manor had significantly changed in the past thirty years (and two months). The room which used to be the small parlor, the one where she would have expected Melete (and therefore Narcissa) to receive a guest of her status, now appeared to be Lucius Malfoy's study.

He looked up as the door opened, clearly startled. "I said no inter– Ah! Who are you? How did you get in here?"

Lucius had been about six years old the last time Bella had seen him, his face slightly more round than his son's, but otherwise very similar. In both looks and temperament, actually. Blaise had told her that he was still an arrogant, entitled arse, but the arrogance sat better on him now than it had as a child. Bella met his accusatory glare with a sharp smirk. "Lucius Malfoy, I presume? Lyra Black. I'm supposed to be meeting Narcissa. Do you know where she is?"

He stared as though he'd never seen anything quite like her before. Bella could almost see him trying to decide what to do. Apparently he still wasn't any good at dealing with unexpected deviations from the usual script. After a moment, he set his quill down, very carefully and deliberately, drew his wand and levitated a chair, placing it directly before his desk, then folded his hands on the desk before him.

"You may address me as Lord Malfoy, Miss Black. Take a seat."

Bella sighed, considered just walking out, but she was already late (so there was no need to hurry), and whatever Lucy wanted to talk about had the potential to be marginally more interesting than etiquette lessons. (Not that that was a particularly high bar.)

The chair was one of the uncomfortable, decorative things that was never meant to actually be sat upon, armless and straight-backed, the upholstery all stiff. She cast a cushioning charm on it before turning it around and sitting, legs spread around the seat, arms folded on the top of the back, chin resting on her arms.

Lucy gave her a sour, offended look, exactly like the one his six-year-old self had given her when she'd stuck him to the ceiling back in June. He had been pestering her to show him something she'd learned at school. She wondered idly how long it had taken someone to find him after she and Walburga had left.

"Would you care to explain why my son has written to me demanding a new wand?"

Bella raised an eyebrow. Had he really? Honestly, she'd forgotten she still had it, what with the time turning it had been a long week. Was it still on her desk? She should probably look for it when she got back to the dorm. "I told Snape to tell him to ask me for it back. He hasn't. I kind of expected him to after potions, actually, but..." She shrugged.
"And why, Miss Black, do you have my son's wand?"

"Wait — he wrote you to tell you I had his wand, but didn't say why?"

Lucius nodded, once, very stiffly.

Bella sniggered. "He lost an honor duel last weekend. I'm surprised no one told you yet."

"You expect me to believe that you, a homeschooled muggleborn of no account, bested my son in an honor duel." He sneered so dramatically she half expected him to growl. Except of course he wouldn't, that wouldn't be dignified at all.

"Yep!" She made a point of popping the 'p'. Lucy's left eye twitched. "In front of the entire school. It was hilarious."

"And the pretense of this duel?" the wizard ground out, his teeth clenched nearly too tightly to speak. He was too easy, really.

"He repeatedly insulted the House of Black." Twitch. "Called the proper Head of the House, oh what was his phrase? A pathetic madman? Blatantly untrue, I mean, being the first wizard to ever escape from Azkaban is hardly pathetic. And he called me a mudblood, unworthy of the Black name. In public. With witnesses. Couldn't really not challenge him after that, you know?"

Twitch. "And if I were to request the return of Draco's wand?"

Bella considered for a moment. "The House of Black would not hold the House of Malfoy responsible for the actions of a single child," she drawled in her best imitation of Arcturus. "Should the Head of House Malfoy make such a request, it would of a necessity elevate the issue beyond the simple matter of a schoolboy's insult. All we request is that Draco Malfoy tender a personal apology to our representative, at which point we will consider the matter resolved." Lucy looked like she'd just smacked him with a fish. "Besides, I don't have it on me." She grinned at the developing expression of rage on the Lord Malfoy's face, rising to her feet.

There wasn't really anything he could do, though. It would be exceedingly improper for him to hex an underage visitor of his wife, and he clearly had no idea what to do with someone who deliberately ignored his attempts to correct her with more socially acceptable displays of disapproval. She could practically hear his teeth grinding, but after a moment he managed to unclench his jaw enough to say, "I will speak to him."

"Right. Well, if that's all, I'm kind of running late, so..."

"Leri!"

An elf appeared with a pop. "Yes, Master Lucius, sir?"

"Escort this...girl to Lady Malfoy."

The elf nodded, groveling, then turned to Bella. Before it could begin spouting terrible broken English at her as well, she turned on her heel and headed for the door. "Thanks Lucy," she called back over her shoulder. "Good talk!"

As it turned out, Narcissa's parlor was at the back of the house, in one of the old conservatories. She seemed surprised to see Bella, which in itself was not surprising, since she was nearly an hour late by this point. She recovered quickly, however. "Lyra, I had thought you weren't coming, Leri,
you are dismissed. Please, Lyra, have a seat.

The coldness of her tone and the closed expression she wore suggested that that wasn't a suggestion. Bella sat, taking a biscuit for herself as she did so. Might as well have a snack with her lecture.

She certainly was not expecting the conjured ropes of an *incarcerous* hex to appear with a crack, lashing her to her seat. Huh. Maybe this tea thing wouldn't be as dull as they normally were.

She raised a questioning brow at her baby sister, finished chewing and swallowing. "Have I done something to offend you?"

"Who are you, and what did you do to my son?"

Powers, no wonder Malfoy was such a spoilt brat, parents leaping to his defense all the time. "Uh, Lyra Black? And nothing, recently."

"Try again," Cissy hissed, glaring daggers at her.

Bella pouted at her. "Fine. Do you mean when I saved his arse from a hippogriff, or when I demonstrated the superiority of the House of Black to our fellow students?"

Cissy flicked the most minor of pain curses at her, causing every square inch of her skin to briefly feel as though it was getting pinched at once. "Seriously? If you're going to torture me for information, you'll need something better than *tsimpísete.*" How old did she think Bella was? *Three?*

"I'm not torturing you for information, just encouraging you to focus, Lyra, dear."

Bella snorted. She couldn't help it. Cissy sounded *just* like Walburga when she said that. She snapped off the spell again.

"I don't like to repeat myself, Lyra."

"Fine," she sighed. "You may recall from my letter, in our first Care class of the term, Draco managed to get between me and an angry hippogriff. I pulled him out of the way before he could get slashed to ribbons. He fell in a pile of shite and got his pretty hair all messy. I got a cut on my arm. The professor collared the creature, and I started working on healing it. Draco kept trying to interrupt me, whining about his hair. I silenced him, finished healing my arm. I may have said something about there being something on his face afterward, not sure, I was a bit woozy from the blood loss."

That last bit was a lie, of course. She *had* taken a blood replenisher when she got back to the castle, but she was quite certain she'd said something mocking about the shite on her dear nephew's face.

"So I recall," Cissy said. "And then?"

"Well, in our first potions class, Draco saw fit to try to pick a fight with me over my silencing him. Apparently I hit him while he wasn't looking. Which, you know, I wasn't looking either. More worried about my bloody arm. But whatever. So, in the course of this, and all through last week, he insulted me and the House of Black, often in front of witnesses — seriously, I just told Lucius all of this, you could just ask him."

"I'm asking *you.* And I will *not* be asking again." She poked her wand at Bella in a vaguely threatening manner.
Bella sighed again, in order to communicate exactly how tedious Narcissa was being. "Well, obviously I challenged him to a duel over the repeated insults, on behalf of the House of Black, and Draco being the absolute shite duelist he is, handily kicked his arse."

"Specifics, Lyra. What did you do to him?"

"Scared the piss out of him with a few illusions, then walked up and took his wand out of his hand. No big deal. I mean, humiliating, yeah, but that was kind of the point."

"You expect me to believe that my son was in hospital for half a week due to a few illusions and a bit of public humiliation?" She hit Bella with the curse again.

"Stop that! It's annoying! And he wasn't in hospital, Blaise told me he was just excused from classes and lounging around the commons while he 'recovered from the emotional trauma' of the whole episode. I have to tell you, Cissy, your son's a little bitch. It's not like I set a real dementor on him."

"You set a dementor on my son?!!"

Okay, that was a better curse, Bella thought, writhing in her bonds as the bottoms of her feet began to feel as though they were on fire. She hated this one — the burning sensation rose slowly, creeping up the body. Cygnus had once kept it up long enough that it had completely engulfed her, felt like burning alive. That took hours, though. She kind of doubted Cissy had the stamina for it.

And in any case, "Dark Powers, Cissy, it was only the illusion of a bloody dementor!"

She didn't even think she could set a real dementor on a person. She doubted they'd be inclined to just attack wherever she ordered. That was just absurd. Clearly Cissy wasn't thinking rationally at the moment.

She dropped the curse before Bella resorted to a freeform finishing spell and a retaliatory hex. "You created an illusion...of a dementor." She sounded like she didn't quite believe it.

"Yeah, fog, cold, a few hallucinations and a manipulation to cause fear, then throw the image of a dementor up, it's not like it was hard. I mean, admittedly the fear manipulation is kind of pushing the definition of 'illusion' but technically, yeah, totally an illusion."

"You, a third year, home-schooled, muggle-raised brat, created an illusion of a dementor that was realistic enough to traumatize my son so badly that he missed three days of classes," Cissy repeated. She still sounded as though she doubted Bella's honesty.

Well, that wasn't her problem (unless Cissy started cursing her again, that was becoming seriously irritating). "Like I said, he's a little bitch. But I might have overdone it with the fear thing. OH! And then I reminded him that Lady Cromwell was a jumped-up mudblood, too, so he should watch his fucking mouth."

Cissy just stared at her for a long moment. And then, to Bella's surprise, she vanished the ropes herself and sat down, pouring Bella a cup of tea. "And my other question?"

"Uh, what?"

"Who are you, exactly?"

"Erm... Lyra Black? Pretty sure we covered this..."
"And who is that? There is no conceivable way that you are muggleborn or muggle-raised squib-spawn as you claim. Mirabella was clearly lying about your meeting when she brought you to me. No transfer would be sent to the office of the Director of the Department of Education. Who are you?"

"Uh, well, I wasn't actually raised by my great-grandparents. That was my mother's story, actually. She died when I was born, and I was raised by a travelling cursebreaker who...may or may not have been my sire, I don't know." Blaise hadn't specified. Cissy's eyes narrowed. "And no one sent me to Mira, I just—"

Narcissa interrupted, clearly dismissing her explanation as entirely facetious, which was a shame because the idea of Bella just waltzing into Zee's office and demanding a transfer was pretty much the most convincing detail of the first cover story. "A 'travelling cursebreaker' who taught you to instigate an honor duel in the tradition of Magical Britain? Try again."

"He was an exiled member of a noble house?"

"I am quickly losing patience with this game. Who are you, and where did you come from? Who sent you, and why? Are you even a Black?"

Well, fuck. There was really nothing else for it. "Of course I'm a Black, did the whole vault ward family magic recognition thing, remember?" Cissy flushed slightly. Had that little fact slipped her mind? Bella smirked. "My name is Lyra, and I'm a time traveller. Yes, I'm a Black, and yes, I'm really going to revive the House. I can't really tell you anything else."

There. The common wisdom regarding time travellers was to help them as much as possible, or else avoid them. Much like a true prophecy in action, whatever the Powers intended in sending them to a particular time and place would come to pass, the only question was whether one would become collateral damage or get the fuck out of the way. Of course, that superstition was from before Time Turners, when the only way to travel in time was via high ritual, which meant the Powers were definitely and explicitly involved. Still, Bella had learned it as a child, she was certain Cissy had, too. So if she accepted that story (which she should, it was practically true), Cissy would still support her, and wouldn't even mention this layer of backstory to anyone.

(And Blaise would never need to know that she'd fucked up a second cover story in less than a month.)

Cissy's eyes grew wide. "That— It— You— How?"

"Stable time loops are a thing, you know. The details are complicated, I don't know exactly how it works. Just, bad things can happen if you mess with time. The less I tell you, the better." All true, in fact. Just because she didn't actually think there was anything she could do to mess up time itself, didn't mean bad (i.e., fun) things wouldn't happen if she could. Just imagine, Eris, if we could fuck up the very concept of time!

A distracted sort of amusement emanated from the Power. Put it on the list, ducky.

What, really?!

Anything could happen. Pay attention to Narcissa, Eris reminded her.

Her sister, who had briefly been reduced to an absent sort of wonder, was glaring suspiciously again. "And you're only telling me this now."

"Would you have believed me if I hadn't already proved I'm a Black?" Claiming to be a time
traveller was a relatively implausible explanation for her presence, after all. "Besides, we needed to test the cover story."

Narcissa's brow furrowed. "We? Are you telling me— Zabini knows."

Bella nodded and took another biscuit, waiting patiently to see where Narcissa's reasoning would take the conversation.

"Who else?" Cissy asked coldly.

"Andromeda and her husband, and Nymphadora, of course."

"Of course?" Cissy pounced. "Of course... Was she the one who sent you back? You— You're going to bring them back into the House?!"

Bella couldn't help but snigger slightly at that. Of course she was. Or she'd make the offer at least, eventually. When she was finally in a position to do so. She wouldn't be surprised if Meda was rather reluctant to come back, given that she had actually disinowned herself and all. In which case she'd claim the Tonkses as a client house. But that wasn't going to happen any time soon. "First, I'm not going to tell you who sent me back. Secondly, I'm going to do whatever I have to to bring back the House. And third, what do you care, you're a Malfoy now."

"Once a Black, always a Black," Cissy snapped absently, clearly still preoccupied trying to figure out exactly where Lyra had come from. "Are you— If you're from the future, you can't be your own ancestor, can you?"

"I...don't think so?" Bella was pretty sure she couldn't. Maybe if she used blood alchemy to grow a copy of herself, it might seem like she was her own mother — not that she had any desire whatsoever to actually bear a child, she'd probably use a surrogate, anyway — but that wasn't really the same thing in any case.

"So, then, Sirius... That would make sense..." she frowned, apparently less than pleased with the imaginary future she was plotting out for the House of Black.

Bella smirked. "That would be telling. But he is innocent, you know."

Narcissa sniffed dismissively. "Of course he is, he was never associated with the Dark Lord. And he never would have betrayed James Potter." She wore such an expression of distaste when she said James Potter's name, Bella was slightly surprised she hadn't outright replaced it with a rude epithet. Apparently her baby sister hadn't approved of their cousin's little Light friends.

"And you let him sit in Azkaban for twelve years because...why?"

Narcissa sneered. "He was a blood traitor and one of the enemy. And in any case, we didn't have the political pull to demand a trial for him after the war. I barely managed to keep Lucius out of prison."

"Oh, yes, because seeing Lucy in Azkaban would have been such a tragedy."

But that did make sense, she supposed. Sirius hadn't become the only remaining candidate for the Head of the House until 1991 (at which point he would no longer have been a blood traitor, technically speaking, since he would be the one to determine the politics and policies of the House), but by then, Narcissa had already been a Malfoy for about fifteen years, and was well on her way to becoming the leader of the Allied Dark. A free Sirius was a threat to her political power, not to mention it would be seen as extremely odd for the Malfoys to suddenly demand a trial for
him out of nowhere. Might raise questions about their own loyalties in the war. Yeah, Bella could see why Narcissa had left him where he was.

Not that any of that would stop Bella from securing Sirius and a trial for him, but it wouldn't be nearly so out of character for a 'muggleborn' to take up the defense of a man claiming to be on the side of the Light, especially since establishing his innocence would drastically elevate her own political standing.

She caught her sister's eye, ignoring her weak defense of her husband. "You know bringing back the House means I will be clearing Sirius's name."

Narcissa nodded. Apparently she had anticipated this, as she said smoothly, "The Dark will not oppose you, even if he would almost certainly set himself against us in the Wizengamot. It sets a poor precedent, imprisoning the Heir of a Noble House without a public trial."

"But you won't support me, either."

"Certainly not overtly." Cissy gave her a tiny smile.

Well, okay, then. "This might be the most productive tea I've ever attended," Bella noted, startling a laugh from her sister. "Though really, Cissy, it's hardly proper to curse one's guests before pouring. Perhaps I should be the one giving you etiquette lessons."

Cissy let out an exasperated huff. "I suppose you already know everything I've attempted to teach you these past weeks."

Bella nodded. "And then some. I did have a proper education, you know. It's very important to know the rules in order to break them effectively."

"Definitely Sirius's..." Narcissa muttered. "Ah, apologies, for that, by the by. If there's anything I can do to make it up to you...?"

Bella shrugged. She wasn't really fussed over it. "Hm... Maybe stop spoiling your precious Drakey-poo and drum some sense of politics into his head? An embarrassment to the House of Malfoy is an embarrassment to the House of Black, what with, you know, that whole marriage alliance we have."

Narcissa gave her a cool society smile. Apparently still not over Bella traumatizing her son, then. "I'll see what I can do."

That was probably the best Bella could hope for. She nodded, and took another biscuit. "So how did you manage to keep Lucy out of Azkaban?"

"Hermione..."

"Hermione..."

"Maia, it's time to get u-up."

When Hermione still failed to respond, Bella yanked back the curtains on her bed, allowing the early afternoon sunlight to stream onto her face. The other girl grumbled at her and rolled over, burying her face in her pillow. Bella smirked. Normally she was the one who hated mornings, but time turning seemed to have gotten their bodies mixed up as to what time it ought to be.
She hopped up on the bed, crouched right beside the muggleborn's head, her nose barely two inches from Hermione's ear. "Come on, Granger, we're going on a field trip."

Hermione rolled over again, opened her eyes, let out an *eep* as she realized that Bella was *right there*, and scrambled away, very nearly falling off the bed. "Lyra! What are you *doing*?! Get out of my bed!"

"Good, you're up, get dressed, we have places to be."

Not that she was going to tell the other girl where those places were, she was almost bound to object to popping down to London for the day. Frankly silly, in Bella's opinion — it wasn't like they were going to miss any classes, they'd already done this part of the day twice already.

It had taken them a few days to fall into a routine, but they pretty much had it down, now. On the first time through, they went to classes, ate in the Great Hall, did homework, and generally pretended to be normal students. On the second time through, they slept. On the third time through, they could do whatever they wanted, so long as they stayed out of sight of anyone who would have seen them the first time around, or knew that they were supposed to be somewhere else.

Hermione went to whatever class she missed the first time through — it had only taken about a week for Bella to convince her it was better to go to the Tuesday/Thursday section of Muggle Studies like she was, rather than short herself on sleep in order to actually be in three classes at once on Monday and Wednesday — or holed herself up in the back of the library. It seemed that she had taken Bella's facetious suggestion that she read through the whole thing seriously.

Bella generally caught up on her correspondence; read old copies of the Quibbler and the Prophet; spied on Trelawney and a few of the other, more interesting Professors; made 'prophecies' come true; brewed potions for her personal use; explored the castle and grounds; or sought out her contacts in other houses to keep up on the local news. On the overnight shift, she sneaked into the Restricted Section looking for tracking spells she might use to find Sirius or spells contemporary with the original Black wards to analyze for clues about how the family magic might work.

They met up for meals in the kitchens when it wasn't convenient to be in the Great Hall. Bella had convinced the elves to feed them on the sly, which had been far more trouble than it ought to have been. Not the feeding part, they'd happily feed any student who managed to find the kitchens at any time of the day or night. No, it was the 'on the sly' part that was an issue.

Firstly, she had made the mistake of taking Hermione with her. Apparently the only elf Hermione had ever met had had *tweelks*, and had been abused by his family because, well, he didn't really act like an elf *should*. Which meant that she had a very...*muggle* idea of what house elf 'slavery' was, and what ought to be done about it. Started talking about freedom and clothes and *wages*, right in front of the whole kitchen, Bella had almost thought the elves were going to kick them out. Or, well, slink off and hide until Hermione left. They *were* elves, after all.

Then, even after she'd finally gotten the muggleborn to shut up, the elves were very reluctant to promise not to mention their extra meals to anyone else. They weren't technically bound to obey anyone other than the Headmaster, but in their minds, any figure of authority in the school was worthy of their respect and should never be deceived. After nearly two hours, Bella had finally hit upon the argument that the hospitality they offered in their own domain was clearly elf business, there was really no need to tell any of the humans anything about it unless they were specifically ordered to do so. (It was a good thing the Head Elf agreed when she did, because the only other thing Bella could think of was shouting at the lot of them in Elvish until they acceded to her demands, and Hermione would *definitely* have found that suspicious.)
The whole process was rather aggravating, but worth it. Finding a way to steal basically six meals a day each from the Great Hall would definitely put a damper on the whole time turning scheme. Not that it couldn't be done, it would just be more annoying than dealing with the elves (which was saying quite a lot, really).

So they had managed to fall into a routine over the course of the past three (or nine-ish) weeks, with Hermione tracking Bella down every eight hours to spin them back in time. But today, on this go-round, Hermione had no classes, there were already versions of themselves in the Great Hall, and there was no reason at all they shouldn't just...leave campus. For a change of scenery, if nothing else.

Though there was a purpose to the little jaunt. Bella had run out of Quibblers, and it had occurred to her that there were other publications she could catch up on. Like Áirthra Endiaféronta, the Miskatonic research journal. They'd had thirty years to come up with all sorts of neat new magic, she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before. This necessitated a trip to the Nameless Bookshop, and as long as she was in London, she thought she might pop over to the muggle side of things to pick up a few new albums. She had listened to the ones she had 'borrowed' from Blaise about thirty times each already.

Hermione was coming because Bella had no idea where to find muggle albums, and also because it would be fun to convince her to go out against the rules.

She just didn't know it yet.

Hermione groaned, hauling herself toward the loo, robes in hand.

"No, wear something muggle!" Bella demanded.

"Why?"

Well, because it would hardly do to wander around Muggle London in robes. She had already altered a pair of Hermione's trousers to fit herself for that exact reason (which Hermione apparently hadn't yet noticed). Granted, they'd also look out of place in Knockturn Alley in muggle garb, but it was Knockturn Alley, no one was going to say anything.

"It's a surprise. And hurry up, we'll be clear to turn soon."

"Not in the dorm," Hermione insisted, digging through her clothes for something appropriate.

They'd run into themselves a couple of times already, Hermione was always terribly awkward about it. She didn't quite seem to get the fact that stable time loops were, well, **stable**. Granted, Bella was almost positive she could destabilize one, if she wanted to, but that would be a waste of a perfectly good time loop. But the theory was clear, it was practically impossible to break a loop by accident. Whatever you did was going to have been whatever you'd already done, and that was that. The worst thing that would happen if they happened to see themselves, or even talk to themselves, was that they'd have to go through the same conversation twice, from opposite sides.

But they hadn't been here when the other versions of themselves had gone to bed, so obviously she wasn't going to put up much of a fight over it. "Fine, whatever. What's taking so long?"

Hermione flipped her hair out of her face and looked up, hands parked firmly on her waist. "I can't find my— Did you steal my jeans?!"

"Borrowed. I'll give them back. Eventually." Hermione looked outraged. "I would have taken that red skirt and those stretchy stockings—" They'd be far easier to deal with when she took her aging...
potion, she was going to have to alter the 'jeans' again. "—but what are they even made of?"

"Tights, not stockings," the muggleborn bit out, still glaring. "And they're a cotton polyester blend, if you must know."

"Yeah, well, I've never transfigured that before, so these were easier to adjust."

"You— But— I'd better get those back! Exactly as they were, too!" She grabbed the skirt and "tights" and stomped out of the room, not quite muttering under her breath about how she hated surprises and Bella was a terrible roommate.

Bella rolled her eyes. And here she'd thought Hermione had enjoyed the surprise birthday party she had foisted upon her. Well, after she got over the embarrassment of having everyone paying attention to her for something other than answering a question in class, at least.

Five minutes later — Bella had used Meda's usual hairstyling charms on Hermione's curls in order to circumvent her usual twenty-minute hair-fighting routine, no idea why Hermione should be so annoyed about this — they cast notice-me-not charms on each other and turned back. Their bathroom re-formed around them, and suddenly it was ten to seven again, with the whole day ahead of them.

(Time travel was so bloody neat.)

"Come on." She grabbed Hermione's arm and dragged her down the stairs and out of the common room.

"Damn it, Lyra, let go of me!" the other girl hissed, pulling away as Bella climbed through the portrait hole. She did keep following, though, so no matter. "Where are we going? I did have plans for this go-around, you know!"

"Well, now you have new plans. And 'out'."

"Out?"

"Of school."

"Lyra, what?! We can't leave school!"

"Why not?" Not that there was any chance that Hermione could convince Bella not to go, but she was somewhat curious as to why the muggleborn was so keen to follow the rules. If half of Harry's stories were true, she was quick enough to dispense with them when she wanted to.

"It's against the rules!"

Ha, called it. "Yes, obviously. But ignoring that, why? Why shouldn't we be allowed to go off campus, as long as we still go to all of our classes?"

"I– We have to stay here, the school is responsible for us. What if something happened? My parents would be furious!"

Bella actually stopped in her tracks to give the other girl a bewildered look. "You actually tell your parents what you do at school?"

"Well, no, but that's not the point! If we, I don't know, got lost, or hurt, or, or whatever—"

"Weren't you petrified last year?"
Hermione glowered at her. "Yes, but—"

"So you could clearly be hurt here, too. And we're not going to get lost, it's just London. Turn here." She linked her arm through Hermione's, turning her into a corridor on the third floor.

"We're going to London?! But— Why? And how? And it's not just London! Do you have any idea how large London is?! My parents wouldn't let me take the bus to the library alone, they certainly wouldn't want me wandering around London by myself!"

"Keep your voice down, Granger. Unobtrusive spells only do so much, you know. And you won't be alone, you'll be with me." Hermione gave her a look suggesting that that wasn't any better. Bella grinned, coming to a halt before their destination. "It'll be fine."

"Even if it would be, we can't leave campus, there's dementors, remember?"

"Yes, yes, I remember the dementors." She hadn't, in fact, but she'd had to find a secret passage out of the school to get beyond the wards and back in anyway, which also neatly circumvented the demonic prison guards. "That's why we're here," she added, gesturing toward the statue in the alcove where she'd stopped.

"What does Gunhilda de Gorsemoor have to do with dementors?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed in a confused frown.

Bella tapped the hump of the crone's back lightly with her wand, and whispered "Dissendium." The stone shifted, the entire back of the statue melting away to reveal a passage, a slide leading down into a tunnel which led right out under the main wards of the grounds and straight into Hogsmeade. There were defenses worked into the passage itself, it wasn't completely vulnerable, but anyone registered by the Hogwarts ward network as belonging there (which every student was when they were Sorted) could come and go as they pleased.

"Lyra... What is this?"

"This is a passage that leads straight into the basement of Honeyduke's in Hogsmeade. The Weasley twins apparently use it to smuggle in butterbeer and pranking materials, I followed them a couple weeks ago, scouted it out already. Perfectly safe, no dementors."

Hermione looked as though she was far more comfortable with the idea of sneaking out now that she wouldn't have to face a dementor to do so. Perhaps Bella should have led with that. "Ooh... But, we shouldn't. We could get in so much trouble."

"No one will even notice we're gone. We'll still be here. Two versions of us will still be here. Come on, where's your sense of adventure?"

The other girl glanced into the tunnel, a slightly longing expression on her face.

"Don't you want to go to the Bookstore with me?"

"You didn't say we were going to the bookstore!"

Okay, maybe she should have lead with that. "A couple other places, too, but yeah."

"Well, I did want to look at some newer magical theory texts — the most recent in the library was published in the Fifties...and maybe some books on proper divination, rather than that rubbish Trelawney assigned."
Bella rather doubted that Anomos had many newly published general theory texts, but she was sure he had some older ones with different perspectives than Hermione would have found outside the Restricted Section. And pretty much anything would be better than their Divs textbook. "So, you're coming, then. Go on, I'll follow so I can close the passage."

Hermione hesitated for another moment, worrying her lower lip and staring down the tunnel. "Okay. But—"

"No buts, go!" Bella ordered, pushing her gently toward the passage.

The girl glared at her, but carefully climbed into the statue and let herself fall down the slide. Bella shot a *tacitus* after her to cut short her squeal as she slid into the darkness, and quickly followed, slipping into the tunnel just as the statue closed behind her.

Hermione was waiting at the bottom of the slide, tapping her toe impatiently, her wand lit with a simple *lumos*, but from the way she was pointing at her throat, she couldn't quite lift the silencing charm.

"You really should learn how to do a silent finishing charm," Bella pointed out. She considered leaving her silenced, but apparating the both of them to London would be hard enough without Hermione fighting her. She cancelled the jinx.

Hermione huffed at her. "As though it's so easy as just deciding, oh, I'll do this spell silently!"

"It is if you focus well enough. All magic is just power, intent, and control. Incantations are a crutch, a substitute for a proper exercise of intent."

The other girl opened and closed her mouth twice, then, apparently unable to think of anything else to say, stalked away down the tunnel. "Are we going to London or not?" she called back, her tone almost indistinguishable from a pouting Meda. Her bouncing curls really did nothing to lessen the resemblance.

Bella smirked to herself, following her room mate toward the town. Somehow, she doubted the girl would appreciate being compared to a ten-year-old.

They renewed their notice-me-not charms before creeping out of Honeydukes' cellar, and made their way to the edge of town. Hogsmeade wasn't really large enough to have proper alleys for surreptitious apparition.

"Right, so how are we supposed to get to London, then?" Hermione asked, staring around pointedly at the obvious lack of transportation.

"Have you ever apparated before?"

Hermione's jaw dropped open. "Are you serious? I thought you were going to summon the Knight Bus or something!"

"The what?"

"It's this—this *bus*, Harry told me about it, you just stick out your wand and, I guess it kind of pops out of nowhere—"

So, an apparating *bus*. "No, apparating ourselves is faster, and far less noticeable than getting a whole bloody bus to do it."
"But isn't it illegal? I thought you had to be seventeen."

"Well, yeah, but it's not hard. As long as you can cast spells silently," she added with a smirk. Hermione glared. "It's fine, I can take both of us, just, we'll have to stand really close together."

"How close?" That level of suspicion wasn't really warranted.

"Well, the closer you can be to my center of mass, the better, so actually embracing would be good." It was fairly clear that Hermione wasn't entirely comfortable even standing close enough to her to use the Time Turner. Bella had long since given up trying to understand why. Some irrational normal person reason, probably.

Sure enough, the other girl made a face before saying, "Fine."

"Right. If you're able, you should focus on maintaining your bodily integrity, including your clothes and hair, and just roll with it when we land."

Before Hermione could object, or ask what she meant by that, Bella closed the distance between them, wrapping her off arm around the other girl and turning them on the spot, casting a transfiguration reversion to stimulate their sense of fundamental identity as she did so — splinching was exponentially more likely when dragging someone else across planar boundaries. There was no real danger that Bella would splinch herself, she hadn't done that since she was eleven, but the spell would help hold Hermione together and with her.

Apparition space was strange, crushing and empty. Apparating yourself felt very much like you were being compressed down to a single point, then expanding back to your proper form as you yanked yourself back into your proper plane, albeit at a different place. It wasn't entirely terrible. Side-along apparition, on the other hand, was miserable. Felt more like being compressed and dragged into a line or curve around the point that was the center of the apparition field, i.e., the person doing the apparating. And while apparition seemed instantaneous, side-along felt as though it took an indefinite but measurable amount of time. It only grew more unpleasant as one aged and developed a more solid conception of oneself — a stronger fundamental identity resisted external actions more effectively than a weak one. Which wouldn't stop the spell working, but did increase the chance of splinching, and made it feel more miserable.

Plus, side-along always threw off Bella's balance, regardless of what side of it she was on. She pulled them back into reality with a crack — she wasn't going to bother trying to control the re-entry to avoid displacing too much air when she had a passenger along — and they immediately fell to the ground as their feet tangled together.

Hermione groaned.

"All right over there?"

"That was terrible. I'm not sure I want to learn how to apparate anymore."

Bella sat up to verify that her passenger had made it in one piece. The fact that she wasn't screaming in pain was promising. Splinching hurt. Hermione appeared to be fine, sprawled on her back in the middle of Walburga's overgrown and untended garden.

"Where are we?" she asked a moment later, apparently recovered sufficiently to attempt to establish whether they'd been successful.

"London."
"But— Whose house is this?"

Bella shrugged, pulling herself to her feet. The reversion had affected Hermione's trousers, leaving them too large and too long again. "I used to know the person who lived here, but she died a couple years ago."

Walburga had apparently survived Arcturus by a matter of months. Cherri, the elf at Ancient House, had been singularly unhelpful in determining how she had died, and Bella hadn't made a tour of the properties yet. There was apparently still another elf in there, but it had clearly gone mad, according to Cherri, it had been pretending not to exist for years, and no one knew why. Without someone to direct it, or anyone to order a funeral, Walburga's body might still be in there, too, for all Bella knew. She really should make a point of investigating that. Maybe over winter hols.

"But—" Hermione began to speak, but cut herself off as Bella pulled her to her feet. "Won't anyone mind we're here?"

"Shouldn't think so. No one lives here anymore. Anyway, we're not even going inside. Here," she added, digging a vial out of her pocket. "Drink this."

Hermione eyed the potion suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Aging potion, should add about ten years," Bella said, throwing her own vial back. Hermione waited to see that it worked as expected before taking her own.

The potion took effect over the course of a few minutes. She felt her legs and arms lengthening, but aside from that, it wasn't terribly uncomfortable. When she judged it had finished, she altered the borrowed trousers again — they were almost the right length, now, but still a bit loose in the hips for Bella's taste.

Hermione had gotten a few inches taller as well, but her skirt and stockings had stretched to fit, as had her jumper and Bella's blouse.

"Ugh, I wish you'd told me we were going to do this," she complained, adjusting her bra and looking very self-conscious. Bella didn't see why. With her hair properly curled for once and a more developed body, she actually looked reasonably attractive. "I'd have worn looser clothes."

"You look fine, come on." Bella headed toward the back gate. She wasn't actually certain this gate had ever been opened, since anyone who wasn't keyed into the wards would use the front entrance, and anyone who was would just apparate in, but the hinges were oiled well enough, and it was kept closed with a charm rather than a muggle lock, so it was a simple enough matter to slip out.

"Right," Hermione said, coming to join her on the pavement. "Where are we, exactly?"

"Ah... Islington, I think this burrough is called. The house is on Grimmauld Place, not sure what this street is. But the river is that way," she pointed to the south. "And Charing is about two miles that way." West. "Ready to go?"

"Go where?"

"Charing. Gringotts. I don't have any muggle money on me," Bella explained, setting the pace as she headed north to the nearest cross-street.

"Yes, okay, but then? Why do you need muggle money?"
"Well, I could just steal more albums, I suppose, but—"

"You dragged me all the way to sodding London so you could look for more of your horrible rock records?! You said we were going to look at books!"

Hermione didn't like Bella's music. She had complained so much by the end of the first week that Bella had found her a book on noise-filtering palings and advised her to put one around her half of the room if it bothered her so much. It had taken nearly another week, but she had finally managed it, even tied it to a few runes to sustain it. Not bad for a first attempt at any sort of ward.

"First, yes. Second, they're great, you have no taste. Third, mostly to go to the bookstore, but since we're here..."

Hermione was muttering under her breath again. She didn't really stop until they entered Diagon Alley. "It's so weird being here when there are no kids around."

That wasn't strictly true, there were quite a lot of small children out with their parents, running errands, but there was no one their age about. Even the teens who attended local day-schools would currently be at school. That was one of the reasons Bella had decided to use an aging potion. The other, of course, was that it would be very suspicious for two schoolgirls to be wandering around Knockturn later. Possibly even dangerous, she was fairly certain Hermione had no idea how to defend herself from...well, anything.

Business was fairly slow at nine in the morning on a Friday, so the trip to the bank went relatively quickly. Bella withdrew enough money to start a tab at the Nameless Bookshop, as well as changing a couple of galleons to muggle pounds. That should, she thought, be more than enough for a few new albums. Not that she had any idea what they cost, but it would definitely be enough for the magical equivalent.

Once they had made their way back down the Alley, through the Leaky Cauldron and out into Muggle London, she stopped to take in the street before her. "So." She turned to Hermione. "Where are we going?"

"You mean...you don't know?"

"Well, that is why I brought you."

"I can't believe you ever thought anyone would believe you were muggleborn."

She had confronted Bella about that fact only a few days after Bella had confronted her about the Time Turner. Bella had admitted that she was in fact raised in the magical world, but refused to tell her anything else. Which, after several more days (and catching wind of the "raised by a travelling cursebreaker" rumor), Hermione had eventually accepted. So of course Bella had ceased to make the slightest effort to maintain the facade around her.

She glared at Bella, arms crossed, looking all offended for some reason. "Why would you think I would know?"

"Muggleborn? Muggle London? And Malfoy and Weasley believe it." Granted, they were about the only people who did, but.

The girl made an inarticulate noise of frustration. "I'm from Oxford! I haven't the faintest idea where the nearest music shop is. And Malfoy and Ron are idiots."

"In case you hadn't noticed, Hermione, most people are idiots."
Hermione sighed, conceding the point. "I suppose we could try Foyles over there." She pointed at a bookstore a block or two down the street. "But I can practically guarantee you won't find what you're looking for."

"Why not?"

"Oh, how shall I put this... Your horrible records aren't exactly mainstream muggle music, you know. And unless you already know what you're looking for, band names and so on, the book store won't likely have anyone who can make recommendations for you, not like a record store would."

Bella frowned. "Well, bugger. I knew I should have brought Blaise."

"Zabini?" Hermione seemed surprised. "I knew you were friends with him, but why would you bring him to look for records? Isn't he a pureblood too?"

"Well, aside from the fact that all the ones I have now I stole from him over the summer? Yeah, he is a pureblood." Kind of. Bella still didn't know if that story about his sire being half-incubus was true, but that didn't really matter: incubi were actually *more* magical than human mages, so she was pretty sure his lineage was still acceptably pure in the only important way. (Obviously part-humans weren't considered 'pure' by other, less relevant standards.) "His mum has business interests in the muggle world. She's a C.E.O. of some big technology company. And at least two of his step-fathers were muggles."

"I...would not have imagined that." Even more surprise.

Bella smirked. "Well, it's not exactly something he talks about much at school, but yeah, he's spent more time around muggles than most people in our year. I'll have to see if he wants to come down here some weekend."

"What, he actually gets *asked*?"

"Well, yeah. *He* doesn't have unlimited free time. And you wouldn't have come if I hadn't dragged you."

Hermione couldn't exactly deny that. She just huffed again. "So are we going to Foyle's, or not?"

"We could ask someone where the record store is," Bella suggested, but without much enthusiasm. Much as she wanted new music, she really *didn't* want to spend the better part of the morning questioning muggles and walking around looking for the proper shop. It would be better to just come back with Blaise.

Hermione made a face suggesting she agreed. "Can't we just go to Flourish and Blotts?"

"Who said anything about Flourish and Blotts?" Bella asked, leading the way back through the pub.

"You said we were going to the bookstore!"

"And you thought I meant...? No. There are about six bookstores I would go to before I'd go *there.*" Maybe seven, if she included that muggle place across the street.

"What's so bad about Flourish and Blotts?"

"Well, they're a bit overpriced, but the selection is just *terrible,* all Ministry approved."
"Ministry approved?"

Oh, this might take a while. "Let's have a drink," Bella suggested, pointing Hermione toward a table in the corner. "I'll be right back."

She fetched a couple of butterbeers from the bar, trying to think how best to approach the topic of banned books, and the reason that the Nameless Bookshop was far superior to any other bookstore they might visit.

"Right," she said, plonking herself down beside Hermione and casting a couple of weak palings to prevent eavesdropping and divert attention.

"What are those?"

"Palings. You'd think you'd recognize them by now, honestly, Granger," Bella teased.

"Ha bloody ha. What are they for?"

"Well, to stop people listening in, obviously. For some reason people tend to object to other people planning to break the law." Rather baffling, really.

"Breaking the law—Lyra! You dragged me out of school to do something illegal?!"

"Only stupid laws."

"Oh, like that makes it better!" Hermione hissed.

"Oh, you'll agree with me, I guarantee it. But right now, I've just dragged you out of school to go for a walk and have a drink."

The other girl crossed her arms and raised a disapproving eyebrow — probably not intentionally emulating Snape, but that only made it funnier. "I presume this law we're going to be breaking has something to do with Ministry regulations?"

Bella smirked. She hadn't even started explaining yet, and Hermione was already agreeing that she would eventually be going along with whatever Bella had planned. Not that she wasn't going to do that anyway — it was perfectly clear that she really wasn't as straight-laced as she liked to pretend — she just apparently wanted someone to push her into doing what she wanted to do anyway. Which Bella was happy to do.

"So, there's three classes of books, information, and spells — knowledge in general, really — in Magical Britain. Ministry Approved, Restricted, and Anathema. Ministry Approved is basically available to anyone. Most of the Hogwarts library, anything you'd find at Flourish and Blotts or Inkheart's—" (or any of half a dozen other shops Bella had visited in her own universe, but wasn't certain existed here) "—anything you can freely import from other countries and so on, they're all Approved. There's kind of a fourth tier, too, I guess, Ministry Endorsed. So Bagshot's history books, for example, are all Endorsed, because the Ministry actually likes the things she says, but Italian and French history books are only Approved, because they don't have anything in them that the government technically finds objectionable, even though they don't tell exactly the same story that a British history book would."

"And the bookstore you want to go to doesn't specialize in Ministry Approved literature, I take it?"

"I don't believe in censorship." Honestly, she couldn't quite wrap her mind around why anyone would, but.
Hermione glared at her. "I don't either, but—"

"Let me finish, I promise you're going to agree with me."

The muggleborn folded her arms stubbornly, but nodded.

"Restricted books, like the ones in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts, tend to deal with, well...anything the Ministry decides isn't appropriate for children, or the masses in general. There are several grades of restriction, from things you're just not supposed to sell to anyone under seventeen, to things you're supposed to have a Mastery in the subject to buy, to things you need special permission from the Ministry to read. Most of those are in the Department of Mysteries, though, so they don't count, really."

"What could possibly be so dangerous—"

Bella sighed. "Anything they consider 'dark', anything that gives direct instruction for the casting of harmful spells or the brewing of harmful potions, anything that's too powerful — weatherworking, for example, or runic casting, or pretty much any ritual magic — and anything that discusses the theory behind any of those topics in enough depth that someone could potentially re-develop the restricted spells on their own." Which was why there were literally no decent books on the Powers in the unrestricted part of the Hogwarts library. She'd had to bring books from home when she was explaining the major holidays to Zee last year.

"They even ban theory books?!!"

"Not entirely, some are available to adults, and some are available to experts. But yeah. There's a loophole to grandfather in family collections, and those can be inherited, but they can't be sold without restriction."

Hermione was fuming, even angrier than she had been about the House Elves. "Is that why I haven't been able to find anything about advanced temporal mechanics at school?!"

Bella shrugged. "Probably. Well, also Hogwarts is slow about acquiring new books, and time magic is kind of a new field. Not new new, but there's been a lot of advancement in the last couple decades." Thanks in no small part to the efforts of Other Bellatrix, apparently. "But there's a few references in the Restricted Section."

"How do you— You broke in, didn't you!"

Bella met her accusatory glare without a hint of shame. "What have you been doing with your extra hours?"

Hermione pouted. "I don't know how to do the sort of things you do with wards, you know."

"Is that your way of asking if I'll take you with me, next time?"

"Maybe."

Bella laughed. Really, she was barely even pretending to disapprove. "No problem. I usually hang out there during Shift Three. Anyway, the more popular, F and B type book stores don't even carry anything Restricted, let alone look the other way about selling to minors. Du Lac's is a little better, since they're international, they can order pretty much anything you want, but they're very serious about following the age laws." The first time she'd tried to order something restricted at Du Lac's, they'd actually asked for identification papers! And that was in her own universe, she could only imagine they were even stricter here. (And she didn't even have the option of begging Ciardha to
buy things and then stealing them from him anymore.)

Hermione nibbled at her lower lip for a long moment before she finally said, "Well, it does seem a bit stupid to base whether one has access to certain information solely on age."

"Oh, you haven't even heard the worst of it, yet."

"Right, you said there were three categories. What was the last one? Anathema?"

"Yep. Anathema works deal with magic so dangerous that the very idea of anyone actually using them is considered a crime against humanity. Though exactly what is Restricted or Anathema varies by country. Magical Britain is at the stricter end, but there's a list of topics that every nation in the ICW considers Anathema."

Hermione's eyes had grown very large. "Like what?"

"Well, pretty much anything on Subsumation and Demonic Congress; the more extreme end of Bio-alchemical theory, though the whole discipline is supposed to be restricted to experts; Flamel's method of creating the Philosopher's Stone — that's apparently considered a threat to the world economy; the more practical aspects of Necromancy, and, well, there's no telling how much of the Maleficia has been banned."

"Why not? And what is that? And Subsumation?"

"The Maleficia?"

Hermione nodded.

"It's what most people think of when they think of the Dark Arts — malicious magics used for destructive purposes. There's as many different aspects of the Maleficia as there are practitioners, it's probably the easiest field to re-invent from scratch. And Subsumation is, well... It's complicated."

It wasn't really. She'd used it herself, the Black family Yule ritual was Subsumation, taking a life and integrating the energy from it into the family and Family Magic as a whole. (She should try to figure out when that tradition had started, it might be important to trying to repair the damage Sirius had done...) But there was just no simple way to describe it.

"There are a bunch of different variations and subfields, but it's kind of like...using your magic to envelop a thing and take something from it to integrate into something else. Basically. The one most people freak out about the most is stealing life or magic from other people to prolong your own life or enhance your ability to channel magic."

Professor Riddle would consider that a terrible synopsis. He had spent over half an hour explaining the concept to her first-year class (as opposed to five minutes or so for each of the other Greater Dark Arts). But Bella wasn't willing to spend hours answering questions about Spell Eating and Visanguis and Emotional Vampirism and Memory Theft, and she was sure that if she brought them up, Hermione would have questions.

The other girl shivered, her expression caught between fascination and horror. "So...what do they do with those? The Anathema subjects?"

"They destroy them."

The girl's mouth dropped open. "They what? I'm sorry, I thought you just said the
government destroys knowledge they think is too dangerous to exist."

"That's exactly what I said." She gave Hermione a rueful smirk. It wasn't really a laughing matter, the destruction of Knowledge in favor of Ignorance. But the look on Hermione's face was just...precious.

"Bu– Wha– How? How can they!?”

"People do a lot of stupid shit when they're afraid." That was a lesson Bella had learned very early on. "They can't get everything, of course, some of the Old Families still have Anathema spells and theory in their libraries — the Ministry technically has the power to go in and take them, but in practice they don't dare. And there are other magical states that don't believe in Anathema restrictions. Miskatonic is probably the most notorious."

Hermione gave her a funny look. "Miskatonic... Like, Lovecraft?

"Never heard of it."

"Him. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, he's a muggle author, an American novelist."

"Uh, maybe? They have kind of a weird approach to Secrecy too, so it's possible. Technically it's the Miskatonic Valley Magical Cooperative, but everyone just calls it Miskatonic or the University." Hermione's expression shifted to horror, which suggested her muggle novelist did have at least some idea about the real University. "They publish a monthly research journal, so there's a lot of expert-Restricted and Anathema theory around, if you know where to look."

"But, doesn't the Ministry just destroy the journals, or forbid them to be imported?"

"Oh, yeah." Bella grinned. "The entire publication is considered Anathema, it's two years in Azkaban to be caught with a copy." Maybe more, here, actually. "So obviously you shouldn't tell anyone that we're here to pick up some back issues."

"We're what?!"

"Not going to get caught," Bella said lightly, smiling at Hermione's shock and disbelief.

"You– You want to risk Azkaban over–over what? A bloody research journal?!"

"Not a research journal, the research journal. They don't just do ridiculous Dark Arts stuff."

Though that was the majority of it. "They're on the cutting edge of magical theory development across the board. Think, the sort of stuff the Department of Mysteries does, but with fewer ethical constraints and thousands of Researchers. It's the premier research institution in the entire magical world, the ICW just...really doesn't like them." Most countries had the sense not to entirely ban the Árhra though, even if they did filter it through their own government research institutions and cut out anything Anathema.

"Still, we— You, you can't do this. Someone— Someone will find out, and you'll go to Azkaban, and—"

"It's just ink and paper, Hermione. Enchanted with anti-scrying spells and sometimes glamours to disguise it as something more innocuous, but there's no dark magic to the journal itself. Nothing that would alert anyone to its existence." She'd be willing to bet Snape had a few issues hidden away in the school already. "No one will find out if you don't tell them."

"Of course I'm not going to tell anyone, but really, Lyra, it's too risky! What if— What if Lavender
breaks in to our half of the dorm, or, or McGonagall does room checks, or—"

Bella laughed aloud at that one. "Has McGonagall ever done room checks?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Look, if it'll make you happy, I'll keep them somewhere outside the dorm. If someone finds them, there won't be anything to link them to us."

"You, there won't be anything to link them to you — I'm having no part of this!"

"Oh, please. Where do you think I learned about time travel? You wanted new theory texts? Well this is the best. References to primary sources. Actual experimental data. Any subject you can imagine, they've looked into. Nothing is out of bounds, and nothing is censored."

Bella had thought that bringing the thing around to censorship again would be the turning point in convincing the muggleborn to join her in the quest for forbidden knowledge.

Sure enough, when Hermione spoke again, it was to say, "You know there are traces, detection spells, and things, that can link you to something you've just touched."

I win. "There are ways around those. Enchantments to put on the object, or, you know, just wear gloves. If there's no skin contact, there's no trace to track."

"Are you sure, because I can't go to prison, my parents—"

"And how long is the sentence for impersonating someone using polyjuice?"

Hermione went scarlet. "That was different — who told you about— Ooh, Harry! I knew I should have told him why we needed to keep it secret!"

"To be fair, he doesn't talk to many people, he's not terribly likely to tell anyone else. Especially since I did tell him that it was illegal.” Even at home, that little stunt would have been a felony, though more important in Bella's opinion, it had been stupid. Even Draco wasn't dumb enough to brag about it if he was the Heir of Slytherin going around trying to kill his fellow students. "So, if you don't believe in censorship, and you know we're not going to get caught, and the risks aren't any worse than you've faced before, for, quite frankly, stupider reasons, with lower expected returns... Are you coming?"

Hermione sighed. "Fine. Just– fine. Yes, I'll come. As long as we stop somewhere and pick up gloves first. And you needn't look so bloody smug about it!"

She really did, though. She had promised that Hermione would agree with her, after all. I win, she thought again, giggling slightly as she dismissed the palings. "Come on, we only have four or five hours before we have to go back."

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If the high street of Charing was far cleaner and more orderly and polished than it had been in Bella’s world, Knockturn Alley was even grimier and more run-down. It used to be simply poor, the sort of place where you'd find second-hand shops and bars full of rowdy warlocks, but here and now it seemed to be actively falling into decay. Of course, there were still second-hand shops and seedy pubs, but the only shops that seemed to be doing reasonably well were the borderline illegal outfits which appealed to more upscale clientele. Borgin and Burkes, for example, or the Nameless Bookshop itself. There were more run-down boarding houses, now, and more prostitutes. More non-humans skulking in the shadows.
"Touch her and I'll take your hand off," Bella snapped at a starved-looking hag which was reaching out toward Hermione as though it couldn't help itself. She grinned as though she'd rather enjoy it — which, honestly, she would, Ciardha never let her just go out and practice the really good defense spells — directing her wand toward the hag. It flinched away from her, even as Hermione eeped and scuttled closer, ducking around to her other side and latching onto her free arm.

"What was that thing?!" Hermione asked, her tone urgent, but her voice hushed, as though she didn't want to draw any more attention to herself.

Bella didn't bother. "A hag. Lesser fae. They feed on humans, like sirens and veela, mostly homeless muggles. There are more of them here than there should be. The Ministry must be making more of an effort to keep them away from the muggle world... This is it."

Hermione gave the doorway a doubtful look. Probably because it looked just like any other abandoned storefront, its windows papered over, the peeling paint on the door which presumably had once spelled out a name reduced to the occasional heavily flaking letter. "Are you... Lyra, you have to be kidding me."

"Nope, this is it. Can't you feel the wards?"

She was teasing, of course. If you knew what to look for, they were almost obnoxiously obvious, stronger than any other enchantment on the block by an order of magnitude. Only the bespoke wandmaker at the other end of the street came close. Of course, if you didn't know what to look for, they were among the most subtle she had ever felt, woven nearly seamlessly into the currents of the local ambient magic. The most obvious part of them was designed to turn attention away from the shop, making it nearly impossible to find unless you already knew where it was. She wasn't sure about the rest, Anomos had threatened to revoke Ciardha's membership if he didn't make her stop analyzing them.

Before Hermione could say something indignant, she reached out and opened the door, revealing a small antechamber, the doorway into the actual shoprooms guarded by a single, harmless looking wizard. His features were absolutely average, from the shape of his eyes to the color of his hair. (Probably the effect of an enchantment etched into his skin.) He hadn't aged a day since the last time Bella had seen him, apparently frozen in time at 'old and crotchety'. When Blaise had told her he was still here, she had expected to find 'ancient and doddering,' or else a new owner using the same name. She was pretty sure this was the same Anomos, though. He was, at least in her own world, practically an institution: the gatekeeper to the true underworld of Magical Britain and its primary link to communities of dark mages abroad. He was politically neutral, and his shop was widely regarded as common ground, simply because he was too important a resource to endanger (or risk offending).

"Odysseus!" she greeted him, dragging a reluctant Hermione across the room so that she could lean obnoxiously on the counter. "I've brought you a new customer!"

He raised an eyebrow at her. No one called him Odysseus outside of the local circle of dark mages, but he obviously didn't recognize her. "The Blackheart wouldn't be pleased to know that you've borrowed her face," he noted.

Or maybe he does. "Nah, she wouldn't mind." Bella graced him with a wink and a confident smirk. "We go way back."

His eyes narrowed. "Stella?"
Not a bad guess — Bella gathered that Other Bella didn't really have many long-time associates, she'd probably introduced Zee to Odysseus, actually. She had in her own world, they used to come down on weekends. Bella had given her that name, in fact.

"Now she would mind if I were to steal her name. We haven't met. You can call me, oh..." Hmm... She'd never needed a sobriquet before. The Blacks were so widely known to be dark that it wasn't unusual or even particularly damaging to their reputation to be openly involved in the local dark magic scene. "Let's go with Angélos, I always did like her. And this is Helen." She pulled Hermione closer to the counter.

"Helen?" the other girl repeated. "And who is Angélos?"

"Yes, Helen," Bella said firmly. After Helen of Troy, mother of the original Hermione. Made sense to her. "And Angel was one of the fun Blacks." Well, Bella thought she'd probably been fun. History remembered her a bit differently. "Helen, this is Anomos, Odysseus to the locals. Odysseus, we're going to want to sign the Book."

The Book was a magical contract, a secrecy pact, bound in blood. It prevented Anomos's customers from betraying the Bookstore to anyone who might wish ill upon the shop or its keeper. More importantly, signing it was a requirement to go into the back rooms and browse the more esoteric and illegal texts.

The man raised an eyebrow again. "You seem to be rather familiar with this process for someone I've never met."

Which was fine, probably for the best if he assumed she was someone he did know, wearing a new face. Bella winked before tossing a small leather purse onto the counter. It was magically expanded to contain a frankly ridiculous number of galleons, but the 'membership donation' was customarily based on what the new member could afford. For some it was merely a token, while those with more wealth were expected to act as financial patrons, to support the continued existence and operation of the Shop. Noblesse oblige, and all that. "That's for her, too," she said sternly.

Anomos chuckled a bit as he pulled the Book from beneath the counter, flipping it to the current page and handing her a blood quill. Bella scribbled Angélos Black, the magic of the quill biting into the back of her hand to trace the letters in her own blood, and dried the signature with a quick seca before passing the book and quill to Hermione.

"Erm, do I...?"

"Just Helen will do. The name's not important."

"What are we— Is that blood?"

"Yes, and we're signing a contract that will prevent us from betraying Odysseus or the Shop to outsiders who would wish harm upon him or it. It's on the first page if you really want to read it."

"Oh, um... I don't know, really, Ly—" Bella glared at her, cutting short the revelation of her other alias. "Uh, Angel. I mean..."

"If you don't sign, you don't get to see anything potentially incriminating," Bella pointed out. "You might as well go back to Flourish and Blotts."

Hermione sighed. "Just let me read the oath first?" She flipped back to the very first page, silent for a few long moments as her eyes flicked over the contract. "There's no punishment clause if I break it?"
"No, the whole point is it's *unbreakable*. You literally won't be able to tell anyone who has any ill intent where this place is, or be able to testify against Anomos if he's ever brought up on charges. In exchange, neither he nor anyone else who's signed this will be able to testify about your activities in relation to the Shop."

It wasn't foolproof — you could still have the information stolen from your mind using *legilimency*, for example but that wasn't exactly admissible in a court of law, so it hardly mattered.

Hermione was still hesitating.

"Look, you *just* watched me sign it. Do you think I would have if I didn't know what I was getting us into?"

"Well, you *are* a bit impulsive..." Hermione sighed. "Fine, I've come this far, I suppose..."

She finally flipped back to the page Bella had signed, and scratched out her code name, wincing at the bite of the quill and rubbing the back of her hand after the name etched into her skin faded away.

"Welcome to the Bookshop," Anomos said, flipping up the counter and allowing them to pass through a second, much stronger set of wards, into the rooms beyond.

"Wait a second," Bella said, holding Hermione back as she started toward the nearest shelf. It took a moment for her to recall the tagging charm Ciardha had used the first time she was here, but after a few tries, over half the books began to glow red. "Don't touch those, they're cursed. The books get more...intense, as you go through the rooms. Beyond tiers of illegality, they're organized alphabetically by topic, then chronologically by publication date. Knock yourself out," she concluded, then turned back to the proprietor, handing him another purse. "That's to start an account. Let me know when we're getting low on funds."

Anomos nodded, tucking the galleons away without even opening it. "Were you looking for anything in particular?"

Bella grinned. "Anything on spells and enchantments from the fifth through the twelfth centuries, methods of casting, magical theory at the time especially; the phenomenon of magical accretion; esoteric tracking spells; and back issues of the *Árthra*. Let's start with, oh, the last five years or so. I've been out of touch."

"I'll see what I can find." He nodded to her, then disappeared deeper into the shop.

"Helen's looking for advanced magical theory and divination texts!" Bella called after him. He didn't answer, but it didn't matter, even if he hadn't heard her, there would likely be plenty in this room for Hermione to start with.

The other girl wasn't looking at the books, though. She was staring at Bella, as though she didn't quite recognize her. "What was that about you borrowing someone's face? I thought you said that was just an aging potion."

"Just impersonating an incarcerated mass murderer and notorious Inner Circle Death Eater. No big deal." Eventually they would get to a point, Bella knew, when she could no longer shock Hermione. But this was not that day. She laughed at the look on the muggleborn's face. "Not really, there's just a bit of a family resemblance. It was just an aging potion."

"And who's Stella?"
"That would be telling." Hermione huffed. Bella was quickly coming to realize that she hated being kept out of anything, even if she didn't really want to know. "Pick anything you want, by the way. I'm buying. And nothing in this room is too bad to get caught with. If anyone asks, you can say you borrowed them from my family library." Technically, it wouldn't even be a lie — If Bella bought them, the books would be owned by the House of Black, even if they were on permanent loan to Hermione.

"I don't even know where to start," Hermione muttered. "Did you say them? As in, multiple? Have you seen the prices on some of these? This one's three galleons," she said, sliding a heavy leather tome back onto its shelf as though it might explode at any moment.

Bella snorted. "Yes, them, as in multiple. I know you really are muggleborn, but sometimes I forget. House of Black — money is not an object. Besides, I still owe you a birthday present. Pick anything you want."

"Anything?" Hermione repeated, as though she still didn't quite believe her.

"I'm not in the habit of making offers I'm not prepared to follow through on," Bella pointed out. She meandered away, casting a casual eye over the shelves as Hermione muttered to herself behind her.

"Oh, hey," she called, as she stumbled across a familiar, pale blue spine. "You should get this one." She tossed it across the room. Hermione only just barely managed to catch it.

"Occlumency? What's occlumency?"

"Read the book and find out."

Hermione smiled at her for the first time all day, holding up another book. "What do you know about runic casting?"

Bella grinned. She knew this was a good idea.

Chapter End Notes

Another awesome chapter entirely written by Leigha. Because she's awesome. — Lysandra

You're welcome.

There is a time skip between the scenes with the Malfoys and the ones with Hermione, about three weeks or so. —Leigha

By the way, the value of the galleon is the same as in my fics. So, three galleons in 1993 would be £750, roughly $2000 in 2019. Spendy book. —Lysandra
After nearly four months (subjectively) spent in this universe, Bella had come to the conclusion that she preferred it over the one she had left behind by a wide margin. Surprising, perhaps, since most of that time had been spent at Hogwarts, of all places, and a Hogwarts run by one of her least favorite professors at that, but time turning did rather relieve the degree to which her obligations as a student chafed.

Sure, there was no Ciardha in this universe, Professor Riddle had inexplicably decided to become an undead Dark Lord rather than the biggest Dark Arts nerd she'd ever met, and Professor McKinnon had been replaced by an absolutely worthless old baggage; Zee and Meda and Cissy were all old, and most of the House of Black was dead; and there were far more restrictions on knowledge and the practice of magic than in her original universe.

But there were just so many more things to do.

She'd never considered looking into the foundations of the House before. She'd learned all the family history and legends, of course, everyone did, but not the practical and magical aspects of its foundations. And the whole phenomenon of magical accretion — the way different magics interacted and changed when cast on the same subjects or in the same place over long periods of time — was just fascinating (even if the more she learned, the more it looked like there was no simple fix for what Sirius had done to the Family Magic).

Sirius was still missing. Gods and Powers, she'd actually tried a tracking spell based on their shared blood, and he'd still managed to avoid it somehow! Infuriating, but fucking impressive nonetheless. Well, assuming he wasn't dead. And neither the self-updating family trees at Ancient House nor his will (filed at Gringotts' when he became an Auror) seemed to think he was dead, so yeah, just fucking impressive.

And Eris was not, so far as Bella could tell, having much more luck with Other Bella. She didn't say so in as many words, but her very reluctance to discuss the subject strongly hinted that she hadn't made much progress, if any. The problem, of course, was that Eris — Chaos — was fundamentally unsuited to restoring anything to its proper order, even the mind of one of her own Dedicates. Bella had suggested that they could appeal to one of the other Powers for help, but Eris had refused. Vehemently. She was a jealous goddess, and, Bella hadn't really understood this before, but apparently because of their connection allowing any other Power direct access to Bella's mind would put her goddess in too close of contact with them. (Amusingly enough, Eris had seemed somewhat embarrassed about that — Bella had gotten the impression she'd done something rather unusual and well, overly committed herself when she was binding Bella to her.)

Inviting another power into Bella's soul would essentially mean inviting it into Eris's mind...or, since she was an incorporeal entity, into basically her everything. That kind of contact would taint Eris with that other Power (and whatever aspect they invoked with a bit of Chaos). Which could have effects ranging from annoying and disconcerting to existentially threatening, depending on the Power and how long they stayed in contact. So not only was Eris firmly against that idea, but there was approximately zero chance that they'd be able to get any other Power to agree to help in the first place, no matter what they offered in return.

Bella had begun looking into advanced mind magic techniques as well, just in case there was a
more mundane way to approach the problem. It had been mundane in origin, after all. She was going to kill Not-Professor Riddle so horribly for that when she finally caught up with him. But she’d barely given a single thought to that. Either the particulars of what she would do to him, or exactly how she was going to find him. She had enough to be getting on with at the moment.

And when she didn't want to work on the major problems of restoring the House of Black and Other Bella's mind, she had about half a dozen smaller puzzles and plots to distract herself with.

Hagrid had come through on his promise to talk to the wilderfolk for her a couple of weeks ago. Their representative had agreed to meet her on the night of the full moon — it could be difficult for wilderfolk to reckon time like humans — out in the Forest. Hagrid had been a bit leery of letting her go off alone at night, but it hadn't been too difficult to convince him she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. He'd just sent Fang with her. And Bella had knocked out the boarhound as soon as they were out of sight. She wasn't about to ruin her chances with the wolves by bringing a dog with her. Who knew what wilderfolk would find insulting?

Hermione had been more than a little annoyed over her disappearing with the Time Turner, preventing them from repeating the three-to-eleven loop and throwing off their whole schedule, but it wasn't as though they'd missed any classes because of it, and she knew that Hermione did all of her homework in the first iteration as well. (It was possible she was enjoying playing with Hermione a little too much, but it wasn't like the other girl could do anything to retaliate while Bella had her time machine.)

The wolves' emissary had met her in the agreed-upon clearing before transforming into a tall young woman with shaggy blondish hair that fell just below her chin, a long face, and wild wolf eyes. She was whipcord thin, fitter than probably any real human Bella had ever met, and gorgeous, entirely unconcerned with such human concepts as facial expressions and small talk and clothing. English clearly didn't come naturally to her, and she'd been somewhat wary and confrontational at first, wondering why Bella had wanted to meet the Pack in the first place, but she'd relaxed a bit after Bella had explained that she was new here, and had just wanted to introduce herself. It had probably also helped that the wolf girl had decided fairly quickly that Bella wasn't as human as she smelled, but it wasn't as though she actually had any reason to visit beyond general curiosity — she'd simply never met any wilderfolk before. She'd asked a few questions about the pack and the forest in general before asking to see the girl's wolf form.

She'd been somewhat concerned that the wolf would take the request poorly, like Dora insisting she didn't do party tricks, but she seemed almost relieved to fall back into the more familiar body, and far more comfortable. It was clearer in that form that she wasn't fully grown. Her paws were still slightly too large, and she nipped playfully at Bella's tunic almost immediately. Bella had swatted her away, of course, and somehow, she still wasn't quite sure how, had ended up drawn into a strange, tumbling-biting-grabbing-tugging play fight. The wolf was clearly being careful not to hurt her (she did still end up with a few scratches, but nothing too deep, and no real bites), but she won easily, pinning Bella to the ground several times, teeth at her throat. Eventually she shifted back to her human form to ask some questions of her own about Bella's people (how so many packs could stand to live so close together and why they lived in buildings and sent their young away from the pack for moons at a time and so on). Unfortunately, Bella couldn't answer most of these, since she also didn't really understand people a lot of the time. Still, the wolf girl didn't seem too disappointed. She invited Bella to visit again, at least, and showed her the boundaries of the wolves' territory so she would know where to come.

She hadn't gone back yet, though she was sure she would eventually. It had been curiously...restful, playing with the wolf-girl. Especially since she had recently been spending so much time making nice(ish) with other students. They were just so very tedious and...terribly human in comparison.
(Eris had been very amused when she'd realized she appreciated the wolf's company better than her fellow humans. In hindsight, it seemed obvious, given that she'd sacrificed her own humanity half a lifetime ago.)

Basic networking was probably the biggest time investment of any project she had in the works, after researching various topics of interest. She'd had Zee to do this, before, and the Black name (when that had meant something) had been a massive cheat. She'd known more than half of her fellow Slytherins since their nursery days. Blaise was arguably even more fun than his mother — Zee was cold and dark and had a delightful disregard for rules and laws, but only when they were alone. Blaise somehow managed to be perfectly open about being, in his own words, a heartless, sardonic bastard, and still charm anyone he cared to. (Legilimency was even more of a cheat than being a Black.) But Blaise was in Slytherin, and they weren't nearly so clearly and obviously aligned as she and Zee had been, so she couldn't just shamelessly mooch off his connections. Not to mention he cared far less for making those connections than Zee had.

So Bella had to go out of her way to meet and talk to Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws on her own. Justin had been some help with this, at least before she'd taken Draco to task over his insults to herself and her House. Since then, he'd been...wary, of her. Not entirely afraid, quite, and certainly not uninterested, but far more reserved than he had been before. As had most of the Hufflepuffs she'd met through him, it was rather frustrating. Zacharias Smith, however, had stepped up to introduce himself in the wake of her little duel — apparently he'd appreciated the show she'd put on, she gathered Malfoy was even less popular than the Penultimate Weasley outside his little clique.

After a few false starts, she'd finally made some progress with the Ravenclaws. On Luna's advice, she'd crashed a meeting of the Parliamentarians. The Predictive Arithmancy club (betting circle) had been a thing in her own universe, though this version was a bit more exclusive, almost all upper-year Ravens rather than mostly third and fourth-years from all of the Houses. Still, they hadn't told her to sod off. Not that she expected they would, she was good at arithmantic modeling, especially refining existing models to account for the inevitable unlikely confluences and branches that seemed to trip up everyone else. She liked to think of it as the 'fuck you' factor, an expression of the chaos inherent in all human societies. After she'd tweaked the Quidditch League Outcomes model and increased its accuracy by about three percent, she hadn't doubted that they'd invite her back. Besides, as long as they kept meeting in the Ravenclaw common room, they couldn't really keep her out: anyone who could answer their doorkeeper's riddles was welcome in that House.

Beyond that, the situation was a bit more complex. Bella was not unaware of the effect her presence tended to have on any given group of people. Polarizing, was a good word. Within a few minutes, hours at most, nearly everyone she'd ever met fell into one of two camps. There was the group that was easier to manipulate: the ones who thought she was fascinating for some reason or another; the ones who were obviously drawn to her, sometimes despite themselves; and the ones who hated her. And there was the group that stubbornly resisted having anything to do with her: the ones afraid of the hints of darkness that always surrounded her, visibly uncomfortable spending any time with her at all, or didn't want to get caught up in the trouble and disruption that inevitably surrounded her.

It was relatively rare for anyone to move from one group to the other, though Neville seemed to have slipped out of the 'obviously drawn to her' category into the 'wanted nothing to do with her' group after her duel with darling Draco. And Snape seemed to have recused himself to that camp as well, she had no idea why. After the first week, she'd been sure he was going to be one of the ones who hated her.

Sure, Nymphadora had written her to mention that he'd been up to Azkaban, poking around Other
Bellatrix (who had apparently confirmed that Lyra was Bellatrix, even suggested she was from an alternate timeline (but thought that Dora impersonating Lyra was just some weird potions experiment of Snape's and apparently didn't know that Lyra actually existed)), but Dora had also said she'd convinced Snape that Lyra was really Cassiopeia (impersonating a young Bellatrix because...reasons), who'd come back from wherever she'd gone to revive the House. Which was actually a really good cover story, Blaise had even agreed. It fit neatly between 'raised by a cursebreaker' and 'time traveller from the future' in terms of false identity plausibility. It was even consistent with the impression she'd given Anomos, so good on Dora.

Point was, there was no reason that Lyra really being Cassiopeia disguised as Lyra (and using Bella's face because she could), would make Snape find her any less irritating. But whatever.

She was far more concerned with the people who were in the first group: the ones who hated her or else were drawn to her. Easy targets and people she could use. Harry and Hermione were both in this group, which was good, because she'd decided they were both of interest to her as well.

Harry, of course, always had been, even before she'd ever met him, since Sirius was supposedly looking for him. But also because, according to just about everyone, trouble seemed to follow him wherever he went (which meant wherever he was was almost guaranteed to be the most fun). Since she'd realized exactly how thoroughly everyone responsible for him (mostly Dumbledore, so far as she could tell from the letter Meda had sent when she'd begun to look into his situation) had utterly fucked him over thus far in life, she'd decided to take him under her wing. As she'd told him that day they'd visited Hagrid, he was practically a Black himself. Not to mention he was by far the most amenable to her influence of any of her fellow third-year Gryffindors. Unlike Hermione, he didn't really seem to think of himself as a good person, even if he generally tried to act like one, and he definitely had less respect for so-called authorities than any of their classmates.

Hermione was a bit more of a challenge. If Bella had to judge, she'd say Hermione was actually more inclined to go dark than Harry, but that might just have been because she was more intelligent, and so much 'darkness' was really just pragmatism. In Zee's terms, Harry was a follower, the sort who could easily be led into becoming whatever she wanted, while Hermione was more the sort who needed to be carefully prodded and challenged into a similar position, with each step appearing to be her own idea. Bella hadn't really set out to get her on-side, but...well, it was just too tempting, once she realized Hermione had a time turner. Plus she'd already inadvertently won the muggleborn's admiration with her treatment of their nominal dorm mates that first night. Their other classmates might have been somewhat in awe of her after the Hippogriff Incident and their first potions lesson — she hadn't realized how rare it was for someone to take the piss with Snape until Blaise had told her, after — but it went deeper with Hermione. She'd gotten the impression from Harry that the other Gryffindor girls had made her life rather miserable for the past two years, though he also seemed to think that was at least partially Hermione's fault. Which it probably was, she could see how many of her behaviors would have been annoying to...practically anyone who was inclined to take offence over anything. It just so happened Bella wasn't.

That was probably the same reason Luna kept seeking her out. It had hardly escaped her notice that the second-year Ravenclaw was rather odd (and therefore interesting), even on their first meeting, but she hadn't quite realized how the other students saw her. So far as she could tell, Luna's housemates alternated between ostracizing her and openly bullying her. Which, well, Bella was rather of the opinion that Luna should learn to defend herself, but Luna seemed to think that frequently being seen with Bella, especially in the aftermath of her 'duel' with Malfoy, was sufficient deterrent. Not that Bella minded. The waifish blonde was probably the most interesting person to talk to in the castle. She had somehow known immediately that Bella was time turning, mentioned something about seeing her in the future — made no sense at all until she'd run into her earlier, in the third iteration of the morning. Which was pretty much par for the course
with Luna. Holding a conversation with her was downright challenging, and she somehow always seemed to know more than she ought. The second time Bella had found her in an out of the way corner sketching, she'd been drawing Eris, a version obviously intended to intimidate someone, all tattoos and sharp teeth. But she'd apparently had no idea who she was drawing.

Which, while downright weird, probably only meant that the little Ravenclaw had some latent Seer potential or something. The problem she'd pointed out on the train, the darkness staining the Weasley girl's aura, was far more confusing. She was almost positive now, that it had something to do with the Chamber of Secrets. Gin herself was very good at avoiding being alone with Bella, but her brothers had no reason to avoid her, and they'd been so defensive when she brought it up that she was certain Gin had been the girl rumored to have been kidnapped by the Heir of Slytherin. She'd even managed to put together that it'd probably been Not-Professor Riddle behind it: he was definitely a parselmouth, the last descendant of Slytherin in Britain (through the Gaunts) in her own timeline, so far as she knew, and there was no reason to suspect that the "Tom" Gin had spoken of in the throes of dementor-induced hallucinations had been some other Tom who could claim the title "Heir of Slytherin". His son, maybe, but somehow Dark Lord Riddle seemed even less likely to spawn than nerdy Professor Riddle. And she had a hunch that someone who called himself Voldemort wouldn't go and name his son something so mundane as Tom, anyway.

That didn't mean she had any idea what he'd done, though. And it was weird, she'd kept an eye on it, the remnants of the curse that had been used on the girl, or whatever it was, and it was changing, being drawn deeper into the girl's own aura, becoming more integrated with it. Almost, almost like she was subsuming whatever it was, just, very slowly. And not entirely effectively, since her own aura was darkening to match it, rather than overcoming it as she took it deeper into herself. Which was kind of neat, honestly, she just wished she knew what it was.

Probably something ridiculously esoteric, she doubted Dark Lord Riddle was less deeply interested in the Malaficia than Professor Riddle, and no one really doubted that he was actively practicing the Dark Arts, even if he'd never admit it. But Gin was one of those people who was clearly drawn to Bella against their own will. It seemed like she was always hovering in the background, at meals or up in Gryffindor Tower, sometimes even in the corridors between classes, but whenever Bella tried to talk to her, she fled. Annoying.

Not nearly as annoying as Lavender Brown, however. After several weeks trying and failing to reassert her social superiority over Bella (all the while acting publically as though she didn't despise Bella as much as she had ever hated anyone), she had apparently realized that wasn't going to happen. Spoilt Bitch could hardly match her in magical skill or knowledge — blatantly obvious in even their first lessons — and while the same could be said for Hermione, the muggleborn didn't seem to realize that there were other arenas at stake: appearance, for instance, and presentation. Even if Bella wasn't particularly interested in it, she did know how this game was played. Mostly because everyone was playing whether they wanted to or not, and it wouldn't do to damage the public perception of the House of Black. Auntie Walburga had insisted she learn the social niceties, and Zee had made a very convincing argument for social influence and popularity as sources of potential power back in first year.

While Bella would probably never be popular or particularly adept at following the rules of polite society, there was a certain degree of admiration and therefore influence to be had by making it clear that she both knew and rejected those rules. Calling Snape 'your Honor' for example, or saving Draco's life before scaring the piss out of him in front of the entire school, or going all 'we speak on behalf of the House of Black' to Lucy after acting as though she had no idea of the significance of her little 'duel' with Draco. It was really a pity no one had been there to witness that particular conversation. (Draco had finally asked for his wand back on the Monday following the Most Productive Tea Ever, presumably after his father told him off for not doing so. Or possibly
when McGonagall and Flitwick began to question his inability to do practical work in class.) But the point was, Bella was very good at placing herself above the rules of society and what most people considered common sense — apparating Hermione to London and back, riding a hippogriff in the first Care lesson, telling a dementor to sod off, and agreeing to meet the wolf-girl alone at night in the Forbidden Forest came to mind — which held a certain level of appeal for lesser mortals who inevitably wished they had the temerity to do the same.

The fact that she did this without apparent effort (without any apparent recognition of the Game at all), her robes impeccable and hair perfectly coiffed, her fashion glamous understated enough to appear absent unless one knew what to look for, and generally while maintaining a higher degree of class than Lavender Brown could ever hope to attain, had to be infuriating to the other girl. That was, after all, the one realm of competition among the third-year witches where she had been the unquestioned champion. (Daphne was arguably better at it than both Bella and Lavender, but she was also far too aloof for Lavender to consider her a threat to her own popularity. They appealed to very different circles.)

Honestly, Bella was a little surprised it had taken Lavender over a month to start attacking her reputation. Slytherins were much quicker to attempt to tear each other down. (Though of course they also made a point of building up their own reputations and influence, which Spoilt Bitch clearly didn't know how to do.) Unfortunately for Lavender, starting rumors about Bella's covert use of Illegal Dark Magic on her roommates (obviously false: if she were using illegal dark magic on her roommates, she would make sure the big mouthed bint wouldn't remember it) had reminded Bella that she existed, and also that she was the subject of a Prophecy that had to be made to come true.

"Hey, guys," Bella said, plopping herself down in a chair adjacent to the couch the Weasley twins had appropriated.

"Ah, Lyra," "what's" "our" "favorite little" "mischief maker" "up to" "this" "afternoon?"

There was really only one answer to that question, for anyone who'd spent any time in Slytherin House. "Plotting world domination. You?"

"Ah," "well," "you see..." Somehow, there was something less furtive about muttering from two different places at once.

Bella smirked at them. "Something illegal and/or of questionable morality, which cannot therefore be spoken of in the Commons, but which I should look forward to immensely?"

The boys looked at each other. "She knows us so well, Forge!" "Indeed, Gred! We could never be caught out doing anything so dull as studying for OWLs, after all. "Dreadfully boring, OWLs, would sully our reputation horribly."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Bella dismissed the subject. She might have bought that if they'd actually had a textbook, the arithmancy notes scattered about certainly gave the impression of studying, but she was fairly certain there was no OWL that required expertise in advanced enchanting and artificing, which was the subject of the book the twin on the left had chucked toward his bag as she approached. Not to mention it would be rather out of character for the boys to be so concerned about exams as to actually study for them, and especially not in October. Whatever they were planning must be really good.

"I think I might be offended, Gred!" "Indeed, Forge! It sounds almost as though ickle Lyrie-kins doesn't believe us!"
Bella suppressed a twitch. The annoying twin-speak thing was irritating enough. *Lyrie-kins* was worse. But hexing them halfway to hell would mean they'd won, beaten her at her own game. And she couldn't have *that*. "Two such paragons of honesty and upstanding Light wizardry such as yourselves would *never* attempt to deceive me, I'm sure," she responded, her tone light, face neutral.

"Never!" "Perish the thought." The first twin conjured a pair of halos above their heads. "Angels, we are," the other said, nodding seriously. Then the rings of light vanished, and an air of seriousness fell over them. "We were in the middle of something, though." "What did you need?"

"Hmm. Two things: First, any updates on the forecast?"

The Twins, inveterate pranksters as Hermione had warned her at the Welcoming Feast, had been only too pleased to help with the data collection necessary in order to facilitate Bella's campaign against the fraud calling herself a Divs professor. She *had* had to tell them what she was doing, but she trusted them not to ruin the prank by telling anyone else. Professional courtesy. They'd found a Hufflepuff fourth-year willing to pass information on the old fraud as well, and Blaise had enlisted several older Slytherins and Ravenclaws under the pretense of conducting an arithmantic analysis of the outcomes of Trelawney's prophecies over the course of the year.

"Oh, hang on, we've got a list," "in the dorm, back in a mo'."

Bella was fairly confident that they'd managed to collect every one of the professor's overly-dramatic predictions this term. So far, she'd made about seventy percent of them come true. She didn't think Trelawney had noticed, yet, but then, most of them had been little things, like a fourth-year Ravenclaw being caught out after hours by Filch, and the fifth-year Hufflepuff who'd had a near-death experience due to a thunderstorm, an open window, and a poorly lit corridor.

She intended the project she was currently working on to be a somewhat more impressive demonstration of the hand of Fate at work. In her very first Divs lesson, the drunk had informed Lavender Brown that *the thing she was dreading would happen on the sixteenth of October. Since Spoilt Bitch was constitutionally incapable of keeping her mouth shut for two minutes, and also happened to already be a fanatic believer in the mystical power of incense, scarves, and cooking sherry, she was confident that *everyone* would know about her misfortune — and the prediction thereof — by the end of the weekend. She just needed to figure out what dear Lavender dreaded.

Which is why the second thing was, "Right, number two: Where's Blaise?"

She had discovered the Twins' ability to locate any given person anywhere in the Castle entirely by accident. In the first week of time turning, she'd caught them coming out of a suspiciously heavily-warded 'abandoned' classroom (while searching for an abandoned classroom to fortify as her own personal potions lab). Curious, she spent several days tailing them (incidentally discovering the secret passage to Hogsmeade), until they suddenly stopped in the middle of a quiet, fifth-floor corridor and called her out.

After several minutes trading blatant falsehoods, one of them had made the mistake of saying, "We know where everyone is!" in response to her demand to know how they'd known she was there in the first place.

So of course she'd said, "Prove it," and to her utter astonishment, they had.

Filch, Snape, Blaise, Luna, Hagrid, even Dumbledore himself wasn't immune to whatever method they were using to locate people. She still didn't know what it was — one of them had gone into an
empty room, while the other guarded the door and relayed the answers with their weird soul-bonded twin telepathy. She had, of course, checked, on the next iteration of that shift, fully expecting to find that they'd been having her on, but they'd been right about every one of them, at least as far as she could tell.

However they were doing it, it didn't seem to have revealed that she and Hermione were time travellers, or at least, the boys hadn't mentioned it if they knew. Though they seemed to be trying to tell her as little as possible about it. After a few days of pestering, they'd agreed to tell her where people were, whenever she wanted, if she would just stop asking how they did it.

She'd agreed immediately, since it was obvious they weren't going to tell her, anyway. She'd just have to figure it out some other way. She'd eliminated scrying and locator spells, as well as tracking spells — the castle had anti-scrying wards on it, and it was simply absurd to expect they'd put a tracking spell on every single person in the castle. Not to mention the wards muddled all but the most powerful of them, as she well knew after months of fruitlessly attempting to track her wayward baby cousin. The only reasonable way she could see to manage it was to somehow tap into the wards themselves, but that would take far longer than it did for the twin in front of her to give an exasperated sigh and say, "He's in a nook on the second floor with Chelsea Miller. The one at the south end of the western corridor."

Not surprising, really. Blaise was often to be found in secluded spots throughout the castle, snogging anyone he could convince to join him. Which seemed to be most of the fourth-year Hufflepuffs so far. She personally didn't see the appeal. Kissing was, well, not unpleasant, but not exactly exciting, either. Even if you were sneaking around and trying not to get caught doing it. Not that she saw the point of that, either. (Back in her own time, Zee had seemed to find that almost as exasperating as the fact that Bella never kissed her first. Just kept insisting it was part of the fun.)

"Cheers."

"Going to go interrupt lover boy? What's up with you two, anyway?"

Bella just smirked. Of course she was going to interrupt him. Not only did she need him to help her figure out what Lavender Brown dreaded, it was one of the few ways she'd found to actually get a rise out of him. Well, as much of a rise as she ever managed to get out of him. "What do you mean what's up with us?"

"Just a bit weird, hanging around with the Snakes."

Bella shrugged. "Blaise is fun." Daphne was less fun, given that she almost always acted the proper pureblood princess, but Tracey was alright, and she'd been trying to get Theo to practice dueling with her again for weeks. He seemed to think the wards would alert the professors if they cast too dark of spells in the Castle, and he wasn't willing to go out in the Forest to practice. Not to mention the centaurs and wilderfolk would probably have an issue with them throwing that kind of magic around, too. Blaise was by far the most amusing, though.

Weasley's eyes narrowed. "Are we talking about the same guy? Stuck up Snake? Kind of creepy bloke? Spends all his time lurking about with Nott and Greengrass sneering at anyone who happens to cross their path? No sense of humor at all? That Blaise?"

"Hmm, no, the one I'm thinking of dances to muggle music and snogs Hufflepuffs in the halls and keeps a boggart in his pocket to cheat at dueling. Calls it Coco. Come on, you can't tell me that's not bloody hilarious."
The Weasley didn't quite look like he believed her, but he did let out a snort of laughter, either at the very idea of Coco the Pocket Boggart, or the idea of Blaise attempting to duel. "Did ickle Lyrie-kins get scared of the big bad Pocket Boggart?"

At that, Bella had to laugh. "No, but Finch-Fletchley did. Twice. Funniest thing I've ever seen."

"Wait. You-- You're serious? Zabini just walks around with a boggart in his pocket?"

"Well not at school, obviously. Wait. Why wouldn't you think I was serious about that?"

The Weasley just shook his head slowly. "Anyone ever told you you're a bit mad, Black?"

Bella smirked. "I hear it runs in the family."

"And she sounds proud of that fact, Forge," the second twin said, coming up behind her chair and passing her a small roll of parchment.

The first one nodded, a false expression of concern plastered across his face. "May have to upgrade that to more than a bit, Gred."

"I would just like to state for the record that I've never murdered anyone," Bella said absently, looking over the list of new prophecies. Nothing too onerous. The "beware of bubble baths" one directed at Chesterfield, a fifth-year Slytherin prefect, might be a bit tricky, but the others seemed easy enough.

"Well obviously. "Murder" is clearly advanced madness. "Post-OWL madness."

"And here I thought it was pre-OWL madness that was the leading cause of death at Hogwarts."

The boys sniggered at that one. "Speaking of which, "we were" in the middle of something. "So if you don't mind...?"

"Right, right, I'm going. Have fun 'studying,'" she said, making quotation marks with her fingers as she'd seen Justin do when he was being particularly sarcastic. "And if you can get a pass to the Restricted Section, Petrie Flanders had some interesting insights on animation in enchanting."

(Ciardha had made her read his whole treatise on inter-planar metaphysics when she was ten, she couldn't remember exactly what she'd done to annoy him that badly.) At the identical stupefied reactions to that suggestion, she smirked. "Oh, were you not reading up on artificing? My mistake."

She skipped away before they could formulate a response. She did so enjoy getting the last word. And she did need to catch up with Blaise, after all.

Blaise was exactly where the Twins had told her to expect him, secluded in a nook in a rarely travelled corridor with Chelsea Miller, a slightly shorter brunette, pressed against the wall. Her outer robes were puddled on the floor, along with his tie. One of his hands was above her head, steadying himself as the other slipped under her blouse. Her eyes were closed, fingers knotted in his hair and roaming over his back, pulling him closer. She made little moaning noises as his mouth moved up her neck, leaving a trail of tiny red love-bites in its wake. Bella smirked. Poor form, forgetting the silencing charms.

She positioned herself at the edge of the nook, behind Blaise, leaning casually on the wall, and waited. As soon as the girl happened to open her eyes...

"Eee! Blaise, sto— Get off!" she stuttered, pushing him away and straightening her top, her
face very red.

Blaise realized almost at once what had happened, turning to glare at Bella. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, no, not at all, go on," she encouraged him, even as Miller stammered out some excuse and fled, robes in hand.

"Dark Powers, I have got to figure out how you keep finding me!" He pouted at her, as though she would tell him if he looked enough like Zee.

"Trade secret. Seven out of ten, by the way. You lost points for forgetting the Silencing."

Blaise sighed and slouched against the opposite wall, composure already regained. "Dare I ask why you felt the need to come track me down? If we keep ending up in snogging corners together, Daphne's going to get jealous, you know."

Bella snorted. "What about all the other people you actually snog in snogging corners?" Because as much as Blaise might sometimes look like Zee about to kiss her, he never had. "And besides, aren't you two promised? Not like I'm going to get in the way of that."

The boy rolled his eyes, letting out an overly exaggerated groan and sliding bonelessly to the floor, lounging against the wall as though it was a chaise by the fire. "That's actually exactly why she's gotten all possessive lately. Mum, ah...put discussions with House Greengrass on hold. Indefinitely."

Oh. Bella hadn't known that. She blinked, slightly shocked, trying to think of something to say other than, "Why?" Because the Greengrass Heiress was an excellent match. Even more so since the Zabinis weren't actually nobility. It was "Lady Zabini" as a courtesy, Zee had earned it with her wealth and her position in the Ministry.

Blaise gave her a one-shouldered shrug and a crooked grin. "Dunno. Daphne thinks it's because she knows— Damn it! I'm not– I wasn't going to marry!" Wasn't, because if she was staying here to revive the House, it was a very real possibility that she would have to marry. Or at least bear a few bastards for the sake of the Black name. Yeah, not looking forward to that, but. It wasn't like Blaise would be a bad option, but— She hadn't considered this aspect of her whole 'Revive the House' plan AT ALL.

Blaise grinned at her speechlessness. "No matter, it's a long way off. Daph's only upset because she doesn't want to marry either."

"Well, who would? And if she doesn't want to get married, why's she all annoyed with me?" Because now that Blaise mentioned it, it was clear that Daphne had been giving Bella a bit of the cold shoulder since they'd gotten back to school. She just hadn't noticed because pureblood princesses were very subtle about that sort of thing. Some might say too subtle.

"She's a witches' witch, as mum would put it."

"Oh... So, are she and Tracey, then...?" Bella was notoriously bad at noticing when people were in relationships. Zee had informed her of this at great length on multiple occasions. But she was almost sure that, if Daphne was actually interested in anyone in Blaise's little clique, it was Tracey. They actually seemed to like each other.
"Not yet. Once they pull their heads out of their respective arses, maybe."

Eh, close enough. Back to the point. "Right, so it would just be a marriage of convenience anyway." Now Bella really wasn't getting it.

Blaise hummed his agreement. "But if she doesn't marry me, she'll have to marry someone else. Someone who might not be so amenable to that sort of arrangement."

"Oooh." Well, fine then. She understood the problem, but it wasn't really. A problem. "Tell Daphne she can have you, then, and if it turns out I need someone to sire an heir, well, there's no need to be married for that. Problem solved."

"Except for the part where mum thinks the Heir of House Black is a better match than the Heir of House Greengrass," Blaise pointed out.

"Doesn't she have enough money already? No, you know what, if she wants to get at the House of Black so badly, she can marry Sirius when I finally track him down. She can't kill him, though, I do still kind of need him."

Blaise positively cackled at that suggestion. And the Weasleys thought he had no sense of humor. "Please wait and tell her that when I'm there to see."

"Done. And to repay my generosity, you can come help me figure out what Spoilt Bitch dreads."

"Uh, what? I mean, sure, but, what?"

Bella sighed. "You are a legilimens, yes?" They hadn't actually discussed this fact at any point, but Bella was positive she'd caught him trying to get in her head before he even knew her name. Possibly in order to try to learn her name, but that wasn't the point.

"Well, yes, but— How long have you known that?"

"Isn't it obvious? Anyway, Trelawney predicted that whatever Brown dreads is going to happen on the sixteenth of this month. So I need to know what she dreads. So I need you to legilimize her."

Blaise groaned, hauling himself to his feet. "Snape's going to kill me, you know that, right?"

Bella grinned. "Only if we get caught. And I'm not going to tell him, so."

"You wouldn't have to tell him, he's freakishly good at mind magic. I only catch him about seven times out of ten, and that's in practice sessions, when I know he's trying."

Huh. Ignoring for the moment the fact that Snape was apparently giving Blaise special mind magic tutoring sessions, "Is it a requirement for the Head of Slytherin to be a legilimens?" Professor Riddle was, too. Bella thought it probably made the job far easier than it otherwise would be.

Blaise looked bewildered. "I don't think so? Why? Got your eye on the job? Hate to break it to you, but the first step isn't getting into Gryffindor..."


"Ugh, fine, I already said I would..."

"Hmm... Being invisible?"
"What kind of fear is that? Being invisible is great!"

"No, like, no one being able to notice her. Being forgotten and ignored."

"Oh. No, not showy enough."

"Her boggart was herself, covered in boils."

"That would be perfect, if we had potions on Saturdays. I could just make whatever she was brewing explode. But no."

"Death?"

"Just death, generally? She goes around thinking she's going to die all the time?"

"It's like, a low level awareness of her own mortality, more than an acute sort of fear. But yeah."

"Gods and Powers, people are weird. And no, if she's dead, she can't spread the news of Trelawney's prediction coming true."

"Being unpopular."

"Well, that's bloody obvious, I just don't know what I could do to ruin her popularity in a single day."

"Just being hideously embarrassed would probably do it, at least enough to make her think she was going to become unpopular."

"Like... Malfoy embarrassed?"

"Well, I was thinking more like flatulence hexes and the like, but I guess she could be dreading you kicking her arse...could tie back into that death thing..."

"Oh, shut up, I already said I wouldn't kill her."

"Seriously, people liking you more than her would probably be good."

"But Blaise, people don't like me."

"I like you."

"You're not people."

"You say the sweetest things."

"Shut up. Public embarrassment it is."

"Ooh, no, I have a better idea! What about doing something she wants more than anything else?"

"I might be a bit sketchy on the concept of dread, but that kind of sounds like the opposite of what I'm going for, here."

"No, it's perfect, see, you have to make it look like she's about to have her dream come true, and then ruin it. She'll be crushed."

"That...might work. So what does Lavender Brown want more than anything else?"
According to Blaise, the thing Lavender Brown wanted more than anything else was Cedric Diggory, a fifth-year Hufflepuff prefect and quidditch player widely regarded to be one of the most attractive boys in the school. This was easily confirmed by removing the silencing element from the palings separating Bella's half of the dorm from Lavender's. She and Parvati seemed to talk about only a handful of topics: developing their entirely figmental divination skills; how much they hated Lyra Black; whether Diggory or a fourth-year Ravenclaw called Kirke was the most attractive boy at Hogwarts; and how to attract the attention of said boys (and any others who happened to be in the vicinity).

Bella almost thought she ought to feel sorry for them. Even ignoring the sheer idiocy which was attempting to plot against Bella where she could easily overhear them (not that she'd bothered to eavesdrop on them before now, they simply weren't enough of a threat), they were clearly even stupider than she'd thought. And she hadn't thought very highly of them to begin with.

 Granted, Zee had spent a fair percentage of her time discussing boys and fashion glamours and clothing styles as well, but she'd also spent a similar amount of time attempting to teach Bella how to manipulate everyone else, too. Not that it did much good, Bella simply didn't care enough about the subject, but she'd at least picked up enough to know that all the tips in magazines like Witch Weekly were utter dragonshite.

Well, they might get people's attention, but she somehow doubted that color-changing eye-shadow charms would be seen as anything other than garish, desperate cries for help. Seriously, if Lavender wanted to look like she had two half-healed black eyes, Bella could do that for her with no magic at all.

But the point was, Blaise was apparently correct in his assessment of Lavender Brown's deepest desires (if they could be called such in someone so shallow).

Which meant the plan, such as it was, was simple:

Make Lavender have a bad day

Arrange for Lavender and Cedric Diggory to be in the same place, preferably with a few witnesses

But not too many, lest Diggory choose to talk to one of them, rather than Lavender

Get Diggory to talk to Lavender. About literally anything.

Utterly humiliate Lavender in front of Diggory.

The first step wasn't strictly speaking necessary, but Blaise insisted that Spoilt Bitch would be more effectively crushed if Diggory talking to her was even better than it normally would be, like a redeeming feature of her day, instead of just one more good thing among many. Which Bella was honestly just going to have to take his word for, but that was fine, she was used to relying on Zabinis to predict normal people's emotional reactions to her plans.

The third and fourth points were the easiest to achieve. Diggory was a Hufflepuff. He was almost guaranteed to stop and talk to anyone who happened to be in the area, especially if they spoke to him first. And it would be simple enough to temporarily enchant one of the Snogging Nooks to conceal herself, just hit the stupid girl with a babbling jinx and something to cause severe intestinal distress, sit back and watch the fireworks.

The real problem, the most difficult part of the whole thing, was to get Diggory and Spoilt Bitch in the right place at the same time, ideally without too many other people around. Lavender's clique
were probably okay, since they generally followed Lavender's lead and would almost certainly let her do the talking if Diggory were to address them as a group, but if Weasley or Finnegan happened to be around, they would almost certainly commandeер the conversation, so they couldn't just herd all the third-year Gryffindors somewhere after lunch.

And though it should be simple enough to lure Diggory to wherever they decided to stage their little scene with some prefectly duty or other — a dispute to resolve or conflict to diffuse, for example — much of his appeal to Lavender lay in his popularity. He was constantly surrounded by friends and admirers, nearly impossible to separate from them, since they would all too willingly volunteer to accompany him on any minor errand. Causing a major issue requiring enough time to bore the sycophants would almost certainly lead to Diggory calling in other prefects or even professors for assistance.

Oh, and ideally, Bella should appear to be entirely uninvolved in the situation. She had a ready-made excuse to leave the castle entirely, of course — McGonagall expected her to have lessons with Narcissa, if she didn't show up to use the floo, she'd have to provide some sort of excuse there — but if she left the grounds, she'd be giving up her main opportunity to surveill the target and enact something on the spur of the moment, based on events witnessed in the first iteration of the day. Which meant they needed to organize a plan ahead of time that would work regardless of external circumstances.

If Bella was to appear entirely uninvolved (or entirely absent from campus), she obviously couldn't be the one to alert Diggory that his presence was required. She'd considered asking Luna to stage a confrontation with some of her more persistent Nargles, but she wasn't entirely certain the little blonde was up to the task of deliberately picking a fight. She'd also considered luring Draco out to start something with Harry, but she was pretty sure he would be reluctant to let her disappear from the scene once she got him into position. Fortunately, Blaise had heard rumors that several of the more outspoken blood purists among the first-year Slytherins were planning to teach one of the muggleborns a lesson for showing them up in Charms. He was fairly certain that he could nudge them into doing it Saturday after lunch.

The timing was necessitated by the fact that Lavender generally spent Saturdays in the dorm or the commons with her followers, venturing down to the Great Hall for meals, but not spending any significant periods of time wandering the corridors or out on the grounds. Which on the one hand was good, because her routine was very predictable, but on the other rather limited the potential opportunities to divert her into Bella's trap.

The one bit of good luck was that the muggleborn, Rhees, was a Ravenclaw, which meant it wouldn't be entirely odd for Luna to be aware that he was under attack by several jealous morons from Slytherin, and run to tell Diggory about it. Nor would it be at all odd for her to go for help rather than intervening herself, which nearly any of Bella's other allies would. She had vacillated on the decision of whether to tell Luna what she was doing and why, but ultimately had decided that there were too many moving parts to guarantee that Diggory would be the first prefect she found unless she knew that she was supposed to be looking for him. Framing the attack as taking out one of the major bullies in Gryffindor to garner her sympathies ensured her cooperation, though, being Luna, she probably knew or suspected that wasn't Bella's primary concern. Didn't matter, she'd agreed to help anyway.

So that left the problems of separating Diggory from his posse of hangers-on, and arranging for Rhees and the Slytherins, Lavender, and Diggory to be in the same corridor at the same time. It was fairly easy to misdirect someone around the Castle, even someone who'd been here for years, since it so frequently changed of its own accord. If a certain door refused to open, for example, or there was suddenly a very solid-seeming wall where a staircase used to be, well, that was just
Hogwarts for you.

Bella could be in three places at once, but at least one of those had to be lying in wait to spring the trap. (Ideally she'd be able to sleep at some point in all of this, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd stayed up all night if she didn't.) Since she would have to do something to separate Diggory from his friends, it made sense to concentrate her efforts on herding him and Lavender together, but that left the decision of where the trap would be sprung to Rhees and the Slytherins, unless she could enlist someone else to help move them into place.

Which wouldn't be a problem, except she really didn't want to fuck up the whole time travelling thing by making it too obvious to too many people that she was in more than one place at once. Blaise was probably safe, and Harry, they wouldn't tell anyone, she was fairly certain, but Harry would likely be somewhat reluctant to go along with the plan — so far as she knew, he didn't have anything against Lavender, and though he didn't think of himself as a good person, she didn't want to risk pushing him too far too quickly. And Blaise had legilimency training with Snape after lunch, so he couldn't do it.

Luna took the problem out of her hands entirely by simply telling Rhees — Dave — that he was going to be attacked by his classmates on Saturday, as was one of the Gryffindors, and he was needed as bait. She brought him to Bella on the first iteration of Friday morning, and he agreed so quickly to Bella's proposal she suspected he'd already been looking for a way to deal with the tensions between himself and the Slytherins, preferably without getting his arse kicked halfway back to London. Of course, they both knew that if this little plot was interrupted by Diggory as planned, those tensions wouldn't be properly resolved, but it would likely buy him enough time to learn the dueling spells Bella promised to teach him as payment for his involvement and his silence.

So the plan was, Bella would sneak into the other side of the dorm and cast a few spells on Lavender while she slept, eat breakfast on the first iteration of Saturday as usual, then head up to McGonagall's office and use the floo to go to the Leaky Cauldron, where she was supposedly meeting Narcissa, then apparate back to Hogsmeade and sneak back into the school through the Weasley Twins' tunnel and set up her concealment at the end of a second-floor corridor. Rhees would make a show of being alone and defenseless to lure his attackers up to the corridor just after lunch. Luna would leave the Great Hall at the same time to find Diggory (alone) and tell him that her friend needed help. Lavender and company would be diverted into the corridor on their way back upstairs after lunch, through a secret passage at the end nearer Bella's hide-out, so that she could more easily curse Lavender in the back, while Luna led Diggory back to Dave and his attackers (at the other end of the hall). Lavender would likely intervene — she was a Gryffindor, after all — preventing Dave from being severely injured before Diggory arrived. When he did, he would almost certainly ask her what had happened, as a witness and the person who halted the conflict. Being a Hufflepuff prefect, he would probably congratulate her on being a good person or something, points to Gryffindor, detentions for the Slytherins, blah, blah.

Lavender would get to be all overconfident for a minute or two, the babbling jinx helping her natural inability to keep her mouth shut overcome any hesitation that awe at the object of her desire acknowledging her might precipitate, and distract her from the strengthening effects of a nauseating jinx cast while she was being herded into the trap. When the emetic curse struck, she would think that she ought to have known better, clearly something at lunch didn't sit well, etc. Well, once she was capable of thinking at all, after throwing up on the most fanciable boy in school and fleeing in horror. (Blaise assured Bella that she would flee, but if she let Diggory escort her to Madam Pomfrey or the like, that was almost as good.)

Then Bella would erase all traces of her concealments, sneak back out of the school and down to
London, floo back to the Office of the Deputy Head, and meet up with Hermione to turn back.

When they arrived in the morning, she would go to bed so as not to raise Hermione's suspicions — unlike Harry, Hermione did have something against Lavender, but she almost certainly wouldn't approve of the plan anyway, since it wasn't the sort of thing a good person would do (obviously, she and Blaise had come up with it), and she wouldn't want Bella to do anything while time turning that might risk her being caught. She might actually take a nap for a few hours, get up in time for lunch, and head down to the Great Hall (under concealment charms, or glamored to look like someone else). She would follow Diggory when he left the hall to return to the library — he was part of an OWL study group, they spent Saturdays learning all the Defense and History they didn't learn in class and tutoring younger students who had the nerve to ask them for help — and send him to the loo with a quick hex. Luna would find him when he came out and lead him off to save Dave from his tormentors. After that, Bella would probably go back to bed, honestly. Which would put her in place to hear Lavender's return to the dorm, and determine whether the plan had been successful based on her reaction. Plus she'd be in bed when Hermione's alarm went off. And then they'd turn back again.

When they arrived in the morning for the second time, she would probably go down to the kitchens for breakfast with Hermione, then work on homework or something to fill the morning. At lunch, she'd again disguise herself, then, when Lavender and her friends left the Hall, she would block their path up to Gryffindor Tower with a few illusions and misdirection charms, possibly jam one of the moving staircases, forcing them to use the far more circuitous back way up, funnelling them into the trap just in time to intervene with Dave and the Slytherins, be congratulated by Diggory, and projectile vomit all over him.

Simple.

Of course, it was all rendered completely pointless almost immediately.

The first part of the plan went perfectly. Bella simply dropped the partition in the middle of the room, and crept over to the other side. Three very minor spells, she had decided, would be enough to ruin the other girl's day, at least compared to her usual standards, yet likely wouldn't be considered the result of outside interference. It wouldn't do, after all, for Lavender to think someone was out to get her. That would give her someone other than herself to blame when her meeting with dear Cedric went sideways.

First, she cursed Lavender's hair to be limp and greasy, resisting all efforts to be charmed into style. Then she gave the vain girl a couple of very obvious pimples on her nose and forehead. Finally, she put a triggered cancellation charm on her, modified with a little Black Cloak assassin's trick (courtesy of Uncle Draco) so that when triggered, it would slowly unravel any spells cast after it was placed (rather than instantly banishing their effects). So when Spoilt Bitch inevitably found a way to conceal the flaws in her appearance, Bella could simply trigger the charm, and it would appear as though her spells had simply failed naturally (though annoyingly quickly).

Not surprisingly, Lavender was late for breakfast. Most people were, on Saturday — no classes meant no reason to get up at the usual time, and the elves obliged by serving eggs and toast until nine o'clock — but Lavender was later than usual, arriving well after the rest of her little friends. Sure enough, she had found a way to hide the acne under a glamour (Bella triggered the cancellation immediately, so that it would fail before she managed to return to the privacy of her room), but she was covering her hair with a hat — apparently Bella's curse had withstood her attempts to fix it.

As soon as she sat down, Parvati handed her a letter. (Owls, unlike elves, had no respect for the
concept of weekends, so the post still came at the usual time.) Lavender opened it at once, smiling slightly at the prospect of whatever news it contained, but the expression faded from her face almost at once, giving way to tears within the space of two minutes. Parvati patted her on the back supportively while Fay and Sophie hovered, displaying overly exaggerated expressions of concern.

Which, honestly, she had just been planning on giving the girl a bad day before she ran into Cedric, so this was pretty much according to plan, even if it hadn't strictly been planned.

"Who died?" she asked, sauntering down the table to needle the target (and satisfy her curiosity about how exactly the universe had decided to support her objective).

Lavender glared at her through her tears. Bella bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Not that it's any of your business, Black, but I've just had some bad news from home."

"Obviously. Hence the question: who died?"

The ridiculous, emotional child buried her face in her friend's shoulder. It was Parvati, still acting the comforting supporter, who said (with unwarranted anger), "It was her pet rabbit, Binky. He was killed by a fox."

"Her...rabbit." Bella didn't get the whole pet thing, she really didn't. All this upset over a bloody animal? And one she would hardly ever get to see, at that? At least the Penultimate Weasley's stupid rodent was actually here in the Castle. Lavender would hardly notice the useless thing was gone, honestly.

"Oh, no, Lavender, I'm so sorry." Hermione actually sounded like she was.

Bella turned to scrutinize her for a moment. Huh. She looked it, too, her brow furrowed, frowning and worrying the corner of one lip between her teeth, tense around the eyes like she was focusing very hard on the problem before her. Her body leaned toward Lavender and Parvati, one hand slightly outstretched toward them, but tentatively, as though she wanted to pat Lavender's back as well, but wasn't sure her comforting gesture would be welcomed. It was uncannily similar to the display of 'sympathy' Zee had demonstrated for her when Dahlia Rosier's mother had died — though Zee, hardly reluctant to touch...anyone, ever, had ended up more in Parvati's position, holding Bella's crying cousin on one of the sofas in Slytherin (while Bella stood there awkwardly, wondering how Amber had died and whether she would be expected to attend the funeral).

Bella was pretty sure that, unlike Zee, Hermione wasn't a good enough actress to feign sympathy for someone she hated, which honestly just made the whole thing even weirder. Apparently someone else's pet dying (not even Hermione's own pet), was sufficient to overcome the animosity she generally felt and displayed toward her erstwhile tormentor.

"I should have known," Lavender sobbed, her voice muffled by Parvati's robes.

"Erm..."

Spoilt Bitch sat up and wiped the tears from her cheeks, gathering herself to explain. "You know what day it is?"

"Saturday," Bella volunteered, wondering if this was going where she suspected it was going.

"It's the sixteenth of October! That thing you're dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October! Remember? She was right, she was right!"

Bella was truly hard-pressed not to laugh, now. It was slightly annoying that her plan was now
entirely unnecessary — though of course she would still follow through with it, she'd gone to all the trouble of contracting Rhees and organizing things with Luna, it would be more trouble not to go through with it.

Fortunately, Hermione was there to carry their side of the conversation, since Bella was far too distracted with trying not to laugh. "You... You were dreading Binky being killed by a fox?"

"Well not necessarily by a fox, but I was obviously dreading him dying, wasn't I?"

"Oh." Hermione paused for a moment, and then, as though she couldn't help herself, "Was Binky an old rabbit?"

"N-no! H-he was only a baby!"

Parvati gave Hermione a warning glare, which Hermione apparently didn't notice. "But then, why would you dread him dying?"

"Leave her alone, Granger," Sophie said, surprisingly, since she hardly ever spoke up about anything.

"Well, look at it logically. I mean, Binky didn't even die today, did he? Lavender just got the news today—" Lavender wailed, burying her face in Parvati's shoulder again. "—and she can't have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock—"

At that point, the Penultimate Weasley, drawn over along with a modest crowd by the commotion, interrupted. "Don't mind Hermione, Lavender. She doesn't think other people's pets matter very much."

"Shut up, Ronald! If you wanted to keep Scabbers safe from cats, you shouldn't have brought him to school! Crookshanks isn't the only one around, you know!"

"He's the only one that's been trying to kill him, though!"

"Uh, Ron, maybe you shouldn't—" Harry began, with a rather guilty look at Lavender, but the Penultimate Weasley cut him off.

"What! He is, and she hasn't done a bloody thing—"

"This isn't about you and your stupid rat! Binky's dead! Dead!" Lavender shrieked at him. The Weasley went a furious shade of red, but did shut up, finally. "Oh, I should have known, I should have done something..."

"There isn't anything you could have done," Parvati said softly. "What the fates decree must come to pass, it's all part of the pattern in the Great Tapestry."

Bella snorted. She couldn't help herself, really. Even Lavender turned to glare at her.

"Uh, Lyra," Harry began, but he was apparently fated to be constantly interrupted, since Fay talked over him.

"What, you've got something to say, Black?"

She shrugged. She had to say something. "Just that Hermione's right. You can't have been dreading this, QED, this wasn't what Trelawney was warning you about. I'd watch out if I were you," she added with a sharp smile.
Lavender shivered, as though she really did have some ability to see the fate that lay in store for her.

"Come on, Lavender," Parvati said, pulling her to her feet.

"Yeah, you don't have to listen to this," Fay agreed, wrapping an arm around Spoilt Bitch's shoulders on her other side and leading the way toward the door.

The crowd fell apart, then. The Penultimate Weasley dragged Harry away, and Bella excused herself from Hermione to use McGonagall's floo. Whether it was strictly necessary now or not, it was time to put the plan into action.

So far as Bella could tell, the Plan was proceeding well until half-way through the second iteration of the day. She had snuck back into the school and fortified her position, then settled in with an advanced potions theory manual to try to figure out what the point of the Indian snakeroot was in the Blood Replenishing Potion (and whether she could substitute something more commonly available) while she waited.

Around a quarter of one, Dave entered the corridor, followed closely by four first-year snakelings, all clearly looking for a fight. They surrounded him, wands drawn, and began to throw hexes right before Lavender and her cronies stumbled out of the passage just in front of Bella. Their attention was drawn immediately toward the conflict at the other end of the hallway, giving Bella an excellent opportunity to hit Lavender with a babbling jinx and the same nausea inducing spell she'd used on Narcissa at Gringotts.

The girls intervened, as predicted, with Lavender telling off the Slytherins while she, Fay, and Parvati held the lot of them at wandpoint, and Sophie rushed in to make sure Dave hadn't been too badly hurt.

Luna and Cedric arrived a few moments later. Lavender appraised him of the situation and he sent the Snakes away, every one of them throwing glares over their shoulders at Dave, promising retribution at some later date. Luna offered to take him to the hospital wing, clearing the stage to leave only Diggory and the target (and her clique, but they weren't really important).

Unfortunately the sound ward Bella had used to muffle any sounds she might make from behind her concealment was a two-way thing. She'd used it intentionally, so as not to be interrupted in her reading by anyone who happened to pass by, but now she rather wished she'd chosen something else, if only so she could hear the adoring prattle that went along with Lavender's worshipful stare and fervent nodding. All four of the girls were standing between Bella and Diggory, blocking his view of her and the line of fire at the target's back. There wasn't going to be a better opportunity than this.

With a devious smirk, Bella released the nauseating jinx and cast the final curse. Gastrointestinal pyrotechnics ensued. The look of horror on Diggory's face as he found himself covered in bile was just delightful, shocked and appalled, though the sight of him fighting his revulsion to try to fulfil his duties as a prefect and ensure that Lavender was all right, or at least get her up to Hospital, was almost as good.

Once again, Blaise's prediction proved accurate. Lavender froze, her hands hovering before her mouth, raised too late to stop the flood of vomit, her face proceeding from faintly green to red and then directly to white as she realized exactly what had just happened. She fled without another word, away toward Gryffindor Tower, apparently too humiliated to even apologize. Parvati appeared to make some attempt on her behalf, but she and Fay and Sophie quickly followed,
leaving Diggory, soiled and baffled, to stare after the lot of them. He dithered a bit, clearly
uncertain whether he ought to follow, but eventually decided to clean himself up and head back
toward Hufflepuff, probably for new robes. And maybe a bath.

Bella smirked to herself, dismantling the enchantments she'd used to hide herself and erasing every
trace of her presence from the corridor before heading back to the third floor and the passage back
to Hogsmeade.

The point at which she realized something was wrong was when she finally made her way down to
the Great Hall (to follow Diggory and cut him out of the crowd). Lavender and her friends were
nowhere to be seen. Neither Harry nor Hermione seemed to think there was anything odd about the
red-haired, green-eyed girl in a Ravenclaw-blue jumper lurking behind them as the muggleborn
asked after the target and how she was handling the loss of her poor bunnikins.

According to Harry, Sophie had asked Neville to bring them back some food: Lavender wasn't
feeling quite up to facing the Great Hall — too shaken by the loss of her bloody rabbit (or perhaps
by Bella's implication that something worse was still lying in wait for her).

Which, well, that was certainly a complication, but it was pretty much guaranteed that she would
find a way to force them out of the Tower. She had seen them in the first iteration of the day, and
stable time loops were stable. She just had to figure out what that was. But first she had to wait for
Diggory and his mates to leave the Hall and hit him with a compulsion giving him the sudden urge
to go take a piss. Honestly, the things some people came up with spells for. After that, she could
leave him in Luna's hands, apparently that part of the plan went well enough.

Once the hapless prefect had been handed off (and Bella had recovered from the sight of Luna
pretending to be concerned for Dave's safety — really, it was just as well she hadn't asked the
Ravenclaw to play the damsel in distress, she was a terrible actress) she headed back up to
Gryffindor. Only to discover that the entire Tower had apparently been evacuated. Which
explained how Bella" had managed to get Lavender out of the dorm and making her way down
toward the Great Hall. Well, kind of. She still didn't know what she would be doing, exactly.

Just that there were an awful lot of Gryffindors milling around the corridor and trying to sweet-talk
the portrait of the Fat Lady into letting them back in. "Not until your Head of House gives me the
all clear!" she exclaimed, clearly annoyed, before heaving herself out of her chair and her frame.

Bella ducked into a nook to consider the situation, only to find it already occupied by a rather irate
Hermione. "What did you do!" she hissed.

"Uh, no idea. What did I do?"

"Put up a sound ward!" Hermione snapped.

Bella obliged. "What the fuck is going on? I leave for a couple measly hours and you blow up the
Tower in my absence?"

"I— Oooh, you! You did this, not me! And what were you even doing up?! You are Lyra-prime,
aren't you?"

"Uh, yes?" Bella reversed the charms that had made her hair appear shorter and redder, and
tweaked her eye-colour glamour back to violet. " Couldn't sleep. Don't worry, no one saw me."
Well, quite a few people had seen her, but they hadn't recognized her. In her experience, you could
do almost anything while wearing a Ravenclaw badge, and everyone would just assume you were a
quiet, reclusive student they'd never paid much attention to before. Changing her hair and eyes
probably wasn't even necessary. "Seriously, what happened?"

Hermione pouted petulantly at her. "I don't know, I was sleeping, and then there was this explosion that woke me up, and you were gone, and the prefects came running up to tell us all to get out. No one was injured, I don't think, but apparently they're worried about structural damage. I had to hide under my bed so they wouldn't see me, and they definitely saw the partition. Professor McGonagall is going to be furious about that, you know."

Bella raised an eyebrow at her explanation. She couldn't think of many things off the top of her head that would cause potential structural damage to the Tower, especially without injuring anyone. Of course, it was always possible that someone was exaggerating, either McGonagall or the prefects or Hermione herself.

"Where is our dear, sweet Head of House?"

Hermione shrugged. "She and Professor Dumbledore were here earlier, and Professor Flitwick, and Professor Snape. They went in supposedly to assess the damage — the common room was a wreck, you know — but they didn't say anything when they came out."

"And you think I did this...why?"

The other girl gave her a very flat look. "I rarely have the foggiest idea why you do anything you do."

"You know what I mean. Why did you think it was me?"

"Well, who else could it have been?!"

Which, well...that was a point, actually. The Weasley Twins, maybe, but she was fairly certain they'd been at lunch. They were kind of hard to miss, for the same reasons that people would notice if two Lyras showed up at the same meal. "I'm sure any of the NEWT potions students could blow up the Tower if they wanted to."

Hermione smiled nastily, as though she'd caught Bella out. "I never said it was a potions explosion."

Bella just blinked at her. "Why else would they bring in Snape?"

Hermione's face fell even as she said, "Professor Snape. But if you didn't do it..." she sighed. "All my books are up there."

Which had nothing at all to do with Bella. And besides, "You can just grab them when we turn back, the Tower won't be exploded this morning."

Hermione flushed. "Well, I," she stuttered. "I could have, but I was busy trying to figure out what had happened, and I, well, lost track of the time. And now I'm locked out with everyone else."

"What? Oh, you're Hermione-two-prime." Suddenly this little interrogation was starting to make a lot more sense. "So you think I did it because you couldn't catch anyone else doing it, then."

Hermione huffed at her. "That may be a contributing factor, yes."

Bella grinned. "Well, if you tell me where you've been, I'll try to figure out what happened in the next go-around."
Hermione's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"And I'll save your books."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? You clearly haven't already run into Lyra-two-prime, or you wouldn't be questioning me now, since she would clearly know more about what happened, and we'll be able to gather more information if we observe different places anyway. So...where have you been?"

The look of suspicion didn't entirely fade, but the other girl sighed in defeat. "Hermione-null went to breakfast and then spent the morning in the library. She had lunch with Harry and then went back to the library until it was time to meet up and turn back. Hermione-prime made her way up to the dorm with you, got woken up by the explosion, hid, then changed her hair and slipped out with everyone else."

"See, aren't you glad now that I made you learn to do proper hair charms." No one would recognize Hermione without the ridiculously bushy hair, getting rid of it was almost an entire disguise by itself.

Hermione glowered at her, ignoring the comment. "After that, she lurked around here waiting to see what happened with the official response, then went down to the kitchens to grab a snack, and met up with you to turn back. I went back to the Tower immediately to see if there was any sign of the impending explosion. There wasn't, and Lyra-prime was still in bed. I followed Lyra-null and Hermione-null to breakfast, then made sure Lyra-null actually left from Professor McGonagall's office." Oh, good thing she'd done that, then. "Then I hid in the common room to see if anyone was doing anything suspicious. Which no one did, other than Lyra-prime sneaking out glamoured at noon. I couldn't figure out what was going to happen, so I stole a dung bomb from Fred and George and set it off so everyone would clear out and no one would be hurt, just to be on the safe side, you know, and came out here right before the explosion."

"Which was when, exactly?"

"Twelve fifteen, give or take a few seconds."

Right, so what Bella was hearing then, was that there was a window of an hour and a half or so between the time Lyra°, Hermione®, and Hermione'' went down to breakfast, and Lyra° leaving for London, after which Hermione'' would return to the common room. Future-Past Bella, Lyra", would just have to set up some sort of explosion that could cause structural damage to the tower, and time it to go off at 12:15, during that window. Shouldn't be too difficult to do with an enchantment. Especially since Hermione was going to take care of making sure no one was around to be collateral damage. Then she could just wait until Lavender and company were evacuated and decided that they might as well go to lunch after all, and funnel them into the trap from the opposite direction.

"Right, so where are we meeting to turn back again?" Bella asked.

Hermione gave her an exasperated sigh. "By the library."

"'Kay. See you later, then." She put the charms back on her hair and eyes as Hermione stared at her with an expression Bella couldn't quite interpret.

"You're just going?"

"Well...yeah? Was there something else?"
Hermione sighed, moving aside slightly so Bella could leave their shadowed corner. "No, nothing. Just..."

"What?"

"Never mind. Where is Lyra-two-prime going to be now?"

Bella shrugged. If they were meeting up again, the library was out, since there was already a Hermione there, as was the dorm, seeing as it was a shambles at the moment. "There's an abandoned classroom on the fourth floor, at the eastern end of the south corridor. I'll expect you..." She cast a quick *tempus* to check the time. "Around one forty-five?"

Hermione nodded. "You'd better have my books," she said, turning on her heel and stalking away.

Bella cancelled her anti-eavesdropping spells just in time to hear Lavender Brown wail over the murmur of the lingering students, "What do you mean we can't go back in?! This is the worst. Day. EVER!"

Perfect.

She headed down to the library to work on the rune scheme she would need to blow up the common room.

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When Hermione made her way to the abandoned classroom Bella had warded as a private potions lab and study, Bella was waiting for her, every book she had been able to find in their half of the room stuffed into a magically expanded knapsack. She handed this to Hermione, along with a copy of the enchantment diagram she had used.

"By the way, this is what happened to the common room," she said with a grin.

Hermione just stared at her for a long moment. "I knew it was you!"

"Well, I didn't. Time travel's funny like that sometimes."

"Why would you blow up the bloody common room?!"

Bella just smirked. "I had to, it had already happened."

"That is not how time loops work and you know it!"

"Oh, relax, it was just physical force, it wouldn't have damaged the wards and I'm sure the elves will have all the furnishings replaced by bedtime. No harm done. They'll probably let us back in in a few hours."

"Lyra! That doesn't make it okay!"

"I would argue that's a matter of opinion."

Hermione let out a wordless near-shriek of frustration before turning on her heel and storming away.

All according to plan.

Chapter End Notes
Side note, I really enjoy Leverage. —Leigha

Which I'm sure is in no way relevant to anything that happened in this chapter...

My writing has slowed down a lot lately. Brain stupid, bluh. Try to have next chapter finished by the weekend, but we'll see. —Lysandra
Define "human"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was something seriously wrong with Lyra.

Well, "wrong" wasn't quite the right word. There were implications that came with that word that Hermione didn't really intend. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that there was something different about Lyra, something...suspicious. Before, Hermione had been able to mostly ignore it — there were other things to focus on, after all, even other Lyra things, there were more than enough distractions vying for her attention. But she was becoming increasingly convinced that something...

She didn't know, was the thing. But it was definitely something.

It had started way back toward the beginning of the year. Hermione had already been rather more mindful of Lyra than she normally would be some random student even then — putting up that barrier in the middle of the dorm had been quite a way to get her attention — so she'd noticed what had happened when Lyra had faced the boggart.

It had turned into the moon. The full moon, to be precise.

That was just...odd. For one thing, Hermione found it rather hard to believe that Lyra was really afraid of anything. That wasn't quite what she meant, everyone was afraid of something, she just couldn't quite imagine Lyra being afraid. Especially not over something so innocuous. The idea was just so weird, she had absolutely no idea what to think of it. And the look Lyra had given the thing, a blank sort of surprise, she hadn't even moved to do the charm, Lupin had had to take care of it. She had to wonder...

And it wasn't just the moon thing, though that was one of the more confusing bits of evidence. There was Lyra's absurd magical competency to consider. Okay, forget for a moment that Lyra had supposedly been homeschooled by a cursebreaker, or whatever, she was still only thirteen. She hadn't been able to find much anything definitive on the topic — apparently, British mages didn't seem to think magical development was a worthwhile area of study — but Hermione seriously doubted Lyra's abilities were at all...realistic. Feasible, that was a better word. She meant, Lyra was too powerful, the breadth of her knowledge too wide, the ease with which she threw around magic, sometimes silently and even wandlessly...

There was a difference, Hermione had already noted, between the way students and adults cast spells. A sort of familiarity, a confidence, that even few NEWT students seemed to approach. But Lyra didn't use magic like a student. Her spellcasting looked like an adult's. Which, according to everything Hermione knew of magic theory, quite simply made no sense at all. She either had to have years more practice using magic than a thirteen-year-old reasonably could (unless she'd started learning and using formal magic at age three or something), or there was some reason she had a closer or deeper connection to her magic than anyone else Hermione had met since she'd come to Hogwarts.

Not to mention Lyra herself was just bloody weird. Hermione had mostly passed this off at first, assuming hers was just an unusually straightforward, brash personality. But it was more than that. She didn't seem to... Despite how intelligent she was — Hermione could count on the fingers of one hand everyone her age she'd ever met who could actually keep up with her and still have a
couple left over — Lyra seemed confused far too often. Not by academic stuff, but by people stuff. She just...didn't understand people.

It had taken a while for Hermione to put this together, but it explained far too much. Why Lyra did and said things the way she did, it wasn't that she chose to not care about the effect she had, it wasn't that she was intentionally provoking people — though, she did do that sometimes, it was usually obvious when she did. No, Lyra simply didn't expect to offend people, most of the time. It was true she didn't care when she crossed a line (like blowing up the bloody common room — Hermione still didn't know why she'd done that), but she didn't even seem to know where they were, she just...

Honestly, Hermione was becoming increasingly convinced Lyra simply didn't understand human emotion. She hadn't thought so at first, she'd thought Lyra was...the way she was on purpose, that she was doing it to mess with people. Either that, or she just thought social niceties were stupid, so had consciously chosen to ignore them, said or did what she wanted to say or do with no concern for what anyone else might think. (Hermione could admit she agreed, for the most part, she just couldn't not care as easily as Lyra did.) At worst, she'd thought the other girl was just thoughtlessly impulsive. But it was more than that, it was too... She was too consistent. If she was just doing things on impulse, Hermione would expect her to care about unintended consequences of her actions, for herself at the very least! But she just didn't, at least not so far as Hermione could see. And one would think, if it were an act, Lyra would slip at times, would show some hint of sympathy here or there, the tiniest indication that she understood Hermione's misgivings about half the nonsense that she got up to.

But no, there was never anything. Nothing, ever. Lyra was always the same, the "act" of her complete emotional dissociation from everything around her never wavered. Even when she was amused or annoyed, her reactions seemed somehow superficial, as though if no one were watching, she wouldn't bother.

Hermione had noticed almost right away that Lyra didn't care what anyone thought of her. By this point, she was starting to doubt Lyra cared about anything at all.

Put all of it together, the peculiarities she'd catalogued over what, after all the time travel, amounted to nearly five months of observation, and Hermione had an unsettling suspicion she couldn't ignore any longer.

She couldn't shake the thought that Lyra might not be entirely human.

She had, of course, considered the possibility that Lyra was just a garden-variety human psychopath who happened to also be a witch, but that wouldn't explain her unreasonable magical abilities and range of knowledge. No mundane, human explanation she could think of would.

But of course, this being the magical world, there were more than just human explanations available to her. And the more she saw of Lyra Black, the more convinced she became that there was something literally inhuman about her.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. Or...not necessarily, at least. "Not human" could mean a whole lot of different things, and whether that should make any difference at all to Hermione or not depended on exactly which they were talking about. Some non-human magical beings were more or less harmless, it didn't really matter. Others were...

Well, not so much.

At one end of the spectrum were relatively normal people who had some sort of magic (or, as in
the case of werewolves, a curse) which led them to act less human over time. Metamorphmagi, for example, were just witches or wizards with an extreme talent for reflexive transformation magic. They tended to live absurdly long lives, regenerating their bodies with magic, periodically changing their identities and age and even sex, growing apart from humanity as other people aged and died around them.

Metamorphmagi could be extremely dangerous spies and criminals, but they didn't actually prey on humans, as in, for food. They were born human, after all, even if they tended to outlive their families by centuries or even (hypothetically) millennia. It was hard to track their histories, but according to one source, Perenelle Flamel was supposed to be a metamorph, and there'd been a notorious thief and con-woman called Lady Grace who was a metamorph and a legilimens (which Hermione thought was just cheating at life). She was one of the thieves who had broken into Gringott's in 1965, though she'd apparently abandoned the identity after that. And the Blacks, of course, had had a few very notorious metamorphmagi in their family tree. One genealogy suggested that a single Black metamorph called Nymphadora had fathered over three dozen children in the generation preceding Lady Cromwell's rise to power. (At least, she assumed "fathered" was the right word — that was a feminine name, but the birth dates made absolutely no sense otherwise.) She’d disappeared centuries ago, and no one knew if she was still alive, but there was a younger one called Cassiopeia who had only been missing for a few decades.

It would make a lot of sense if Lyra was really Cassiopeia, or even Nymphadora. She certainly looked like a thirteen-year-old, but if she was a metamorph the advanced magical skills she displayed could be the product of decades or centuries of practice, rather than just a few years. And her detachment from the world around her could easily be the product of a metamorph's...extended perspective on life and death and the very idea of personal identity — even her complete lack of modesty, and the way she always looked good, even first thing in the morning, would make sense if she could change anything about herself whenever she wanted. But then she'd come across a source — quite by accident, in a potions theory text — that claimed the aging potion she and Lyra had used when they went to London didn't work for metamorphmagi. And if it just didn't work, she could have convinced herself that Lyra had used her metamorphy to fake the effects, but the text — and the two corroborating sources she'd found later — were very specific on the fact that the potion should have some effect, but the results would be dangerous, erratic, unpredictable, and very, very obviously not right.

So Lyra wasn't a metamorph. Which was a shame, because quasi-immortal shapeshifter was the least disturbing possibility Hermione had managed to come up with. (And also it suggested that Lyra was just that pretty, which was annoying.)

The list of possible explanations also included that she was a werewolf or demon (or possessed by one), or a lilin or veela, or a vampire (or dhampire?), or a fae changeling, all of which were more likely to be more dangerous to humans than a metamorph, though how they were dangerous, and to what degree, varied wildly. Unfortunately she just didn't have enough data to properly inform the differential.

She was almost positive that Lyra wasn't a veela. They were supposed to have some sort of inherent sexual aura and begin experimenting with sex at what humans considered a disturbingly young age. They supposedly had very little concern for human ideas of propriety and hated being in enclosed spaces, which kind of fit. But while Lyra was annoyingly attractive, she didn't exactly seem to be aware enough of other people to be that...sexually oriented, and much as she might like to go wandering off in the Forbidden Forest, she didn't seem to have a problem with Potions in the dungeons. And also, veela were supposed to be some sort of human-bird hybrid, they tended to have feathers in their hair even in their most human form. So that one was out.
The information on lilin was much...spottier. Contradictory. Some sources described them as being rather like veela, but with a slightly different psychological profile. Others seemed to be referring to some sort of sex demons, using the term interchangeably with incubus and succubus. Which wouldn't be mutually exclusive, except for the fact that incubi and succubi were supposed to be more or less intangible except when they were feeding on humans. But those could both be eliminated, too, either for the same reasons as veela, or because Lyra was undeniably tangible.

Vampire or dhampire was...probably almost as unlikely. Again, there seemed to be some confusion about what the two terms meant, specifically. Some authors used them interchangeably, while others implied differences in the way they were created or organized socially (though which traits were attributed to which creature varied by author). But nearly all of them agreed that both types of creatures had problems with sunlight, either because it physically hurt them or because it revealed their true nature. It was possible that there was some sort of magic they could perform to prevent or hide that effect, but if there were Hermione would have expected it to be well-known and publicized, especially since most of the information she'd found on vampires had been focused exclusively on identifying and killing them. (Humans really didn't like not being at the top of the food chain.) And Lyra had never made any efforts to avoid the sun.

Outside of the lilin thing, it was nearly impossible to eliminate all of the different types of demons and possessing entities that could possibly be responsible for Lyra's emotional blind spots, odd behavior, and even odder magical abilities. Or rather, it was easy enough to eliminate dozens of them, but there were just so many demons, and they were so poorly catalogued and studied that she couldn't even know if she'd found all of the relevant ones.

She had asked Professor Lupin about recognizing possession — completely aside from the Lyra issue, it seemed like a sensible precaution given their experiences with Quirrell and Ginny. And there were no hints that Lyra's body was being corrupted by contact with a demonic entity — most demons couldn't possess anyone for very long without their victim growing very ill, undergoing involuntary transfigurations like the face Harry had described on the back of Quirrell's head, or simply having their body break down on a fundamental level. And mental possession, like what had happened to Ginny, almost always resulted in a dramatic shift in personality, dizziness, poor motor control, confusion, exhaustion, and memory loss. While Hermione hadn't known Lyra long enough to say whether she'd undergone a sudden shift in her personality before coming to Hogwarts, she could certainly say that Lyra never seemed confused or exhausted, and her memory was nearly as good as Hermione's. And she didn't think she'd ever seen Lyra lose her balance. She had seen her turn around to talk to Zabini while skipping down the stairs and avoid all the trick steps without breaking stride. So possession was out, but that she might be some sort of demon wasn't.

Changeling fae was probably the best fit, based on the behavioral descriptions she'd been able to find in the library. There was just one major problem with that theory: the Fae hadn't been known to interact with humans in centuries. They had apparently shifted their entire society to a plane of existence slightly out of sync with this one when humans became too numerous. The only evidence that they were still alive at all came from veela and goblins, with whom they apparently still occasionally interacted. But neither goblins nor veela had any particular reason to be honest with humans about anything (given what she knew of human-goblin interactions and the way veela were treated like animals in the literature, Hermione would be surprised if they were), and there was quite a lot of speculation about potential misinformation disseminated about the fae in the centuries before their disappearance. One source had even suggested that accounts of interactions with the fae had been enhanced or entirely fabricated based on the lives of certain notorious and legendary witches and wizards, including no less than six members of the House of Black. Which was just — urgh, seriously?!
So it was very, very possible that the similarities between Lyra's behavior and abilities and the accounts of changelings was because the accounts of changelings were based on the antics of ancestors from whom she'd inherited some strain of familial insanity, rather than because she actually was a changeling.

Granted, she'd never seen Lyra handle anything made of iron or steel, but she couldn't think of the last time she had, either. All the doorknobs and taps and hinges in the school were brass, glass, or porcelain; the tableware was pewter (enchanted to prevent lead leaching into the food); and the buttons on wizard's robes, including their school robes, were traditionally carved from bone or stone or softer metals like copper. Which, she realized belatedly, was probably because the castle was maintained by house elves. The jeans Lyra had borrowed when they went to London had rivets, but the few spots where they touched skin would be easy enough to cover with transfiguration, or even Spellotape. And none of their potions had called for iron cauldrons or stirring implements yet.

So the leading theory at the moment — at least partially because it was the easiest to test (outside of ambusing Lyra with a bit of iron, which, given her reaction to the Hippogriff Incident, she might not visibly react to even if it did hurt her, and would almost certainly annoy her and reveal Hermione's suspicions) — was that she could be a werewolf.

There were a couple of compelling reasons to think this, aside from the fact that werewolves tended to become more wolfish and less human the longer they lived with the curse, which dovetailed nicely with Lyra's lack of human understanding. First, her boggart had been the moon. The full bloody moon. And then she had disappeared on the night of the last full moon. She hadn't showed up to turn back at eleven, throwing off their entire time-turning schedule — Hermione had had plans for the second and third iterations of that evening, to say nothing of the night shift — and when she'd finally come back to the dorm, well after sunrise, she'd been tired and irritable and apparently less inclined to make an effort to act, well, human, than usual. (And not coincidentally, less inclined to explain her abominable behavior.) And, perhaps most convincing, when she'd changed her robes that evening, Hermione had seen that she was covered in cuts and scratches. Werewolves were known to inflict damage on themselves if there were no other targets for their aggression, and if those cuts weren't cursed, she was sure Lyra could have healed them in two seconds.

This was the easiest theory to test because tonight was the full moon again. If Lyra was a werewolf, she'd have to find some excuse to disappear again (or just vanish, but still). Which didn't necessarily prove anything, but if she showed up to turn back as usual, she couldn't possibly be a werewolf.

Though it would be good to know ahead of time if she wasn't planning on coming, if only so Hermione could plot out her day accordingly. She supposed she could just ask. Not whether Lyra was a werewolf, per se (though she was sure the other girl wouldn't hesitate to ask if she suspected Hermione wasn't human). Just...whether she was planning on showing up tonight. She checked her watch. Lyra should be coming back to the dorm any minute now.

About two seconds later, the door flew open. "Hey, Hermione. Ready to go?"

"Ah, well, I actually wanted to talk to you about something," she began, hesitating slightly because, well...trying to deduce the species of her roommate wasn't exactly the sort thing she'd ever expected to come up. The purpose of her question made it difficult to ask innocuously, no matter how unexceptional it might be.

Lyra gave her a blank look. "I swear, I had nothing to do with the new wall."
"Wha— No, it's not about that." They had discovered only that morning that a wall had somehow developed behind Lyra's room divider. She'd made it transparent to check whether the other third-year girls had left for breakfast already, only to find a solid wall, indistinguishable from any other wall in the castle. After poking at it for a few minutes, Lyra had declared that the house elves must have put it in when they were repairing the damage to the tower two weeks before.

Personally, Hermione suspected Professor McGonagall might have had something to do with it. She'd had all six of them in her office after the professors had inspected the dorms in the wake of Lyra's as yet unexplained decision to explode the bloody commons. She'd been livid. Hermione had never seen her lips go so thin, even when she'd flubbed the polyjuice last year and gotten stuck halfway between cat and human.

Lavender and her cronies had sat there all smug while Professor McGonagall lit into Lyra for lying to her about the paling in the first week of school, and Lyra just sat there taking it, her smirk growing broader as the tirade wore on. When the professor finally paused for breath, she'd said, "I never said I didn't do it, just that it was a bit absurd to believe that I had," which had rendered Professor McGonagall absolutely speechless for a full ten seconds.

When she'd finally recovered her senses, she'd slapped Lyra with a month's worth of detentions (with Filch, she didn't want to deal with Lyra herself) and ordered her to take it down. But then Fay, much to Hermione's surprise, had spoken up, asking if they could keep it, but maybe just make it so Lyra couldn't take it down whenever she wanted. And Professor McGonagall had asked them if they all wanted the room divided (which they did, none of the others wanted to share a room with Lyra, and Hermione didn't want to share with them, either), and, after ranting about Hogwarts policy for a few more minutes, agreed they could keep it, but only because the Castle had already given the new room its own exit and loo.

"I don't care about the wall—"

"Huh, I thought you were annoyed about it earlier."

"Well, yes, but only because you still haven't told me why you set off a runes-based bomb in our own common room."

"It's all your fault, you never should have told me I did," she insisted. If it weren't for the shit-eating grin on her face, she might have almost sounded sincere.

"You're infuriating, you know that?!

"It's part of my charm." (Hermione glowered at her.) "So what did you want to talk about?"

She sighed. "Are you planning on turning at eleven and seven?"

"Uh, yes? Why wouldn't I? I mean, I do have a thing I was planning to do, but it shouldn't interfere with the schedule."

"Well, you did just vanish on me, that one night—"

"Oh, come on, that was one night, and it was ages ago — besides, why would you wait until—" And then she cut herself off and started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Uh, you think I'm a werewolf?"
"Well— I— No, I don't, I just..."

"Why else would you think I wasn't going to show up on the night of the full moon? Gods and Powers, that's hilarious. You know like, half my jewelry is silver, right?"

Hermione couldn't stop herself defensively crossing her arms. "How would I know that, for all I know, it's costume jewelry."

There were half a dozen little silver flowers with bright red hearts nestled in Lyra's curls today. She pulled one of them free and offered it to Hermione, still giggling. "It's silver, promise. You can test it, if you like. Just mind the ruby, that's real too."

Of course they were. Because apparently the Blacks had more money than they could ever possibly use. Lyra, in typical Lyra fashion, thought nothing of spending thousands of pounds on illegal books on a whim. Why wouldn't she casually wear real jewels around school?

She took it anyway, just in case Lyra was trying to fake her out, but she didn't really doubt it. She was just kicking herself over missing something so obvious.

"It wasn't that funny," she said, pouting slightly, but she had hoped that she'd be right about this one, because while werewolves were dangerous, and naturally dark creatures, they were basically just normal witches and wizards about ninety-eight percent of the time. They weren't contagious when they weren't transformed. If Lyra wasn't a werewolf, that only realistically left some kind of demon, or a changeling, both of which were more likely to be dangerous (and even malicious) all the time. A lot of them preyed on humans, either stealing energy from them or killing them for food and...

"Yeah, it was. Why would you even think...?"

"Well, you weren't here on the last full moon, and when you came back, you were covered in cuts and scratches, and I saw your boggart!"

"Bog— Oh! Yeah, I don't know what that was about, maybe it was just confused, it had just been forced to change quite a few times. And you've clearly never seen real werewolf scars, if you think those little scratches were— Seriously?"

"Fine, yes, it was stupid, forget I said anything. What are you doing tonight?" she asked, a desperate and obvious bid to change the subject.

Lyra grinned, giggling again. "Tailing Professor Lupin. I'm pretty sure he's a werewolf, you see..."

"Oh, shut up."

"You have no idea how funny this is. I've got to tell Blaise..."

"Are we turning back or not?" Hermione snapped.

It wasn't until the world had solidified around them once again that Hermione thought to ask, "What were all those scratches from, if not a werewolf?"

Of course, Lyra just smirked at her.

"Let me guess: 'That would be telling.'"

"Got it in one!" the infuriating girl said cheerfully, shrugging off her robes and letting down her
hair. "Now, if you'll excuse me, even werewolves need to sleep."

Hermione glared at her, but said nothing. She might be laughing now, but Hermione would figure her out. Eventually.

Harry jumped, suddenly and painfully, like the worst static shock he'd ever gotten in his life. Heat flaring across his face despite the highland autumn chill, he forced himself to look away, staring at the bare branches of the trees above him.

Somehow, when Lyra had warned him that wilderfolk didn't really behave like normal people, it hadn't occurred to him that normal people behavior included wearing clothes.

Harry had been anticipating today with no small amount of dread. For one thing, it was Hallowe'en — the last two years, this was about the time everything started going swiftly downhill. He realized it was likely nothing horrible would happen, that his first couple years at Hogwarts had been very unusual, all things considered. But with the visceral horror that were dementors and the sinister threat that was Sirius Black combining into a lingering feeling of danger, yeah, he wasn't convinced this year would be any different.

(Though, he was mostly convinced that Lyra was right, and Black was innocent. He had been an Auror and a fighter for the Light — and, according to the papers, a close friend of his parents'. He never had had a trial, and from what Harry had heard the evidence he'd ever done anything wrong was extremely thin. But, while he might very well be innocent, other people didn't know that, which meant things could still go horribly wrong pretty easily.)

The other thing bothering him, Hallowe'en just happened to be the first official Hogsmeade trip of the year. Sixth- and seventh-years did go off to the village all the time, nobody tried to stop them, but this was the first time the carriages were actually made available to get people back and forth, a few staff members lingering in the village in case the younger students needed anything. Though, he knew from a few Gryffindors (Fred and George, mostly) that even lower-year students sometimes wandered off to Hogsmeade, the staff letting them go so long as they had permission from their parents.

Harry had noticed before how little supervision they were usually under — the professors did keep an eye on them in class, of course, and in the halls and at meals, but otherwise they were mostly left to their own devices. It was why the students could get away with all kinds of stuff, from smuggling in contraband to having noisy all-night parties in the common room to rampant bullying to snogging (and more, he'd heard) in broom cupboards and abandoned classrooms. And some of the rumors of what went on in the Hufflepuff common room were so extreme he couldn't believe half of them were true. Hermione had commented before that, from what she'd read (because she was always reading about everything), magical society held to a pre-modern concept of childhood, thought of people their age less like fragile babies that needed to be coddled and more like tiny adults who could for the most part manage themselves.

Honestly, nobody had ever treated Harry like a fragile baby that needed to be coddled, so he mostly had to take her word on that one (which wasn't unusual, he just took Hermione's word on a lot of things). He was just relieved he was allowed to do what he wanted without being yelled at.

So, everyone had been all excited about the first big Hogsmeade trip of the year, the first time most people in their year would be going. So he'd been surrounded with them all gushing about it, for weeks now. And he couldn't go. With his little explosion at Marge being a bitch, he never had gotten Vernon to sign the damn form, and McGonagall hadn't been willing to make an exception. (He thought because of Black, from how uncomfortable she'd looked, which was stupid.) Which at
Once was a disappointment and a relief. Yes, he'd like to get out of the castle, be able to do ordinary things like go out to village and mess around like a normal bloody kid.

But on the other hand, going to Hogsmeade would mean having to go past the dementors at the gates. So, it was complicated.

He'd been lingering in the entrance hall, watching everyone else cheerfully crowding out to the carriages, trying not to look like it was bothering him, when Lyra had suddenly shown up out of nowhere, saying she was going out to the forest to meet with the wilderfolk girl she'd met a couple weeks ago, and asked if he wanted to go with.

There was nothing he could say to that but agree to go along. Honestly, he'd had absolutely no idea what he was going to do with himself, with everyone else he might have hung out with out of the castle. He might have otherwise have taken the time by himself to get his classwork done — he'd noticed Ron was more a hindrance than anything when it came to studying — but, well...there were side effects to Hermione being in a fight with Ron, and actually having other friends to hang out with. Particularly, she outright refused to help him with his work like she used to, so he had to do it all himself these days. With quidditch practice and Ron being a constant distraction, if he didn't want to be up past midnight finishing things the night before he had to get everything done early. Which meant he didn't really have any work to do at the moment. If Lyra hadn't appeared and given him something to do, he might have ended up just...sitting around somewhere, trying not to think about things.

And that never ended well for him.

And, well, even if he had had something else to do, he might have decided to tag along anyway. He was sort of interested about wilderfolk — they didn't learn much of anything at all about other magical races, and people seemed to know nothing about wilderfolk in particular. (Harry had asked a couple magical-raised people about wilderfolk and they had very little to say, even Hermione had only read references to their existence.) That was just...weird, especially since there was a whole tribe of them, dozens, living out in the forbidden forest. But then, apparently most people thought they were werewolves, for some stupid reason. Werewolves were still human twenty-eight days out of the month, why would they be living out in the forest? Idiots.

It did sound interesting, but he would have gone with Lyra even if it didn't. Honestly, Lyra was one of his favorite people in the world these days. He couldn't think of a single other person who had always talked to him like he was just a normal bloke — not a worthless freak ruining everything, or some sort of magic Jesus who was either going to save the world or ruin everything. Even Ron and Hermione had flipped out a little when they'd first met, but Lyra hadn't reacted at all. (He was actually a little embarrassed that the first thing he'd said to her was asking if she was related to Sirius Black, that seemed almost as bad as asking if he was the Harry Potter.)

That, and she was just nice. Okay, she was nice to him, anyway. Well, no, she wasn't even really that nice to him. "Nice" wasn't quite the right word. She just...She just talked to him, was all. (And had all sorts of interesting things to say when she did, even if he didn't know what to think about a lot of them.) And listened when he talked about things. Granted, she often thought the things he had to say were silly or stupid, but she actually listen — the things she thought were silly or stupid were what he actually meant, not what she decided he must be trying to say. He hadn't noticed how often people assumed he meant something different than what he was actually saying until he'd met someone who just took all of it at face value.

And, well, when he did say something she thought was silly or stupid, she'd explain why she thought it was silly or stupid, and more often than not she had a point. It honestly didn't bother him
that much. After a couple years being friends with Hermione, he was used to a smarter girl telling him he was being an idiot. Lyra was just less patronizing and more blunt about it.

That was reason enough for him to want to hang out with her, but he had another he'd deny if anyone asked. He wasn't so ignorant of what was going on in his own head. It wasn't the most important thing, but he did notice Lyra was a girl. A pretty girl, who actually went out of her way to talk to him.

So, he hadn't even really thought about it, he'd just agreed to come along.

And now he was standing in the middle of the Forbidden Forest trying not to stare as Lyra chatted with a girl wearing a cloak and nothing else — even the cloak was Lyra's, she'd been completely naked at first — as though it was the most normal thing in the world. Or, well, talking at her, at least, saying hi. The wild...person? Wild...ling? (A wilderfolk, just one, didn't sound right.) The wolf girl, anyway, wasn't saying much. She was just kind of staring at him, all tense, like she was going to run away or attack him or something.

"Why is he here?" she asked abruptly. "Why is he, all..."

Lyra looked over, he could feel his face burning even more. Trying to pretend someone else didn't exist was way harder than sitting in his room, making no noise, and pretending not to exist himself.

"Acting all weird and embarrassed? Probably because you're not wearing clothes, people can be weird about that. And he's here because you were asking me about humans last time, I thought it would be easier to bring one than try to explain them myself." And then she stepped away from the wolf girl and smacked him in the back of the head. "Stop acting like a moron."

"Hey!"

"Honestly, haven't you ever seen a naked woman before?"

"No!"

Lyra tilted her head to the side, giving him a completely uncomprehending look. "I thought you were on the quidditch team. In case you haven't noticed, all of your chasers are female."

Was it possible to burst into flames simply from embarrassment? If accidental magic could make the earth swallow him up right now, that would be great. "I– Well, yes, but—" From the beginning it'd struck him as very strange, the open showers in the quidditch changing rooms, he always just went up to the tower where he could do it in private. "I know we can shower together, but that doesn't mean—"

Lyra sighed and turned back to the girl. "I'm not sure, but you know how humans don't go into heat?" The wolf girl nodded. "Human males want to mate with human females all the time, but there are social conventions and stuff that make it inappropriate for them to act like it sometimes. Most of the time, really. Including when they're first being introduced to someone."

"B– wha– That's not—" Honestly, it wasn't. He– Well, the wolf girl was a girl and very naked, he couldn't deny that, but he wasn't... That wasn't what he was thinking about, not even close. Honestly, she hardly even looked, well, like a girl. She was almost an adult, for one thing, and well, he could believe she'd lived her entire life out here in the forest. She was almost painfully skinny. There was a leaf in her shaggy, uncombed hair, and her feet were covered with mud from the recent rains. And more importantly, she looked like he was making her just as uncomfortable as she was making him. (She was being very careful to keep Lyra between the two of them, and it
almost looked like she was baring her teeth at him.) Harry didn't like making girls uncomfortable. Which was just annoying, because he seemed to do that sort of a lot. It was just...

Well, it was just really bloody uncomfortable, wasn't it?

"I probably should have brought Blaise, but Harry's the most normal human I know."

"What? Wait. Is that supposed to be a compliment or an insult?" Honestly, he couldn't tell, that flat way she had of saying everything. If Petunia had said it, "normal" would have been a compliment, but Harry had never met anyone less like Petunia than Lyra.

She blinked at him, her face as expressionless as the wolf girl's "It's just a fact."

"Well...okay. But, um..."

"What, was I wrong? About the clothes?"

"What? I– I don't know! I just— It's not polite, staring."

"And why is your reflex to stare?"

"Well– It's just weird, uh odd. Unusual. You just don't see naked girls around."

Lyra just kept looking at him, if anything confused that this was making him uncomfortable.

Which, well, he was used to Lyra being bloody weird, so that wasn't even surprising, when it came down to it. Besides, she did see naked women all the time, or at least herself. Probably Hermione, too. (Not that he really thought she'd think it was any weirder if the wolf girl had been a naked bloke, but that wasn't the point.) "It's– It's like if you were to go and, I don't know, start flying around Muggle London. Anyone would bloody stare."

"And it's not polite because...?"

"It's just...not? Most people don't like to be stared at. It's awkward."

By the way a single eyebrow ticked up her forehead, she didn't understand that either. "Not as awkward as obviously not staring," Lyra said, motioning toward Harry's entire...person.

And, well, she had a point. With an act of sheer will, he schooled his face into a neutral expression, stood up straight, and met the wolf girl's eyes. Pointedly ignoring everything below her chin, but still. She peered back at him, head cocked slightly to the side, her narrow, dirt-streaked face peculiarly expressionless. Just looking at her, he wouldn't guess she wasn't human — he might just pity her a bit, the tangled nest of mixed blonde hair was thicker and messier than his ever got — if it weren't for the bright gold of her eyes. "Let's start over. I'm Harry. What's your name?"

"Name?" the girl repeated. "What is a name?"

Harry was staring again, and now it had nothing to do with the wolf-girl's lack of clothing. "You... You don't know what a name is."

"No."

"You have got to be kidding me!" Harry muttered, turning back to Lyra. "Seriously? How long did you spend talking to each other, and you didn't introduce yourself?"

Lyra just shrugged. "It didn't come up."
Harry pointedly ignored that, turning back to the wolf girl. "Then what– How do you talk about each other? You and the rest of the wilderfolk, I mean, how do you talk about people if nobody has any names?"

"We do not talk. Not in any way that would make sense to you, I mean. Talking is a human thing that humans do with other humans. And centaurs, they do it too. We only talk when we have to with humans or the centaurs. We do not talk with each other." This was the most the girl had said at once so far, making the peculiar way she spoke far more obvious. It was cautious and stiffed, as though she were taking special care to say everything correctly, like...well, like it were completely foreign to her, and she didn't do it very often.

The idea was so completely strange Harry had absolutely no idea how to respond.

Luckily, Lyra had fallen into that explaining-things mode she and Hermione both seemed to live in half the time. "A name is a special kind of word used to refer to a specific person. All humans and most other magical beings have one, though exactly how they work varies from culture to culture. Some cultures, they'll have names that describe them somehow, which might change over their lives, but here people are given a name which isn't usually meant to mean anything, just a series of sounds people will use to refer to them for the rest of their life."

The wolf girl slowly nodded, eyes a little unfocused, digesting the idea. "Is that why he said he is hairy earlier? Humans are not really, so I was thinking."

Lyra let out a short cackle, Harry trying to ignore the added warmth to his cheeks. "Ha, no, that's not what he was saying. His name is Harry, but it doesn't mean hairy, they're separate words."

"That is confusing."

"Human language is stupid sometimes."

With an odd noise Harry couldn't quite figure out, somewhere between a moan and a giggle, the girl said, "Is funny, humans be stupid to show they are not stupid. They come up with special things, all kinds of things, and say, they do things because they are smart. But it is a lot of work to do human things, I think. There are so many things, humans have to be taught how to do human things for years and years and years. And you know, I watch them, and so many humans are scared and sad all the time. All your human things, they do not make you happy, I think. It is stupid."

The faintest sense of a frown crossed Lyra's face — from the question she asked, she was completely passing by the part of that ramble Harry thought was strange, but okay. "If you think the way humans do things is stupid, then why do you want to learn about it all?"

"It is like me." The wolf girl grinned, a peculiar, frozen, close-lipped version of the expression, the gold in her eyes almost sparkling. "I don't want to learn human things because they are better, but because they are different. Most of us, we don't care, we just try to stay away, but I was always different. I am always most curious, I am always most brave. I hunt with the centaurs and I start fights with the spiders and I sneak into human places, and I listen and I watch. I am always finding new things, it is what I do.

"And now I am thinking that if I talk to humans enough they will not be afraid of us so much. And they will learn wolf things instead of human things and maybe they will not be so sad."

"I'm perfectly happy."

"You are not human, you said so yourself."
"Good point."

Harry had been trying to work through what the girl was saying, but that little exchange completely distracted him from everything she'd said before. "You're not human? I thought— I mean, but..."

A crooked grin spreading across her face, Lyra's voice was shaky with laughter. Which was weird, Harry didn't think this was nearly that funny. "Why, Harry, that's a rather personal question to ask someone, isn't it?"

It took Harry a couple seconds to figure out what the hell he was supposed to say to that. The way Lyra and the girl kept smiling at him was not helping. "I mean, I don't care if you're not." He'd always known Flitwick wasn't entirely human, and now he knew Hagrid wasn't either, and it didn't matter to him, really, not even a little bit. It was just a thing, he didn't see why it should make a difference one way or another. "I just mean... Some of this stuff is still new to me, you know, I'm not entirely used to the idea of there being people who aren't human. I'm just curious, I guess, I don't really care, but I don't want to—"

"It's fine, Harry, you can stop panicking. The wilderfolk concept of race is one defined by behavior more than biology — I don't act like a normal human, therefore I'm not one."

The wilderfolk girl nodded at that, the gesture a bit robotic, something more imitated than natural. "Is obvious. I think, I look human now, but no one would think I am one because I cannot do human things, see? Doing is more important than being. My people, we do not accept only people who are exactly like us. Sometimes we will take in plain wolves, or dogs, or, or..." The girl trailed off, glancing up at the sky and frowning for a second. "What was the word you used again?"

"Animagi," Lyra answered, instantly.

"Yes, that was it. The humans who can change, animagi," the girl repeated, slowly and carefully, "some of them are still humans even when they are not. But some of them know enough wolf things to live with us, and they are welcome."

"Does that..." Harry cleared his throat, hoping to shake the discomfort out of his voice. He couldn't help it, this whole conversation was just bloody weird, he had no idea what he was doing. "Does that happen a lot? Animagi coming out to live with you I mean?"

"Not a lot, but sometimes. Right now we have...two? Maybe three, there was one with one of the other clans who was very old, I do not know if she still lives."

It only took a few seconds of a questioning look from him before Lyra obliged with another explaining-things moment. "Sometimes, an animagus will fuck up and not be able to change back the first time, or simply decide they'd prefer to abandon their humanity entirely. It's very rare, but it does happen. Given how many mages there are in Britain, and how common canine animagi are, I'm not surprised the pack here has two or three. Hell, it's where wilderfolk came from in the first place."

"Wait, you— You mean wilderfolk are from animagi and, and—" Harry cut off, turning an uncomfortable glance toward the wilderfolk girl. She didn't look particularly bothered by this topic of conversation. If anything, she looked confused again, staring at him with her head tilted a few degrees, as though trying to figure him out.

"Yes, Harry, that's exactly what I'm saying. Sometimes, an animagus will fuck the animal he shares his form with. The products of these unions and their descendants are wilderfolk. There's a reason most mages often try to pretend there's no such thing as wilderfolk, just the fact that they exist..."
makes people uncomfortable. I mean, with how obsessed so many British mages are with muggleborns, can you imagine how much they hate the thought of some of their number breeding with literal animals?"

Harry avoided both their eyes, trying to ignore the squirming in his stomach and the heat on his face. Honestly, the thought was making him more than a little uncomfortable, and he thought that pureblood shite was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard.

After a few more minutes of teasing Harry, there was an odd shift in the wolf girl's posture, a sense of tension slipping away. Of course, that didn't make things any less awkward — once she'd decided Harry wasn't a threat (if he understood correctly), she walked right up to Lyra and licked her face. Just, went up to her, and— It was really fucking weird! Lyra didn't even seem to care that much, just laughed and shoved her off.

Seriously, sometimes he wondered if Ron wasn't perfectly on about that whole Lyra-Black-is-completely-insane thing.

They ended up sitting on the ground, having a meandering conversation which mostly consisted of the girl asking question after question after strange, disconcerting question. Lyra hadn't been joking when she'd said wilderfolk didn't really get human things, and the wolf girl hadn't been joking when she'd said she wanted to get human things. Over and over and over, why this, why that, why bloody everything.

Why did they always wear clothes even when there wasn't a good reason for it (what the hell qualified as a good reason...), why did they build things, and then spend all their time inside of them, how did they get by with so many packs (he translated "pack" to family in his head every time) living in so tight a space, didn't they fight, why did they send their kids here, didn't they miss each other, what exactly did they teach them here, couldn't they do that at home, what was all that stuff for anyway, why did humans use wands, it wasn't like they really needed them to do magic (which, obviously, Harry had completely forgotten he'd done plenty of magic before he'd even heard of wands), what if something happened to it, clearly in a fight with a wizard she'd go straight for his wand and bite it in half, how many students were there in the school anyway, how did they stay cooped up in that big stone cage so long without everything just getting messy, why did people put up with bullying, you all have wands just hex the arse, did people really believe something as stupid as pureblood supremacy (there was one thing they agreed on, at least), why did people get married anyway, why did it matter if someone's parents were married or not, why did anyone care who other people were having sex with, why was jealousy a thing, why was money a thing, why did people want fancy but pointless things, why did people care if other people knew they could afford fancy but pointless things, why did people do jobs they hate, why, why, why... Of course, that didn't include the questions involving why Harry was uncomfortable with things. See, possibly for warmth, or possibly just because, the girl was practically curled up in Lyra's lap, which was just sort of...weird. Not to mention she kept smelling Lyra's hair. And there was that whole licking her face thing. Harry kept trying to explain that smelling people or licking their faces was just kind of weird, but something about that clearly didn't click, she just kept staring back at Harry like he was the crazy one.

It probably didn't help that it didn't seem to bother Lyra at all. When the girl had started crawling all over her, Lyra had given her something of an exasperated look, but hadn't actually tried to shove her off. The hair-smelling she even seemed to think was funny. Which was...

Well, Lyra had said just a few minutes ago she acted so un-human the wilderfolk didn't even think
she counted as one. And...Harry was realizing just this second she'd never actually said she was. So, uh... Now that he thought about it, it wasn't that surprising Lyra didn't seem to have a problem with it.

All things considered, even given the bruises and scrapes he ended up with by the end, the chaotic three-way play-fight they ended up in was far less uncomfortable.

(Except for the times Lyra tackled him anyway, that was...awkward.)

Eventually, about the time Harry was worn out enough it almost hurt to move, the wolf girl changed back into human form again. Which was unfortunate, because she'd lost the cloak a while ago now. And it was also awkward, because at the time she'd had Lyra pinned down on her back, licking at her face in victory. She didn't stop licking her face right away, getting a couple more in before sitting back a bit. (Harry consciously turned away, his face going all too warm again.) "So. I need to go back now."

"Right, we should be getting back too. Think you could do me a favor?"

"Maybe."

"I'm trying to find someone. He's pack, but he's been lost and alone for a long time, and I'm afraid he might be hurt or sick. I'm told he should be somewhere around here, but I don't know where. If you happen to run into him, maybe you can bring him to me next time we meet."

The wolf girl let out an odd sound, something halfway between a hum and a whine. "Yes, yes I can do that. But, how will I know him?"

"He'd look like— Let me up, I can cast an illusion." There were some shuffling sounds from their direction, Harry glanced over his shoulder. (He carefully focused anywhere but at the very naked wolf girl, putting her well into his peripheral vision.) Lyra cast a quick charm with silent ease. An image of Sirius Black snapped into existence, or at least someone very much like him, looking so sharp and so solid it could be real. (He looked rather less insane than in the photos in the Prophet, almost normal.) "Something like this. This won't be perfect, it's been a while since I've seen him, but it should be close. Keep an eye out for him for me?"

"Yes, I can help. When do we meet next?"

While the two of them talked about that, a thought suddenly occurred to Harry. He blurted it out the second he thought of it, actually, he was probably talking over one of them, but he couldn't really help it. "Hey, there's a quidditch game in about a week, if you want to come."

Even without looking directly at them, he somehow knew both Lyra and the wolf girl were blankly staring at him.

Feeling the heat spread across his face again, he said, "I mean, you were just saying, human things, and quidditch is a human thing, I just thought..."

"Breathe, Harry. And sure, I don't see why...Sylvia here couldn't hang out and watch the match."

"Sylvia?" the wolf girl repeated.

"Well, now that Harry and I have both met you, it really would be convenient for you to have a name. If only so we can talk about you when you're not around. 'Sylvia' was the first thing to come to mind. Like it?"
"Oh, yes, that is good, okay." It was hard to tell, but Harry thought there might be a cheerful note on her odd, stilted voice, slightly higher, slightly sharper. "Sylvia," she muttered under her breath, slow and careful. "I will try to remember that."

Harry snorted.

It took a couple more minutes to explain to the newly-named Sylvia where to meet Lyra and, more importantly, when — turned out, wilderfolk didn't exactly keep to such silly human concepts as dates. With a last lick of Lyra's face, Sylvia changed back into a wolf, sniffed at Lyra's hands and clothes for a bit, then bounded over to Harry, circled him a few times, wet nose prodding and snuffling at him. (Nearly knocked him over, she was big as a wolf, a hard mass of muscle and white-silver fur, waist-high on him.) And then she was crashing away through the underbrush, a long string of bright, cheerful barks gradually fading away into the distance.

Her voice flat, casual, Lyra said, "So, that was Sylvia."

Despite how awkward the whole thing had been, Harry couldn't quite keep a smile off his face.

The trek back to the Castle was rather more miserable than the walk out had been. For one thing, playing with Sylvia had worn him out quite a bit, and it was late October, it wasn't exactly warm out. Of course, he was also absolutely covered in mud. It had been raining, and they'd just been rolling around across the ground, he was filthy. Lyra was too, of course, her hair matted and heavy with it, streaks across her clothes, even her face. Which was a bit odd to look at. She was usually so, well, pretty, it was strange to see her all mussed up and dirty and sopping.

Okay, he needed something to distract himself from how bloody cold he was. "You're looking for Sirius?"

Lyra glanced over her shoulder, just for a second before turning back around again. "Of course. It's the whole reason I came to Hogwarts, actually."

"Uh, I thought..." Well, the story was Lyra had been being homeschooled, but whoever was raising her had died...but then, the story was also that Lyra was muggle-raised, and that was so obviously a lie that Harry didn't think anyone still believed it.

"Honestly, Harry, you've seen me do magic. Does it look like I need to be here?"

...Well, when she put it like that...

"Hopefully I can find him before the idiot gets himself killed. Hide him away somewhere while I work on getting his name cleared. I do have a few ideas on how exactly I can go about that, but it'll probably get tied up for a little while, it might take a year to get the Wizengamot off their stupid arses."

"And you're sure he's innocent."

"Yes, Harry, I'm sure he's innocent."

He didn't doubt her, not really. He'd looked into it, a little, after asking Hermione how exactly the archive of back issues of the Daily Prophet in the library worked. Sirius Black did turn up here and there, before that Hallowe'en, and a lot of it very strongly suggested he'd been on their side. He'd more or less been kicked out of the Blacks, the scandal had been enough to get into the stupid society pages, he'd been a good enough of a fighter for the Light in the war that he'd been mentioned in the paper plenty of times.
(Not as many as his mother, Harry had found, but those articles were infuriating, he'd stopped reading them pretty quickly. Racist pureblood shites.)

But anyway, he'd also confirmed Sirius hadn't gotten a trial. Take it all together, it certainly did seem very possible, even likely, that he'd been innocent the whole time. It was a bit hard to believe, that everyone had been so very wrong about him for so long, but, well, people could be stupid sometimes. Most of the time, really. Harry wasn't as confident as Lyra, he wouldn't come out and say, yes, everyone else was a fucking idiot, and Sirius Black was totally innocent, but he was willing to just go along with it.

Before long they were walking out onto the grounds — which just made Harry colder, at least the trees blocked most of the bloody wind. So, eager to get back up to castle, he noticed right away that Lyra was walking in the wrong direction. He'd never come at it from this direction before, but she was headed more or less straight toward the quidditch pitch. "Uh, Lyra? Where are we going?"

"Sylvia got us both completely bloody filthy. Because of course she did. I don't know about you, but I'm miserable, want to get cleaned up as soon as possible."

It took Harry a second to figure out what she meant, heat flaring in his face and his stomach set to squirming with record speed. "Ah, no, we don't— We should just head up to Gryffindor, it—"

"That sounds like far too much of a walk when I'm cold, wet, and covered in mud."

"But, um... I just, I mean—"

"You don't have to come with me, but I'm stealing a shower in the changing rooms."

Harry forced out a harsh sigh, shaking his head to himself. Normally, fine, he'd just walk off and leave her, and that would be that. But... Okay, this might be kind of silly, but he knew the pitch wasn't empty at the moment. He'd seen the schedule, and they were still a ways away, but from here he could see tiny figures buzzing around in the air, tiny figures on broomsticks. Tiny figures wearing green.

It was kind of silly, very silly, he knew Lyra could more than take care of herself. But...he just wasn't comfortable leaving her alone, when he knew the Slytherin team was in there. Especially when he knew she'd be taking a shower, and therefore...in a rather more vulnerable position than normal.

No matter how intensely awkward the thought made him, so awkward he felt his skin might nearly crawl itself right off his bones, he simply wasn't comfortable with lettering her go in there by herself.

Some day, he was really going to get himself in trouble.

Of course, Hermione would argue he already had, far too often, but he couldn't really help that, could he?

After two years and a couple months on the team, the Gryffindor changing rooms were quite familiar to him now. The whole thing cast in the red and gold of their house, it was made up of three sizeable rooms (not including a toilet here or there). The largest was a sort of sitting room thing, with one of those magical fireplaces that seemed to operate without a flue at all, a few armchairs and couches sitting around. Oliver's shite was still set up, easels and poster boards dense with sketches of one play or another, the disorganized jumble taking up a whole half of the room. This room was fine, he'd never had a problem with this one.
Going in further from there, that's when things started getting seriously uncomfortable very quickly. Harry had been completely blind-sided, on his first day with the team, to learn that there was only one changing room. British mages, it turned out, were far less...modest than their muggle cousins. Now, Harry had already been planning to avoid changing with the rest of the team whenever possible — there'd been...issues, with the other boys, during PT back in primary, he'd gotten into the habit of going off by himself. But... Honestly Katie and Angie and Alicia were intimidating enough already, without them being in there too, and...

These days, he changed into his quidditch robes back in his dorm room. Things were just easier that way.

The changing room itself was somewhat odd, or so he'd thought at first. Maybe primary school changing rooms were just terrible, he didn't know, but the wood floors and the lockers (really more closets than anything, much bigger and with proper nice polished wood and everything) were just far nicer than he'd been expecting.

He'd peeked into the showers before, but he'd never actually used them. An open space without even any dividers of any kind, the whole thing was just so... Yeah, that had been all he needed to know.

Harry parked himself on a bench in the changing room, back turned to the door into the showers (just an open portal, no actual door, because of course there wasn't). He'd wait right here, and it would be awkward, yes, but it would be fine, he'd just keep an eye on the door out, and wait for her to finish, and try not to think about...well, anything. Yes, it would be fine, no big deal, no matter how twitchy and uncomfortable he was already feeling, it was fine, she—

She peeled off her sticky, clinging robe, dropped it down onto the floor. Right there, in the middle of the room, as though she weren't doing anything out of the ordinary. She was working off her shirt when Harry abruptly caught himself, turning his head sharply away, his neck, the backs of his shoulders itching, painfully hot.

In the awkward silence (awkward on his end, anyway), the room rang with an amused scoff. "Honestly, Harry, you're so ridiculous."

That was rich. Harry was pretty sure, no matter where she went, Lyra was always the most ridiculous person in the room.

Except, well, ridiculous kind of implied that she couldn't pull it off, whatever she was doing. Somehow no one ever seemed to act like she was ridiculous even when anyone else doing the same exact thing definitely would be.

"Seriously, you're almost as bad as Hermione," she said, over the sound of the water starting.

Harry did not want to think about Hermione, Lyra, and nudity at the same time. "Can we just change the subject?"

She laughed at him. Because of course she did. "All right, all right. Are you going to the Revel tomorrow?"

"The what?"

"The Revel," she said again, her words clearer — she must have come closer to the door or something — but that didn't help.

"I can hear you fine, just, what's the Revel? Also, no, I wasn't planning on it."
"Obviously." He could hear her smirking. "It's for Samhain. The Slytherins — well, all the Traditional students, really, but that's mostly just Slytherins — do this ritual out in the Senior Woods. The Dance of the Dead. Basically we pierce the Veil and allow the spirits of the Dead to return to this plane for the night, and they go around possessing people and you get to remember some of their lives. Also, there's a bonfire. Sounds like fun, right?"

Yes, Lyra Black was definitely completely insane. "Er... No. You're really planning to go and volunteer yourself to be possessed?"

"Eh, I'll probably just witness the rite and maybe talk to a few spirits for a while, but yeah, most people get possessed."

And of course it wasn't suspicious at all that she didn't think she was going to be possessed, even though most people would be. Maybe she really wasn't human.

"It's pretty minor, just sharing memories, basically. Which, seriously, you don't think that sounds neat? I think it does."

"Well, you like riding hippogriffs and reading textbooks, so..."

"Hey! Hippogriffs are awesome, and only interesting textbooks. Think about it: we have magic. My tutor used to say that knowledge is power, literally when it comes to magic."

Which was a good point, and one Hermione had made before, but that didn't change the fact that Harry would rather actually do things than just read about how to theoretically do things and why that would work or not. And if he didn't change the subject, Lyra was almost guaranteed to start recommending magical theory books that he didn't have a chance in hell of understanding, which always made him feel like a bit of an idiot. He should be used to that after two years being friends with Hermione, but he still didn't like it.

And he definitely didn't think letting bloody ghosts or something possess him sounded like fun.

"What is... Sowin, did you say?"

"Yeah, Samhain. Spelled 'sam-hain'. It's the holiday honoring Death and Destruction, and also traditionally considered the end of the year, in a magical, ritual sense."

"Er, don't take this the wrong way, but a holiday all about death and destruction sounds kind of... creepy and, well, dark."

Lyra laughed, apparently not offended. Though Harry didn't actually think he'd ever seen her offended, unless he counted when she'd found out he knew nothing about the Noble House of Potter, and even that was more outraged than offended. (She'd written to a solicitor called Mrs. Tonks on his behalf, and Mrs. Tonks had offered to challenge Dumbledore's guardianship of him on the grounds that Dumbledore hadn't told him anything about anything, ever — Harry hadn't even known the Headmaster was his guardian in Magical Britain — but Harry wasn't sure he wanted to. Sounded like the sort of thing that was bound to get him more attention than he wanted from just about everyone, and he didn't exactly have a lot of options as a replacement.)

"It is dark, but that doesn't mean it's bad. And even the Light honor the dead, even if they don't actually celebrate the Deathly and Destructive Powers. Or any of them, anymore, really. Most of them are Progressives, you know?"

"Uh... huh." That was straying into a realm of politics Harry was even less comfortable discussing than the weird magical religion. Mostly because he didn't think he was expected to have an opinion.
about other people's religions, but he definitely was expected to have an opinion about politics. Which was, well, he didn't really know what to think.

He knew Dumbledore and the Weasleys were "progressives" and "Light" but he didn't really know what that meant. And he was pretty sure Hermione didn't either, because if she did, she could explain it a lot better than she had when he'd asked about it after finding out that Lyra was definitely "Dark" and also called herself "anti-statutarian", which she described as thinking the Statute of Secrecy was more of a problem than a solution and Hermione described as one of Grindelwald's basic principles.

Which sounded kind of terrible, honestly. Wasn't Grindelwald just as bad as Voldemort? History of Magic was a bloody useless class, but he'd definitely managed to pick up that Grindelwald had killed like half of the witches and wizards in Europe (or something) before Dumbledore stopped him. And Ron said that the Slytherins were all Dark. The Malfoys were basically the head of the opposition party in the Wizengamot. (Potter was apparently traditionally a Light house, which seriously? Even Ron had known the Potters were nobility, and no one had ever mentioned it!)

Obviously it was better to be Light and Progressive than Dark and...whatever the opposite of Progressive was. Backward? But...see, the problem was Lyra. It was beyond obvious that she didn't think much of the Light or the Progressives, including Dumbledore, but she didn't seem evil or bad. And her views on muggles were more modern than the Weasleys — Harry hadn't missed the way Mrs. Weasley always talked about muggles like poor slow children who needed to be protected by wizards, rather than, well, people, and Mr. Weasley thought it was just amazing that they'd ever managed to survive without magic, let alone thrive. And he found himself pretty much agreeing with the idea that the Statute of Secrecy was a problem, especially since it and Dobby had almost gotten him drummed out of Hogwarts the summer before last. Sure, the Dursleys were scared of magic, but Harry was pretty sure most muggles were more open-minded than the bloody Dursleys.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Uh, no," he admitted.

A snort of unamused laughter floated out of the shower room. "'Progressive' encompasses a whole set of beliefs, but the relevant one here is that there's no such thing as the Powers, which is just...wrong. Objectively, factually wrong. But they took the idea of science and muggle rationalization of the natural world and ran with it, apparently not realizing the fact that magic is a part of the natural world. Traditionalists believe in the Powers, which are... You know what, I'll get you a book, that'll probably be clearer than if I try to explain."

"Isn't it just some magic religion thing?" Harry asked, as the sound of the water cut out.

"Well...no, not really. Not the way you'd think of religion. Pre-Abrahamic religion, sure. But it's not so much about belief and faith and all the philosophy that goes along with modern muggle religion as...recognizing certain realities about magic. Really, this will be much easier if you read a couple things first, then ask questions," she said, casually walking past him, absolutely starkers, her wet hair plastered down her back, and not a towel in sight.

"Gah!" There was nowhere he couldn't see her out of the corner of his eye. He stood up and turned to face the nearest wall, his face burning.

"Gods and Powers, Harry, stop being so dramatic."
"I'm not being dramatic," Harry ground out. This was a perfectly natural response to being confronted with a naked girl.

"Yes, you are. It's just a body. You have one yourself, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Well yeah, but yours is..."

"Basically the same as yours, but without the penis. Do you hide from your roommates like this?"

"Well, uh..." He did change his robes in front of the guys, that was true, but he always changed his shorts when he took a shower, so...

"Well, uh..." she repeated mockingly, suddenly sounding much closer. "Stop being stupid."

And she seized his upper arm and spun him around.

Harry was caught off guard, and Lyra was stronger than she looked. He turned and stumbled, ending up with his back against the wall, Lyra Black — all of Lyra Black — standing about six inches away from him, her wand in his face and a very annoyed expression on hers.

Not any more annoyed than he was, though. "What the hell!"

"Look at me, damn it!" she said, taking a couple steps away so he could. "Don't make me jinx you."

"Why are you doing this?" He hated how whiny that sounded, even as he said it, his eyes fixed firmly on her knees.

"Because you're being bloody stupid."

That startled a snort of laughter from him, because it was stupid. But she was being just as stupid as he was! He let his eyes flick up to her face. Well, to the wall well to the left of her, and then to her face, avoiding looking directly at anything between her knees and her neck. She looked very serious — he didn't doubt she actually would jinx him and force him to look. But it was such a ridiculous thing — seriously, "What does it matter if I don't want to see you — or anyone — naked? It's none of your business!"

"It matters because there's no reason for you to not want to! There's no reason for you to want to and there's no reason for you not to want to! It shouldn't matter at all, but it does. That's why it matters!"

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"No, it's not! You're acting like something matters when it doesn't matter — why? Because you think it should, but it doesn't and it shouldn't, you're just wrong, and you're insisting on being wrong even though you know it doesn't make sense. And it's my business because you're insisting on it to me!"

"It's not just me! It's— it's just not right. It doesn't have to make sense! People don't have to make sense all the time!"

"People are fucking stupid."

"You can't just force people to not be stupid about everything you think is stupid," Harry said, as scathingly as he could.
"Not everyone, no, but I can definitely stop you being stupid about this. Look. At. Me."

He did, really paying attention to the look on her face for the first time since they'd started shouting at each other. There was something almost desperate behind her fury. He didn't even know why they were fighting about this, it wasn't like it was that important, really, he didn't care that much about being polite and respectful, especially to someone who obviously didn't care, he just... He hated being forced into things. And had, he suddenly realized, gotten trapped into this argument somehow, and everything had gotten ridiculously out of hand, and he had no idea how. So. Fucking. Stupid.


He let his eyes travel down from her face and hair — now nearly dry — to her neck and shoulders and...chest. Which, well, she hadn't been exaggerating, when she said she pretty much looked like him. She had little almost-boobs, but not really boob boobs. Only a couple of girls in their year did. Neville's pudgy chest was more boob-like. Goddamnit, stop thinking about Neville with boobs, seriously, what the fuck, brain! Lyra's waist was a bit thinner than Harry's, and her hips wider, but not by much. His trousers would probably fit her, though she was a little taller. And she didn't have a cock, obviously. She didn't have as much hair down there as the wolf— Sylvia (he hadn't been able to prevent himself getting a few glimpses of her), but he still couldn't really see anything between her legs from this angle, for which he was extremely relieved. Her legs themselves matched her arms, long and thin and graceful, and...covered in scars?

He did a double-take, his eyes skimming back up. All the annoyance he'd felt at being forced into looking at her in the first place (he could not emphasize enough how much he hated being forced to do things) vanished in an instant. There were at least a dozen relatively normal-looking slices and burn marks, mostly on her arms, including the cut she'd gotten from Buckbeak, but also a vicious-looking slash across her stomach, old enough that it was just a flat stripe with a visibly different texture than the surrounding skin. There was a long, welt-like mark curving around her left hip, and her right leg, from the knee down, looked like it had been cross-hatched by something— a curse? It had to have been a curse of some kind, Harry didn't know anything else that could do something like that.

"Now, was that so terrible?" she asked, smirking at him, all her anger and frustration gone now that she'd gotten her way (which was more than a little unsettling), apparently not noticing that he wasn't even thinking about the fact that she was naked anymore.

"What happened to you?" he couldn't stop himself from asking.

"Uh, what?" He waved indistinctly toward her scars, though, really, that was pretty much all of her. She looked down, then back up at him, apparently seeing nothing out of place. "You're going to have to be more specific."

"Your — your leg. And that... Is that from a whip?"

Comprehension dawned. "Oh, yeah. Fire-whip. Dueling practice. The leg was a flaying curse set into a trap-ward." She frowned slightly. "Completely missed it when I was disarming the thing, walked right into it." And then she shrugged, turning to the very important task of removing mud from the clothes she'd left lying in the middle of the floor. Her hair, dry now, swung aside to reveal even more marks covering her back. Marks that couldn't possibly be the result of dueling practice, unless she'd been practicing sitting still and taking whatever curses her dueling partner wanted to throw at her. Harry bit his tongue on the comment he wanted to make — mostly because he didn't know exactly what that comment was, just. Something.
Instead he asked, "Why didn't you heal them?"

She shrugged, answering between cleaning charms. "Oh, you know, some were laced with curses to resist magical healing, some just weren't bad enough to bother. And, well. My tutor told me when I started learning to fight that scars were reminders of mistakes we weren't going to make again. Plus I think the flaying curse one looks kind of neat."

Harry had so many questions about Lyra's life before she'd come to Hogwarts. She mentioned little bits and pieces like that sometimes, enough to make him believe what he'd heard about her being raised by a "travelling cursebreaker". (Ron said that really meant a sort of magical mercenary, thief, con-man type of character.) But she never actually said where she lived or who the travelling cursebreaker actually was, or what had happened to him, even when he outright asked.

Though that possibly not human thing that had come up earlier was seriously looking more and more likely. (Who thought getting flayed was neat?) And she had never actually said that she was.

He had to ask, just to be clear. "Are you actually human, really?"

She hesitated for a long moment, but eventually gave him a tiny smirk, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "I'm a Black. Make of that what you will."

_RIGHT. CLEAR AS MUD._

"Well, this is just balls," a first-year Gryffindor muttered, kicking one of the squasy purple sleeping bags Dumbledore had just conjured all over the Great Hall.

Ginny thought that pretty well summed up the situation.

Sirius Black was somewhere in the castle, they were all stuck in the Great Hall for the rest of the night, and Percy was in charge.

The worst part was Percy being in charge, she decided as she heard him call over the crowd, "Lights out in ten minutes!"

Most of the Gryffindors, all still clumped together on the side of the hall where their table normally sat, erupted in protest. It wasn't even nine-thirty yet, and curfew wasn't until ten. But Percy always let power go to his head, Ginny was sure he would insist on being a complete plonker over this, though it looked like Chauncy and Oliver were heading up to the front of the room to attempt to reason with him.

"Come on, let's find a place to sleep." Ginny looked around, slightly surprised, but then realized Ron was talking to Harry, not her. They had grabbed a pair of sleeping bags and were looking around as though any spot in the Hall would be any better than any other.

Well, Ginny had to admit, any spot that wasn't near her dorm mates would be better than any spot near them, but Ron and Harry didn't have the same...issues with their year-mates that she did with hers. (She was pretty sure everyone knew that she had been involved with the Chamber of Secrets last year, and the other girls hadn't liked her before that.)

Except, well, _that._

Hermione was coming toward them, stalking between sleeping bags and looking very annoyed to have to come anywhere near Ron. Ginny was more familiar with their ongoing feud about Scabbers and Crookshanks than she wanted to be, simply because Harry had been busier than usual
this term, which meant that Ron had to find other people to occupy his time, and apparently he
didn't have any other friends. The twins had threatened to start testing their inventions on him if he
didn't leave them alone. Ginny was absolutely his last resort, but she was conveniently available.
AKA, not very good at avoiding him. She was far too busy trying to avoid other people, like her
roommates, Colin Creevey, and—

"Harry, have you seen Lyra?"

Lyra bloody Black.

"Not since the feast. She said it's a holiday, so she was going to hang out with the Slytherins. Some
Powers thing, I guess? I still don't really understand the whole magical religion thing."

"Wouldn't worry about it, mate, only stuck up traditionalists like Malfoy celebrate the old holidays.
Wonder who invited Lyra."

"Would've been Zabini, wouldn't it," Harry said. Ginny thought he was probably right. Black and
Zabini spent a frankly suspicious amount of time together for a Gryffindor and a Slytherin.

Hermione huffed at them.

Ron ignored her. "Still think it's weird she's friends with him. After she scared the piss out of
Malfoy, I thought she didn't like the Slytherins, but they were still sitting together in potions."

"Oh, honestly, Ronald, it's not as though all Slytherins are the same bloody person!" Hermione
grabbed a sleeping bag and dragged it away without waiting for a response. Ginny considered
following her, but Hermione was even worse than Luna about trying to get her to talk about What
Had Happened.

"C'mon, Harry," Ron said, storming off in the opposite direction. Harry followed him with a rather
resigned look, leaving Ginny to find a place for herself, alone.

Of course, neither Hermione nor Luna was nearly as bad as Black, she mused, taking her own
sleeping bag and wandering off toward the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. They might be annoying,
with their supportiveness and misplaced sympathy and comments about how it would be better for
her to talk about it, but Black just came right out and asked things like, "So who's Tom?" and "Were
you kidnapped by the Heir of Slytherin last year?" And as much as Ginny wanted people to stop
treating her like a fragile little kid who would fall apart if they so much as looked at her funny, it
was like walking through a ghost, being reminded of What Had Happened so...directly.

Which was one of the reasons she hated Lyra bloody Black.

She would have understood if Black had just put her foot in it, and then backed off when Ginny
told her to, but she kept trying to corner her and talk about it, like she just didn't get that it was
horrible and Ginny just couldn't talk about it, and even if she did, she wouldn't want to tell Black
about it, of all people. Trying to avoid her would have been relatively easy if Ginny had been able
to just hide in her dorm room, Black had never followed her there. But if she stayed there, it was all
too easy for Janine and Caitlin to find her. And while they weren't nearly as bad as they were last
year (or maybe it just seemed that way after What Had Happened), they still made it very clear that
she didn't really belong every chance they got. But if she went to the library or the owlery or out on
the grounds, to the part of the woods that weren't Forbidden, Black was there. No matter how
random it seemed, there was no way it could possibly be a coincidence, she had to be doing it
intentionally.
Somehow. Ginny didn't know how. What she did know was it was bloody creepy. (Well, that and infuriating.)

Of course, there were a lot of things about Black that were creepy. Like every time she ran into her, Black just gave her that bloody smirk, like I-know-something-you-don't-know and said "Hello Ginevra" in that way that reminded her so much of Tom. Just being in the same room with her kind of reminded her of him, actually, and not just because she kept bringing up What Had Happened. Tom had been all sophisticated and smooth, all the time, and Black was crass and weird and didn't seem to give a rat's arse what anyone thought of her, but under that, they both had this confidence. Like they had everything and everyone under control. They walked into a room like they owned the bloody place, like they were going to do exactly as they pleased, and God help anyone who got in their way. But it wasn't just that. It was like...wherever they were was the place to be, the center of things. Because they were the sort of people who made things happen.

Just being in the same room as her made Ginny's skin crawl.

She obviously wasn't muggleborn, she knew far too much about, well everything, according to Hermione. And even when she was being crass and weird, she was still graceful and proper like she had to think about it to be rude, and turned out all girly — Ginny might not use fancy glamours and hairstyling charms herself, but she'd seen her dorm mates at it enough that she knew them when she saw them. In a way, that made her weirdness even weirder. Nothing seemed to fit about her.

Everything she wore — the dueling outfits that probably cost more than everything Ginny owned put together, her knee-high, high-heeled boots, even her bloody hair ornaments and earrings — was so old fashioned, it was like she'd walked out of the 1940s — the magical 1940s — but she only listened to modern muggle rock music (according to Hermione, who hated it), and the way she talked was more like Helen and Sam (the muggleborn second-year Gryffindor girls) than Janine and Caitlin (who were rich pureblood bitches like Black). Apparently she was a bloody traditionalist (who even celebrated Samhain, really?), but she didn't act like a blood purist, and she claimed to be a Black, but she also claimed she got the name from a squib, and no noble Ginny had ever met would be caught dead admitting there were squibs in their family, let alone claiming to be muggle-raised squib-spawn. (Though if Ginny was the incestuous love child of Sirius and Bellatrix Black — not that that rumor had been confirmed — she'd probably think squib parents were better, too.) She kept secrets and snuck around like a Snake half the time, and the other half kept drawing attention to herself by doing insanely Gryffindor things like riding Hippogriffs and mouthing off to Snape in her first lesson with him.

Ron thought she was entirely mad (impressive as hell, but still bloody mad).

Ginny honestly wasn't entirely sure she was human.

She was almost positive she'd seen Black sneaking out to the Forbidden Forest one night last month, and she hadn't been too out of it on the train to miss her standing there all annoyed and talking to the fucking dementor. It hadn't occurred to her until a few days later, but Ginny wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that the reason she spoke 'Greek' was because she was actually some kind of 'demonic dark creature' too. (And that definitely hadn't been Greek she was speaking. Ginny didn't actually know Greek, but she'd heard enough Greek spells to know that it sounded completely different.) That would explain why she was just so unconsciously terrifying.

Because Ginny didn't think she was actually trying to scare people, most of the time, if only because she went so over the top with Malfoy. She just did things, and didn't seem to get why
anyone would think them unreasonable or disturbing. Even Malfoy — Ginny had seen her just casually go up to the Slytherin table and sit down next to Zabini a few days after their duel, and she'd looked so confused (and amused) when the blond ponce scrambled to get away from her. And Hermione had told her about the hippogriff attack in their first Care class. She said she'd been afraid that Black was going to lose her arm, or faint from blood loss, but she didn't even scream, just healed it herself and was cracking jokes and asking about the homework ten minutes later, no big deal.

So she was apparently immune to dementors and pain, and had no idea how real people worked — which probably meant she was tormenting Ginny accidentally, but that didn't make it any less terrible — yeah, she was sticking with a firm not human. She didn't know what Black was, but she definitely wasn't normal, and it was creepy and sometimes terrifying, and it was really more surprising that so many people seemed to like her, than that Ginny couldn't stand her.

Because people did like her. Well, mostly. Some of them, like Ron and Neville, just wanted nothing to do with her because they thought she was crazy, and rumor was she'd done some things to Lavender Brown that made most of the third-year girls hate her almost as much as Ginny. But Harry, Luna, Hermione and the twins liked her (and Hermione and Fred and George disagreed on everything). She'd only been here for two months, and she already had friends in all four houses.

Ginny would be lying if she said she wasn't a little bit jealous about that.

About Harry especially. He spent almost all his free time with her, now, or her and Hermione, and even when he was hanging out with Ron (and Ginny, she tended to enjoy Ron's company more when Harry was there as well), he kept bringing up Black, and things she'd told him, or asked him and made him think about, or things they'd done — apparently she'd dragged him out to visit the hippogriffs with Hagrid, and insisted that Sirius Black was innocent and didn't have a trial, and told him that Potter was a Noble House (which Ginny could have told him, she didn't know how he could have not known that) and his mum was into High Ritual, and she didn't believe he'd had a bloody thing to do with getting rid of You Know Who (which he apparently thought was a good thing), on and on and on!

It wasn't fair! Ginny had known him for two years, she'd loved him since before they'd even met, and he barely noticed her. She'd thought things would be different this year, that was the only good thing that had come out of the Chamber of Secrets — he'd saved her. Her. Ginny Weasley. And she, stupidly, thought that now, after that, he'd actually see her. Maybe ask her how she was on occasion, how she was getting on with the whole not-being-possessed thing, but no. She was just his best mate's kid sister, and that was all she'd ever be.

And Lyra fucking Black had been here for two months, and she'd apparently never even heard of The Boy Who Lived (which was weird, since she was obviously a pureblood, but she was equally obviously a terrible liar, so Ginny was pretty sure she wasn't just pretending not to have heard of him), and she had already practically taken over his whole life! She wasn't even very nice to him, she was just as condescending to him as she was to everyone else, the lying, superior little rich bitch! Ginny had thought Harry had better taste than that. There were dozens of other girls who would be better for him! (It went unsaid that Ginny herself was at the top of that list.)

The lights went out then, before Ginny had settled on a spot. She'd been looking for Luna, and she'd kind of expected her to be easy to find. She tended to stand out. But she hadn't seen her anywhere, and she didn't really have anyone else to meet up with. "Damn it, Percy!"

She lit her wand along with about half the other students, filling the room with eerie shadows and pinpricks of light under the cloudy ceiling. It was just bright enough for her to tell that there wasn't
really any space left that was large enough to spread out her sleeping bag, except at the very edges of the hall, under the tables that had been pushed aside to make room for them all.

No sooner had she laid out on her sleeping bag and nox-ed her wand, than a dark shape obscured the lights from the center of the Hall.

"This spot taken?" a boy's voice asked.

"Uh, no. No, it's not."

He dropped his own sleeping bag beside hers, sitting cross-legged upon it. "Blaise Zabini, I don't think we've met."

Ginny groaned. If Zabini was here, that almost certainly meant—

"Come on, Blaise, it'll be fun."

Lyra bloody Black.

_Goddamnit!_

She peeked under the table to see who Blaise was talking to, and like clockwork, that fucking smirk spread across her face. "Hello, Ginevra. Long time, no see."

She shoved Zabini aside so she could sit on his sleeping bag as well, leaning on one hand and tucking her feet under herself. She started casually casting light charms and a couple spells Ginny thought were meant to prevent eavesdropping with her free hand. Which suggested they were planning on staying, now that Black had her cornered.

Ginny glared at her, but surprisingly, she didn't follow up with some question about What Had Happened. Instead she ignored Ginny entirely and turned back to Zabini. "I don't get what you're so worried about, it's not like he'd _really_ expel you, Zee's on the Board."

"This is Snape we're talking about. If he says he'll expel anyone out of bounds tonight, he'll find a way."

"Any Slytherin."

"I am a Slytherin."

"I'm not."

"You _really_ think that would matter?"

"It _doesn't_ matter, we're not going to get caught."

"Yeah, because I'm not going." Zabini paused for a moment, then added, "He's not going to stick around, you know. If the professors don't catch him, he's gone."

"Who said anything about looking for Sirius?"

"If this was really about Samhain, you'd be bugging Theo. Truth? I thought it was a little weird when you showed up in the first place. You _did_ skip Mabon."

Black rolled her eyes. "I'm not allowed to go to Mabon."
"You actually didn't do something because you're not allowed? You." Zabini sounded like he didn't quite believe it.

"Well, that and it's just good sense. Wisdom doesn't really like Chaos. Too impulsive. Shut up." Zabini looked as confused as Ginny was about the "shut up," but Black just shook her head as though it wasn't important. "I really only celebrate Walpurgis, but I'm allowed to participate in Samhain and Yule rituals. Destruction and Mystery are complements to Chaos, and even the other Powers bow before the Ultimate Inevitability."

"What are you even talking about?" Ginny asked, slightly annoyed. Following her around to interrogate her was one thing, at least that she could understand, but following her around to ignore her and talk about the bloody Powers? What the hell?

"It's Samhain," Black said, with an uncomprehending stare, as though she thought that explained everything and Ginny was an utter moron not to realize it.

"No," she said, just to be contrary, "it's Hallowe'en."

Black's eyes narrowed. "Are you fucking with me? Blaise, is she fucking with me?" Zabini laughed. "I know Dumbledore is a progressive bloody twat, and Harry's appallingly ignorant about...pretty much everything. At least Hermione tries to learn what's going on around her. But the Weasleys are purebloods, how can you not know this?"

Ginny glared at her, crossing her arms. "Just because we're purebloods doesn't mean we hold with outdated nonsense like the Powers."

Another uncomprehending stare from Black. Zabini smirked, though. "Careful, Red, you almost sounded like Darling Draco there for a second. The House of Malfoy doesn't care for antiquated, barbaric rituals either."

Black muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like, "Going to have a talk with Cissy about that."

But Ginny's attention had been caught by something Zabini had said. "Rituals?"

"Uh, yeah? Not much point in celebrating the holidays if you're not going to commune with the Powers, is there?"

"You can't do ritual magic, it's illegal."

Zabini snorted. "Like that would stop her?"

"Besides, it's not. Well, okay, it's kind of a grey area, but since holiday rituals don't use the power summoned to create an external effect, they don't count."

Zabini looked as surprised to hear this as Ginny was.

"What? You didn't think Dumbles would let the Slytherins keep the traditions alive if he had that good an excuse to get rid of them, did you? Honestly, I'm surprised he hasn't found some other reason to stomp them out yet."

"He tried, but there's enough Traditionalists on the Board that they threatened to remove him as Headmaster if he made such a blatant attack on their beliefs."

Ginny's mouth dropped open at that. She couldn't imagine a Hogwarts without Dumbledore.
"They couldn't. He's Dumbledore."

Black raised a very unimpressed eyebrow at her. "I see what you meant, Blaise, about the Light practically worshiping him. Trust me, Gin, the Powers are far more worthy of your respect than Dumbledore. Even if he is the most powerful wizard in Britain, he's still only human."

"I know that," Ginny snapped, glaring at the both of them. "We don't worship him. He's our leader, not our god. If anyone was worshiping their leaders, it was the Death Eaters!"

Neither Black nor Zabini reacted to that, other than a slight snort of laughter on Black's part. "The Zabinis weren't Death Eaters, Gin. And neither was Sirius. Bellatrix... Well, she was, and she did worship that bastard, but only because he used compulsions on her for her entire life, since she was a child."

Zabini shot a sharp look at Black, probably wondering how she knew that, just like Ginny was. But if it was true... "But that's unforgivable." Bill had told her and Ron about all the Unforgivable Acts when they were little (and the Powers, and all sorts of things Mum didn't think kids ought to know). Using compulsions on a little kid was one of the worst. "You're saying the only reason Bellatrix Lestrange is an evil bitch is because R— You Know Who made her his mind-slave? But — how would you even know that?"

For some reason, they both found this amusing, Zabini sniggering and Black giggling. "Oh, no," she said, after a moment. "Bellatrix was always an evil bitch, Monsieur de Mort just turned her from being the Blacks' evil bitch to being his evil bitch. And Arcturus, the last Paterfamilias, was a legilimens, he suspected what was going on as early as the Nineteen Sixties, wrote about it in his diaries. But by then it was already too late."

Both Ginny and Zabini were gaping at her. "But if that's true..." Ginny started to say, trying to think of the implications. Could Lestrange's crimes even be held against her, if she'd been twisted that tightly around Tom's finger? Surely they had to be — she'd killed so many people, tortured more — the Longbottoms... But, well, if people had known, she might have been Kissed or sent through the Veil rather than to Azkaban. Just put her out of her misery, and everyone else's.

Zabini must have said something, she'd completely missed it. It was Black's voice, speaking in a rather annoyed tone that caught her attention again. "Of course I've read Arcturus's diaries. I was getting nowhere focusing on the Family Magic itself, so I thought I'd start working my way back, see if any of the Lords Black said anything about it. Nothing so far, though. Seems like the last few generations didn't really pay any attention to it before Sirius broke it, which, really? Seriously not helpful." She pouted at Zabini for a brief moment before adding, "Which is why I really need to find that bloody bastard."

What? How could Family Magic be broken? And Black was trying to fix it? It certainly sounded like it. But that was insane! And absolutely absurd for someone their age to think she could pull off, not to mention she shouldn't even know about any of that — Ginny didn't know anything about the Weasleys' Family Magic. She didn't even think Bill did, and they'd been raised in their family. Black was supposed to have just been introduced to hers.

It was incredibly annoying, how bad she was at lying about who she really was, especially since no one (Ginny included) seemed to be able to figure it out, despite the hints Black had to be dropping left and right.

Zabini didn't seem to be annoyed, though. He probably knew. If she really was a demon of some sort, he'd probably summoned her, she did seem to spend even more time with him than she did with Harry. (Not more than she spent with Hermione, but they were rooming together.) Demon
Summoning seemed like exactly the sort of thing a Snake like Zabini would be into.

"I'm still not going. And if you are, you should wait until the professors give the all-clear, so they
don't catch you while they're looking for him. But I'm telling you, he's not going to stick around, he
can't be that much of an idiot if he's managed to avoid capture this long."

"What makes you think you could find him, anyway, if Dumbledore and the professors can't?"
Ginny had to ask.

"I've been looking up obscure tracking spells. Most of them are too dark for any of the professors
but Snape to try, and he isn't related to Sirius by blood, so." Was she really suggesting that she was
going to use dark, restricted Blood Magic to try to track down Sirius Black?

Apparently yes, because Zabini rolled his eyes. "Maybe go tell a few more people how many laws
you're planning on breaking."

"Pft, it's not like either one of you have actually seen me do anything, I could just be talking out of
my arse to impress you." She gave Zabini a blinding grin. "But yes, fine, I'll wait until the
professors are done."

A tension Ginny hadn't noticed until it was gone disappeared from Zabini's posture. "Good." He
shifted around to lounge across Black's legs, his back to her chest, facing Ginny. It seemed like that
would be kind of awkward to her, but he looked perfectly comfortable, and Black just looked down
at him with a sort of bemused look on her face.

"Hey, while we're waiting, check out her aura," she said after a moment, gesturing at Ginny. "It's
super weird, right? What even does that?"

Zabini stared at her very intently, frowning slightly.

Goddamnit! It had been what, nearly twenty minutes, and Black hadn't once tried to question Ginny
about anything, and now when she let her guard down, just a little... Ginny glared at her. Then she
had an idea. "Are you a demon?"

She might not be able to make Black leave her alone, but she could definitely ask a few
uncomfortable questions of her own.

Black was obviously surprised. "Uh, no. Have you been talking to Hermione?"

"Should I be?"

The girl shrugged. "Not like I care. She was asking weird questions yesterday, not important." She
poked Zabini in the shoulder. "So, what do you think?"

He opened his eyes — Ginny hadn't noticed him close them — and smirked up at Black. "Well, if
you ask me, demon fits better than werewolf—"

"Hey! I'd make a great werewolf! And you know what I meant."

He shrugged, then turned his insinuating smirk on Ginny. "Someone's been a naughty girl — soul
magic and subsumation? Tsk tsk."

Ginny felt all the blood rush from her head. "Wh-what are you talking about? I didn't— I haven't—
Tom—" she cut herself off there, biting her lip hard, and trying to focus on the pain rather than the
memories threatening to drag her under.
"Why do you call him Tom?" Black asked. That was a new one. "Isn't he like, old enough to be your grandfather?"

"What?"

"We are talking about Tom Riddle here, right? Heir of Slytherin. Swotty dark arts nerd, talks to snakes. He'd have to be about seventy by now. Calls himself Voldemort, but you call him Tom. That's interesting."

Time stopped. All Ginny could hear was the thundering of her pulse in her ears and his voice, talking to Harry, "Voldemort is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter..." and losing control of her body and the fierce joy of having a body after endless nothing, and waking up in the Orphanage as the bombs fell and writing Dear Tom, and the awful, awful disgust and disdain he felt even as he wrote back pretty poison words, and—

Black snapped her fingers in front of Ginny's nose. "Hey, Gin! Earth to Weasley!"

Zabini was rolling his eyes. "That's not going to work. She's terrified, I'm surprised even you can't feel it." Then he reached out and gently turned Ginny's chin so that she was facing him, looking directly into warm brown eyes. "Gin, can you hear me?"

She didn't say anything, but he seemed to know she could.

"Gin, I want you to listen to me. Ignore him, he's not here. You're not in the Chamber of Secrets, you're in the Great Hall with me and Lyra. You're warm and safe, he's gone. Harry stopped him, remember? He killed the basilisk and stopped Tom, remember?"

Oh, she did. She remembered pain, first as the basilisk was torn away from her, the familiar bond dying with its death, fracturing her already fragile soul even more deeply and tearing at the bond with Ginny. She remembered the phoenix song, piercing through her mind like knives, like acid eating into her brain, and death, the journal dissolving into a puddle of ink and blood and basilisk venom and clinging with all the strength she had to Ginny's soul and life, and slipping, shattered soul tearing itself apart, no longer bound to the book, and Ginny's soul, not yet fully assimilated, not enough to hold her here, and fear as she slipped further and further from life, and then a snap, and blackness overwhelmed her—

"He destroyed the book, didn't he, Gin? Can you tell me why?"

She remembered Tom explaining, taking pleasure from the heady terror building in the noble young idiot standing before him, "Ginny poured out her soul to me... I grew stronger... powerful... Powerful enough to... start pouring a little of my soul back into her... It took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary..."

"Tell me."

The compulsion washed over her like Tom ordering her to sleep from the back of her own mind. She heard herself say, "He... Harry destroyed the diary...because the diary was Tom. It... he... He died. Harry killed him."

"Good girl, Gin. Very good." A feeling of warmth and safety spread through her, calming her, almost like... almost like Tom used to make her feel, like her problems were small and distant and—

"Get out of my head," she growled, slapping Zabini's hand away from her face, turning away from his eyes, suddenly aware of the floating lights and him and Black and the tears slipping down her
Zabini rolled his eyes. "Fine, next time, I'll just let you panic until you remember that he's dead by yourself. It was a horcrux," he said, turning to Black, who was watching the pair of them as though this whole thing was utterly foreign to her, but fascinating. Ginny shuddered. Creepy bitch. "It tried to subsume her soul to revive itself, but Potter interrupted before he could manage it. If I understood what was going on, they were already pretty deeply connected by that point. When it fell apart, she ended up with a few fragments of his soul, memories and such." He grinned. "Who knew the Dark Lord was such an angsty bastard?"

"He always was a bit melodramatic," Black said, as though she knew him personally. "Huh. Well, I should have asked you to do that weeks ago. Wait — you know he's not really dead yet, right?" she said, turning to Ginny.

She thought her voice sounded admirably even for someone getting news like that. "What do you mean by that?"

Black shrugged. "Just, you know, the horcrux is gone, yeah, but the original's still alive. Must've had more than one, or, you know, did something else to keep himself on this plane. He is a demon now, though. You know, since he doesn't actually belong here."

"What do you mean? How do you know that?"

"Uh, I...have my sources."

"Lady E?" Zabini asked. Black nodded.

"Well, that and the Dark Mark would have faded if he was really gone. Lucy's is still pretty visible, or at least it was last month, so, yeah. He's not dead yet." And then she smiled. "Which means I still have a chance to kill him. Want to help?" This last, Ginny thought, was directed toward her, but she honestly wasn't quite following the conversation anymore.

"Uh, what?"

"Do you want...to help me...murder the shit out of Tom fucking Riddle?"

Zabini buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with laughter. Ginny could see why. Black just looked so serious, as though she wasn't a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl casually talking about killing the greatest Dark wizard in recent British history.

"You're insane," Ginny heard herself mutter.

"So I've been told. Are you in or not?"

And while Ginny may have hated Black, while she may have been weird and creepy and probably a demon, all that was utterly insignificant against everything Tom had done to her.

"Fuck yes."

Chapter End Notes

Lyra is so bad at pretending to be a normal person some people aren't even convinced
she's human. That's, like, a whole nother realm beyond "not subtle". —Lysandra

Just to be clear, this chapter should not be taken as an indication that we like Lyra/Harry better than Lyra/Hermione. I totally ship Lyra/Sylvia, though xD —Leigha

However, this should be taken as an indication that Harry is a silly moo. —Lysandra

(A very silly moo.) —Leigha
There were people out on the grounds. Human people.

Sirius's metaphorical ears perked up. He roused himself from the stupor he somehow kept falling into, letting himself fall into Padfoot's mind and instincts and lose himself.

He missed people.

So much.

That was half the reason — more than half, probably — that he'd been so stupid, why he'd broken into the school...not that long ago. A week? Two? He didn't know. But not long. He had to save the Fawn, Prong's son (no, Jamie's, the boy, Harry), he had to. Had to kill the Rat. And then everything would be good again. Then he could go home. With people. With Moony.

He was there. Sirius didn't know why, how, but he smelled him all over the Castle. He knew it was him. He smelled like home, like pack, like it was still Back Then, before they left Hogwarts and everything went wrong.

No, no, that was wrong — Moony wasn't a friend anymore. Wasn't pack.

No humans — they were hunting Sirius! Even Padfoot couldn't be seen — Moony wasn't a friend anymore, and he could have told Dumbledore, the professors, anyone. It wasn't safe. He couldn't get caught, if he got caught he couldn't save the Fawn, couldn't kill the Rat. Everything would be wrong, more wrong, wrong forever.

But it was raining, water pouring down out of the sky so hard even human eyes wouldn't be able to see him if he stayed in the shadows, on the edge of things. He could go closer, he could see why, what they were all doing, he could get close enough to pretend he wasn't cast out, alone in the forest with only the Wolves for company.

It was raining and Padfoot's paws had carried him to the base of the Quidditch stadium without Sirius even noticing.

He noticed, though, when the announcer shouted, "Potter!" over the storm and the crowd roared in response.

Jamie? But... No, no — Harry, the Fawn, Jamie's fawn, no his son. Sirius remembered him, he had seen him, followed the line of light and warmth that stretched between them south, found him, before he came back to school, in that muggle town — he'd been scared, almost been hit by a bus, popped out of nowhere! And then he'd been gone, and Sirius had waited, he had watched, but the Boy was gone.

And eventually, Sirius didn't know how long it was, but eventually, he had realized he wasn't coming back.

So Sirius had gone north, had come to Hogwarts, hiding in the Forest, waiting, watching for the students, for the Faw— Harry, he thought sternly to himself. He was Sirius, not Padfoot, he had to remember human things. Harry.
He could see him again.

He could see him again, flying like James, he wouldn't be scared, he wouldn't see Sirius — Padfoot. No one would see Padfoot, he could hide, he could be sneaky, and he could see Harry.

He just had to find a way into the stands. He could go sit at the top, by one of the towers, hide in the shadows, no one would see him.

He padded around the base of the stadium, seeking a stairway.

Wait.

That smell...

Wolf?

The Remoran Wolves — that's what they, the humans, had called them, he thought he remembered, Back Then, when he was at school — they had found him, cold and alone and hungry, so hungry, waiting for the students at the school, for the— Harry to come to him. They brought him into the Pack, let him hunt with them (but not stags — never stags!), let him belong (let Padfoot belong, Sirius didn't belong anywhere).

They weren't normal wolves, too smart, smarter than him, and more human, too, at the moment. They were, he thought, wilderfolk. Or some of them. They changed, sometimes, not often and not all of them, but sometimes they needed to speak with the centaurs, or wanted hands to start a fire.

One of the ones who changed more than most, a dominant female, two or three years old, not quite an adult — they grew slower than normal wolves, he knew that...somehow. From Back Then, must be. She was the most curious one, the most adventurous, always running off and poking her nose in places she shouldn't, it was her scent. She was here.

She shouldn't be here.

Sirius — Padfoot — shouldn't either, but he knew more about humans, he could avoid them, he could hide. She wouldn't. Too curious. Too adventurous. Humans didn't like wolves (or Wolves) any more than they liked Sirius, they'd be scared, she could get hurt.

Now he had to go up in the stands. He had to find her, get her back to the Pack.

He followed her trail around the back of the stands, creeping carefully up the stairs, then under the seats until he found her, sitting with the humans, right out in the open, her head resting in the lap of a dark-haired girl, fingers scratching idly at her ears, until the Wolf noticed his approach, jolting to attention.

She turned toward him, wuffed softly. The girl stopped talking to her human companion, looked around, directly at him, and raised an eyebrow. "Friend of yours?" she said to the Wolf, smirking like...like...

No.

"What?" the other girl asked, craning to see what had gotten the attention of— She couldn't be— "Looks like Sylvie was followed," she said, casting a water repelling charm in Padfoot's direction. "You can come out," she added. "It's fine."
"Where are all these dogs even coming from!?” the other girl exclaimed, pouting at...at...

He crept closer. He had to know. It couldn't be, but—

She put on an air of false offence. "Hermione! How dare you! Sylvia is a Wolf, not some mere dog."

The girl squeaked, shooting a scandalized look at the Wolf...who apparently had a name, now. "Lyra! You can't just— She's a wild animal?! she hissed.

Lyra — a Black name, yes, but not Bellatrix, she can't be Bellatrix — rolled her eyes, went back to scratching Sylvie's ears. She leaned into it, her tongue lolling out in wolfish pleasure. "Oh, yes, terribly wild, vicious creature, this one. Lighten up, Hermione. She knows to behave. I wouldn't have brought her if she was going to be a problem."

"Since when do you even— No. Just — no. I'm not going to ask. What about that one?" Hermione snapped, waving a hand toward Sirius.

Lyra — definitely not Bellatrix, even if she was a Black — hummed slightly under her breath. "Well, he's not a Wolf. He almost looks like he could be a Grim, but of course, they're more phantasmal, and the eyes are all glowy and red. Probably just a mundane dog taken in by Sylvie's pack," she said, though the way she added, "You are welcome to join us, you know. Might want to come down the aisle, though, you're a bit big to try crawling between the benches," suggested she knew he wasn't.

"What's going on?" a boy's voice asked, turning and peeking between the seats. "Oh, hey, guys, there's another one!"

"What? Where? Oh! Hey, boy, come on out!"

If Sirius had been Sirius, he would have groaned. So much for being sneaky.

"Hang on, I think I've got... Want a sandwich, buddy?" a third boy joined the others. His offer smelled tantalizingly of bacon.

"Honestly, Dean. You brought sandwiches to a quidditch match?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"What? Sometimes the matches go on long enough we miss lunch."

"So, you're saying you didn't bring something to eat?" Not Bellatrix asked, smirking at the other girl.

"Well, no, of course not!"

"You should have," a new voice chimed in. "Mess like this, they'll be lucky if Potter catches the Snitch before dinner."

Sandwich Boy — Dean? — was still waggling the food enticingly in Sirius's direction. He crept forward. He couldn't help himself. It was bacon. And bread. How long had it been since he'd had bread?

He took it slowly, careful not to nip the boy's fingers, but couldn't stop himself gulping it down in just a couple of bites, or the whine that followed. Entirely involuntary. The boy had laid a hand on his head, warm and heavy — how long had it been since he'd felt a human's touch?
"Stop that," said Sylvia's human, the one who definitely couldn't be Bellatrix, even if she did look like her and sound like her and it would be just like Bellatrix to go and invite wilderfolk to a bloody Quidditch match, smacking the Sandwich Boy in the arm. "You're disturbing the boundary line. If you want petting, Padfoot, you can come around to this side."

Sirius scrambled back, away from the sound of his name on human lips — how had she— She couldn't—

"Padfoot?" the other girl asked. Sirius barely heard her through his panic.

"Sort of a generic term for all the big black spectral dogs. Better name than Grim, I thought."

So...she didn't know.

She didn't know, he thought again, trying to reassure himself. He was distracted by Sandwich Boy making his way down to the end of the row and crouching, making little whistling noises and calling to him, "C'mon, boy. Come sit with us."

Sirius huffed a doggy sigh. He might as well, they already knew he was here, and besides, it was still raining hard enough that Moony wouldn't see him. He didn't know where he was, but if he'd been close enough to see Padfoot through the white-out rain, Padfoot would have been able to smell him, easily.

He padded back to the stairway and scrabbled back out into the open, whining and licking at Sandwich Boy's hands.

"Aww, who's a good boy? Come on, buddy, come on."

The boy led the way back to his seat. Sirius felt a slight tingle as he came close to the group, and paused, looking around, trying to see what had changed.

"It's okay," Not Bellatrix said. "It just keeps the rain off and the more annoying humans away."

Right. The rain was gone. It was, he discovered, looking up, still falling, but somehow vanishing before it reached the small group of students. No one outside the little circle seemed to notice.

The other girl — Hermione, was it? — made an annoyed little tsk.

"Give it up," one of the boys advised her. "She's not going to tell us how she did it."

"It's not that," the girl said. "I know how she did it, I just don't know how she made it not affect us."

"Trade secret."

They were interrupted by a snatch of commentary, briefly audible over the storm: "Gryffindor scores! Bringing the score to one-hundred to seventy, with Gryffindor in the lead! Can't see a bloody thing, and neither can the fliers — one of the Puff chasers just took a bludger—"

"Ooh, can anyone see Harry?" Probably Hermione said. Sirius's ears perked up at the sound of his godson's name, but all the responses were variations of no.

He sat, dejected. How had he thought he'd be able to see Harry in this?

The Wolf — Sylvia — gave his lower jaw a perfunctory lick, and he felt fingers working their way down his back. His tail thumped against Sandwich Boy's ankles.
"This one's much friendlier than the other," one of the boys noted. He smelled of fear, but was bravely holding his ground, peering over his friends' shoulders at Sirius.

"Sylvia's not unfriendly, Nev, she just doesn't know you. How would you like it if I just walked up and started fondling your head?"

The boy sputtered in response. From the way his face went red (well, yellow) and the embarrassment wafting off of him, Sirius didn't think he'd mind at all. Though it was clearer, now that he was on this side of the bleachers, that the Wolf was anxious, her body pressed tightly against Not Bellatrix, her head not so much resting on the girl's lap as being the closest she could get to crawling into her lap without knocking her off the bench. He wouldn't be surprised if she'd snapped at anyone else who dared to touch her.

She relaxed slowly, over the course of the match. No one could see anything beyond the small, rain-free circle. That didn't stop Sirius trying. It took a while for it to occur to him, but even if he couldn't see Harry, he might still be able to find the Weasley boy, the one the Rat was using as a cover, the boy who thought the Traitor was his bloody pet.

He thought the kids he was sitting with were third-year Gryffindors, like Harry, but none of them were the one the Rat was using. Could he be on the team? The commentator — when they managed to hear him — had said "Weasley" a couple of times, but— Sirius wasn't very good at guessing ages, never had been, but— From that picture, in the paper, there had to be at least four or five Weasleys at the school, the one he was looking for could be anywhere.

Which seemed rather hopeless, at the moment.

How was he supposed to find the boy with the Rat, if he even had the Rat with him, and the Traitor hadn't decided to stay up in Gryffindor Tower, warm and dry. (Though Sirius could hardly complain about his own circumstances, Not Bellatrix had used a drying charm on him as soon as he sat down, he was fluffier than he'd ever been in his life, but dry and warm, and after the rain soaking him to the skin he felt almost clean for the first time in...well, he didn't know how long, maybe ever.) How was he supposed to find the boy without risking Moony — or anyone he might have told about Padfoot — seeing him?

It was no good, he'd have to just stay here, stay until everyone had gone, and then go back to the Wolves and try to think of a plan — that wasn't why he was here, now, anyway. He was still hoping to catch a glimpse of Harry, but in the meanwhile, oh it had been so long since he'd seen humans, since he'd been able to sit with them and listen to them talk, instead of run and run whenever they came near. And the boys kept stroking his head and back and giving him bits of food and calling him good boy. Was there really any harm in just...enjoying it? Just for a bit?

(He ignored the voice in the back of his head that flew into a panic, the one screaming that he had to do something, he had to act, because HARRY IS IN DANGER, and the Rat is still on the loose, and—)

Padfoot yawned and laid down across the boys' feet, all three of them, in the row behind the two girls and the Wolf. He wasn't planning on falling asleep, but he must have, because he woke up to the sound of thunder and Hermione (he was almost positive that was what Not Bellatrix had called her, but he couldn't remember, quite...) asking (very shrilly) whether any of the others knew what was going on.

It looked like a time out to Sirius, the dark blurs no longer racing about in the air, but standing on the muddy pitch, but he had no idea why. The commentator might have said, but all Sirius could hear was: "Gryff—fifty—up!"
The boy who wasn't Sandwich Boy or the timid one let out a whoop. "I think we're ahead," he said, when the others looked at him like he'd gone insane.

"So what?" Not Bellatrix said (the irritation on her voice sounding uncannily like Bellatrix, but it wasn't, couldn't be). "I wouldn't care if we were two-hundred and fifty behind, I just want one of them to catch the damn ball so we can go back up to the Castle."

"Well, yes, so would I," the other girl agreed. "But if we're going to spend the whole day out here, I'd like to at least see Gryffindor win."

"It'd look exactly the same as Hufflepuff winning in this shit. Why didn't they move the match? Or, fuck, get a group together to push the storm through? Or ward the shit out of the pitch so we could actually see anything? People are so stupid."

There was a distant-sounding whistle, almost completely obscured by a peel of thunder, and fifteen blobs kicked off the ground. Sirius couldn't even tell the referee from the players.

"Can't they call it for the weather?" Sandwich Boy said. "That can't be safe, flying in lightning."

"There's lightning wards on the stadium," Not Bellatrix said. "Just not rain redirection wards."

"Well why not?"

"Uh, something about weather being a factor for the players to contend with?" The timid boy sounded like he was asking a question himself, rather than answering one.

The group subsided into sullen silence for a few minutes and then...

"—seen the snit— ...Potter—on his tail, but..."

That time, the commentary didn't cut out because of the wind. An eerie silence was falling over the entire stadium, an unnatural cold frosting the seats around them, despite the weather ward they were under.

Sirius felt a whine escape Padfoot's throat, even as the humans lapsed into distracted, preoccupied silence. He knew that cold.

Dementors.

Hundreds of them.

He cowered down between the seats, making himself as small and insignificant as possible, fighting back panic as they began to swarm from every direction, wafting onto the field and swooping in from above.

And then he heard it.

"Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me!"

Not Bellatrix was on her feet, glaring at the mass of dementors as though they had personally offended her, apparently unmoved by their very presence, like anyone in their right mind would be.

And then she grinned. Lightning struck, illuminating the feral expression in striking contrast, the same come-try-it grin she'd worn when he was seven and she saved his life, dueled his father to a stand-still, laughing all the while, and Sirius knew, he knew, even before she muttered, "I warned you, bastards," before she started casting spells into the mass of demons at the center of
the field, felt magic rolling off her, so dark that it made the hair on his back stand up, he knew that he wasn't looking at Not Bellatrix.

He didn't know how she was here, at Hogwarts, or why (his first thought was for Harry, but if Bellatrix was after him, Sirius was sure he'd be dead already, not flying around the quidditch pitch), and she was obviously a third-year Gryffindor, which no one would expect (but that was her all over, twisted and devious, it was exactly the sort of thing they should expect), but it had to be her, because the idea that there were two of them...

Maybe it was the dementors. It had to be the dementors.

(But, a creeping doubt whispered in the back of his mind, who else would go around inviting wilderfolk to quidditch matches and trying to set bloody dementors on fire? Who else would laugh like that, in this situation?)

She couldn't be here, she just couldn't. And even if she could, why would she? (Was she hunting the Rat, too? He had gotten Moldyshorts killed, too, That Night...)

He saw the silver lights of patroni cast throughout the stands, more than he would have expected. Not enough to drive them away, but enough to keep them from some parts of the stands, keep them from overrunning the spectators. But what about— Where was—

"HA! I got one!"

Sirius had missed the spell, but there was a dementor falling to the ground, wreathed in sickly-looking greenish yellow flames, its hood thrown back and its terrible face with its great sucking maw withering, twisting and collapsing in on itself as the fire burned. (Bella had once been Sirius's favorite cousin, he recalled as he watched the demon writhe in pain.)

And then there was a silver phoenix sweeping around the students, pushing the dementors back, spreading hope and warmth in its wake, almost like a real phoenix's song: Dumbledore.

Bellatrix winced, a hand coming to her temple, abandoning her attack on the monsters as they fled from the field. The next crack of lightning showed the players diving for the ground, for the spot Dumbledore was already striding toward, his brightly spangled robes visible even through the rain, still beating down.

Bellatrix sighed. "You'll have to excuse me, Sylvia, Padfoot. Apparently Harry thought the best way to deal with a horde of dementors was to fall off his broom." He what? Was he okay? Sirius had to go to him, had to check, but— But can't be seen, can't be caught... "You should go back to the Pack before the humans recover, I'll come visit some other day."

And then she was gone, leaving Sirius with a Wolf and a handful of traumatized teenagers, slowly coming back to their senses. Sylvia began to slink toward the stairs, came back and nipped at his ear when he didn't come with her. He followed her out in a daze.

This was his fault, if it wasn't for him, the dementors wouldn't even be here.

He had to go, had to lead them away, had to... Had to wait, wait for the Crookshanks — best familiar, the Crookshanks — to come to him again, to tell him that Harry was alive and safe, find out what Bellatrix was doing here, but then he had to go. He'd come back, he swore it, he would, but he couldn't let them — couldn't let them hurt Harry because he was here...

He let out a mournful howl as he followed the Wolf back into the Forest, expressing his pain and guilt and loneliness as only a dog with a human soul could.
Severus really didn't think Bellatrix — the young Bellatrix — was trying to attract attention, but he also couldn't conceive how it was possible for her to be so very obviously suspicious unless she was trying.

He'd held his silence for nearly two months, after realizing her true identity. He hadn't addressed her performance in that farce with Draco, or the demolition of the Gryffindor common room which he was certain she had something to do with, or her unauthorized jaunts to Knockturn Alley — Anomos had been asking about the Blackheart the last time Severus was at the Bookshop, which meant she'd been to the Bookshop (and that couldn't possibly bode well for anyone). He hadn't even said anything when she convinced the Granger girl to abuse her time turner for the both of them. (Why Granger, of all students, had been given access to such a device was a question as yet unanswered by either the Headmaster or his Deputy.)

But using Class Five dark fire spells on bloody dementors, in front of the entire school, when she could just keep her head down? In front of Dumbledore? It was almost as though she was trying to get caught.

Granted, Dumbledore and everyone else, including Severus, had been distracted at the time by the dementors themselves, and the spectacle of fucking Potter falling off his bloody broomstick into a thrice cursed horde of dementors.

But later, in the aftermath of it all, there had been one dementor left behind by its fellows, barely alive, lying in the mud under a shroud of greenish yellow flames. Severus's analysis suggested the fire fed on dark magic — an integral aspect of a dementor's life-force, albeit one which was constantly regenerated from the ambient magic of the environment — transmuting it to light, a small amount of heat, and a miasma which was creeping slowly across the quidditch pitch, killing every insect and blade of grass in its path. The curse wasn't enough to kill the thing, but it was obviously sufficient to incapacitate it.

Which, well. Severus hadn't known that was even possible. Yes, he had known that there were light magic battle spells that could 'kill' dementors (though, like boggarts, they always respawned), and it had been in the Arthra that a team of Researchers at Miskatonic had developed a ritual involving the Destructive Power that could bend them to one's will. But he had never even considered trapping one under a curse that sapped magic. That was...

Bloody brilliant, actually. Deranged and twisted, yes, but also brilliant. And very, very conspicuous.

There was only one person in the school (aside from Severus himself) who had the slightest chance of casting such a spell — he didn't recognize the specific curse, but it wasn't hard to determine the class of spells it belonged to — and only one who would think to attempt it.

He'd broken the curse and let the fiend go, rather than further raise Dumbledore's interest in the young Bellatrix. It was already far too high, in his opinion. He had thus far relied upon Severus to monitor the girl in the wake of the incident with Draco. Severus could hardly imagine the fallout if she managed to raise enough suspicion that he began investigating her himself. He would almost certainly decide in short order that she was a threat to the entire Light agenda (which she undoubtedly was, but Severus had never much cared for the Light agenda, truth be told) and move to neutralize her, consequently drawing down the wrath of her patron goddess upon them all.

There was nothing else for it. Loath as he was to take such a step, he was going to have to have a talk with the girl.
"Black. My office. Now," he snapped, sweeping past Black and Granger as they approached the Great Hall for dinner.

"Erm." Granger hesitated, hovering anxiously, but Bellatrix waved her off.

"I'll catch up with you later, Hermione." She skipped a few steps to catch up with Severus and fell in beside him. "Your Honor, to what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked, a hint of a smirk suggesting she was still amused by that ridiculous form of address.

Severus refused to respond until he had secured the door of his office behind himself and felt the privacy wards snapping into effect. When he turned back toward the girl, he found she was sitting on the edge of his desk, her feet on one of the student chairs and a near-realistic expression of confusion on her face.

"Does the word 'subtlety' mean nothing to you, Miss Black?"

The false confusion disappeared, replaced by more genuine confusion. "Um, no? Yes? Way to be ambiguous, your Honor. I know what the word means, I just don't particularly care to exercise it."

"That fact is perfectly self-evident, I assure you."

"So, why did you ask, then?"

Severus sneered at her. "I was simply curious as to whether you left behind your incapacitated dementor through ignorance of the concept, or sheer stupidity. That is the sort of thing people tend to notice, you know."

"Incapacitated? Wait — you mean the one I set on fire? It didn't die? Damn."

"Indeed. You were fortunate that it was I who stumbled across that little blunder. Others might have drawn it to the attention of those whose scrutiny I suspect you would rather avoid, Bellatrix."

He had decided before fetching the child that the only hope he had of convincing her to moderate her behavior was to reveal that he knew who she was, and insinuate himself into her campaign to...achieve whatever passed for goals in the mind of an agent of Chaos, ideally as a valued advisor. Brilliant and deranged she might be, but she was still only thirteen years old and new to this universe, and therefore vulnerable to manipulation by a sufficiently subtle handler.

The girl reacted to the revelation of her true name with a very convincing imitation of any other thirteen-year-old girl pouting. "Did Blaise give it away in your legilimency lessons?"

Severus felt his eyes widen slightly at that. Of course, it had already been clear that this Bellatrix had recruited the Zabinis as her primary allies, but he hadn't realized they knew the truth of who she was, and presumably where she'd come from. And apparently Bellatrix was a poor influence on Zabini's sense of discretion. Though that wasn't precisely surprising.

"No," he said shortly.

She frowned. "Then...was it Dora? She said she told you I was Cassiopeia."

She had, in fact, offering the somewhat plausible explanation that 'Lyra' was a Black metamorph in the wake of a far more blatant lie of ignorance. Severus recalled thinking that he might have believed her if he hadn't known the shape and texture of Bellatrix's mind. He had believed that she believed it. He hadn't thought the brash Hufflepuff had such capacity for deception as to deliberately leak hints of deception to mislead him about her occlumency abilities, then clamp
down on them to imply sincerity. Strangely enough, he found himself almost proud of Miss Tonks.

Though he would, of course, be certain to watch her more closely in any future interactions which might occur between them.

"Travelling to Azkaban was only necessary to confirm what I already knew."

"So...what was it, then? The duel with Malfoy?"

Severus scoffed. "As though that vulgar display could possibly be termed a duel."

"Hey! Everything I did was perfectly legal, not my fault Draco's a pansy."

Tension was quickly building behind Severus's eyes, rising in concert with his irritation. "The legality of your actions is not in question. The advisability of so clearly demonstrating the advanced development of your magical abilities and the tastefulness of so demonstrating before the entire school, upon the Heir of House Malfoy, however..."

She shrugged, characteristically unrepentant. "Cissy will get over it, and really, it's far more entertaining if Lucy doesn't."

Well, that was probably true. Bellatrix always had taken an inordinate amount of pleasure in driving her brother-in-law up the wall. "In any case, the fact remains, the unrestrained nature of your actions over the past two months has been the antithesis of subtle—"

"Well, it's not like I was really trying," she interrupted. "I'm a Gryffindor now, we're supposed to be the antithesis of subtle. But I haven't done half the things I've thought of since I've been here. I didn't blow up the bloody school during that potions exam you gave me, and I totally could have. That's restraint." She pouted again, as though this was a great concession on her part.

"Be that as it may, I was under the impression you had some sort of agenda, here, which presumably does not entail being discovered and contained in the Department of Mysteries for the remainder of your unnatural life."

"Well, yes, I do, and no, it doesn't." She appeared entirely unconcerned by that potential consequence of her actions, of course. "But what do you care?"

Severus glowered at her. "Personally, I'd rather Eris not decide to make my life a living hell, thanks very much."

Bellatrix snorted. "I presume since you're telling me all this, you're not planning on turning me over yourself. Not sure I see the issue."

No reaction to his casual mention of the fact that she was a Black Mage, of course. Bloody psychopath. He scowled. He hadn't been planning on discussing this, but if he needed to give her a reason in order to convince her... "I'm not, but Dumbledore would. And due to a series of unfortunate circumstances, I am compelled to follow his orders for the foreseeable future. It is highly likely that should the Old Goat recognize you, I would be called upon to apprehend or incapacitate you. Wouldn't want to sully his own hands, you see."

The girl raised an eyebrow at him. "Noted. Never did like him. So you want me to be more...circumspect, so Dumbles doesn't order you to chuck me to the Unspeakables, and Eris doesn't decide to make your life unbearable?"

"That is essentially the sum of it, yes."
She grinned sharply. "So what's in it for me?"

"*Other* than my assistance in correcting your frankly *abysmal* attempts to pass for a normal third-year student?"

"Uh, yeah. Because you just said you'd do that anyway, to stop Dumbles finding out about me. And by the way, why are you doing his bidding? I thought you were a Death Eater."

Severus bit his tongue on his first reaction, which was to snap that it was none of her bloody concern. "I was a spy. More of an intermediary, truth be told, as I was acknowledged by both sides as a double agent. A certain oath was necessary in order to gain Dumbledore's confidence. An oath which still binds me, in the absence of a Dark Lord to execute him." Of course, that was somewhat misleading, but there was not a single chance in any of the nine hells that he would tell *Bellatrix* about *Lily*.

The girl sighed. "And here I thought you were going to tell me you'd flipped on Not-Professor Riddle and were volunteering to help me kill him, for real this time. Seriously, who even makes a horcrux? Okay, I mean, if I had to pick anyone I knew as being the most likely to make one, Professor Riddle would be it, but. Still kinda dumb, right?"

What. The. *Fuck?*

He didn't even know where to start. The Dark Lord's name was *Riddle*? Apparently he was a *Professor* in the world this *Bellatrix* came from? *Horcrux*? He had a *horcrux*? How would this *Bellatrix* even *know* that? Especially given the apparent differences between her world and his... Not to mention, the idea of *Bellatrix*, any *Bellatrix*, trying to kill the Dark Lord was just...absurd. Patently absurd.

*And who just goes around* revealing *that* sort of information, *apparently on a bloody* whim?

Of course, she knew he already knew who she was, which could be a contributing factor, but still.

He blinked, then realized he'd been staring speechlessly for several seconds. Mostly because *Bellatrix* had stood up and was snapping her fingers in front of his nose.

He swatted her hand away.

"Ha! I knew that worked, at least some of the time."

Ignoring *that* bit of nonsense... "*Not Professor Riddle?*" he finally managed to repeat.

"*Ugh*, having to tell people the same thing all the time gets really tedious, you know? But fine. In my world — you know I'm from a different universe, right?" Severus nodded. "Yeah, well, in my world, Grindelwald's revolution totally failed, so things are kind of different. One of the big ones is that Professor Riddle, my Defense professor, swotty dark arts nerd, is your Dark Lord. Voldemort."

"*Don't* say the name," Severus snapped reflexively.

"Why not?"

He hesitated before admitting, "Habit. It was widely recognized that *Voldemort* is a rather silly nom de guerre, and Death Eaters were expected to have a certain degree of respect for our exalted leader. *Bellatrix* — the other *Bellatrix* — insisted." Violently.

*This* *Bellatrix* rolled her eyes. "I really should start planning what I'm going to do to him for that."
What? "I seem to have missed something."

The girl scowled. "Not-Professor Riddle started using compulsions on Other Bella when she was about five years old, and pretty much never stopped. He's going to pay for that. But I digress..."

Severus missed the next few minutes of her monologue entirely, as his entire world stuttered and realigned itself. Bellatrix, the Dark Lord's most fervent supporter, had been a victim of early childhood mind-molding? He could scarcely process the idea, and yet, it made so much sense. Her fanaticism, her almost House Elf-like devotion to her Master, the degree of effort she had put into realizing his vision — far beyond the degree of effort the Dark Lord himself had contributed, at least by the time Severus joined the organization...

How had no one noticed?

"...and Blaise says that it tried to subsume Gin's soul in the Chamber of Secrets, but Harry killed it before the process was complete, so that's gone, at least, but obviously Riddle's not completely dead, because the Dark Mark is still visible, or at least Lucy's was last time I saw him, I'm guessing yours is, too?"

Fuck, that sounded like it might have been important. It also sounded like the Old Goat had neglected to tell him some very important details about the fiasco at the end of the previous school year. Ignoring for the moment the fact that Zabini was apparently going around using legilimency on his fellow students at Bellatrix's behest — he'd deal with that later...

"It is. I don't believe any of us were particularly surprised that it never fully faded. The Dark Lord did like to boast that he'd insured himself against Death more completely than any other man."

"Huh. I wonder what else he did. I mean, it's not like horcruxes are exactly rare—"

On a scale of safeguards against true death, no. They weren't exactly the sort of thing the average Light wizard would be likely to have heard of, but the older students from darker families had a tendency to try to scare their underclassmen peers with stories of such magics...

"—and Gin said he, the soul fragment, was really young, like, still in school. I kind of don't see Professor Riddle not trying to improve on his immortality throughout his life."

…and enough information on them was widely available that Lily had gifted him with a theoretical arithmantic reconstruction of the ritual process when they were fifteen. It wasn't remotely out of the question that the Dark Lord had pieced it together by that age as well, even if... "Riddle?"

Severus didn't recognize that name, which almost certainly meant it wasn't a pureblood house.

Bellatrix obviously understood the implication. She smirked. "Yep, Riddle. He's a half-blood, like you. You two actually have a lot in common, I didn't really notice that before now. But yeah, he gets the Parseltongue from Slytherin through the Gaunts on his mother's side, but his father was just some rich muggle. Which makes the whole pureblood supremacy thing here really ironic."

Severus was quite certain the Bellatrix from this universe wouldn't find that quite so amusing. But in any case, "Any other methods he used would almost certainly have been physical in nature. The Horcrux ritual damages the soul in a way which precludes the use of any other soul-magic prevented which come to mind. If I recall correctly, a significant degree of the potential in the ritual is based on that vulnerability."

According to Lily, at least, that was part of the sacrifice entailed in the process. Which was one of the reasons Horcruxes weren't more commonly used — there were other methods of obtaining
immortality that didn't prevent the effective use of other soul magics on oneself. Not to mention, the sort of person most likely to try to cheat death was not likely to be comfortable relying on a single soul tether as their only insurance. He couldn't help but wonder if the Dark—*Riddle* had known that when he'd done it.

Bellatrix nodded, as though this was obvious. "Not to mention the whole lich enslavement thing."

Severus smirked. The idea of *Riddle* becoming some necromancer's pet through his youthful stupidity was just too amusing. "Yes, well. In any case, the ritual Lily enacted to destroy his body is likely to have overcome any contingencies he might have had in place."

The girl leaned forward, abject fascination painted across her face. "Do you know what she did?"

"Only the results. According to Dumbledore, the—*Riddle's* physical body was atomized. The official story is that his body was never recovered, but the DMLE analysis revealed that it was misted over the entire scene."

"*Neat.* Wonder if it hurt."

Which was such a very *Bellatrix* response that Severus was hard pressed to keep his reaction to a single raised eyebrow. "I haven't the faintest idea. Much of the upper floor of the Potters' house was destroyed by the fall-out. Given that it was *Lily*, I would imagine a ritual integrated into a trap ward, probably involving one of the aspects of Order or Destruction."

"Or both," the girl suggested. "From what I've heard, she wasn't dedicated."

So far as Severus knew, very few people knew about the battlefield ritualism she had used in the war. Well, aside from the Diagon Alley Massacre, but that was purely Dark. Certainly nothing had been printed in the Prophet had indicated that she *wasn't* dedicated to one of the Powers. There had, in fact, been a good deal of speculation to the contrary, after Diagon Alley. "*Heard? From whom?*

"Oh, you know. *Around.* It's been a long time since the Powers have found a pair of ritualists as entertaining as *Lily Evans* and Tom Riddle. It's not really a secret everyone was trying to recruit them."

Because it wasn't disturbing at all to know that the Powers had been gossiping about *Lily* with *Bellatrix*, or that they had apparently been comparing her to the fucking *Dark Lord*. He allowed himself a scowl before dismissing the topic. "In any case, I would assume any additional protections Riddle employed were tied to his body, and now void, were it not for the fact that Potter's destruction of the Horcrux does not appear to have untethered his shade from this plane."

"Well, I can't say I'm really surprised. If anyone could work out how to overcome the soul damage, or make one of the other soul-protections work on a fragment, it *would* be Professor Riddle."

Which reminded Severus, "What does he teach, your Riddle?"

"Uh, officially? Defense Against the Dark Arts. Unofficially, mostly just *actual* Dark Arts — the theory, at least — and freeform magic, and what he likes to call 'creative problem-solving.' And, you know, subterfuge and sarcasm and taking the piss. Basically what you'd expect from the Head of Slytherin. Why?"

Mostly curiosity, if Severus was inclined to answer honestly. "I simply wished to know whether your version of the man was sufficiently similar to the Dark Lord I knew to extrapolate motivations based on similarities in their base personality. Tentatively, I think yes. Had the Dark Lord become
a Hogwarts professor in this timeline, he might have made similar choices in his curriculum."

"Uh...huh," Bellatrix said, as though she thought that a rather silly question to concern himself with. "So, what do you think?"

Severus raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

"About helping me murder the Undead Dark Wanker," she elaborated. "You'll consider it?"

As though he didn't consider that very prospect at least once a day. Very little further consideration was required. If that was the reason the Powers had seen fit to send a Dedicate of Chaos to Severus's universe, it would be foolish in the extreme to oppose her, and moreover, Severus had no real desire to do so. When the threat posed by the Dark Lord was finally resolved, Severus's vow to Dumbledore would be fulfilled, and he would be free to live his own life, finally. (Not that he believed for a moment that that was the only purpose she might have here, but it was still preferable to moderate her actions by advising her directly rather than work to counteract the effects her presence would have from the other side, as it were.) "In exchange for your consideration of the potential implications of your impulsivity, certainly."

"Fine, fine. I'll try to be less obviously...me."

Severus held absolutely no confidence that she would even attempt to do so.

"Oh, by the way, if you hear anything about Sirius, I'd appreciate a heads-up before you tell Dumbledore or the DMLE."

Severus sneered. He was even less inclined to do favors for his childhood tormentor than he was to willingly associate with a younger version of the woman who had tortured him throughout the final years of the war. "What incentive could I possibly have to give your murderous cousin any opportunity to escape justice this time around?"

She blinked at him as though he was a bloody moron. "I don't know about you, but I'm just a schoolgirl."

Severus was certain she was attempting to imply something there, but he couldn't imagine what it was. "I fail to see how it could possibly have escaped your notice, but I am not."

"No, that's not— I mean, I don't have any resources. Well, I have access to the Black fortune, but the House of Black is all but defunct. We have no political capital to speak of, and money alone won't be enough to take down Not-Professor Riddle. We're going to need allies at every level of society, informants wherever we can find them, political influence... Bribes are pretty fucking useless if there's no incentive not to just take the money and do fuck all in return. The way I see it, the first step to killing that bastard once and for all — or getting anything done around here, honestly — is to bring back the House of Black. Which will be much easier if the official Head of the House isn't a soulless, dementor-Kissed husk of a wizard."

That was, disinclined as Severus might be to admit it, a very good point.

"Besides, you have to know he wasn't really a Death Eater. Cissy does. And killing people in war doesn't count."

Severus glared at her. "I think you'll find that killing people in war very much does count, but I was referring to an earlier incident. Your dear cousin proved himself capable of murder at the age of sixteen, if not by his own hand."
The girl perked up slightly at that. "You know what I meant — it doesn't count as murder. Whose death did Sirius arrange?"

"Mine."

Bellatrix blinked at him for a moment before pointing out the obvious. "You're not dead, you know that, right?"

"Not for lack of trying on the part of your new 'Head of House', I assure you. So you could see why I might be hesitant to do him any favors."

The infuriating child shrugged. "Well, he obviously didn't manage it, so if you think about it, all that really proves is he didn't have the balls to kill you himself. And, you know, he literally wasn't capable of murder. And you'd be doing it for me, not him. And quite frankly I think giving me a heads up on his whereabouts is a pretty minor thing to ask in exchange for me keeping Eris out of your life."

Severus raised an eyebrow at that. "Even in the event that I am forced to participate in your capture?"

Bellatrix smirked at him. "I can't make any promises you won't get caught in the wake of anything she might do to Dumbledore, or Magical Britain as a whole, but she won't target you specifically if I ask her not to. Not that I think it'll come to that, but yeah. Swear you'll talk to me before anyone else if you happen to be the one to catch that worthless arse, and I'll give you your insurance policy."

"I will...consider your proposition." Specifically, he would consider the likelihood that either circumstance would transpire, and whether the chance to insinuate himself further into the girl's confidence and her plans would be worth finding himself allied with Sirius Black when she eventually managed to find him — he didn't really doubt that she would. Disregarding the Dark Lord's descent into madness, events had always had an inexplicable tendency to work out in her favor. Not to mention the possibility that she might actually succeed in finishing off Riddle once and for all, freeing him from any association with Dumbledore and thereby from any obligation to hinder her activities, or otherwise associate with her in any way.

He would most likely agree, he knew, but he'd made more than his share of ill-considered vows in the past. Even if she wasn't demanding his absolute loyalty or a commitment unto death and beyond, he was loath to agree to any alliance without due deliberation.

Bellatrix gave him an overly exaggerated sigh and rolled her eyes, hopping off his desk. "Fine, but don't take too long about it. And if that's all, I'm going to back up to dinner."

Severus waved a negligent hand toward the door, unlatching it with a freeform charm. "Go on, then. I find myself in any case unfortunately in need of a long conversation with Albus Dumbledore about the merits of hiding the details of student possession from one's resident Dark Arts and Mind Magic expert."

The girl cocked her head slightly to one side.

"What?"

"Nothing, just— Nothing." And then she grinned, skipping past him. "Eris says to give him all her love."

Before Severus could think of a response to that little aside, she was gone, leaving him with an
increasing sense of foreboding.

One of these days he would learn to stop underestimating the capacity of the universe to make his life more complicated.

Fuck you, Bellatrix.

Chapter End Notes

FYI, writing Sirius is really hard. —Leigha

Schedule issues might be coming up in the near future. (More than this chapter being a half-week late, I mean.) My updates on my solo fic have slowed down a lot recently too. I've barely been writing at all the last couple weeks, due to feeling 1000% awful all the time. We'll see. —Lysandra
"Can I talk to you?" Gin asked, sidling up to Lyra in the Gryffindor commons. "Uh, alone?" she added, shooting a sidelong glance at her brothers, just a few feet away. They were entirely absorbed in their latest project, something to do with human transformation potions, based on the books Lyra had been able to catch a glimpse of. In her estimation, they were as unlikely as anyone else to even notice Gin was there, let alone whatever she wanted to talk about, but fine.

It wasn't as though Lyra's own reading was getting her anywhere. All the mind magic experts agreed: it was impossible to remove early childhood compulsions without irreparably damaging the mind of the subject. That was the whole reason placing such compulsions in the first place was Unforgivable. And while the supposed impossibility of such a feat wasn't necessarily an insurmountable obstacle — there was that one time she had travelled forward in time, after all — Bella wasn't any sort of mind mage. She should probably ask Blaise if he had any ideas about where to start.

Snape would theoretically be more informative, but even if he had decided he was willing to let her know if he heard anything about Sirius (and had implied he was totally in on the conspiracy to kill Not-Professor Riddle), she suspected he would balk at doing anything that would help Other Bella. She'd gotten the impression he didn't like her very much. Knowing herself and the position Other Bella had held in the Death Eaters, she'd probably had a lot of fun at his expense during the war.

"Sure." She closed the tome — a copy of Perenelle Flamel's treatise on mind magics, disguised as a Muggle Studies text — with a snap, shoving it into her bag. "Where are we going?"

Gin didn't answer, just headed toward the Portrait Hole. Lyra followed her to a nearby classroom (empty, save for the professor's desk and half a dozen armchairs — undoubtedly someone's attempt to create a private parlor for themselves), whereupon she said, in a rather furtive tone, "Can you, er..." and waggled her fingers about randomly for a bit.

"Can I what?"

Gin sighed. Pouted. "Anti-eavesdropping charms?"

Lyra rolled her eyes at the younger girl. "How was I supposed to get that from this?" she asked, waggling her own fingers.

The Weasley glared — an expression that made her look uncannily similar to the Penultimate Weasley — and said nothing. Not that Lyra had really expected an answer. She was already casting the spells anyway. As soon as she was done, she fixed the girl with a flat stare.

"Well?"

Gin glared at her. "You said you were going to kill Tom. What are you doing? Do you know where he is? What should I do? I want to help."

Oh. That. Lyra hadn't made a point of following up with the redhead after Samhain, mostly because she wasn't really to the point yet in her plans where Gin would be of any use whatsoever. "I definitely am. But first I need to solidify my power base. No, I don't know where he is, but history suggests he'll make another attempt on Harry's life eventually, so presumably he'll show up here at some point." Really, Harry was just good bait for everyone Lyra wanted to find. Very convenient. "And... I suppose if you really want to help, you could let Blaise legilimize you. We
need to know everything we can about Riddle. I may have a source who can tell me about what he was like later on, during the war—" Assuming she could find a way to fix Other Bella... "—but I haven't found anyone else who knows anything about him as a kid."

"I– I can't," Gin said, her voice shaking slightly. "Zabini, I mean. I– I just can't."

Lyra frowned at her. "Snape, then."

"No. It's not– not Zabini that's the problem — not that I like Zabini, either — it's the...the legilimency. It's too much like– too much like having him in my head again." Then she frowned. "Why would you think Snape would be better, anyway?"

Lyra shrugged. "He's a professor. Responsible, adult-like person. Also, apparently Dumbledore's mind magic expert. Not, you know, Blaise." She didn't see it herself, but the way other people acted around Blaise — even the other 'cool kids' — she gathered he was considered somewhat off-putting, though not exactly in the same way as Lyra herself.

Gin shook her head. "The dungeon bat's worse than Zabini, even if he is a professor! He's the Head of Slytherin for god's sake!"

"Uh...so?"

The younger girl rolled her eyes. "Right, you like the Slytherins. Weirdo."

"I like some of the Slytherins." Really only Blaise. Like was a strong word for the rest of them, and some had really been getting on her nerves, lately. Draco, for example, seemed to have gotten over the public reprimand she'd given him at the beginning of the year, or started to, at least. Unless she was very much mistaken, he and Lavender were colluding, following her around in the first iteration of each shift, when she was publicly visible, planning...something. Which had the possibility to be entertaining when it finally happened, whatever they were planning, but in the meanwhile, it was just vaguely annoying that one or the other of them was always around.

"Whatever, not the point. The most useful thing you could do at this point is tell us everything you know about Young Riddle."

"It's all muddled. His memories and mine. I've been working on occlumency, trying to sort it out. Bill — my brother — he gave me a book... But it's still...confusing." Lyra was pretty sure that was a defensive posture, arms crossed, shoulders hunched, not quite meeting her eyes. "I don't know anything, really," she admitted, sounding rather angry about that fact.

Which was good. Lyra could work with angry. "And you don't want help with the occlumency, right? Because I could probably get Blaise to do that." And coincidentally see all of her memories while he was at it.

"No! I don't want anyone else in my head, for any reason — why is that so hard to understand?!"

Lyra shrugged. Personally, she couldn't imagine life without Eris's presence lingering at the back of her mind, but given what Riddle had done to Other Bella, she could kind of see why people who weren't immune to it might be discomfited by legilimency in general. There wasn't really a rush on obtaining whatever information Gin might have, though. There was still the solidifying-the-power-base thing to do before Lyra even started looking for Riddle, and she should learn occlumency anyway, so letting her do it herself wasn't a complete waste of time. "Well, fine, then. But otherwise, you're pretty useless."

Gin, already glaring at her, started to go red, her hands balling into fists at her sides, posture stiff,
"I...am...not...useless! I will find a way to help, whether you think I can or not!"

Lyra made a point of leaning casually on the professor's desk, just to make it clear she wasn't even remotely threatened. "You're a twelve-year-old who's been studying magic for all of what, a year and a half? Your instinct when I annoy you is to get ready to punch me in the face, not hex me. You should work on that, by the way, because, as I think I said, you're a twelve-year-old girl — pretty much anyone would flatten you in a physical fight. And you creep around like a traumatized little mouse, keeping to yourself and letting your year-mates bully you. You have no influence to speak of, no connections, no money. The only thing you have to potentially bring to the table is information, and you can't do that, and you're not willing to accept help so you could. Sounds pretty useless to me."

"Oh, like you're so much better! You're only a third-year!"

"I'm only in school at all because this is the most advantageous place for me to be. I've been studying magic since I was three, and fighting since I learned to walk. You saw what I did to Darling Draco, right? And I did say I was still solidifying my power base. Influence and connections will come with the restoration of the House of Black." Money wasn't even worth mentioning. The Weasleys were poor, even Hermione had more money than the Weasleys.

Gin seemed to wilt as Lyra spoke, but she was still defiant when she said, "Fine, if you don't want my help, I'll find some other way, but now that I know he's still alive, I'm going to kill him."

Lyra grinned. "Good."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, but... What?"

Lyra sighed, trying to articulate her thoughts. "You're angry. That's good. Well, better than acting like a victimized little kid, at least. Anger, hatred, determination — even desperation — to see him dead, they make you dangerous. Also kind of stupid, because you are twelve, and consequently useless, but that's a temporary state of affairs. So, theoretically dangerous. Potentially dangerous."

Gin appeared to think about this idea for a long moment. Several expressions flickered across her face before she apparently settled on a grim sort of determination. "Teach me."

Lyra frowned. She'd been hoping that goading the girl would convince her to agree to legilimency, or at least occlumency pointers, or else get her to realize that there was some as-yet-unknown form of assistance she could offer. "Teach you what?"

"You said being useless was temporary. Teach me to not be useless. You think you have some sort of a chance against him, so teach me to fight like you."

Lyra laughed. She couldn't help it. "I can't teach you to fight like me. And I'm not exactly planning to offer him a duel, anyway." Not that she had any concrete plans at all, but a head-on confrontation seemed highly unlikely to succeed. Something more like Lily Potter's trap, though... That was more promising.

The girl pouted at her. "Well, why does it matter then, that you're a better fighter than I am? And why can't you?"

"Well, number one, I don't think you could actually cast most of the spells I'd use in a real fight,
and two, I can't cast any of them in the Castle without the wards going berserk. And three, I'm pretty sure if you tried to fight like me, you'd end up dead in, like, two seconds. And it matters because if we're trying to kill a Dark Lord, we're going to have to deal with his followers. Minions. Traps. Even if I'm not fighting Riddle one-on-one, I'm pretty sure there's still going to be fighting at some point. At the very least, anyone involved has to be able to defend themselves."

"Well, teach me that, then," Gin demanded, scowling mulishly at her. "I promise I'll tell you what I know about Riddle when I get everything...straightened out, but I want— I need to do something, now. Something to make everything... Just, something. Anything."

Lyra sighed. She really hadn't given much thought to inviting Gin into her...whatever this was. She'd just had the idea that it might be useful to get someone with a personal grudge against Riddle, someone who had information that probably didn't exist anywhere else, to work with her. She hadn't anticipated having to find things for her to do. (Managing people really wasn't Bella's strong suit. That was definitely Zee's job.) "Okay, let me think for a second."

As a rule, Bella didn't plan things. It hardly seemed worth it, when any plan she made seemed to go to hell within the first couple of minutes. And she hardly ever tried to do anything she couldn't accomplish on her own (or with a single accomplice, at most), so this whole (Torturing and) Killing (Not-)Professor Riddle thing was kind of new territory for her. (Just killing him, she'd decided, wasn't quite fair recompense for what he'd done to Other Bella and by extension the entire House of Black.) Because she really had no illusions about the outcome of any contest between herself and Professor Riddle. She might be absurdly powerful and well-read for someone her age, but Professor Riddle could flatten her in about ten seconds if he wanted to, and he'd had decades to study magic. She had Eris on her side, yes, but he was more than capable of calling on the Powers himself, and he actually did plan things. Plus he was uncannily good at ferreting out plots against him. She didn't think anyone had managed to successfully prank him in the entire two years she'd been in Slytherin, and she knew for a fact that people had tried. And not just students, either. (Professor Riddle had an admirable ability to annoy people who thought too highly of themselves. Especially Dumbledore.)

Which, obviously Not-Professor Riddle wasn't exactly the same as Professor Riddle, but it had to be assumed that he would be equally difficult to capture, torture, and eventually murder the shit out of.

So Lyra needed resources. If she could get Other Bella back to her right mind, that would obviously be best, since she'd apparently known him better than anyone. Snape was good, and Hermione could probably be convinced to help as well, at least with research. (Lyra kind of doubted she would be any more useful in an actual fight than Blaise.) Between the three of them, she was pretty sure they could come up with something that Riddle wouldn't catch, or at least make enough contingencies that they managed to take him down anyway. Blaise would be a good spy — mind mages always were, fucking cheaters — and had the right sort of connections and background to integrate himself into practically any group she could think of if he so chose. Theo had an automatic in with the Death Eaters through his father, and he might be convinced to fight on her side if it became necessary. Gin was not, so far as Lyra could see, especially intelligent, nor, as she had already noted, did she have any political influence or connections, or any special talents to speak of. Outside of information on Riddle, she really didn't have much to offer.

But.

As much as Bella liked fighting fire with fire, if it did come down to a fight, or even if it turned out that their contingencies needed a light ritual, or hinged on light battle magic, it would be immensely helpful to have someone around who wasn't absolutely, one hundred percent dark.
Dora might agree to help, depending on the situation, but it might turn out that she was more loyal to the aurors and the Ministry than Lyra. Hermione, well... Lyra could see her doing background work, but she didn't really seem the direct violence sort. It was hard to say why, exactly, she was just soft like that. Harry probably would be a good fighter — taking on a bloody basilisk with a fucking sword was just stupid, but managing to kill it suggested impressive survival instincts. If he'd hesitated at any point, he'd almost certainly be dead. But, ideally, he would be kept ignorant, in order to serve as more effective bait. Not entirely ignorant, but definitely not a light battle mage in training. See, if he was too competent, Riddle would find it suspicious and deduce there was something afoot. He would have to be able to defend himself, though, she should probably say something to him about that, get him started learning actual defense instead of just schoolkid stuff.

Gin, on the other hand, had no other loyalties, and there would be no reason for the original Not-Professor Riddle to care about her or investigate her thoroughly enough to find her abilities suspicious. Lyra couldn't be sure whether she'd go for the throat in a life-or-death situation, but she didn't seem like the type to overthink and second-guess herself in a fight. She was reasonably powerful — as Lyra understood it, she wouldn't have survived the whole horcrux thing if she wasn't — and desperate to do something against Riddle, which should, Lyra thought, lend itself well to the sort of obsessive practice it would take to reach any level of competence in a reasonable period of time. Plus she was stubborn and a little jaded and had that whole righteous fury thing going for her, all of which were pretty much requirements to be a light warrior. Well, a good one, anyway.

She'd still have to learn enough about the dark to defend herself effectively, obviously, but if she was really that determined to do something useful (other than letting Blaise look at her memories), she could do worse than learning how to fight.

Lyra still couldn't teach her, though. For one thing, she was considered near-suicidally reckless by pretty much everyone she'd ever fought (which was more effective for her than playing it safe ever had been, but probably not something to teach a novice duelist), and she was fairly certain that she would be even worse at teaching basic offensive magic than Snape was at teaching introductory potions. Plus, as she had already mentioned, the offensive magic she knew tended to be very dark, equally illegal, and it would probably take two or three years before Gin had the degree of focus and strength needed to cast them, especially in an actual fight.

Not that she knew anyone else who could really teach Gin serious light magic, either, but they had time to figure that out. (Maybe Dora would help, since it wasn't illegal or anything.) First, she'd really need to learn the basics, in a more conservative and defensive style than Bella had developed.

Which, well, there was really only one person who came to mind for that.

"Right, come on," she said, dismantling the anti-eavesdropping spells and heading out into the corridor.

"Where are you going?!!"

"Come and find out."

She did, of course. Complaining about Lyra's lack of explanation and demanding to know where they were going all the while, or, well, at least until they reached the secret passage Lyra was looking for, at which point she fell (briefly) into shocked silence and wide-eyed staring.

Really, Lyra didn't think it was that big a deal. Everyone knew Slytherin had all sorts of secret passages that led from the dungeons to...basically any painting or tapestry with a snake in it,
anywhere in the Castle. Of course, these were only supposed to be used as exits, but there was a single Parseltongue password that opened any and all of them from the outside. Technically students weren't supposed to know about this, let alone the password, but Professor Riddle wasn't exactly discrete about using them, and Bella was very good with languages. She couldn't do the magic part of Parseltongue, but the enchantments only recognized the audible aspect of it anyway.

"Where are we? Is this Slytherin?" she asked, following Lyra down a tightly spiraling staircase and into a small junction with three tunnels branching off of it.

"Uh, yeah. The common room should be...this way." Assuming the ouroboros over a doorway still meant the same thing it did in Lyra's own universe. Which, she didn't see why it wouldn't.

Several minutes (and many ignored questions about what they were doing and how Lyra knew how to get in and where to go) later, they did, in fact reach the common room, a low-ceilinged arcade filled with columns and nooks and sofas and braziers dividing the floor space into a veritable maze. It was just as shadowy and green as Lyra remembered, and relatively sparsely populated compared to the Gryffindor commons. For some reason, people didn't seem to like just hanging out down here.

"Hey, Yaxley," Lyra said, approaching the first prefect she recognized, interrupting what seemed to be a trashy romance novel.

"Black? How did you get in here?"

"Magic. Have you seen Theo?"

The prefect frowned at her and ignored her question entirely. "Did Zabini give you the password? I'm going to kill that kid, I swear."

"Nope. I just convinced one of the secret exits to let me in."

"Uh-huh. And how exactly did you do that?"

"Magic." She really couldn't help her smirk. The irritation on Morgana's face was just too funny.

"She spoke Parseltongue to it," Gin interrupted, apparently impatient with Lyra's little game. "Why are we here, Lyra?"

"We're looking for Theo Nott. I have a business proposition for him."

"You speak Parseltongue? Next you're going to tell me you're the Heir of Slytherin," Morgana said, raising a disbelieving eyebrow at her.

"No, obviously Harry's the Heir of Slytherin, and no, I don't actually speak it, but how many sounds do you think snakes can make? It just so happens that this one—" She said the word (presumably open). "—opens all sorts of secret passages. By the way, Gin, this is Morgana Yaxley. Yaxley, this is Gin Weasley."

Gin nodded stiffly, glaring at the older girl for no apparent reason.

Morgana nodded back— "Weasley." —then proceeded to ignore the glaring redhead. "So, you expect me to believe you just...what? Walked around the school, hissing at random portraits and patches of wall until you found a way in?"

"Nah, that would be silly. I had Lovegood do it, much less suspicious." She really had told Luna
that there were secret passages that could be opened with Parseltongue. It had come up in a
collection about Luna's mother, who was apparently a Speaker. Luna wasn't, but she knew more
than Lyra, who had picked up everything she knew from spying on Professor Riddle. "So, have
you seen Theo?"

Morgana sighed, rolling her eyes. "I give up. His lot usually sit over there," she said, pointing
toward one of the corners by the tunnel leading to the boys' dormitories. "Do your business, and get
out — you know you're not supposed to be here, and I refuse to be responsible if some idiot takes it
into his head that a lion in the snake-pit is a fair target."

"Oh, no! Your poor little snakelings might get themselves hurt." She smirked broadly. Really, she
couldn't possibly think that Lyra was going to come out the worse if some idiot decided to object to
her presence. "Come on, Gin."

The prefect rolled her eyes again and went back to her novel. Not exactly the most congenial
farewell, but Lyra had found most of the Slytherins didn't really know what to do with her. Not that
this was in any way unusual. Most people had no idea what to do when confronted with anything
outside their normal range of experience, which Bella tended to be. They'd been downright hostile
the first few times she'd sat at their table in the Great Hall, but curiosity had eventually won over
some of them, mostly the upperclassmen who had more or less abandoned the silly House Rivalry
in favor of focusing on their OWLs, NEWTs, and Life After Hogwarts. And then, after a few
weeks of refusing to give them any straight answers about herself (other than the original cover
story, which everyone knew was a lie), the curiosity had mostly faded to irritation and disinterest.
Flint, the Quidditch Captain, still seemed to be very suspicious of her, and obviously Draco and his
clique resented her presence enormously (which was endlessly entertaining), but most of them
didn't seem to care anymore.

Dragging Gin (her hair marking her out as a Weasley even in the low light) across their common
room by the most circuitous route possible only garnered a bit of whispering and pointing. A
couple people sniggered. No one actually tried to stop them. No one even shouted at them, or tried
to take points from Gryffindor for their presence. It was kind of disappointing, really.

Even Theo just did a minor double take when she draped herself over the back of his chair with a
bright "Hey, guys."

Daphne didn't react at all (because of course she didn't), and Tracey quipped, "So, are you
defecting, then? And what's with the kitten?"

"This is Gin Weasley. Gin, this is Tracey Davis, Theo Nott, and Daphne Greengrass. No Blaise?"

Daphne's brow furrowed, ever so slightly. Eh, it was something.

"No matter, you've already met him, and we were looking for Theo anyway."

Theo tipped his head back to give her a very suspicious glare, but Tracey, as usual, was the first to
react. "Why?"

"Yes, why?" Theo repeated. "And come sit down, you're making my neck hurt."

"Fine." Lyra gave the Slytherins an overly dramatic sigh and moved to half-sit on one arm of
Daphne and Tracey's sofa. Gin hovered awkwardly beside her. "He meant you, too."

"Uh, I'm fine."

Whatever. "Right, well, I have a proposition for you, Theo."
His eyes went all narrow and suspicious again. "Go on..."

"I need you to teach Gin to fight."

Whatever Theo had been expecting her to say, that apparently wasn't it, because he just sat there looking completely nonplussed for several seconds. More than long enough for Tracey to butt in again. "Did you adopt a Weasley? Seriously, what's with the kitten? And how did you get in here, anyway?"


"I'm not a minion!"

"She's totally a minion. Well minion in training. She's kind of useless at the moment, which is why I need Theo to teach her how to fight."

"Why don't you do it?" he asked, finally finding his tongue again.

She just raised an eyebrow at him. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. You're better than I am, and you know it. Why do you want me to do something you could easily do yourself?"

"Because, people who aren't me can't pull off my style. Besides, can you see me teaching? Especially a beginner, it'd be a trainwreck."

Tracey sniggered. "She has a point, Theo. It'd be like having Snape back in first year, and the kid would come out of it only knowing how to do fashion charms or something."

Which was kind of hilarious, actually. "I could totally kick your arse with fashion charms, you know." She'd just need to fuck up a few hairstyling spells to blind and muffle an opponent... If their hair was long enough, she could probably even find a way to make it strangle them. Hmm...

"Now you've given her ideas," Daphne chided her...girlfriend? Were they a thing yet? They looked awfully cozy at the other end of the sofa, but Bella was notoriously bad at recognizing when people were in a relationship. She'd have to ask Blaise later.

In the meanwhile, she gave the pair of them a sharp grin. "Just a few. Not the point. Theo?"

"Weren't you teaching that Rhee's kid?"

"That's different. I just had to teach him enough to convince the baby snakes to find easier prey." She'd only ended up teaching him three spells (upor, cadarma, and sesapsa), and it had still been rather aggravating, demonstrating them over and over, and correcting his wand movements and pronunciation. She'd even had to look up the wand movement for sesapsa. Ciardha had taught her to use it to catch and throw back curses, which kind of defeated any attempt to use the proper wand movement in the first place. Dave wasn't nearly that coordinated yet — to be fair, he had only learned about the existence of magic about six months ago, but still — so she'd had to teach him the standard shield form.

Theo's eyebrows ticked upward. "Who are you expecting Weasley to be fighting?"

"Oh, you never know. Aurors, Death Eaters, defense professors, warlocks, werewolves, hags, inferi, vampires, uh...demonic invasions from foreign planes? Whoever."
Tracey gave her a rather peculiar half-smile. "Was that list in any particular order?"

"Likelihood of conflict, obviously," Lyra said promptly, though really, it had just been the order in which they'd occurred to her.

"I'm not going to fight aurors," Gin snapped, glaring at her. She stopped short of saying that she was going to kill Riddle in front of the Slytherins, though, which was probably good — Lyra wasn't really ready to start recruiting anyone else. She hadn't been planning on recruiting Gin, but whatever. She'd make it work.

"Never say never," Tracey quipped, giving her a cheeky wink.

Theo, however, was slightly more focused. "You realize that sort of project would take years."

"Uh, yeah, why do you think I'm trying to get you to do it for me?"

Even Daphne smiled at that, though Gin looked slightly offended.

Theo sighed. "And in return you're offering...?"

"Open access to the Black Libraries until you come of age. All of them. Borrowing negotiable on a case-by-case basis."

The boy's eyes grew wide. Understandably — the Blacks had been collecting rare and esoteric texts for centuries. Giving the heir of another Noble House unfettered access to that sort of treasure trove was practically unprecedented. Not that that really mattered to Lyra, she didn't even know what all the libraries contained. She'd only really spent much time at Ancient House and Grimmauld Place — their collections were decent, but the oldest and rarest texts would be kept at the Keep (or in the Vault at Gringotts), and practically every property had accumulated its own collection of books over the years. She should probably start cataloguing them at some point, but it was hardly a priority. (And Hermione would probably do it for free.)

"Are you serious?"

Wow, she hadn't even thought that Daphne was capable of sounding that outraged. "Uh, yeah. Why wouldn't I be? So, Theo, what do you think?"

He didn't seem to think about it at all, skipping straight from shock to "I'll do it."

"Good. I'll leave it to you and Gin to work out your schedule, then, and we can figure out access to the libraries over the Hols."

"Erm. You do realize that means there's a non-negligible chance that you'll have to meet my father."

"Uh...why?" Not that Lyra was particularly opposed to meeting Theo's father. Cadmus Nott had been the same age as Bella in her own world. He was a much larger and more outgoing boy than his son, loud and pushy. He'd repeatedly tried to challenge Zee's position as the leader of their year in Slytherin, but he hadn't been too difficult to handle. He was terrified of rats, and had learned to display a healthy degree of respect after Bella had designed a ward to attract them and carved it into the back of his headboard. (That was the first time Professor Riddle had ever given her a detention. Not for scaring Nott — she was pretty sure he'd found Nott's reaction just as funny as she did — he'd just been annoyed at her for drawing pests into Slytherin.)

"Because Lord Nott is a controlling asshole," Tracey explained. "It still kind of amazes me that he
lets Theo go to Blaise's, given, you know, the muggles."

"He and Lady Zabini have an...arrangement," Theo said, blushing furiously.

"Yeah, okay, but— Why can't you just tell him you're going to visit Blaise? I'm staying there anyway, Ancient House isn't really up to human habitation at the moment."

"Father would likely confiscate anything I took home unless he knew who it really belonged to." His resentment and resignation were almost tangible.

"So, because Lord Nott is a controlling asshole," Tracey added helpfully.

"And," Daphne added, "because everyone wants to meet the mysterious new Black Lady Malfoy's been dropping hints about for the last few months. If he gets even the slightest hint that he can get an introduction, he's almost guaranteed to make that a condition of Theo being allowed to visit with you."

*DARK POWERS, Cissy, what the fuck are you thinking...*

Lyra sighed. "Fine, if it turns out to be entirely unavoidable, I'll floo over and say hello to your father."

"Erm... You do realize you'll have to, uh...act like the Black Heiress."

Lyra smirked. "I am the Black Heiress. Q.E.D, however I act is how the Black Heiress would act."

Theo didn't seem to find that answer very reassuring. "Uh...huh. Maybe I can tell him I'm staying here, and go home with Blaise instead..."

"Whatever, let me know," Lyra said, dismissing the subject. "So we're good?"

"Uh, yes?" Theo didn't sound too certain about that, but she'd take it.

"Gin?"

The younger girl nodded, looking all grim and determined again.

"Right, I should go, then. I was supposed to be in Transfiguration about twenty minutes ago."

Gin blinked at her, entirely uncomprehending. "Why even bother going at this point?"

Lyra sniggered. "Well, you see, it will annoy McGonagall infinitely more if I show up at the very end of class than if I just don't show up at all."

"Are you trying to get her to give you more detentions?"

"I think Argus and I are starting to develop a real rapport."

"You're insane, you know that, right?" Tracey asked, a note of concern in her tone. Lyra had no idea if it was real.

She shrugged. "That is a very popular opinion, yes. Anyway, I'll see you later, guys."

The Slytherins offered casual farewells as she headed toward the main entrance.

"Wait up!" Gin demanded, hurrying to catch up after taking a moment to plan a meeting with Theo.
after dinner.

The door opened just before she reached it.

"Lyra? What are you doing here? And— Weasley?"

Lyra giggled. She had never seen Blaise look so confused. "Plotting to take over the world," she offered, brushing past him and slipping out of the common room.

"But—"

"Sorry, can't talk, late for transfiguration!" she called back to him.

As the door closed, she heard him ask, "How the fuck did Lyra get in here?"
Owwww, Eris, what happened? Lyra thought, coming slowly (and very painfully) to consciousness. *It feels like someone used the Cruciatu on me. Did someone use the Cruciatu on me?*

Eris chuckled, lower and softer than she might have done, but nevertheless exacerbating Lyra’s migraine. She winced, screwing her eyes more tightly closed, which also hurt. *No, my little Bellatricce, I believe you are suffering from acute magical backlash. It will pass.*

_How long?_

_A few hours. Perhaps a day. You are better able than the average human mage to channel that sort of power, but you are still only mortal._

_I hate being mortal. I'm going back to sleep._

The second time Lyra regained some semblance of consciousness, presumably several hours later, her migraine had been reduced to a throbbing ache in her temples. She was still acutely aware of every point of contact between her skin and the sheets, but she felt sufficiently recovered to attempt to open her eyes.

She closed them almost at once. Bright afternoon sunlight was streaming through the west-facing windows, reflecting off the white-painted walls and ceiling and curtains of the hospital wing.

Several feet away, she heard Hermione moan. That might have been what had awakened her in the first place.

Right, it was starting to come back to her, now. Hermione had been reading about runic casting, and they'd been talking about the theory behind the actual _casting_ process, and... And then Lyra had gotten bored with the speculative conversation (which, to be fair, they'd had about three times already, covering absolutely no new ground). And decided that it would be a good idea to just _try_ it. Which had gone about as well as her first attempt at scrying her tea leaves in Divs. Except when half-cast runes destabilized and collapsed on the caster, well...ouch.

_You know, Eris, sometimes I wish you'd tell me when I'm about to do something phenomenally stupid._

_But how else would you learn?_ Lyra was almost _certain_ that was sarcasm, because it was something Ciardha liked to tell her, that stupid, painful mistakes were a learning experience.

_You're not funny._

_I'm hilarious, you're just out of sorts._

_You're a terrible patron. I'm going to dedicate myself to Set instead._

_Too late, you're stuck with me. Besides, I'd tell you if you were going to kill yourself. That wouldn't be amusing at all._

_Nice to know you care._

_Stop fishing, you know you're my favorite._
Lyra was saved from having to come up with a response to that by Hermione regaining sufficient consciousness to mumble, "H'lo? Where—? Is this... Lyra, 'm gonna kill you."

"Not if I do it first." Her voice was thick and slightly slurred, even worse than Hermione's.

"What?"

"Uh, never mind. I might be concussed."

"Where's Madam Pomfrey?"

"No idea." Sitting up to look for her seemed like too much work, especially since it would mean opening her eyes again.

"What did you do?"

"Uh... I'll explain later." Like, when it didn't feel like her skull might crack open at any moment, and they weren't in a relatively public place where anyone could hear her talking about what had gone wrong with her attempt to cast very illegal dark magics.

Not that runic casting was really dark, but she wasn't really feeling up to dealing with people who cared about her breaking laws at the moment.

There was a rustle off to her left, a creak of bed springs as Hermione sat up. Apparently she was far less affected by the accident than Lyra. Which did make sense, she'd been the one casting, so of course the backlash had affected her more — Hermione would just have gotten caught in the fallout. Probably an explosion.

"You'll explain now," she demanded, but before Lyra could tell her to bugger the fuck off, the Healer bustled over to their beds.

"Goodness, Miss Granger, lie back down!"

"But— Madam Pomfrey, I'm fine, I was just—"

"Nonsense, you have a cracked skull, complex fractures of your left tibia and fibula, massive bruising of your back and shoulders, and twenty percent of your face and hands suffered second-degree burns! You are not fine, you're drugged to the gills. Now lie down!"

Hermione whimpered, but there was another creak as she complied. Lyra winced. She was never going to hear the end of this.

"Now don't give me that look, we'll have you right as rain in a day or two, provided you stay in bed and follow my orders to the letter."

"Uh. Do I even want to know my prognosis?" Lyra mumbled.

The Healer rounded on her with a gust of air and a soft sort of snort. "You — I'm quite frankly surprised you are conscious! You're in recovery from acute magical backlash—" Apparently Eris had called that one. "—and while you apparently suffered less blunt force trauma than Miss Granger, your burns are far more extensive — your face, arms, and chest... I'm afraid you'll be here for at least a week."

Lyra groaned. An entire week spent in a single room sounded like nothing less than torture. "Are you sure?"
"Of course I'm sure! Now, drink this." She inclined Lyra's head slightly and held a vial to her lips.

"What is it?" she asked, finding it far more difficult than it ought to be to talk with her head at this angle.

"It's a sleeping potion. Your body and mind need rest to recover! Drink!"

Lyra did. It seemed easier than arguing the point, especially when she really would rather not be conscious. The last thing she heard before she passed out was Hermione asking, "Can we have visitors?"

The third time she woke up, she immediately realized the answer to that question was yes, because Dumbledore was glaring at her from the chair beside her bed. He'd closed the curtains, and Snape was hovering in the corner, as far from Dumbledore as he could possibly get. He waited until her eyes were open to cast secrecy spells around the three of them, giving her a look she couldn't possibly interpret as he did so. Presumably he was making sure she knew that their conversation would be private, which was oddly...nice of him.

Dumbledore continued glaring.

Snape, his spells cast, continued to loom silently. Not exactly out of character for him. Dumbledore wasn't particularly prone to silent glaring, but she had seen that particular expression before, most often directed at Professor Riddle.

Well. If no one was going to say anything... "Is it still Friday?" She reached for her wand to cast a tempus charm, and was unpleasantly surprised to find that both it and the holster that should be strapped to her left arm were missing. The holster was on the bedside table, but her wand wasn't. Which was a rather more urgent concern than the date. Before either of the wizards could answer her first question, she fixed a glare of her own on Dumbledore. "Where is my wand?"

It was Snape who answered, though, tossing the magical instrument carelessly onto the pile of kicked off and crumpled blankets at the end of the bed. "You're lucky, it still appears to work," he sneered. Obviously not impressed by her little fuck up. Didn't matter. She shoved away the pain in her chest and head long enough to lunge toward her feet and seize her wand, then collapsed back onto the pillow. "Ow." Worth it. She hated being unarmed. Hated it. Especially when she was in the presence of two wizards as dangerous as Dumbledore and Snape.

After a couple of deep breaths — or as deep as she could manage, given the damage to her chest — when it appeared neither of the wizards was about to answer her question, she glared at them again. "Diem tempusque ascribe!" she cast, or tried to — normally she would channel the proper degree of magic through her arm and wand automatically, so quickly she would be hard-pressed to actually track the pulse of energy. Apparently acute magical backlash precluded casting anything at all without a truly spectacular degree of pain resonating through every inch of her body — maybe even her soul. She only barely managed to prevent herself screaming — a bloody whine escaped her throat. She let herself go limp, her head falling back, her wand lying useless at her side.

So, she couldn't see Snape giving her a nasty grin, but she fancied she could hear it in his tone when he said, "It is generally advised that mages in suffering from magical backlash refrain from attempting any magic for at least three days. Twelve hours is certainly not sufficient time to recover."

Would've been nice if Pomfrey had mentioned that, before knocking her back out, earlier. Or
Dumbledore, just now. (She wouldn't really have expected Snape to prevent her causing herself greater pain, but wasn't Dumbledore supposed to be all light and kindly?)

"Noted." She hated how weak her voice sounded. "So, it is still Friday, then?"

"Indeed."

"And you're here because...?"

Honestly, if she had to guess, she'd say Snape was here to gloat over her misery, and Dumbledore was going to use this as an excuse to expel her, but there was a chance — a slim one — that she was wrong.

"Difficult as this may be for you to comprehend, we do take an interest in the use of illegal magics within the bounds of Hogwarts."

"I presume you have some proof of this alleged use of illegal magics?"

Really, it was too much to hope that they didn't — sure enough, Snape pulled a book from some expanded pocket or other. The same book Hermione had been reading, which Lyra had snatched and referenced as she attempted a (theoretically) very simple rune-cast enchantment to create a small sphere of light. Which they'd presumably found alongside her unconscious body. He held it up, raising an eyebrow as though daring her to deny that this was exactly how she had fallen into her current condition.

"Okay, yeah, there is that. But come on, you have to agree it's absolutely asinine that runic casting is illegal in the first place. I mean, I was only trying to make a little ball of light. Perfectly harmless!"

Snape looked very unimpressed. (Dumbledore was still glaring at her silently. What the fuck was his deal, anyway?) "And yet we find ourselves here. In the Hospital Wing."

"Yeah, but obviously I wouldn't have messed up such a basic enchantment if I had been able to get proper instruction instead of sneaking around and trying to reinvent the wheel. Not my fault, or the fault of runic casting as a discipline."

The dark wizard pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly frustrated. Probably because he knew she was right, but couldn't say so in front of Dumbledore. "It is, however, your fault that you chose to pursue a discipline which I daresay you know is potentially catastrophically dangerous, with no guidance, supervision, or precautions whatsoever."

"Give me a little credit — I put up a circle to limit the effects, I'm not a complete idiot."

Snape's eyes narrowed even further. "Keep talking, you only further incriminate yourself every time you open your mouth."

Which was, admittedly, kind of idiotic. If Snape was Professor Riddle, this would be the point where he told her she was an embarrassment to Slytherin House. Oops. "I blame the pain potions."

"You're not on any pain potions."

Huh. Pomfrey's numbing charms must be really good. Or else she was burned worse than she thought. "Concussion?"

A slow shake of his head was his only response to this.
"Uh, kind of blowing myself up earlier today? That has to count for something."

Silence. Apparently it didn't.

Dumbledore was still glaring at her, and changing the subject was starting to look like a very good idea. "Why are you even here if you're not even going to say anything?!" she snapped at him.

"I am simply waiting to hear some explanation — any explanation at all — of the thought process behind your actions."

Lyra blinked at him for a long second. Was that not obvious? "Uh... Something like, that sounds neat, and then it wouldn't really hurt anyone to just try this one little spell, and then oh, fuck me."

"Language, Miss Black!" Dumbledore snapped, which was something other than silent glaring, at least.

"Whatever. That was pretty much it."

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose again, but apparently it was Dumbledore's turn to talk, now. "And I note no remorse for the harm that did come of your one little spell," he said, his tone incredibly disapproving. Like, glamouring the tea level of disapproval.

"Well it's not like I'm going to do it again, I don't like being in Hospital, you know!" Obviously she'd take more precautions next time, maybe even see if Anomos knew someone who could actually show her how to not explode her runes in her face. (And especially how to avoid hitting herself with magical backlash again — not being able to do magic was about the worst thing she could imagine, and she could imagine an awful lot of terrible things.)

"And Miss Granger?"

"I'm sure she won't try it, either." Well, she probably would have, eventually, if Lyra hadn't just demonstrated very clearly why she shouldn't. But now she wouldn't. She'd probably bore her to tears saying I told you so about how just up and trying to cast something was a terrible idea, actually.

Snape rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "He means, do you not feel any remorse for seriously injuring your friend."

She was pretty sure Snape meant that she should be feeling some remorse over that. But she wasn't really clear on the concept of remorse and how to fake it, so the best she could offer was, "She wasn't hurt that badly. Pomfrey said she'll be back in class by Monday."

Judging by Snape's exasperated expression, that was a wrong answer. This was why she normally delegated this sort of conversation to the nearest Zabini. It was very inconvenient of Blaise not to be here.

"Miss Black, I will give you one more chance to provide me with a reason not to expel you from Hogwarts, effective upon your release from Madam Pomfrey's care," Dumbledore said, his grave tone clashing with his electric blue and fuschia robes.

Oh. That. Well. She had to think for a moment. Did she really want to stay at Hogwarts badly enough to convince him to let her stay? It would almost be convenient if she was expelled, she could take her OWLs independently and just go on with her life, work on restoring the House, causing chaos, etc. (Assuming he didn't actually press charges, which, she kind of would have expected Narcissa to be here if he was actually threatening legal action against her. She was a
minor, technically. Her guardian should be present for that sort of thing.)

But on the other hand, she still hadn't managed to catch Sirius, which was the whole reason she'd come here in the first place. And while it had been a bit of a long shot that he would actually show up here, his appearance over Samhain had confirmed that she was on the right track, so it would be rather galling to be forced out now. Not to mention the other projects she'd started since the beginning of the year.

Unfortunately, she wasn't really at her best at the moment. All she could think of was, "I already said I'm not going to do it again, kicking me out won't make me any less likely to do it. And besides, do you really want me out somewhere in Magical Britain where you can't keep an eye on me?"

That last point was kind of cheating, since it was widely believed that one of the main reasons Dumbledore hadn't found some way to get Professor Riddle sacked in her own universe was because he didn't trust what Riddle might do if he weren't bound by his position and responsibilities at Hogwarts. Because he definitely could have. He was far cleverer than he looked, and while Professor Riddle might be leagues beyond Bella in terms of subtlety, it wasn't exactly a secret that he was involved in some very dark magic. Even if Eris hadn't told her that he was a ritualist, he couldn't have told her first-year class half of what he had about the Greater Dark Arts if he hadn't at least experimented with them himself.

Fortunately, Dumbledore didn't know that. This Dumbledore. Not that she was sure it would have made a difference if he did, it would still be a valid point that she would be more dangerous loose somewhere in Magical Britain than here, under his direct supervision. Though she might be cursing herself in the foot, encouraging him to keep a closer eye on her. She'd have to make sure to be very careful not to get caught doing anything overly suspicious.

Dumbledore resumed his silent glaring, apparently considering this point for almost two whole minutes. (Lyra counted.) Finally, he said, "You will, of course, be aware of the reputation for...immoderation which follows your family here in Britain."

Well. She had no idea where he was going with this. Though that was kind of a weird way to put it. Not the immoderation bit, she was fairly certain that was to avoid insulting her by calling the entire House of Black bloody lunatics. But here in Britain, instead of here in Magical Britain suggested he knew she was raised in the magical world, probably in some other magical state. She wondered where he thought she was from.

"You can call it insanity, Headmaster. And yes, it would be rather difficult to miss. Sirius has been in the papers, what, at least once a week since July."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I assume you also realize that it would be a poor start to your tenure here to emulate that reputation."

She made a face at him. "You make it sound like I'm trying to make people think I'm crazy, or something. I promise, I'm not." She really didn't have to try. "Things just sometimes...happen."

The old man's eyes narrowed sharply, but it was Snape who interjected. "Experimenting with runic casting is not just a thing that sometimes happens!"

"Nor does calling for an honor duel in the middle of the Great Hall or exploring the Grounds on the night of the full moon," Dumbledore added, giving her a severe frown.

Lyra wondered how he knew about that. "It is so not my fault that Draco's a twat!" ("Language,
Yeah, yeah, whatever. "And speaking of the full moon, you have some right to talk, calling me 'immoderate' — you did know Lupin was a werewolf when you hired him, right?"

Dumbledore sat back quickly, eyes suddenly wide, rather as though she had slapped him. Snape just pinched the bridge of his nose again. "Should I take that to imply that the reason you were out on the grounds on the full moon was in an attempt to observe the werewolf transformation?"

Well, the real reason she'd been out there was to meet Sylvia, but somehow she didn't think the wilderfolk would like her talking about them with humans, so they didn't need to know that. "Not really. Well, I mean, it would be kind of neat, right? But mostly I just wanted to make sure he wasn't actually, you know, in the castle all wolfy."

Which he was. Apparently he'd managed to get his hands on the Wolfsbane potion — that hadn't existed in her timeline, she hadn't heard of it until she'd done that essay for Snape — and spent the moons warded into his office. She'd followed him there, then transfigured a couple of the stones in the wall between that and the next classroom over to transparency to watch the transformation. Which was neat. Messy, but neat.

"And you thought the best way to do this was to go outside the Castle, where you suspected a transformed werewolf would be. Just to see if you were indeed correct. Tell me, Miss Black — do you have a bloody death wish? Truly, I'm curious."

Lyra raised an eyebrow at the black-clad wizard. Was that concern on his face? "Uh, no? Why would I— Oh, you mean, wasn't I worried that Lupin would kill me? No, I'm pretty sure I could take down a werewolf if I had to. I mean, I've never tried, but it's not like they're that smart, and, well magic. Even werewolves aren't immune to fire. By the way, Hermione was wondering if you were going to mark those essays, even though Lupin said we didn't have to do them."

"Essays?" Dumbledore repeated, with a rather suspicious glance at Snape.

"Yeah. Snape gave us an essay on werewolves that day he covered for Lupin in Defense. Hermione finished hers before Lupin told us not to do it, and handed it in in Potions because she's the world's biggest swot."

"Severus, you swore you would not discuss this issue with anyone who did not already know!"

"And so I didn't," Snape said smoothly. "I simply set an assignment to prepare the students for a potential danger they might encounter at some point in their lives. If some of them managed to draw the connection, I hardly believe I can be blamed for that."

"You agreed that the students were adequately protected!"

"No, I agreed that the students were protected to the best of my ability. Do we know whether the Wolf is bound by the Unbreakable Vow of the man? Do we know whether it would prevent him from turning a student, or simply kill him after the fact?" Those were...very good questions, actually. Too bad she was pretty sure Dumbledore wouldn't let her do an experiment to find out. "And it certainly does not protect any of the staff from his curse!"

"Hence the Wolfsbane, Severus."

"Forgive me, Headmaster, if I fail to fully trust in a werewolf to comply with measures intended to subvert its curse." The sarcasm there was cutting. "Not to mention the potion does not render it
harmless, but merely rational."

"We will discuss this later, Severus," Dumbledore said firmly, apparently realizing that they were holding this very fascinating argument in front of a student.

"Uh, if it helps, I already knew, before he gave us the essay. I'm sure some of the other students figured it out, too. And the Slytherins have made it a House Secret since they don't want him sacked."

Snape glared at her again. "And how would you know that, pray tell."

"Well, can you think of any other reason Blaise would refuse to talk about it with me? I told him I already knew, but apparently he didn't want to risk getting censured by the House if they thought he'd told me." Apparently the other Slytherins were still annoyed with him because they thought he'd given her the password to get into their common room, anyway. "Admittedly, I'm guessing on the reason, but it makes sense — he's not terrible, and I've heard about the last few Defense professors."

More nose-pinching.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and abruptly changed the subject. "Miss Black, as I was saying. It sets a poor precedent to begin your tenure at Hogwarts following in the footsteps of your more...notorious relations. I do not believe in punishing students for the sins of their parents, much less distantly related cousins, but your own actions here have been exceedingly questionable and cannot go unaddressed. I hesitate to move immediately to expulsion with any first offence, even one so egregious as this—" (Lyra only barely managed to restrain a snort — on a scale of things she had done at Hogwarts, this was hardly egregious. It wasn't even the first time she'd blown up part of the Castle this year, but whatever.) "—and especially for a student who has had such a short time to adjust to life here at Hogwarts, but should evidence that you have continued to use illegal magics in defiance of this warning be brought to my attention, I will have no choice but to consider that option."

"So, does that mean I'm not being punished?"

"Oh, no, certainly not," Dumbledore chortled. "Professor McGonagall informs me that repeated detentions with Mr Filch have failed to make any impact on your behavior and general disregard for the rules of Hogwarts and Gryffindor House—" Gryffindor had rules? This was news to Lyra. "—but we cannot leave such a breach of the laws of Magical Britain unaddressed, especially considering the harm you caused to Miss Granger. I have consulted with your Head of House and we have agreed to revoke your permission to leave the Hogwarts grounds for lessons with Lady Malfoy, along with your permission to visit Hogsmeade on the appointed weekends. In addition, you will serve detention after dinner every Friday, Saturday and Sunday for the remainder of the term with Professor Snape—"

"What?!" Snape interrupted, apparently far more strongly opposed to this punishment than Lyra. "Is this why you— I do not have time in my schedule to supervise three additional evenings of detention each week! Between brewing Wolfsbane and helping with the wards, on top of my usual duties, I do not have time to supervise even one!"

Not to mention, you know, he really didn't want to spend any more time with her than necessary. That was obvious enough Lyra hadn't even needed Blaise to point it out.

"I'm sure you can find something useful for Miss Black to do, Severus," Dumbledore said, his blythe tone so absolutely dismissive of Snape's objection that even he was apparently at a loss for
words. "Though I suppose if you are absolutely unable to cover those days, you may appoint alternative evenings. As I said, you will serve detention with Professor Snape after dinner three evenings a week until the winter holiday. And unfortunately you have forced my hand — I must also take two-hundred points from Gryffindor House for your astounding lack of judgment."

As though Lyra could possibly bring herself to care about the bloody House Cup. She was even less concerned about losing points than having to find alternative ways to sneak out of school when she wanted to go to London or Ancient House. If anything, that was actually a good thing — it was somewhat annoying to have to fake meeting Cissy every week, and she could always just use the Time Turner and the secret passages to get out without anyone the wiser. "So, just to be clear, I'm not being expelled, and you're not pressing charges...?"

"Oh, dear me, no. No, I much prefer to handle Hogwarts affairs internally whenever possible." Good to know. "I will also be confiscating this book, of course, along with any other illegal texts you may have brought to Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall will search your dorm room to retrieve any such texts, and provide you with a receipt." Well. Good thing she'd caved to Hermione's paranoia and moved all the really illegal stuff to her unofficial study. "Your guardian may, of course, petition Hogwarts for the return of any of those which can be proved the property of House Black, though we will unfortunately be forced to bring it to the attention of the proper authorities that the House of Black has violated age and subject restrictions in allowing you access to them."

Translation: If you ask for anything back, then I'll press charges.

Lyra was pretty sure there was a loophole in that particular law, she wouldn't really be in much trouble, but it was probably a good idea not to get the House involved in a minor legal scandal when she would likely need to leverage any political capital they might still hold in order to get Sirius a trial. Besides, it wasn't like she couldn't easily afford to replace anything he might have found and confiscated. She had hardly brought anything truly rare to Hogwarts.

She nodded, suddenly feeling very tired. "Understood, sir," she said, trying her best to sound subdued.

He stared at her for a long moment. What he was looking for, Lyra had no idea, and quite frankly, she couldn't bring herself to care. Eventually he said, "Very well," and turned on his heel, sweeping the curtain and the secrecy spells aside as he strode out of the ward. Snape followed him, after shooting her a furious scowl — probably for her unintentional intrusion on his evenings for the next month, she thought, because he maintained it as he stalked after the man who held his leash.

As his billowing black robes whipped around the doorway and out into the corridor, she noticed a familiar pair of dark faces across the ward from her own bed, their hair transformed to bright yellow feathers. Apparently the Patil twins had failed to be sufficiently wary of red headed men bearing sweets. Lyra sighed. At least the Trelawney Project was going well.

By Sunday afternoon, Lyra was certain she would not make it through the next four days. She was already going mad with confinement. Hermione, her skin still pink and new in places but more or less healed, would likely be released in the morning, which, well, Lyra couldn't decide if that would be an improvement. Almost everything Hermione had said over the past two and a half days was either complaining about Lyra blowing her up, or nagging criticisms of her decision making skills, but at least that was something. When she left, there would be no one to entertain her, nothing to do, nothing to read — she couldn't even practice magic. Madam Pomfrey had confiscated her wand around midday Saturday, when she realized Lyra was trying every few hours to cast small spells, testing the degree to which her magic had recovered. In short, Lyra was already anticipating the remainder of her convalescence being terribly boring.
There were, of course, other people who might potentially visit her, but such visits tended to be relatively brief and awkward.

Harry had come by on Saturday morning and spent what appeared to be a very uncomfortable half an hour attempting to make small talk while Hermione glared daggers at him for not being as furious with Lyra as she was. Then he'd fled, and he hadn't been back yet.

Blaise had made an appearance as well, establishing that she would make a full recovery before spending the better part of an hour mocking her failure. He wouldn't have dared if she could use magic, she was sure, but since she had been effectively disarmed, he took full advantage of the situation to amuse himself. Not that she expected anything less. If she hadn't been the one lying in bed, she would have thought it was just as funny. He had also brought greetings from the other Slytherins and Gin, who appeared to have taken to stalking Theo instead of Lyra herself since he had agreed to their little arrangement. According to Blaise, he was being mocked mercilessly by Draco and Pansy over his new Gryffindor girlfriend, but, being Theo, it would be difficult to tell whether he'd noticed, let alone cared.

Luna had wandered into the wing a few hours after Dumbledore and Snape had left to give both Lyra and Hermione little bracelets made of glass beads etched with runes invoking the Lively Power to promote healing, then quickly excused herself because Hermione's "cholercrab infestation" was unnerving her (and also the Hospital Wing smelled like healing potions). Which was just as well, Lyra had no idea how to explain that despite knowing exactly what the bijou was and how effective it would be for anyone else (unlike Hermione, who clearly thought this was one of those butterbeer cork-wrackspurt things Luna sometimes invented), she couldn't possibly use it. Just the feel of the enchantment lying dormant in her hand made her want to chuck it out the window. (She'd passed it off to Blaise to give to Gin, or anyone else who could use it — she didn't really care as long as it wasn't anywhere near her.)

That pretty much concluded the list of people Lyra would have guessed might visit her in hospital, at least at Hogwarts. If she'd been at St Mungo's, she might have expected Zee or Meda to drop by. Adults didn't tend to come to Hogwarts unless they were specifically invited for a conference. Professor Riddle had asked Ciardha to come talk to him once her first year, for example. She probably wouldn't have expected Cissy, though, even at St Mungo's. Not for something as minor as this. If she'd been in actual danger of dying, yeah, sure, but she had no doubt that her baby sister was mostly concerned with the potential Lyra presented for the House of Black, rather than her general health and wellbeing.

So she certainly hadn't expected Cissy to show up in Madam Pomfrey's domain.

Neither, it appeared, had Madam Pomfrey, as her reaction when Narcissa crossed the tripline trigger in the entryway to the wing was to bustle out of her office and demand to know what she was doing there.

"I believe it is well within my rights to visit my ward when she is injured under Dumbledore's supposed protection. Now, if you will excuse us," Cissy said dismissively, sweeping past the matron with her nose in the air.

Lyra heard Pomfrey mutter "Well I never..." before she stalked back into her office, probably to floo the Headmaster and make sure Narcissa was actually allowed to be there, rather than trying to confront her herself. Probably a good call. Cissy did look rather annoyed. Or, well... She looked like Arcturus usually looked when Cygnus complained to him about Bella and he called her over to the Keep to question her about whatever she'd been up to. She just kind of assumed that "gods and powers, Bellatrix, what have you done now" was pretty much synonymous with "annoyed".
"Narcissa? Why are you here?"

Cissy's eyes narrowed. "I don't suppose it could possibly have anything to do with the letter I received from your Head of House informing me that your permission to leave Hogwarts for supplementary lessons had been revoked, or the official statement from the Headmaster that should you be caught practicing illegal magics again, he would consider your actions grounds for expulsion, or the positively delighted note from my son mentioning that you'd somehow managed to blow yourself up."

"Well, only a little bit." (Hermione scoffed loudly.) "Honestly, it's not that big a deal. Magical backlash and a few burns. I should be back in classes by the end of the week."

Cissy visibly bit back her response, instead pulling her wand to cast privacy spells around the two of them, presumably to lecture her in more detail about exactly why she'd been an idiot.

Lyra rolled her eyes. "Hermione was there, anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of her."

For a brief moment, her baby sister looked confused, her eyes flicking from Lyra to Hermione and back again, before taking on an expression reminiscent of Druella about to do something very spiteful. Which made no sense, but presumably it would become clearer in the next few minutes.

"Fine," she said shortly, casting the spells around both Lyra's and Hermione's beds instead.

"Have you two met?" Lyra asked, staving off the inevitable lecture for a few more seconds.

"Erm, no. No, we haven't," Hermione said, sitting up a bit straighter in her bed. Narcissa just raised an eyebrow at her, as though to imply that of course she'd never met Hermione — why would she have?

"Well then, Narcissa, this is Hermione Granger, First of her Name, and also the only one of my dorm mates worth talking to. I'm sure you'll excuse her for failing to bow, given her current circumstances. Hermione, this is Lady Narcissa Malfoy, née Black. She goes by Cissy or Missus Draco's Mum."

"Lady Malfoy will do, Miss...Granger," Cissy cut in, disrupting the usual flow of the introduction. And after Lyra had made a point of doing the thing so properly, too. She smirked.

"Ah, pleasure to meet you, Lady Malfoy."

"You're no fun," she informed Hermione. "I presume this is the part where you ask me what I was thinking and I explain and you call me a reckless idiot? You really needn't bother, I already got it from Dumbledore and Snape."

"No." The superior little I'm going to enjoy watching you squirm smirk was still firmly in place, despite Lyra's best efforts to displace it. "This is the part where I tell you about a very enlightening conversation I had with Madam Tonks the other day, Bellatrix." She pulled the visitor's chair down to the foot of the bed so she could see Lyra's face, and sat, crossing her legs with a rather triumphant sneer, as though daring Lyra to deny her true identity.

"What? Bellatrix?" Both Lyra and Narcissa ignored Hermione's interjection.

Damn it, Meda!

"So, you're not angry about the failed runic casting thing, then?"
Cissy's forehead creased slightly. A bit, then. "You did blow yourself up," she pointed out. Which was kind of Lyra's take on the whole matter — there had kind of been a built-in punishment, especially since she was now stuck in Hospital until the sadistic bitch who called herself a Healer deigned to let her go. "You look terrible, by the way. Did you know you have no eyebrows?" she pointed out in a rather mocking tone.

Lyra did know that. Half of her hair was singed off, and the burns on her face and chest were only half-healed, hidden under a thick slathering of burn paste. "Uh...yeah."

Cissy shook her head slightly. "No, I'm not here because of that, or only indirectly. You see, this little...adventure of yours has managed to entirely upend my plan to confront you regarding the spectacular...oversight, shall we call it, that you seem to have made in revealing your identity and purpose here. You see, I had intended to wait until the next time you came to the Manor — and don't think I didn't notice the discrepancy in the schedule McGonagall thought we had arranged, and the one I was under the impression we had agreed to—"

"You really shouldn't have used me as an intermediary," Lyra noted.

"Shut. Up. Bella. I was going to wait until the next time we met in person to discuss this, until, quite suddenly, that meeting was cancelled by an outside party. I certainly wasn't going to wait until the holidays—"

"I'm spending the Hols with Zee, by the way." She was pretty sure she hadn't mentioned that to Narcissa yet.

"Somehow I'm not surprised."

("Who is Zee, Lyra? And why is Lady Malfoy calling you 'Bella'?")

"But in any case, you see how this visit has become necessary."

"Uh, not really. Since when do you and Meda even talk? I thought you hated her for abandoning the House."

"I had a legal matter to discuss with her on behalf of one of our client Houses, if you must know," Cissy explained — pointedly not denying her hatred of her older sister. "Your name came up. And I mentioned that I knew that she knew you were a time traveller. And she proceeded to apologize for not telling her that my sister's alter ego had decided to drop in on us all. You said you were from the future!"

("What!? You're a time traveller? But that doesn't make any sense!" Hermione proclaimed, now perched awkwardly on the edge of her bed.)

"No, actually, I said I was a time traveller and I was here to revive the House. You were the one who decided I must be from the future."

"Of course she did!" Hermione exclaimed, finally dragging Narcissa's attention away from Lyra. "Travelling to the future from the past is impossible. And besides, being a time traveller doesn't explain anything!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Narcissa snapped, just as Lyra said, "And my being a werewolf would explain things?"

"Ugh, shut up, Lyra! I know you're not a werewolf!" Hermione groaned, then turned to Narcissa. "I mean— Nothing about her makes sense! It just — doesn't fit! Okay, the way she uses magic for
one thing, like an adult, that would make sense if she was from the future and de-aged herself somehow, maybe, but that sort of time travel — over decades — just isn't possible, and it wouldn't explain anything if she was from the past, which is even more impossible, and quite frankly I don't know what you are," she continued, apparently talking to Lyra again, "but I refuse to believe you're really human, the way you act — were you trying to set dementors on fire at the quidditch match?! And Dumbledore's patronus disrupted your casting, I saw it!"

Both Lyra and Narcissa blinked at the muggleborn for a few seconds. Then Narcissa said, "Well, I do find it rather refreshing not to be the last person to know who you really are."

Lyra pouted at her. "It's not like I've been going around telling people, they just keep figuring it out! I still don't know how Snape knew!" Cissy's eyes narrowed further.

"Are neither of you going to explain what the hell is going on here?!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Hermione! I'm human, I'm just..."

"Insane," Cissy suggested, her tone entirely unamused.

"No— Well, okay, arguably, but not the point, shut up, Cissy. I am human, and I am a time traveller — technically a dimension hopper. I didn't come from the past of this universe, it was an accident, long story. I'm good at magic because magic likes me, basically, but also because I've been doing magic since I was three — it seems this universe isn't quite as serious about early education as mine was—"

"We learned in the seventies that it's often detrimental to a young mage's development to push them into doing magic too early or at too advanced a level," Cissy said defensively.

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her. "Pretty sure that's complete dragonshite, but whatever. Darling Drakey-poo is your kid, if you want to raise him as a spoilt, lazy twat, that's on you, I suppose. Though I have to say, I thought I would've raised you better than that."

"You raised...?"

Lyra ignored Cissy's furious objections in favor of addressing Hermione's question. "I'm nine years older than Narcissa. Our parents...would rather not have been. Parents, I mean. Which essentially left me and the elves to raise Meda and Cissy. Presumably it was the same in this universe."

Hermione shook her head slightly. "Even if you are from a different timeline, that doesn't explain why you...are the way you are. Or the dementor thing. And why was your boggart the bloody moon?"

"What?"

"You have a boggart?" Cissy sounded almost as confused as Lyra — though after a moment's reflection, she realized how Hermione must have come to that conclusion.

"Uh, no," she answered absently before explaining, "Professor Lupin's boggart is the moon." Cissy came to attention, her eyes growing large at the implication. Bugger. "Before you say anything, Slytherin knows and made it a House Secret."

"I'm not in school anymore, Bella. I could not care less what Slytherin House considers to be a secret."

"Yeah, well, you should. No one wants him sacked, is the point. So just, don't say anything."
"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"I told you weeks ago, you never listen to me. Lupin's a werewolf."

"I– but– you– What?"

"Remember, you were asking if I was going to be around on the full moon and I told you it was stupid to think I was a werewolf because I wear silver literally all the time, and that I had plans to follow Lupin because I thought he was?"

"Well— Yes, of course I remember, but I thought you were just making fun of me!"

"I wasn't just making fun of you."

"Bella! Focus!" Cissy demanded.

"Fine, fine. Point is, leave Lupin alone. From what I hear, he's the best Defense professor Hogwarts has had in years. He takes the Wolfsbane potion and spends the moons warded into his office. And those wards are very solid. Flitwick's good. I have no idea why he's teaching charms. But yeah, total non-issue."

Cissy relaxed slowly, though she still looked rather preoccupied.

"So...the boggart?" Hermione asked, uncharacteristically hesitantly.

"Can you really imagine me being afraid of a boggart?"

"Well, no, that's kind of my point! Everyone's afraid of something!"

Lyra shrugged. "Not always something a boggart can replicate, though. Some fears just don't make for good visuals, so a boggart will skip to the next nearest potential victim." Which was perfectly true, just not at all the reason boggarts ignored her.

Hermione harrumphed at her, almost as though she didn't believe her. Rude. "That's not what you said last time I asked you about it, you know."

Oops. Honestly, Lyra had forgotten they'd talked about it at all. Perhaps the disbelief was warranted, then. "Was that before you figured out Lupin was a werewolf?" Hermione nodded, biting her lip. "Obviously I didn't want to give it away, then." That seemed reasonable, right?

Hermione was still scowling at her. "I suppose you have some sort of explanation for the dementors and Dumbledore's patronus, too?"

"Well, ah... Dumbledore's patronus threw me off because I'd just been casting very dark magic, the sudden contrast was a bit of a shock." And also because magic that light was just ugh... "And the dementors..." Lyra shrugged. She didn't really know how to explain that without explaining Eris, and that definitely wasn't something she wanted to tell Hermione at this point. She hadn't even wanted to tell her who she really was, she'd been having far too much fun watching the muggleborn try to figure out what kind of dark creature she might be. If she'd realized this was what Cissy wanted to talk about, she wouldn't have told her to let Hermione listen in, but fifteen minutes ago, she hadn't even realized Cissy knew she was Not-Other Bella.

"Bellatrix is broken," Narcissa explained, giving Lyra a superior sneer. Apparently she had taken Lyra's pause to gather her thoughts as an indication she had no idea what to say, which was a reasonably accurate assessment, but she would have thought of something.
"Hey! I'm not broken," Lyra pouted at her. "I just...don't really do the whole emotions thing."

"You don't do emotions," Hermione repeated. "Emotions aren't a thing that you do!"

Lyra sighed. Hadn't she just said that? "Fine, just go with the 'I'm insane' explanation, it's close enough."

Hermione made an inarticulate noise of frustration. "That doesn't explain anything, though!"

"Yes it does. Dementors manipulate and feed on emotions — either happiness or suffering, probably suffering, I think, but you know, sources differ. I don't really feel that sort of thing, therefore, dementors don't bother me."

"That's not what she meant, Bella," Narcissa said, flicking a tacitus at her — at her! Bloody galling was what that was, especially since her ability to do freeform magic had gone all wonky from the backlash, so dispelling it was rather trickier than it should have been.

"My sister, for reasons most likely hereditary, is apparently incapable of any true sensibility or emotional understanding of even those with whom she has the most in common." What the hell was that tone supposed to imply? "Surely you have remorseless killers among the muggles, soulless men with no sympathy for their fellow man. Bellatrix is like that. She always has been. Which only makes it more curious that she is apparently attempting to revive the House of Black," she said pointedly, turning back to Lyra. "I thought you didn't care for our family, sister."

 Damn it, I almost had it that time...

Before Lyra could break the silencing jinx, Hermione, who had been silently mouthing 'remorseless killer', fixed her with a horrified expression, blood draining from her face as comprehension dawned. She stood, wincing slightly to put her weight on her recently healed leg, but backing away slowly nevertheless. "You're Bellatrix Lestrange! You told me, at the Bookshop, that you were impersonating an Inner Circle Death Eater, but— you, you're actually— I can't believe I've been sharing a bedroom with Bellatrix Lestrange..."

Ha! Got it!

"It's Bellatrix Black, actually. No idea what she was thinking, marrying Lestrange. And Cissy, that's my jinx, find your own! And technically, I'm not actually, I'm from an entirely different universe, Other Bella had thirty years to do stupid shit for Not-Professor Riddle that I wasn't even around for in either universe, we're not the same person." Hermione let herself collapse onto the bed. "And I'm reviving the House, Cissy, for the same reason you're helping me — just because I didn't like any of them doesn't mean I have some irrational desire to avoid regaining the power and prestige associated with our name. And besides, they're all dead now."

"But... But..." Hermione muttered, apparently overwhelmed by Narcissa's revelation.

Well, that was...probably not good. Not that Hermione's opinion of her was actually important, but if she freaked out and told anyone, well... Lyra really didn't want word to get back to the Unspeakables that she'd kind of sort of accidentally fallen into their universe. They tended to find things like lost time travellers fascinating. And she suspected that the Department of Mysteries would be harder to escape from than Azkaban.

"Good job, Cissy, you broke my roommate. Hermione, can you hear me?" Hermione nodded, her eyes very wide. "Good. Please be aware that even though I've never actually killed anyone, if you breathe a word about this to anyone, I will kill you."
Cissy smirked. "Oh, yes, that's certainly going to convince her you aren't really the same person as
the Bellatrix of this universe."

Lyra very deliberately narrowed her eyes at her baby sister. "Why are you being such a bitch?
There was literally no reason for you to tell Hermione any of this."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this?" Cissy snapped back, pushing herself to her feet and stepping
forward to loom over Lyra. "You told Meda and her husband, Zee, apparently Severus, even —
why not me?!"

"I didn't tell Snape, he probably figured it out with legilimency, fucking cheater. And I only told
Zee because she could help me get papers and stuff. Why should I have told you?"

Bella had never seen Cissy look so furious, pacing between the beds. Auntie Walburga would be
appalled by her lack of self-control. "I. Am. Your. Sister! Your only sister! I could have helped you,
I could have——"

Lyra cut her off with an exasperated sigh. "In my world, Meda was my sister, and you were four.
You were still in the nursery, I hardly ever saw you, I couldn't possibly have predicted how you'd
have turned out, and had no idea whether you'd be inclined to help me or not. In fact, you're
married to a Malfoy and leading the Allied Dark. If it weren't for your frankly incomprehensible
loyalty to the House, our interests would almost certainly be opposed. Meda has no political power
or ambitions, her husband is a nobody, and she hasn't exactly made a secret of her disdain for the
sociopolitical system of Magical Britain! She had no reason to object to my showing up out of
nowhere and fucking things up. Why would I come to you, when I could go to her?" She smirked.
"Also, Meda has public offices. Much easier to just drop in on than Malfoy Manor."

Practical considerations aside, though, it really just hadn't occurred to her to tell Narcissa.

"I– You– Why do you always have to be so— so rational?!" Cissy bit out, still clearly furious, but
with no grounds for actual objection.

Lyra's smirk only broadened. "Well, you see, Cissy, I don't do emotions. Two seconds ago I would
have sworn you understood that. Was that all you wanted to talk about?"

Cissy froze, apparently realized how far her composure had slipped, and carefully schooled her
features into impassiveness. "You are impossible. I hate you, you know."

Lyra had to laugh at that. "If lies make you happy. Sooo..."

"Why are you here?" Hermione interrupted, apparently out of nowhere. "How did you get here,
even?"

"No reason, really. And magic, obviously." Which was actually true, even if Cissy very obviously
thought she was just being glib.

"No, that is a valid question. I hardly think you came here intentionally to revive the House, given
that you are, well...you."

"Hey, Arcturus's brainwashing was very effective! But no, you're right, I was going to shake up the
foundations of the social order in my world by helping Grindelwald's rebellion succeed, but instead
I ended up here, in a universe where, as far as I can tell, Grindelwald's rebellion did succeed."

"So you just— just decided to— to go back in time and start a war because— because— what?! On
a whim?!!"
Hermione sounded slightly hysterical. Oops. Narcissa, on the other hand, had a hand at her temple and exasperation on her voice. "It wouldn't be out of character. Though I can't say I'd really expect her to leave de Mort." She raised an eyebrow at Lyra as though this was a question.

She sighed. So bloody tedious, repeating herself. "He's my professor in my universe, not a Dark Lord, and I'm certainly not his apprentice. I mean, yeah, he's brilliant, but I'm not really the apprenticeship type, you know?" Cissy looked very surprised to hear that — Other Bella apparently had been the apprenticeship type, though obviously through no fault of her own. Which reminded her... "By the way, I hear he's not really dead. So I'm going to kill him. Just a heads up."

"You're going to kill who? Lyra! Explain!" As had so often been the case in this conversation, Hermione's question was ignored by both Lyra and Cissy.

She just raised an eyebrow at her, as though it was almost expected that Lyra was planning on killing a Dark Lord (albeit a rather washed-up, pathetic one). "Imminently?"

"Well, no. First I have to get the House back in order. Leverage, political influence, you know. Fuck, I just explained this to Snape like, a month ago. But yeah, eventually. It's pretty much the only goal I have at the moment. I'm open to suggestions."

"Suggestions for killing him, or suggestions of other potential goals?"

She'd actually meant the latter, other things to add to her to-do list, but "Uh, either? Both?"

Cissy made a rather ambiguous sort of humming sound. "And dare I ask why you've decided to kill the only man your alter ego ever loved?"

Right, this was going to go over fabulously. "First off, love is a strong word and totally doesn't apply. And secondly, you know how it's Unforgivable to use compulsions on a kid before the age of seven or so? Yeah, turns out the reason is because they turn out like Other Bella."

Cissy sat down very quickly.

"Lyra! I swear, if you don't start explaining what the hell you're talking about..."

She smirked at Hermione. "You'll do...what? Go tell Madam Pomfrey I won't tell you about the Unforgivable Acts? Mr. Tom, Tom Riddle, the biggest dork in the entire multiverse, apparently has the potential to become the Dark Lord Voldemort under certain conditions. He used compulsions on my alter ego — the Bellatrix Black of this universe — when she was far too young, and twisted the entire development of her personality and identity to center on himself. Which is both super illegal and just...evil."

Contrary to popular belief, Bella Black did consider some things to be evil, specifically those which were the antithesis of Chaos, and subverting someone's will to the point of mind-slavery definitely qualified.

"Are you implying...so all the things she did... It was all him?" Cissy finally managed to ask. "You are the way you are, because of — because of him?"

"Oh, no. No, no, no. I am the way I am because I'm me — we've already covered that. I didn't meet him until I started school, he didn't touch my mind. Other Bella was just... Her priorities are his priorities. She wants nothing more than to be a perfect tool for him, an extension of his will. It's completely sick. And he's going to die for that."

"You're going to kill You Know Who?" Hermione said scornfully. "You— You're mad. The entire
idea, it's ridiculous. Even if you are the best thirteen-year-old witch who's ever lived, he's still decades older, and a bloody dark lord, and—"

"And nothing. I just said I'm not going to do it any time soon, probably, but he will die for what he did to Bellatrix and, by extension, to the House of Black. If I can manage it, he'll suffer for a good long while, first, too."

Cissy's face had become a smooth, impenetrable society mask. "I will...have to consider your proposal."

Lyra grinned. "Oh, Cissy, I think you misunderstand me. That wasn't a proposal — it's a promise. And you know I always keep my promises."

"You're insane. I've been sharing a bedroom with a crazy person..."

"Yes, and you're repetitive. Catch up, Hermione, everyone else has moved on."

"Bella, I—"

"It's Lyra, Cissy."

"Fine, Lyra, then. You— I know you keep your promises, but you can't be serious."

"I don't see why not. You'd better not be underestimating me just because I'm covered in burn paste at the moment."

"No, it's just... Bella— Lyra. You're thirteen years old. You're the same age as my son, I just can't —"

"Shut up, Cissy."

"Bella, I only have your interests in mind, but—"

It was so annoying not having her wand. "Hermione, silence my idiot sister. Please."

The muggleborn looked from Lyra to Narcissa and back again, somewhat warily, Lyra thought. "Um, no?"

Narcissa gave her a triumphant smirk. "I know you, Bella, and I know what you're capable of, but —"

"But nothing, Narcissa Zaniah. You have no idea what I'm capable of. Dark Powers, you just compared me to Draco, and I hate to break it to you, but he's a mediocre example of an average third-year mage at best. Quite frankly I've had it with you treating me like a child. Do you not remember what your own childhood was like? Because mine was worse. You have no idea, Cissy. None. I'm not asking for your help or advice or opinion, I just—"

"I don't want to lose you again!" Cissy interrupted. "I just— You're my sister, or at least some version of her, you are the only family I have left, and even that means nothing to you, I — It means something to me! And the Dark Lord, you don't know him — you weren't here for the war — and you can't declare a vendetta against him before you've even taken your OWLs! I don't even think he can be killed, he would obliterate you. And I... He already took you from me once. I won't let him do it again."

Well. That was...unexpected. Bella hated this sort of conversation for precisely this reason — they
always seemed to take ridiculous, inexplicable turns, and she had no idea how to address them.

"Are you done?"

Narcissa nodded stiffly, her entire body tense.

"I'm not even going to pretend I understood any of that. But you don't...have to protect me, or whatever you think you're doing with your objections. I'm not exactly planning on a direct confrontation, and you obviously weren't paying attention when I said I wasn't planning on going after him any time soon. I don't even know where he is, or what state his last run-in with Lily Evans left him in. But anyone can be killed."

"Yes, Bellatrix. Anyone can be killed. Even you." There was an odd sort of urgency in Cissy's tone, which Lyra really didn't think was warranted.

"Well, obviously. As I've recently been reminded, I am only mortal." Lyra frowned. She wasn't really an introspective sort of person, but thinking on it, that whole 'being mortal' thing was kind of a drag. "I'm definitely not planning on dying any time soon, though, if that's what you're worried about. Anyway, if you don't have anything else we need to talk about...?" Narcissa looked for a moment as though she was going to say something, but thought better of it. "Right. I'll owl you when I figure out what I'm doing for Yule. Obviously it won't be the family ritual, but I'll definitely put together something."

The family Yule ritual invoked the Solitary Power, and while Bella could reap some of the benefits of it through her connection to the family magic, she was pretty sure she couldn't perform it properly by herself. Eris was a jealous goddess, after all. But Yule was the Darkest Night. If nothing else, she should at least do something in honor of the Dark as a whole.

"Yule?" Hermione repeated — the first thing she'd said in quite some time, Lyra realized. Apparently her curiosity had overcome her shock and fear. "Family ritual?"

"Ask me about it later. Cissy?"

Narcissa hesitated. "I... I'll be leading Draco in an observance." Lyra pouted at her. On the one hand it was good to hear that her nephew hadn't been completely corrupted by the Malfoys and their utter disdain for anything less than entirely civilized (by their own, very limited definition of the term). But on the other, that probably meant Cissy wouldn't be able to join Lyra for her own ritual. "You're welcome to join us, of course."

"I—" She could, she supposed. Her first impulse was to beg off, but there was no real reason to do so, except that Draco might somehow find out who she was in the course of the ritual. Unlike Hermione, Lyra was quite sure he couldn't be threatened into silence. Not only was he too stupid to be trusted not to accidentally reveal her identity, but if she actually followed through on any such threat, there would be no point in having saved him from that damned hippogriff. Plus, she had been toying with the idea of introducing Harry to the Dark, and had no idea what Zee and Blaise were planning, either. "Send me the details. I'll think about it."

Cissy raised an eyebrow at her. "Yule. Sunset. The ritual room at Malfoy Manor."

"Well, yeah, obviously." She would have been surprised if Narcissa had been planning to bring Draco to one of the Black properties for the ritual. "I meant the details of the ritual."

"Why?"

It was, admittedly, kind of a weird thing to ask for, but Lyra thought it was reasonable. The only
reason to keep it secret was if it was a house tradition, and it wasn't like she wouldn't find out what it was if she just showed up. "Because I might want to focus on a different facet of the holiday than you do."

In fact, it was almost certain that she'd want a more general focus than Cissy, who, if she was modeling her observance on the Black family ritual, would probably be more concerned with the Solitary Power than the Infernal. (Or any of the others, but she probably should honor the Infernal this year, what with the successful dimension hopping and all.)

"Fine. I'll send you an owl." No objections about how Lyra was too young to go around designing her own holiday rituals, she noted, which was amusing because invoking the Powers was far more dangerous than trying to kill Not-Professor Riddle. He, like Lyra, was only mortal, after all.

"Good." Holiday plans pretty much concluded the list of things Lyra could think of to discuss, and it seemed Cissy was gathering herself to go as well, rising and moving the chair back to its proper place. "Oh! Wait! Since you're officially my guardian, can you get Madam Pomfrey to give my wand back before you leave?"

"You actually let her take your wand?" Cissy seemed somewhat amused by that. Bitch.

"I didn't let her, I just couldn't stop her — stop smirking at me, it's not funny, magical backlash is terrible. But it's been three days now and she still won't give it back."

"I'll see what I can do."

Ten minutes later, Cissy was gone, Madam Pomfrey was casting the final strengthening charms on Hermione's broken leg, and Lyra, wand back in hand, was under strict orders not to strain herself casting any unnecessary magic.

She promptly ignored these, of course. As soon as Madam Pomfrey went back to her office, she, covered the walls and ceiling with an illusion of the night sky (more or less — Astronomy wasn't her best subject), just for a change of scenery. If she was going to be stuck here by herself for four more days, she certainly wasn't going to spend them staring at blank nothingness.

"You've misplaced Lyra, by the way. Freudian slip?"

Before Lyra could respond, Hermione scurried out the door, taking the last word with her. She decided she was still going to consider that a win, though. If the other girl was sufficiently recovered from the revelation of Lyra's original identity to throw out comments like that, she probably wasn't going to turn her in to Dumbledore.

Of course, there was a world of difference between not telling Dumbledore (or anyone else) who Lyra was and where she had come from and no longer being absolutely furious with Lyra for blowing her up, and now (if Lyra was interpreting her snide comments correctly) for lying to her about her identity for the better part of six subjective months. Which was just ridiculous — Hermione had even less grounds to expect to be told that sort of thing than Cissy. But in any case, Lyra was quite certain that if Professor McGonagall hadn't ordered Hermione to deliver her homework to her in Hospital, her roommate wouldn't have been speaking to her at all.

Not that their conversations were exactly stimulating at the moment.

"Please?"

"No."
"I'll take you to the Bookstore again."

"No!"

"But I'm going crazy in here!"

"You were already crazy."

"Look, it's been five days, I can do magic again, and it's only superficial healing left." Literally the only thing that Lyra still needed to do was apply a Scar-Reducing Solution to her chest, arms and face every six hours for the next two days, and wait for her eyebrows and hair to grow back.

"There's absolutely no reason I should have to stay here! Just turn me back with you!"

"Lyra, I said no, and I meant it."

"I should never have given you back the Time Turner."

As she'd told Snape, she wasn't a complete idiot. Along with drawing a circle to limit any potential spread of her runic casting and moving to a completely empty classroom rather than making the attempt in her own study, she'd also given the Time Turner to Hermione to hold while she tried it, on the grounds that it probably wouldn't be a good idea to risk it being affected by the runic casting, however slim that risk was.

The little golden artefact had survived the physical explosion better than either of the girls, but now, instead of being grateful for her foresight and repaying the trust Lyra had placed in her by allowing her to hold onto it again, Hermione was refusing to take her back anymore.

"I thought you liked having me around to talk to."

She really had thought Hermione appreciated her company and advice enough by this point to continue to bring her along, even if she didn't give the Time Turner back. Even when they hadn't planned something specific like breaking into the Restricted Section, she kept seeking Lyra out during the third iteration of each shift just to read in her general vicinity. Occasionally she'd mention something she'd read or ask about something Lyra was they'd talk for an hour or two, and then go back to their own pursuits. She'd thought Hermione liked this — why else would she keep doing it?

"That was before I found out you're really—" She looked around furtively, and, seeing no one else in earshot, hissed, "Bellatrix Lestrange!"

"Black." Lyra was pretty sure that Hermione's insistence on calling Other Bella (and Lyra) Lestrange was intended to annoy her, but she couldn't stop herself from correcting her every time anyway. "And I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Of course you don't, you're a bloody psychopath!"

That was a new one. "Psychopath?"

"Of course, wizards don't know anything about psychology! It's a word for soulless monsters like you," Hermione scoffed.

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her — or would have done, if she'd had eyebrows at the moment. "You do know that Pomffrey will let me out of here eventually. If I'm a soulless monster, shouldn't you be concerned about offending me?"
"Oh, like you care."

Which, to be perfectly fair, Lyra didn't. She let it go, returning to the subject at hand. "I'll just steal it from you again, you know."

Hermione snorted, redoubling her glare. "Good luck with that."

"Uh, what?" Unless Hermione had somehow managed to cram about six years of study into the past two days, she was fairly certain it wouldn't even be difficult to get the little bauble back.

"I don't have it," the muggleborn snapped.

"What?"

"You heard me! Snape confiscated it. I have to come to his office to turn back now, and give it back to him in the past, or he says he'll get me thrown out of the program entirely, and it's all your fault — if you hadn't blown us up, this never would have happened!"

Well. That was problematic, to say the least. "So that's the real reason you're mad at me? Because Snape's being a dick?"

"Professor Snape, and he's right, I should never have let you talk me into over-turning in the first place! Even if I did still have it, I wouldn't take you back with me!"

Well that was obviously dragonshite. Of course she would. Bella could be very persuasive. "Did he actually say that? I'd think any Slytherin would consider using it to less than the fullest extent to be a crime against the very concept of ambition." Professor Riddle, for example, would almost certainly have approved of everything Lyra had done in regards to the Time Turner, though he probably wouldn't have liked having three of her around at any given time.

"Well, no, but he did say he was taking it away because of you."

"What did he actually say, then?"

"That I was shockingly irresponsible and he knew I couldn't be trusted not to take you back if you asked me to — which I certainly can, thank you very much! — and that he simply couldn't allow you access to such a device — as though I just do whatever you like! — because detentions aren't really a punishment if you have as much free time as you want, and if he has to suffer, you have to suffer!"

That was... Dark Powers, he really did know her, didn't he? Clever fucking bastard. "So, he'll probably give it back after the holidays, then?" Sooner, if she could convince him that causing her to suffer in detention was only going to force her to make him suffer even more. "Because it sounds like he didn't actually have a problem with us over-using it in the first place."

Hermione froze. Apparently she hadn't considered this possibility. "Do you really think...?"

"Did he limit you to just turning back for the hours you need for classes?"

"Well, no, but he said that it was more convenient for him to meet me in the morning before classes, and then during his afternoon break."

"Uh huh. Well, it would be even more convenient to not bother trying to cut my access at all. If he's spiteful enough to do that, I don't think it would be that much more difficult to meet you at lunch or between his morning classes. Ergo he's not really trying to punish you. He'll probably give it back
when Dumbledore's finished punishing him."

"What?"

Lyra smirked. "Well, I'm pretty sure the only reason I have detention with Snape specifically is that I happened to mention that essay on werewolves in front of Dumbledore. Making Snape supervise my detentions is basically the closest Dumbledore can get to putting Snape himself in detention for the next month."

"Why would he—?"

"Because Dumbledore doesn't want anyone to know about Professor Wolf Wolf, and Snape apparently thinks he's a security risk. They got into an argument about that essay Snape gave us on Friday, while Dumbledore was threatening to expel me."

"You didn't tell me you were almost expelled!"

"It didn't come up. Does it matter?"

"Of course it does! If you get expelled—"

"—I'll have to pay to sit my OWLs independently, and I won't have to sneak out of school to go to London? Oh, no. The horror."

"Well then, why are you even here in the first place?"

"That—"

Hermione sighed and finished the phrase with her. "—would be telling. Yes, yes, I know. Seems a bit stupid, though, to tell me who you are, and keep that hidden."

Lyra rolled her eyes. "I didn't tell you who I was, if you recall. I was trying to be subtle." Hermione giggled at that, clearly in spite of herself, as she bit her lip and attempted to look put out again at once. "I'm pretty sure Cissy only told you to annoy me because I hadn't told her, but it hardly matters. It's not like I can obliviate you."

Hermione's eyes grew wide, as though she hadn't considered that possibility. "Would you? If you knew the spell?"

Lyra actually had to think about that for a second. It would be convenient if she could just obliviate anyone whenever she fucked up, but, "No. And I do know the spell, I'm just pants at offensive mind magics."

"What? Are you saying there's actually something Lyra Black is bad at?"

"There are loads of things I'm bad at. Like following orders and bowing to authority and pretending to be normal. Astronomy. I'm pretty bad at potions considering I've been studying it for seven years, now. Uh... People. I'm terrible at people. That was Zee's job, and I haven't really found someone to replace her yet."

Hermione smiled slightly, finally taking a seat on the visitor's chair. "I'd noticed. That you're 'bad at people'," she elaborated, making quotation marks with her fingers. "Who's Zee? You mentioned her before, when you were talking to Draco's mum. And why wouldn't you obliviate me if you could?"
"Uh, Zee is Blaise's mum. Mirabella Zabini. I was already Bella, so she was Zee. And I wouldn't obviate you because messing with someone's mind, with their memory, is wrong. It's almost worse than outright forcing them to do something, because the choices they make afterward are all tainted by the mind magic."

"It's 'wrong'," Hermione repeated. "How do you know?"

Lyra wasn't sure what she was getting at here. "Forcing someone to do something is pretty much the opposite of everything I believe in."

"But you forced me to let you turn back with me."

"No, you chose to let me turn back with you. You could have told McGonagall that I'd stolen the Turner, or tried to think of another way out of the situation. But you didn't, because taking me back had essentially no cost for you, and admitting that you'd lost control of the Turner would mean a loss of respect and therefore prestige. But you still had a choice."

Hermione scowled at that. "Well, fine. But what I meant was, how do you decide what's right and wrong? Good and evil?"

"Well, most Blacks would tell you that anything that benefits the Family is good, and anything that hurts the Family is evil. I'm a bit more... I guess you could say 'religious'."

The other girl sniggered. "You're not going to tell me you're a good Christian."

"No, definitely not." She grinned. The idea was kind of funny — imagine her worshiping a long dead Light Lord! "I recognize the Powers. Specifically, I follow the one that governs anarchy and wild freedom. So the ability to choose, unrestrained and uninfluenced, is good, and limiting a person's ability to choose — not the available choices, but actually influencing the choice itself — is evil."

Eris was very clear about that.

Of course, Bella was personally of the opinion that sometimes it was more practical to do something evil than work around other people being impossibly stubborn. Eris didn't like it, but that was only because gods tended to take a very black-and-white view of things. Sometimes it was necessary to do something morally repugnant in pursuit of the Greater Good. But even Belle wouldn't permanently alter someone's mind with obliviations or childhood compulsions or something like that.

Hermione was quiet for a long while, apparently digesting that idea. Lyra left her to it. She wasn't sure exactly how they'd gotten to this point, but she was starting to think that Hermione might not be angry with her anymore, and she didn't want to bugger it up. Plus this was the only real conversation she'd had with anyone in two days.

"Okay," she said at last. "But, how did you decide that Chaos is good and Domination is evil? Why not, oh, I don't know, Life and Death, or Wisdom and Ignorance?"

"Oh, so you read the book I gave Harry?" Those particular titles for the Powers were fairly distinctive. Hardly anyone called the Youthful Power 'Ignorance' anymore.

Hermione flushed slightly. "Well, yes. You didn't really think he was going to read it, did you?"

"He did, actually. At least the introduction." He'd come back with all sorts of questions about the domains of the Powers and what they really were and how Death worked and what a soul was. It
was one of the more interesting conversations she'd had with him, though he'd seemed somewhat disappointed to learn that mages lost their individuality and became one with the Deathly Power when they died.

The other girl looked rather surprised, but she didn't say anything else about it. "Well, anyway, why Chaos?"

"You were here when I reminded Cissy that my childhood was bad. If I had to choose a Power that resonated with my father, it would be Domination. I embraced Chaos, Freedom, because, well... If you ever have the Imperius cast on you, you'll understand."

Hermione's eyes grew very wide. "But that's Unforgivable — I looked it up, after you mentioned the Unforgivable Acts, and— Lyra! How could he?!"

Lyra shrugged. "I was a very disobedient child, and he was never a patient man. Why is this so much more shocking than what Not-Professor Riddle did to Other Bella?" She hadn't reacted nearly that strongly when she'd told Narcissa about that.

"I, well," she sputtered. "It's just— We already know Riddle's a monster. But your own father? Didn't anyone in your family do anything about it?"

"Uh, Arcturus refrained from intervening on Cygnus's side, which was really better than I might have expected — the simplest thing he could have done was put me under a geas to bring me to heel, thereby eliminating the conflict between me and Cygnus entirely. Druella couldn't care less. She liked to pretend she never had children. I should probably figure out if she's still alive in this timeline, actually."

"You are talking about your mother, right? You don't even know if your own mother is still alive?"

"Druella supposedly gave birth to me, but I was raised by the House Elves and Auntie Walburga — Sirius's mother. She didn't move in with us until I was seven and I'd already found a way to prevent the Imperius from having an affect on me. She died a couple years ago, it was her house we stopped at in London."

"Wait — I thought the Imperius couldn't be blocked! How do you stop it...?"

Lyra still wasn't going to tell her about Eris if she could help it. "Ah...ill-advised ritual magic. I probably couldn't replicate it if I tried. I had no idea what I was doing, but it worked."

"Mostly the same, according to Arcturus's diaries. In this world, Not-Professor Riddle was apparently Other Bella's tutor, and knowing him, he would have considered it...sort of like a test of character, to see whether she would eventually put a stop to him by herself. Which she did, apparently, when she was fifteen. As soon as she could beat him in a
duel, he backed down. Of course, he didn't stop being a shit-stain on the face of the universe — she killed him in sixty-nine."

"So... So when you...left, to come here, he, your father, was still..."

"Beating me? Raping me? Cursing the shit out of me? Yeah. By the way, the Cruciatus is way worse than any of the reference texts say. Words can't really capture it." Were those tears in Hermione's eyes? What the fuck? "Uh, it's not really a big deal, it's over now. And I was at Hogwarts for most of the last couple years, anyway."

Hermione was crying anyway. "Lady Malfoy was right," she muttered from behind her hands.

"Uh...about what?"

"You are broken — you keep making me feel sorry for you, and even for her, and — and you're so broken you don't even see it. How bad it is."

Lyra frowned at her, though she wasn't looking. "I was there, I'm well aware of how bad it was. Note the past tense, it's important."

Granted, the fact that she had left, rather than beat Cygnus at his own game was a bit less satisfying than if she'd been able to curse him half to death for once, but the effect was the same, and the fact that Other Bella had eventually won meant she didn't really have to wonder whether she would ever have managed to get out from under him eventually. And she hadn't had to stick around until she was fifteen or maybe sixteen to find out. (She presumed that a Bella tutored by Professor Riddle would be slightly more lethal than one tutored by Ciardha Monroe.) Best of all possible outcomes, really.

"No, no, I'm sorry, it's just..."

"Why are you crying? It didn't happen to you, and it was thirty years ago!"

"Not for you!"

"It kind of was, actually. It's not like Cygnus is going to hunt me down thirty years in the future in another universe, so it's just as over. I wouldn't have told you if it bothered me." Lyra rolled her eyes, catching sight of the main doors to the ward as she did so. A very familiar face was apparently on his way to visit her. "Gods and Powers, thank you. Blaise! Get over here!"

Hermione looked around, momentarily confused, then went rather red when she realized Blaise was about to see her snivelling.

"Hey, Lyra... What did you do to Granger?" he asked, taking a seat uninvited at the end of the bed. "I thought you said you'd told her some things and she was angry at you."

Blaise himself had also been rather annoyed with her, which she maintained was unfair, because it was really Cissy who told Hermione, and it was Meda's fault Cissy knew in the first place.

"Turns out she was angry at me because Snape is being a dick to her, because Dumbledore is punishing Snape by making him supervise my detentions. It's a whole thing. But then we started talking about morality and I thought I mostly had her not angry at me anymore, so I kept talking, and obviously I fucked it up. Fix it, please."

Blaise's default smirk spread into a genuinely amused grin. "You're going to have to be a bit more specific."
"Ugh, fine. Here, give me a second." She pulled the curtains closed with a quick summoning charm. Anchoring privacy charms to them was only slightly more difficult. She hadn't really given it much thought before, since no one else was at this end of the ward, but three people were bound to attract more attention than two, especially since Blaise wasn't exactly the type to sit quietly in a visitor's chair.

"Cozy," he said, stretching himself out on the bed. "So, what exactly did she tell you?" he asked Hermione.

Hermione, to her credit, looked to Lyra for permission before speaking. "It's okay, he knows everything."

The other girl worried her lip for a moment, but eventually started talking and, being Hermione, didn't stop for quite some time. Blaise seemed content to just let her go on without interrupting, so Lyra followed his lead. Eventually she got to, "And then she goes and tells me about her childhood, and her father abusing her, and no one caring, and, and— It was only a few months ago, and it's just horrible, and I feel so sorry for her, and I shouldn't because she's Bellatrix Lestrange—" "Black." "—but I do anyway, and even she keeps saying I shouldn't because it's over now, but—but..."

"But you can't, because you can't stop thinking about how you would feel if you were in her place."

"Exactly. Thank you! See, Lyra, he gets it!"

"Blaise," Lyra whined. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"According to mum, I'm supposed to cover your arse, which you make bloody near impossible, by the way, and explain people to you. Didn't know about the abuse, though. She didn't mention that."

Lyra shrugged. Other Bella probably wouldn't have mentioned it to Zee until after she had taken care of the problem and it was no longer a weakness for Zee to potentially exploit. If she understood Zee's relationship with Other Bella correctly, she probably hadn't said anything about it because she didn't expect a thirteen-year-old Bella to be over it yet — that was the sort of thing Zee tried to take into account even though Bella had told her more than once that being nice and considerate didn't really matter. She was pretty sure Zee was smart enough to realize it didn't make much sense under the current circumstances anyway if she thought about it a bit, but Lyra somehow doubted she spent much time thinking about Bella's former home life. She certainly didn't, and it was her own past.

"Details?" Blaise requested, waggling his eyebrows in what she was almost certain was meant to be a suggestive way. It was kind of hard to tell when his face was upside-down.

In which case, she was passingly familiar with this game. She grinned down at him. "How long have you got?"

He smirked. "Just whatever you told Granger. You can fill me in on the rest some other time."

It was Hermione who answered, glaring at the two of them and repeating Lyra's words verbatim. "'Beating me? Raping me? Cursing the shit out of me? Yeah. By the way, the Cruciatus is way worse than any of the reference texts say. Words can't really capture it.' But the worst part is how she just— She doesn't care, and..."

"And now she's crying again. Look, if I were to tell you that Cygnus raped and cursed me on the
regular, and used to use the Imperius to make me suck his dick, you wouldn't start crying!"

Blaise actually looked a bit like he was trying not to laugh. "Lyra, you're not helping."

"Apparently neither are you."

"Look, you're right, I wouldn't start crying on you. As evidenced by the fact that I'm about to hit you with a silencing charm if you don't shut up and let me work."

"Sorry," Lyra muttered. "But I get where Granger's coming from. See, she thinks what happened to you is bad and horrifying in its own right, and if it happened to her, it wouldn't just be about the physical harm and being made helpless — it would be about betrayal by someone who, in her worldview, should automatically be a protector. That's why she thinks what Cygnus did to you was worse than what Riddle did to Bellatrix, even though mind molding is considerably worse from a subversion-of-will standpoint. Granger didn't grow up in a world where she had to protect herself from day one, she's never been responsible for anyone else's safety, she's always been taken care of. Like Draco, kind of. So when you tell her things and she empathizes with you, she feels the way she thinks she would feel if she were in your place, and it's far more horrible than it actually was for you, because of the emotional context. It's like... Like the difference between being put under the Cruciatus and being put under the Cruciatus and attuning your magic to the Light at the same time."

Lyra winced. Even trying to cast proper light magic was painful in a completely non-physical way. Trying to drag herself into the Light... Yeah, that did kind of sound like the metaphysical version of the Cruciatus. "Good analogy. But then, why would it be worse that I don't feel that way?"

"Because she thinks it was so bad it damaged your ability to feel things. Emotionally."

"That...sounds like it would be a good thing?"

"Well, yeah, but people who feel things think that losing the ability to feel things is terrifying, and being so damaged by something that you lose your ability to feel things, to them, is like flubbing a ritual so badly you squib out. They see it as a psychic wound, since being able to feel things is their default state."

"O...kay? I guess? I mean, I'll take your word for it, but I still don't see the upside to being able to feel like shit about being treated like shit."

"Well, to be fair, when normal people are damaged badly enough that they no longer feel things, they don't just lose the bad feelings, they lose the good ones, too. Happiness, love, wonder, that sort of stuff. They think — or, well, feel, really, that the good emotions are worth the occasional bad emotions."

"Are they?"

Another shrug. "Depends on the relative frequency and magnitude of the highs and lows."

"Legilimency is so cheating."

"The feeling that goes with that sentiment is called envy," Blaise said with a superior smirk. "Now, will you shut up?"

Lyra made a rude hand gesture over his face, but nodded. "Fine, I'll be quiet."
The boy sighed and rolled onto his side to look at Hermione. "Okay, Granger. Hermione. Can I call you Hermione?" She nodded. "Hermione, then. Were you paying attention to that?"

"Uh-huh," Hermione hummed, nodding again, her nose red and her eyes full of tears.

"That's the closest thing you're ever going to get to Lyra understanding where you're coming from. She can't really comprehend something she's never really experienced. It would be easier to explain color to a blind woman. Which means if we're going to come to a point of mutual understanding here, you need to try to imagine what life would be like without emotion. Are you with me?"

Another nod, accompanied by a sniffle.

"What you, and apparently Narcissa, don't get is that Lyra and/or Bellatrix doesn't feel a connection with people. Ever. No love. No guilt. No instinctive trust or sense of fellowship built up through shared experience — whether that's the rush of your team winning at quidditch or sharing your hopes and fears with each other in the privacy of your dorm. If you tell her you're scared or horrified, she might have a basic idea of what that means, in terms of how you're likely to act, but she has no idea what it feels like to be in a similar state. If you tell her you're hurt, I can almost guarantee she's going to think but I didn't touch you before she realizes she's said something you really didn't want to hear."

Well, she probably wouldn't, actually. She'd had a conversation like that with Meda, once, so she thought she'd probably catch it if a similar situation developed with Hermione. But she wasn't about to debate the point.

"All of her relationships are built on mutual benefit and tangible reciprocity. It really doesn't matter who it is. For example, from what you said, it sounded like Narcissa was expecting Lyra to immediately think of her and look her up when she got here, simply because they're family. But to Lyra, they have no relationship worth speaking of, because Narcissa was a child when Lyra knew her, and they had no history between them. She couldn't be considered a dependable potential ally and resource."

"She said she didn't even know if her mother was alive," Hermione said, still sniffling. "How can you— How could she not care? She's her mother."

Blaise sat up, placing himself so he could see both of them at once, and gave Hermione a soft smile. Lyra would have called it patronizing if it was directed at her, but Hermione didn't seem to mind. "Mother means something very different to you than it does to Lyra, and not just because she's weird. Most purebloods' parents, especially in the Noble Houses, are very authoritarian. Children are an investment in the future of the House who need to be trained to their future role in Society. They're not...doted upon, or showered with unconditional affection. With very rare exceptions, I guess, like Draco. It's pretty obvious Narcissa's overcompensating for her own upbringing with him."

"That would explain so much," Lyra thought. She'd have to bring it up the next time she spoke to Cissy.

"But anyway, I'd be willing to bet there's very little resemblance between, say, Daphne's childhood and yours. And Daphne's parents actually like her."

Hermione didn't really look any less appalled to know that the other purebloods were raised more similarly to Bella than herself, Lyra noted absentely. She was quickly growing bored with this topic. Presumably Blaise knew what he was doing, but she didn't really see the point of his little tangent.
"From what I've heard, Druella Black was a particularly bad mother. She didn't even make the
effort to see her children were properly educated and socialized. She basically neglected them the
point that she might as well have not existed at all. Narcissa Malfoy thinks of Bellatrix, the one
who raised her, as more of a maternal figure than Druella, which, so far as I can tell, means Druella
treated her not only as a stranger, but as a stranger she didn't much like the look of. She went back
to the Rosiers after Cygnus died — and yes, Lyra, she's still alive, or at least she was back in
August, when I asked mum about your family."

Ah, that explained how he knew all that, then. She had been wondering. "Did she happen to
mention whether Dru actually broke her marriage contract?"

"Nah, you'll have to hunt through Arcturus's papers and see if you can find it."

"It's not that important, she'd only get a widow's stipend, anyway. She doesn't have a claim on the
House. I was just curious. Carry on."

"And that's the only thing you're curious about. The money," Hermione observed. It was hard to
make out through the thickness of her voice, but Lyra thought that was disapproval. Somehow, she
didn't think correcting her about the fact that she really cared about the lack of a claim on the
House, far more than the money would help.

Apparently Blaise agreed. "Family means nothing, remember."

That wasn't strictly true. Family meant someone Bella had a duty toward, a responsibility to protect
and support them...unless they made it clear that they weren't willing to do the same for her, as
Druella and Cygnus — most of the adults in the House of Black, really — had done over the years.
It just didn't mean she trusted them or anything. But that might be too fine a nuance to bring up just
now.

"Okay, okay, I get it."

The boy sighed. "I don't think you do, really, but that's okay. You don't have to be able to imagine
what it feels like to not feel things as long as you can look objectively at a situation and compensate
for the emotional overtones you're projecting onto it by just kind of mentally filtering them out."

"Okay! I said I get it!" Hermione repeated. She was starting to sound a bit annoyed, which was
infinitely more familiar and preferable to weepy.

"Yes, well, after you wrap your head around the idea of not having an emotional connection
to other people, the next thing you need to try to grasp is not being emotional about yourself. Lyra
lives in the moment. She has no emotional investment in the past, and rarely considers future
consequences, though that's more because of her...religious leanings — is that what we're calling
it?"

Lyra nodded. "Close enough."

"Right, being stupidly impulsive and consistently failing to think about consequences or
plan anything, ever—"

"I plan things! I'm just not very good at following the plan..."

"—is at least partly due to her religious leanings, but there's also... Hmmm... Let's call it a lack of
temporal continuity in identity. Consequences aren't her problem, they're Future-Lyra's problem.
And trauma that happened to Past-Lyra isn't really an issue for Current-Lyra. Sure, it may have
affected choices she made in the past that still affect her today, like opposing Cygnus by embracing
"Chaos, but it's not something that really affects decisions she makes today."

"So in regards to the situation at hand, the minute Cygnus no longer had any power over Lyra, he stopped having any relevance in her life. The abuse she went through? Equally irrelevant. It's over and can't happen again so, in Lyra's mind, it doesn't matter. She doesn't need to take it into account or plan to deal with that particular danger in the future, it's...no longer something that could be used against her—" Blaise really was uncannily good at this understanding her thing. And much less concerned about pretending to be nice than Zee, which made it much more obvious, much more quickly. "—so why would she bother thinking about it at all?"

"Because we were talking about morality, and Hermione asked me why the Binding Power was evil," Lyra reminded him. Hermione had rather glossed over that part of the story, focusing far more on things Narcissa had said and the whole how-can-you-not-care obsession. Apparently it had been a rhetorical question, though, because Blaise ignored her entirely. "Does that make sense, Hermione?"

She sighed. "Not really, no. I mean, intellectually, yes, I guess, but... I just can't imagine living like that."

"It's hard to miss what you've never had," he said, which sounded reasonable enough to Lyra. "Just, do yourself a favor: don't try to sympathize with Lyra, and don't expect her to understand what you're feeling, either. If she says something doesn't bother her, it doesn't, and insisting that it should is only going to leave you both frustrated and confused."

The other girl still looked rather skeptical, but at least she wasn't crying anymore. And when she opened her mouth again, it wasn't to protest that Lyra had to feel something about all this. "And what about you?"

"What about me what?"

"How do you know all that?"

Blaise gave her a blinding grin, so sincere it had to be mocking. "I pay attention, Hermione."

She glared at him, arms crossed defensively. "You really expect me to believe you got all of that, just from 'paying attention'? Pull the other one."

He sniggered. "Well, Mum told me some of it. They were friends, you know."

"Can she even have friends?" Hermione asked resentfully, as though Lyra wasn't sitting right there.

"Well, Mum did name Other Bella as my godmother, so apparently she thought so."

"That's just stupid, what does friendship have to do with godparenthood?"

Not that Lyra really doubted that Zee considered Other Bella a friend, but that was a stupid reason to think so. Keying her into a ward-system that hadn't been acquired until three years after Other Bella had gone to Azkaban was much more the sort of sentimental thing she thought hinted at friendship.

"If you're allied with someone, and you like each other, and you trust them enough to name them as a godparent, you're friends. By definition."

Lyra gave him a skeptical non-existent eyebrow_raise. "I don't think that's a real definition."
"Well, what else would you call a long-term alliance built on mutual support, affection, and trust?"

Which, well, she didn't have an answer, but she'd certainly never thought of friendship in those terms before. She supposed that she liked Zee. She'd certainly prefer to spend time with her over anyone else she'd left behind. They'd worked very well together, and neither of them had betrayed the other over the two years they'd been in Slytherin — or ever, apparently, in the case of Other Bella and the Zee of this universe. "Fine then, yes. Zee's a friend."

Hermione was watching their exchange with an expression as though she was attempting to solve a particularly difficult Arithmancy problem. When she noticed Lyra noticing, she said, "That really shouldn't have been that hard a question."

Lyra had no answer to that but a shrug.

"Don't feel bad, Hermione. She doesn't dislike you, you just don't have enough history to be considered trustworthy yet."

"And you do, I suppose?" the other girl snapped.

Blaise smirked. "Not really, but I'm cheating — Mum vouched for me. Plus I'm very likable."

Lyra giggled. "You know normal people don't really like you, right?"

He rolled his eyes, giving her an overly-exaggerated sigh. "If normal people didn't like me, do you really think I'd spend so much of my time getting snogged? It's not my fault most people interpret disinterest as aloofness. Doesn't mean I can't be charming when I want to be."

"Yeah, well, you're a fucking cheater, aren't you." Blaise's eyes narrowed slightly, and he gave a minute shake of his head, barely a twitch. Right. The legilimency thing was supposed to be a secret. Not that it was a very well kept one.

In any case, she stopped talking, and Hermione seemed to be too preoccupied to notice. "Normal people," she repeated. "So are you... You're a psychopath, too? You're like Lyra, I mean. Or...?"

"I prefer the term sociopath," Blaise said haughtily, before breaking into laughter. "The look on your face!"

"I thought wizards didn't do psychology," Hermione said, shooting an accusing glare at Lyra, who had never said anything of the sort.

"They don't. I attended a muggle prep school for a few years. They thought I needed professional help, I think they called it, after Jack died and I wasn't what they considered appropriately broken up about it." He made an overly-exaggerated sad expression at her.

"Bet Zee was really pleased about that."

"Oh yeah, she was super annoyed. Seriously, I'd only known the guy for like, two years, but," he shrugged, then turned back to Hermione. "They didn't actually diagnose me with anything, so no, I'm not a sociopath. Or a psychopath."

"Just because a child can't be officially diagnosed doesn't mean you aren't more like Lyra than so-called 'normal people', or that you didn't just dodge my question," she snapped, eyes narrowed in that suspicious I-will-figure-you-out way she'd had about her in the days after Lyra had proved she wasn't a werewolf.
"Fine, I'm more like Lyra than you, but more from habit and inclination than because of genetics or fucked up ritual magic," he said casually, poking Lyra in the head.

She swatted his hand away. "Genetics?"

"I'm sure Hermione has a book on it."

Hermione didn't seem to be terribly satisfied with that response, or inclined to offer an explanation of 'genetics'. "What does that even mean?!"

"It means he's a really good translator," Lyra said, as seriously as she could manage. She honestly had no idea whether he was telling the truth, but she also didn't really think it mattered. Before she could beg to differ on whether her Dedication and the results thereof had been fucked up, Madam Pomfrey yanked the curtains around her bed open.

"Time to change your bandages," she said firmly. "Miss Granger, Mr. Zabini, you'll have to come back later if you want to continue your visit."

Hermione cast a tempus charm, squeaked, and beat a hasty retreat, calling "Goodbye," over her shoulder.

"She was supposed to be in history ten minutes ago," Lyra explained, in response to Blaise's raised eyebrow.

"Ah, well, see you later."

"Wait, was there something specific you wanted to talk to me about?" He had been coming to visit of his own accord before she'd demanded his help with her crying roommate situation.

"No, I missed you, that's all," he said, his tone saccharine sweet. "Just killing time and avoiding Miller, really."

"Mr. Zabini!" Madam Pomfrey snapped impatiently.

"Going, going. Later, Lyra."

"Now, let's see about finishing off those scars, shall we?" the Matron said, closing the curtains again behind him.

Lyra sighed. Forty-two more hours to go.
"You ready?"

Harry twitched at the voice suddenly chirping in his ear. His wrist nearly tipped over the inkwell, he had to scramble to stop it from spilling all over his transfiguration homework. "Dammit, Lyra, you almost made me..." Turning toward her, Harry trailed off, staring at her like an idiot.

Lyra was right there. It'd sounded like she was close, yeah, practically yelling in her ear, but he hadn't realized she was quite that close. Her face and her hair were blocking the common room behind her entirely, her nose practically touching his cheek, just grinning at her, dark eyes sparkling with some silent joke.

He felt the inexplicable need to swallow.

It took a few seconds for him to find his voice again. Leaning a little bit away, far enough he could properly look at her without their faces ending up pressed together, he said, "Ready for what?"

Lyra blinked, the grin replaced with a confused sort of frown. "Did you forget, or is this one of those decisions I made without telling the people involved?"

"Uh...?"


"No...?"

She shrugged. "Oops. So, wanna sneak out to Hogsmeade?"

"Well, yeah." Of course he would go, if he had the option. To hear people tell it, Hogsmeade wasn't quite as exciting as it was made out to be, but it was still something else to do. It hadn't bothered him that he was stuck in the castle for ten months out of the year and not allowed to leave until he'd been denied an opportunity to get out, if only for a few hours. Not to mention, it was kind of just one of those normal person things that Harry Potter apparently didn't get to have, simply because he was Harry Potter.

(It still annoyed him a bit, thinking back to when he'd asked McGonagall to make an exception. She obviously sympathized with the situation with the Dursleys, but she couldn't let him go anyway, because Sirius Black. Which was stupid, because Black was innocent, anyone looking back at what had happened during the war should easily come to that conclusion, unless everyone in the entire bloody country were all fucking idiots — which, honestly, that would explain a lot...)

But, it wasn't quite that simple. "Lyra, you might have noticed, people do tend to recognize me."

She gave him a flat look, the kind that called him a moron without any need for actual words. "Harry, you might have noticed, glamours exist."

...Oh. Right.

After a detour to grab a cloak quick — it was the middle of December, it could get bloody cold up
here — Lyra led the way off, heading down into the castle proper. He was a little confused when Lyra stepped off the Staircase onto the third floor. She stopped at a seemingly random spot in the middle of the corridor, looked around for a bit, wand flicking with charms he didn't recognize offhand. (Probably detection spells, if he had to guess, confirming they were alone.) Then she walked up to a statue of an elderly, stooped witch, tapped it with her wand.

The statue slid open, revealing a passage quickly sloping into darkness under their feet. "How the hell did you find that?"

"That wo—"

"—would be telling, yeah, fine."

Huffing out a little sigh, Lyra pouted at him. (He tried not to stare.) "Am I really that predictable? Nobody even lets me get the whole sentence out anymore."

He had absolutely no idea what to say to that. Not that it mattered, Lyra grabbed him by the sleeve and threw him down the chute before he could really try. It was a short distance down a smooth, curving slide to a low-ceilinged passage, lit dimly enough it was black, the air seeming thicker than usual. He'd barely picked himself back up to his feet when Lyra appeared behind him — somehow, she was standing upright, her boots skidding along the slide far easier than they should, probably using a charm of some kind. She hit the bottom, skipped a step to stop just next to him, grinning as easy as anything.

How the hell did she do shit like that? So not fair.

Lyra had them get into their disguises before even going along another step. They didn't do anything really complicated, just a few color-changing charms, a few illusions to alter the lines of their faces, slightly, just enough they wouldn't be recognized. The longest part of the whole process was probably Lyra trying to get Harry's hair to behave — the untameable mess shrouding his head was rather distinctive, after all, just changing the color wouldn't be enough. She cast charm after charm at his head, cursing under her breath the whole while, for some minutes until she was finally satisfied.

"Honestly," she said, letting out a frustrated sigh. Lyra hardly even looked like herself anymore, her face subtly wrong, her eyes too blue and her hair too blonde. "I'd thought Liz was exaggerating. Apparently, the infamous Potter hair deserves its reputation."

Harry blinked. "Who's Liz?"

"Oh, doesn't matter, never mind." Lyra looked almost uncharacteristically awkward, she was hardly ever affected by anything. Maybe it was just more obvious on her glamored face. "Anyway," she said, whipping around on her heel to start off down the passage, "so, Hogsmeade. Why didn't you get the permission slip signed, anyway? You never said, I'm curious."

Yes, she was curious. It certainly wasn't that she was trying to change the subject. "Something happened, and I had to leave early this summer. Just hadn't had it signed yet."

She shot him a disbelieving look. "Uh-huh. And people say I'm a terrible liar."

"You are a terrible liar."

"Doesn't mean you don't suck at it too, Potter."

"Shut up, Black."
"We both know that's never going to happen," she said, her lips splitting into another reckless grin. Feeling like a little bit of an idiot, he smiled back at her anyway. He couldn't really help it, for some reason, it was weirdly infectious.

This passage was rather odd, when he thought about it. They had been on the third floor, but the thing was a straight shot, maybe arcing down a little bit, but he was sure it went right through where the first floor should be. But, well, magical buildings did stuff like that all the time. He'd been in secret passages before where there shouldn't be enough space in the walls to fit them, some staircases somehow went straight through rooms above them, the whole castle was a twisting mess that shouldn't work, but somehow did. Something thick and musty on the air told them they were underground, despite his head telling him they hadn't gone down nearly far enough.

Magic was pretty neat, no matter how seriously confusing it got sometimes.

Though, apparently the environmental wards controlling the temperature in Hogwarts — it did get cold sometimes, but never too cold — didn't reach all the way out here. Which was odd, because they were underground, so he'd think there'd be some insulation from the winter chill, but, magic, weirdness, whatever. He'd think it'd at least be good enough he wouldn't be able to see his breath, but he wasn't an expert on the topic. And really, apparently he needed a new winter cloak, because this damn thing wasn't working at all, it actually felt cold. Not just a little cold, but seriously cold, that shouldn't be...

It wasn't until his ears started ringing that he realized the cold had nothing to do with the season.

He must have blacked out at some point, because he was abruptly off his feet, the corridor sliding by around him, bobbing up and down in a steady rhythm. A glance around, his vision oddly blurry, he picked out glamored-Lyra walking next to him. She was holding her wand on him, a faint look of exasperation on her unfamiliar face. Her eyes flicked over to him, and she stopped, one eyebrow ticking up. "You back?"

"Yeah." His voice was thin, grating a bit, his throat nearly too dry to speak properly. He drifted down to his feet, weight coming back in a rush, his shaky knees nearly pitching him to the floor. One hand on a wall propping him up, he took a few long, deep breaths, trying to expel the sick clamminess lingering in his lungs, bring strength back to his limbs.

Trying to pretend her screams weren't still echoing in his ears, that he didn't know exactly whose voice that was...

And trying to ignore the heat on his face, the worms squirming in his stomach. They must have been passing the gates, where the dementors were standing guard. He'd passed out again. Through however much stone and dirt, they still affected him so much, far more than they did Lyra, he couldn't...

He cleared his throat, pushed himself away from the wall. He nearly teetered right back over, staggered for a second, but managed to keep to his feet. "Sorry."

Lyra was staring at him, her brow pulled down into a frown, but exactly what kind of frown he couldn't tell. He didn't think she was angry at him but, well, it could be hard to tell with Lyra. "You really need to do something about this dementor problem of yours, Harry."

"I know that." It'd become quite obvious he couldn't just leave it be when the things had invaded the quidditch pitch in the middle of a game. Oliver had even said he'd have to look for a replacement seeker if Harry couldn't figure it out, and that was assuming he could even get a new
broom in time. (Though, he was going to Hogsmeade now, could probably begin solving that problem today.) Unfortunately, what he could find on dementors in the library was all patently unhelpful. "How do you do it?"

She blinked. "Do what?"

"I mean, they hardly seem to affect you at all. Dean said when they showed up at the game you were just throwing curses up at them." And cackling like a madwoman, apparently, Dean had said it was bloody creepy — Harry didn't think it was worth bringing up that part.

"Oh, well... It's a kind of occlumency, I guess."

Harry tried to not roll his eyes. "Okay. And what's occlumency?"

"One of the major branches of mind magic. To put it very, very simply, any technique designed to protect the mind from outside influence can be called occlumency. When people say it, they usually mean a very particular sort of...passive...meditative...thing."

Wow. That was quite possibly the worst explanation he'd heard from Lyra for anything ever. It was hardly even an explanation at all. "Alright. Could you teach it to me?"

She let out a laugh, short, surprised. "Ah, no."

"Look, I have to find some way to—"

"I'm not refusing to help, Harry. I'm just saying, what I did... I didn't learn normal occlumency. In fact, I didn't really learn it at all. It's a long story, but the point is, it's not something I can teach you." She paused a moment, blinking to herself. Her eyes narrowed a little, examining Harry with an oddly contemplative frown. The words coming slowly, almost reluctant, she said, "I do know someone who might be able to help. But I suspect you won't like it."

"Uh..." Honestly, he didn't like a lot of the things that came out of Lyra's mouth — she was really bloody weird sometimes. "It isn't, like, against the law or something, is it?" He knew Lyra had a rather... Well, she had strong opinions about what magic should or should not be illegal, put it that way.

"No, nothing like that. It's just one of those things normal people are weird about."

Despite himself, he couldn't help smiling a little every time Lyra said something like that. "What is it, then?"

"The best way to pick up occlumency, so I hear, is to learn to protect yourself by having someone try to read your mind. Of course, you're not going to learn to do it right away — the other person is going to end up seeing, well, pretty much everything. Anything that has ever happened to you, anything you're thinking while you're talking to them, all of it. It's not really possible to keep secrets in that sort of situation."

And there went the worms in his stomach again. He shifted in place a little, trying to not think about...well, everything he'd rather Lyra not know about him. There was quite a lot, really, mostly involving the Dursleys. He'd managed to get away with not telling anyone what went on at Privet Drive, even Ron and Hermione knew hardly anything, and he... He wanted to keep it that way. They would just...

And stuff about Lyra herself, actually, come to think of it. He... He'd just been thinking about her more, lately, than he was entirely comfortable with letting her know. Not that he thought she would
care that much if she did know — honestly, she hardly ever seemed to care what anybody thought of her at all. It was, just, bloody awkward, he'd rather avoid it.

But if it was the only way... "That... Well, I wouldn't be happy about it, but if you, er, kept all of it to yourself, we could..."

"I didn't mean me. I can't, actually — the thing I did to protect myself means I'll never be capable of legilimency ever. Er, mind-reading, by the way, legilimency."

Despite how inconvenient that was, he couldn't deny that he felt a little relieved at the thought that Lyra would never be able to read his mind.

"No, I meant Blaise. He'd probably want something in exchange, but I'm sure he'd be willing to teach you."

Harry blinked. "Blaise... Zabini? You want me to let Zabini in my head?"

An odd expression crossed Lyra's face, looking somewhere between confused and exasperated — as though she couldn't understand why he should object to having Blaise Zabini digging around in his memories, and would like him to stop being so silly now, please. "Is there another Blaise around here I don't know about? Of course I mean Zabini. To be frank, you wouldn't be letting him do anything. He's a legilimens, he can read your mind whenever he wants."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Lyra rolled her eyes at him, letting out a sharp sigh. "It's not supposed to make you feel anything, Harry, it's just the truth. And, why does everyone in Gryffindor hate Blaise so much? And it is just Gryffindor — I can't even tell you how many Hufflepuffs I've caught him snogging. Well, actually, I guess Draco and Parkinson sort of hate him too, but, he's really not that offensive, I don't get it."

"He's just..." Uh, now that he was thinking about it, he hardly knew anything about Zabini at all. He didn't think he'd even heard the bloke's voice more than a handful of times. People did talk about him a little now and then — well, more accurately, people talked about his mother now and then. (There was a lot of talk about her being a serial killer, which was weird, because if she was and everyone knew it he was pretty sure she'd be in Azkaban by now.) Harry had never spoken to him, only ever seen him in classes, wasn't part of Malfoy's pack of racist bullies. "Um...I don't know, I guess. It's just... Well, he is a Slytherin..."

"Harry, you're a Parselmouth — in Britain, that's almost always Slytherin Family Magic. You can deny it if you like, but I have no doubt the Hat offered you Slytherin."

He couldn't meet her eyes, staring over at the wall behind her. "Uh, well... It, it did, actually, but I asked it not to put me there." Had he ever actually admitted that to anyone before? He'd told Dumbledore, back at the end of last year, but he'd said it didn't matter... in a less-than-reassuring way, now that he thought about it.

Flicking her fingers at the air once, she brushed that aside, as though everything Dumbledore might have said on the topic last year were completely irrelevant. "Regardless, you could have been in Slytherin. If you hadn't argued with the Hat, or if it had just put you there no matter what you say, you would still be you. But you still hate all the Slytherins, just because they're in Slytherin. The only thing I can think to call that is stupid."

"Sure, if you have some reason to dislike Blaise — which I personally can't imagine, he's fun — that would be one thing. Though, even if you do, you should consider getting him to teach you
anyway, he's simply the best option conveniently available. But if you insist on leaving yourself vulnerable like this because *he's a Slytherin*, then, I'm sorry, you're a fucking idiot."

Despite himself, Harry almost had to laugh. Lyra wasn't sorry. Lyra wasn't sorry at all.

All right. Fine. Zabini had done nothing to him personally, Lyra was right, Harry had no good reason to be so leery of him. But that didn't mean there weren't any problems with the idea. "It's not that... I'm not sure I'd be comfortable with, well, *anyone* just...digging around in my head, you know."

Her face sank into a confused frown. "Just a minute ago, you were asking if I could do it."

"Yeah, well, you're..." She wasn't *nice*, of course, but he... Well, Harry didn't exactly *trust* Lyra, that word didn't carry quite the proper implication. He meant, he knew she... Her *intentions* were good, where he was concerned — she was just a little bit mad, this was what 'being nice' looked like for Lyra. He thought. He didn't think she'd *intentionally* do something awful to him, was the point. "I wasn't thrilled about the idea of you doing it either, but at least I actually know you."

Lyra smirked at him, her light glamored eyes dancing with silent laughter. Apparently there was something funny about what he'd just said. "What do you think he would do to you anyway? What's the downside?"

The 'downside' was Zabini going around telling people...well, everything. He just, he didn't want people to know certain things, that was all. Of course, he couldn't *tell* Lyra what it was he didn't want people to know, so he had to talk around the point somewhat, but he thought he almost made sense.

She gave him a very odd look, but shrugged it off. "Don't really have to worry about that. Unless there's some immediate benefit to it, breaking his confidence with you would be a terrible decision — and sabotaging his relationship with the future Lord Potter would require an awful lot of benefit. So, he would have no *reason* to do that. Any sort of relationship he could develop with you would be worth more than whatever he could possibly get from gossiping about what he sees in your head."

"People usually use any opportunity they can get to mess with me over stupid shit. Slytherins especially." The whole Heir of Slytherin thing from last year came to mind. Or, Malfoy going on about dementors. He *still* hadn't stopped being an ass over that. Really, that there was another benefit of hanging around Lyra — Malfoy was a bloody coward, he left Harry alone when he was with her.

"By 'people', do you mean Draco? 'Cause, you know, he's a little shit, shouldn't even be in Slytherin."

Harry barked out a shocked laugh at that. "He probably begged the Hat or something." Wasn't the number one thing Slytherin House prized supposedly cleverness? Malfoy had never struck him as particularly clever. A bit of a hot-headed idiot, honestly...

Yes, Harry did realize that was a little hypocritical of him.

Over the next couple minutes, Lyra eventually managed to wheedle him into promising he'd at least consider it. Which, well, he wasn't entirely humoring her when he said he would. The whole...mind-reading...thing, the idea was just...unsettling. But, he had to do *something* about his dementor problem, she wasn't wrong about that. He'd heard that Lupin was teaching a spell to the NEWT students to protect themselves, but apparently it was *seriously* difficult magic, many of
them couldn't pull it off — and if some seventh-years couldn't, what were the chances a mediocre third-year student could? It was an option, of course, he'd been considering asking Lupin about it for a little while now, but he knew it was a long shot.

In any normal circumstances, Harry doubted he'd trust a Slytherin to go digging around in his head for a second, but... Well, this bloke did seem to be Lyra's best friend here at Hogwarts. Even Hermione had mentioned him a bit lately — it didn't sound like she liked him, but it was obvious on her face that she didn't hate him, anyway. That might be enough.

Would try just talking to him first, obviously, before making any kind of decision either way.

Eventually, he had little idea of just how far, the dark little passage started curving up again. Then there were stairs, a tiny switchbacking thing, ascending in a tight spiral. At the top was what looked like a plain trapdoor, narrow bands of light casting bright stripes over the two of them. Before pushing it up, Lyra insisted they cast a couple of notice-me-not charms. Lyra actually re-did his, giving him a somewhat exasperated look as she did — it hadn't been good enough for her, apparently.

When she did go up, stepping into what looked like a storeroom of some kind, he instantly saw why she'd bothered: someone was in here, digging around in a stack of crates a couple rows over. Lyra watched him for a moment, turned back to Harry, tipped her head toward another staircase leading up. He trailed after her, trying to keep his steps as light as possible, wincing when the stairs creaked under his feet.

On the other side of the door at the top was the gaudiest, busiest, most ridiculous sweet shop he thought he'd ever been in. Not that he'd been in any, mind — Petunia seemed to be of the opinion that even being able to smell the sort of shit she bought for Dudley by the pound was too good for useless little freaks like him. The place was insane, loud and bright and colorful, he couldn't even really tell what was going on in here. Lyra lingered only long enough to grab some chocolate and throw a few knuts on the counter, handing it off to him without a word and hardly even looking at him. Then she hooked Harry by the arm, dragged him through the crowd and out onto the street.

(Harry assumed she was only giving him chocolate to deal with the aftereffects of the dementor exposure. At least she wasn't making a big deal about it. He unwrapped one of them as they stepped out into the village, keeping equally silent on the matter.)

He'd seen pictures of the village before, of course, it didn't really come as much of a surprise. He did still think the blocky wooden buildings were rather...plain, for mages. Though, if all of them were like Honeydukes (he only knew that's what that'd been by the name on the chocolate wrapper) on the inside, well, there was a saying about books and covers. The little streets were packed with students, dozens of them walking around in clumps, the constant chatter thick on the air. Lyra kept pulling him along, didn't even slow down. She must have some place in mind, but really, she hadn't said anything, Harry had no idea what was going on.

It didn't take him long to notice that... It was sort of strange, actually. The notice-me-not spells were gone, Lyra had dispelled them once they were out from behind the counter, but nobody hardly seemed to notice them. Or, him, really. Which...

People stared at him a lot, okay. Every time he went to Diagon Alley or something, any time he was in public anywhere in Magical Britain, there was inevitably a storm of pointing and whispering. And that was on the good days. He couldn't count the times people had run up to him talking about, oh, Harry Potter, it was such an honor to meet him, insisting on shaking his hand, all that shit, it happened all the bloody time. But people hardly looked at him twice, like...like he were any other kid around. It was...
It was rather nice, actually.

After a few minutes, Lyra was pulling him into another store — a quidditch supply store. Which was sort of bloody weird. Lyra had gone to the game last month, but she didn't seem to particularly like quidditch. She didn't play herself, she looked at people talking about the League like they were idiots, she'd even complained about going that once, she didn't seem interested at all. "What are we doing here?"

Lyra looked at him, giving him a crooked sort of frown. "I was under the impression you needed a new broom."

"Oh." He turned toward that half of the store, the brooms sitting out in display (which he thought was sort of weird, what was the point of just looking at them). For a moment he just stood there blinking like an idiot. "Uh, I do, but I don't have that kind of money on me." Honestly, he doubted he'd ever had enough galleons withdrawn all at once to cover the price of a broom — he mostly only used that stuff for school supplies, and brooms were seriously expensive. Maybe he could order one and arrange to pay for it later...

"Why the hell didn't you bring any, then?"

"I might have, if I knew that's what we were coming out here for."

"Obviously, why else would I..." Lyra trailed off, the irritation abruptly whipping from her face, leaving her blankly staring at him. "Huh. I never did tell you about sneaking out here today, did I. Oops."

Despite himself, he felt his lips pulling into a smile. Lyra was just so absolutely ridiculous sometimes. "No. You didn't."

"Oh well, just write a note for it quick."

He frowned. "Write a what?"

"Gods and Powers, did nobody tell you anything?"

No. No, they didn't. That was turning out to be a common theme this term, learning things he should have known that nobody had bothered to tell him about. He couldn't think of anything to say, just made a helpless little shrug.

Lyra let out a long, exasperated sigh. Shaking her head to herself, she said, "Alright, I'll cover it. But we're going to Gringotts at some point soon, this is just unacceptable."

Was... Was she really offering to buy a racing broom for him? She knew how expensive those things were, right? "Uh, you really don't have to... I mean, there's still some time, I can figure it out —"

"Don't twist yourself up about it, Harry. I'm not wanting for gold, to put it mildly."

"Uh, the sort of broomsticks I'm going to be looking at run thirty-five, forty galleons."

He had looked into this stuff, after all. True, he hadn't the greatest impression of how much exactly a galleon was worth but, considering how slowly he tended to go through them (and how the entire Weasley family apparently had trouble scraping together a single whole one at any one time), he had the feeling it wasn't exactly a small amount of money. Whatever broomstick he did end up getting, it would be the single largest sum he'd ever spent at once, probably by a few times. Forty galleons was a lot of money for Lyra to just be randomly throwing at him.
But, that didn’t seem to really mean anything to Lyra. She gave him a doubtful sort of look, as though she didn't entirely understand what he was even trying to say. "The financial well-being of the House of Black won't be significantly affected by fifty galleons one way or the other. Or the House of Potter's, for that matter — they were never as wealthy as us, but the Potters are an old noble family, I expect you've got plenty sitting around. Buying a broom really isn't that big of a deal."

Harry opened his mouth to say that wasn't really the point, it was the idea of Lyra spending that much on him, seemingly on a whim, that was making him uncomfortable, but she cut ahead of him before he could even start to get it out. "If it bothers you that much, you can pay us back later. We can take care of it during that visit to the goblins you desperately need. Now, if you're done being all silly and modest, go look at the shiny toys like I know you want to."

Did she have to make it sound so condescending? Honesty, sometimes he wondered why the hell he put up with her.

Maybe Hermione was right, and he was just a massive pushover for anyone who was even marginally nice to him. Which, well, Hermione did have her entire friendship with him as evidence...

"I am going to kill him."

The parchment shook in her hands, enough she could hardly read Meda's handwriting. Everything else had dropped away, she couldn't even see her dorm room around her, couldn't hear a thing but the pounding in her ears. Black rage carried her away, her chest filled to bursting, her breath came hard and hot, but she barely noticed, her lips twisting in a feral, bloody grin, nearly twitching with anticipation.

"I am going to kill him, for this. Cygnus won't last the night."

"Trixie..." Zee's voice came to her too light and thin, fuzzy, she could hardly pick out the words. "You can't. I mean, you can, but — think for a second, what will happen after you do?"

Reluctantly, Bella tore her eyes from the page, turned up to shoot Zee a flat look. She was sitting on Bella's bed, where she slept more often than in her own these days, completely naked, which was sort of new, but not really a deviation from the pattern, lately. Really, Zee had been acting very odd this evening, kept talking at Bella while she was trying to work. But that wasn't unusual either, Zee had been acting odd for months now, Bella had no idea what was going on with that.

But the confusing mystery that was Mirabella Zabini wasn't really important right now. "He'll never hurt Meda again. That's what'll happen."

"And you think your head of House will just do nothing?"

"Arcturus is quite practiced at doing nothing." He'd done a little bit, since her Dedication, but he'd only paid enough attention to realize there was anything he should be doing something about because a child of his House had gone and become a black mage at the age of seven. (It'd seemed the thing to do at the time, but Bella had learned since that such was practically unheard of. Ciardha had near had a heart attack when he'd found out.) Honestly, she wasn't even sure how much he knew about what went on in their household, he seemed to be consciously avoiding involving himself as much as possible.

It was very hard for Bella, sometimes, to remember that Arcturus was the head of the Family, and
she was supposed to respect and obey him. He'd failed the Family utterly, as far as she was concerned, he was doing more harm than good. He should feel fortunate she didn't deal with him the way Blacks usually did their enemies.

It was hard to tell — Bella had trouble figuring facial expressions sometimes to begin with, but with her head too intense with thoughts of murder it was more difficult than normal — but she thought that might be a worried look Zee was giving her, fingers toying at the sheets and biting at her lip. "Trixie, a murder within his House isn't something he can just brush aside and pretend didn't happen."

"You're clearly unfamiliar with the history of the House of Black."

Zee rolled her eyes. "This is serious, Trixie, if—" She cut off with a harsh sigh, her head shaking hard enough her hair bounced across her shoulders. "Trixie, Cygnus is a public figure. People will notice if he suddenly goes missing. Lord Black can't... He'll have to say something, and the most convenient thing to do would be to implicate you."

"I don't see the problem with that." Even if the DLE decided to prosecute — which, given that killing him could be excused as self-defence, was unlikely — Bella would just flee the country ahead of them. With Eris’s help, she didn’t doubt that she could do it. She wouldn’t even have to go far — most European nations refused to extradite to Britain, because they’d just end up in Azkaban, which moral people evidently had a problem with. The scandal would do some damage to the House’s prestige, of course, but since Arcturus could just lay it all on Bella for being completely insane, the hit would end up being relatively small, they’d recover quickly.

Small enough it'd be worth it. Meda mattered more to her than ensuring Arcturus didn't get a little mud on his face. Quite honestly, if she felt it were necessary, there was very little she wouldn't do for Meda.

Her affection for her little sister was the sole, tiny shred of her humanity Eris hadn't burned out of her, after all.

Something crossed Zee’s face, too quick for Bella to even begin to guess what it was. "Trixie, if you do this, you can’t come back."

"Back where?"

"Here, Trixie, to Hogwarts."

Was it just her imagination, or was Zee saying her name rather more than usual? "And that would be such a terrible thing. Honestly, it’s fucking boring here. You must have noticed our classes aren’t exactly doing me any good. I wouldn’t have come at all if it weren’t expected of me."

That thing crossed Zee's face again, rather more strongly this time, but Bella was too distracted to interpret it. "Trixie..."

"I'm done." Bella was suddenly on her feet, so smoothly and so quickly she’d hardly even felt herself move. "I'm done talking about this." Much of the time, she never really understood the inclination people had to talk about things, endlessly, instead of just doing them. It was nothing but pointless dithering, she wouldn’t have it, not when it was Meda. She confirmed she had her knife on her, and turned away, moving for the door.

Before she could touch the handle there was a pressure at her elbow — Zee, moving to stop her. Without hardly even thinking about it, Bella twisted the freeform spell into shape, cast a stinging
jinx into the girl's hand. There was a yelp, a hiss, and Bella was free again. She turned around, absently feeling her face fall into a steely glare, her voice rising, "This isn't your business, Zabini. You have no right to decide what I do, so sit back down, and shut the fu—"

Zee grabbed Bella by the collar with both hands, leaned into her, and before Bella could even blink—

A startled jerk shot through her all at once, hard enough she abruptly lost her train of thought. The force of Zee pushing into her had her stumbling into the door behind her, Zee's arms wrapping up behind her head shielded it from thumping against the wood, lips not lifting from Bella's for an instant. And Zee kept leaning into her, hands buried in her hair, and she'd kissed her before, of course, but...

Eris?

Yes, ducky?

The fuck is this?

Her Patron's only response was to cackle at her.

Zee had kissed her before, of course, seemingly made a point of doing it whenever she could come up with an excuse, but this was different somehow. It was more insistent, harder, and... Bella didn't know what to call it, really. More than before, not immediately retreating with a disappointed pout when Bella just blinked back at her, lightly licking her bottom lip, nipping at her, trying to entice something out of her, and Bella was just staring back at her, blankly blinking, Zee's face close enough it just an olive-toned blur, and she just...

Seriously, what is even happening right now...

I believe Mirabella is trying to distract you, Bella dear.

Well, apparently it was working, because she'd been murderously enraged a moment ago, and she could feel it draining away, slipping through her fingers bit by bit, Bella too shocked and confused to remember just now what exactly she'd been so angry about.

After a while, she had no idea how long, she just sort of...went along with it. She'd never done this before, she'd never really been inclined to, just stared at Zee being confusing and ridiculous for a second and moved on. It just...seemed the thing to do. Not that she had any bloody clue what she was doing. Honestly, she still didn't understand the kissing thing. She knew it was a thing people did, but she just thought it...strange. But she didn't know what the fuck else to do with herself right now, so just...following along, that seemed to be the thing to do.

The high giggle, smothered at the back of Zee's throat, probably meant it wasn't the wrong thing to do.

She had absolutely no clue what the fuck was going on.

And with Zee draped all over her, the heat of her body was starting to make Bella uncomfortably warm.

Zee pulled away eventually, what had to be...Bella didn't know, she hadn't been counting — far more slowly than she'd started in on her, almost reluctantly. And she just smiled at Bella for a second, something in her eyes almost seeming to sparkle. She was silent for a long moment, just...smiling at her. Then she said, "There are smaller steps you can take first, steps that would be
far less costly. If you kill Cygnus you will sacrifice much in return. It would be wise to exhaust all
other avenues before risking so much."

It took Bella a second to remember what the fuck she was talking about. Right, Cygnus, Cygnus
hexing Meda, then the killing of him. Yes. Bella just blinked at her for a few moments, forcing
herself to focus. "Ah... Far less effective avenues."

"True, but far more practical. You said Lord Black has taken steps to insulate your sisters from
your parents over the last few years, at your insistence. Well, insist to him again. Write to him, that
he has not gone far enough, that your sisters are still vulnerable while you are too far away to
protect them, and that this is completely unacceptable. You can even tell him that you nearly ran
off to murder him. Tell him whatever you need to to convince him to take this seriously.

"If he refuses to act, then we might have to consider something else. But just writing your head of
House, telling him what happened and that he must do something about it, that presents a very
small risk. Much smaller than the one you were about to take. Trying this first, at least, is the
rational thing to do."

Bella thought about it, but it only took a second. "Right. Yeah, you're right. I'll do that, then.
Okay."

Zee's smile split wider, her teeth showing bright. She planted one last peck on Bella's lips, then
finally released her, arms unwrapping from around her head as she stepped away. "Good. Well, it's
going late, but if you wanted to write that letter before going to bed, I'll wait."

"...Yeah, I should probably do that now."

"I'll leave you to it. But Zee didn't leave her, not really — she turned and sauntered off toward the
bed. Picking up one of those novels of hers she kept leaving around, she sat, leaning against the
headboard, and started reading.

Sometimes, Bella had to wonder if Zee had completely forgotten she had her own room across the
hall. She certainly acted like she was supposed to be in here.

I'm serious, Eris, I am so confused. What the fuck was that, why is Zee being all— What the fuck
is happening?

Aw, my little bellatrice, you really are quite precious sometimes.

Bella quirked her lips in a pout, frowning at the air above her. You're not being very helpful.

Eris just laughed at her again.

Heaving out a heavy sigh, Bella stomped back to her desk and settled in to write.

Lyra couldn't say she understood what the point of Hogsmeade was. She meant, not the existence
of the village itself — obviously, people had to live somewhere — but why exactly students
visiting all the time was...a thing. Okay, just needing to get out of the castle now and again, that
sort of made sense. Lyra thought she might go completely insane if she were stuck in one place and
not allowed to leave for three months straight. But if she just needed to get out, she would go out
onto the grounds, into the forest, not to Hogsmeade.

Honestly, Hogsmeade was kind of boring. It was just a bunch of little houses, with more stores and
things than a village of this size could reasonably support. (Without the regular patronage of
Hogwarts students, she doubted they could be profitable.) And they weren't even interesting stores and things. The whole...shopping thing normal people did was completely baffling, she really didn't get it. She could count the stores she actually liked going to on the fingers of one hand (one of them didn't even exist in this time, unfortunately), and needing to go practically anywhere else — which she did have to occasionally, for clothes and such — was nothing but a tedious chore.

But, far as she could tell, shopping was pretty much what people did at Hogsmeade. There didn't seem to be much else to do. Buy things, have lunch or tea, that was it. Zee had dragged her out here...well, she wasn't sure how many times exactly, it'd become a regular thing once Zee had realized in November of their first year that Bella was fully capable of leaving whenever she wanted without anyone even noticing (excluding Professor Riddle, who didn't care). Which wasn't nearly as hard to do in her time as it was here, the professors were a bit more overprotective — clearly, going through a couple wars had turned everyone paranoid. Zee just pulled her around here and there, always ending up in a couple of these colorfully empty, boring stores for a few minutes at least, and usually getting something to eat somewhere, and of course talking pretty much the whole time, that part she sort of understood, but...

There was no reason to go out to Hogsmeade just for that, they could talk perfectly fine anywhere. She didn't get it.

(Zee often seemed vaguely disappointed with her for just suffering through these sorts of things, which was equally confusing.)

The point was, after the issue with Harry needing a broomstick was taken care of, Lyra had absolutely no idea what to do. Even taking care of the broom thing was more incidental than anything. Lyra hadn't really bothered during the last Hogsmeade weekend back in November either — she had gone with Hermione, largely because the silly girl had been rather insistent that they go, but she'd gotten bored quickly and declared she was dropping by the Bookstore instead. (Hermione, of course, had abandoned Hogsmeade to come along, because nothing would keep Hermione Granger away from the prospect of new books.) Staying on the grounds and introducing Sylvia and Harry, as she'd done on a different shift, had been a far more entertaining use of her time.

And this was an even worse waste of her time than the hour or so she'd been here with Hermione, since she only got one go through each day now. She really did miss time travel.

She couldn't say there was more than one thing in all of Hogsmeade she actually liked. Well, two, technically — she'd gotten the impression Dora spent more time at Meda's house than one would expect for someone who theoretically had her own flat. But she doubted either of them were even in at the moment. Schools were virtually the only institution that actually respected the muggle concept of a weekend, so she'd be willing to bet Meda was at her office in Charing or something, and Dora was almost certainly off doing something Auror-related. So, dragging Harry off to their house would be rather pointless.

She'd asked Harry if there was anything he particularly felt like doing, but of course he was less than helpful. Just looked back at her and shrugged, said something about not caring much one way or the other, looking strangely uncomfortable. (But then, normal people looked uncomfortable very, very often.) Lyra puffed out a sigh.

In the end, she just led Harry off toward the... Ah, okay, it was still called the Three Broomsticks in this time, she hadn't been certain. It was getting around the time one was generally expected to eat things, so that seemed the thing to do. The place was bloody packed, but she managed to find an open table. Well, she managed to make an open table — Spoilt Bitch and her minions fled at only a hooded glare, quite pathetic, really.
Harry fidgeted a bit at her paying for lunch, but at least he didn't kick up a fuss about it this time. The whole thing was rather peculiar. Not lunch itself, the menu hadn't changed appreciably since she'd last been here thirty years ago in a different universe, no, it was the table conversation that was a bit... Well, Harry just seemed strangely uncomfortable. All fidgeting and stumbling over his words, more than usual, almost coming off...well, Neville-ish in his uncertainty. It was utterly baffling. She was trying to not be annoyed with him but, honestly, what was his problem?

Luckily, a convenient distraction came bumbling into the pub in the form of the Minister of Magic himself. (And "bumbling" did seem the proper word for this Fudge bloke, what she'd read of him had left her less than impressed, though not particularly surprised.) What was the Minister even doing in a place like— Oh, he was with Hagrid and Flitwick and McGonagall, that sort of explained it, must be visiting the school. Though, if the Minister were to take lunch with Hogwarts professors, Lyra wouldn't expect him to pick the two part-humans on staff — she'd been under the impression Fudge had connections to the more boring, human-supremacist arm of the Allied Dark.

Since Harry was being boring and confusing, she might as well eavesdrop.

She couldn't use any of the standard suite of monitoring charms, of course — Flitwick was sitting right there, he'd notice if she charmed anything in his vicinity. But there were advantages to having Ciardha Monroe for a tutor. Instead of casting any sort of charm around their table, she cast one around her own. It was an adaptation of the typical voice-amplifying charm, but with one of the terms inverted and a couple switched around, instead amplifying noises coming from a particular direction. She'd needed to practice it a bit to filter out shite behind her target, but Ciardha had brought her out to restaurants with the express intention to have her refine her eavesdropping spells, because he was fun like that.

"—I must say. Have one yourself, won't you? Come and join us..."

"Well, thank you very much, Minister."

Harry had jumped at the Minister's voice breaking out over their table, staring dumbfounded at the empty air for a moment. "Lyra, what..."

In place of a proper answer, Lyra tipped her butterbeer bottle toward the Minister's table.

While the party across the pub traded empty pleasantries, Harry shot her a tight look. He seemed almost annoyed with her. "Why are you spying on the Minister of Magic?"

Lyra shrugged. "I'm curious."

That didn't seem to make him any happier. Which was just too bad — Lyra had the feeling that he'd like the honest answer of I'm bored even less.

"So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?"

"What else, m'dear, but Sirius Black? I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Hallowe'en?"

With a scoff, Lyra said, "I thought Dumbledore said he preferred to deal with Hogwarts affairs internally. He just cut up one portrait, honestly." Legally speaking, minor property damage was a far lesser offense than practicing restricted "Dark" Arts. Not that she had any idea why Sirius had sliced the Fat Lady to ribbons — perhaps he'd simply met her — but it did seem a weirdly inconsequential thing to bother involving the Ministry over.

"I really don't think that's the point, Lyra."
"Well, no." Of course, Sirius had proven that all their efforts to keep him out of Hogwarts were ineffective, but had they really expected anything different? He'd already broken out of Azkaban, what was surrounding the place with dementors supposed to accomplish? Lyra really didn't see how the Minister dropping by to chastise the staff (presumably) was supposed to solve anything.

Gods and Powers, normal people were bloody stupid.

"...dementors have searched my pub twice? Scared all my customers away... It's very bad for business, Minister."

"Rosmerta, m'dear, I don't like them any more than you do. Necessary precaution...unfortunate, but there you are... I've just met some of them. They're in a fury against Dumbledore — he won't let them inside the castle grounds."

Seriously, normal people were bloody stupid. If you really wanted to catch someone who had demonstrated an ability to evade dementors, which breaking out of Azkaban proved quite well, perhaps you should surround the school with — oh, she didn't know — Hit Wizards, maybe? Fucking idiot.

It was to her advantage that Fudge keep being an idiot, but she couldn't help it, stupidity was annoying.

"...to protect you all from something much worse. We all know what Black's capable of..."

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it. Of all the people to go over to the Dark side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought..."

Lyra abruptly remembered a line from one of those muggle films Blaise had forced her to watch over the summer. A grin stretching across her face, she forced her voice low and melodramatic. "You underestimate the power of the Dark Side."

Harry choked on his butterbeer.

"The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst? Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do."

"I can't believe that. What could possibly be worse?"

Lyra had trouble thinking of something normal, moral people would consider worse, herself. She'd been under the impression mass murder was pretty much at the top of the scale. Which she thought was a little absurd, really — at least when someone was dead their suffering was over. Rome had practiced enslavement magics on a scale unmatched before or since, but decimating a village here or there was considered the greater crime. She really didn't get it.

McGonagall abruptly changed the subject, and they went off for a little bit about how Sirius and James Potter were the best of friends that could ever be, weren't they just precious. They explicitly compared the two to the Weasley twins which, well, Lyra hadn't seen that coming. Sirius had been a toddler when she'd left, and therefore boring, and she'd only even seen Jamie once or twice. (She hadn't even been certain her Aunt Dorea's Jamie Potter and Harry's father James Potter were the same person before she'd looked it up.) If Sirius could in any way be compared to the twins, maybe he wasn't entirely a lost cause.
Brainwashed by his little Light friends, maybe, but at least he might be entertaining.

"Black was best man when James married Lily. Then they named him godfather to Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Honestly, why would I be tormented by that?"

"Because you're a fragile, innocent little baby who needs to be protected from the horror of knowing things."

Harry scowled at that — which was good, Lyra wanted him annoyed with this bullshit. The bloke was far too willing to let people control his life for him, it was really quite irritating.

"...had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once."

Lyra would put gold on Dumbledore's "useful spies" numbering exactly one, that one being Snape. Riddle was a legilimens, and she doubted a Dark Lord Riddle would hold himself back from examining his minions' minds on the regular. But Snape was a master of mind magic himself. Assuming Lucy was at all representative of the talent Not-Professor Riddle had managed to recruit, Lyra doubted there could be many other possibilities.

Of course, she'd been under the impression Snape loathed James — if he had learned Not-Professor Riddle intended to wipe out the Potters, she'd have expected Snape to stand back, watch, and laugh. She made a mental note to tease him about it later.

"Dumbledore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm."

Lyra frowned — a charm? Not a ward, or a ritual, but a charm?

"How does that work?"

"An immensely complex spell, involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul. The information is hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find — unless, of course, the Secret Keeper chooses to divulge it. As long as the Secret Keeper refused to speak, You Know Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting-room window!"

Oh, so it wasn't a charm: it was soul magic. It sounded vaguely like an ancient Egyptian practice, whereby various cults had prevented the spread of secret knowledge by binding it to the souls of their members. She assumed it was done by ritual, probably involving the Intangible Power and maybe Order (there was something uncomfortably domesticated about trapping and taming knowledge). She would say Ignorance, but deliberately hiding information seemed a bit too much like Deception for direct opposition to work. Either way, that would make it by definition not a charm, but people tended to get uncomfortable when phrases like "soul magic ritual" were bandied about, the choice of terms was probably a euphemism. She'd also thought it was lost, one of the many ancient magics forgotten with the collapse of the old Egyptian priesthood. It'd been lost in her time, anyway, maybe it was different here.

Not that it truly mattered one way or the other — with how deep into Lyra Eris had carved a place for herself, soul magic tended to behave...oddly. Lyra wasn't inclined to restrict knowledge in such a way to begin with, but she had absolutely no idea what would happen if she tried to bind knowledge to Chaos. Considering how strongly Eris refused to let another Power near Other
Bella’s mind, she could safely assume it was a very, very bad idea. It was possible she couldn’t even be brought in on a Secret bound to someone else, but it wasn’t something she’d be experimenting with.

"...would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself... And yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters’ Secret-Keeper himself."

Wait a second — McGonagall had personally witnessed Dumbledore and the Potters discussing this? Fucking hell, had these people even heard of the concept of operational security? This Fidelius thing was most useful if nobody knew who the Secret Keeper was, the more people who were in it...

Lyra blinked, straightening in her seat a little. Oh. Oh, that was brilliant... Eris?

Yes, ducky?

Lily was a particularly talented ritualist, right?

Oh, yes. She was fun, that one. And that was a high compliment, from Eris.

She didn’t happen to alter this Fidelius thing to make someone else the Secret Keeper? That would be the smart thing to do, really. It sounded like far too many people had been in on the Fidelius scheme than was entirely necessary — seriously, what the hell did McGonagall have to do with anything? If people were off blabbing away that Sirius was the Secret Keeper, it neatly attracted attention away from the real Secret Keeper. Clearly, they’d even fooled Dumbledore: his failure to defend Sirius only made sense if he believed only Sirius could have betrayed the Potters, the Light were supposed to be principled about that sort of thing. It would require a soul magic ritual to alter a soul magic ritual, but they had Lily available, so it was possible...

A trickle of dark amusement from Eris had Lyra smiling to herself. You know, I don’t think that possibility has ever occurred to anyone in the know. It backfired rather horribly in the end.

Well, yes — the Potters being murdered did implicate the decoy Secret Keeper, especially if the real Secret Keeper were unavailable for whatever reason. (That whoever it was had been tortured for the Secret and disposed of once they’d outlived their usefulness was a good bet.) It hadn’t worked out, but it was still a neat trick.

The more Lyra heard about this Lily Potter person the more entertaining she sounded. She’d be a perfect addition to the Conspiracy to Murder Not-Professor Riddle, if not for that whole being dead thing.

"But James Potter insisted on using Black?"

"He did. And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed—"

"Black betrayed them?"

"He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You Know Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters’ death."

Honestly, people were so bloody stupid. How exactly did Fudge know so much about Sirius’s motivations? He didn’t, that was how. Even assuming Sirius hadn’t been erroneously convicted, it was public knowledge that Sirius had never given any statement pertaining to his crimes, he’d
never even been properly interrogated. (The excuse at the time had been that he was in no fit mental state to have a coherent conversation. So the thing to do about that was to chuck him at the dementors, obviously.) Fudge had absolutely no idea what Sirius could have been thinking at the moment, because he'd never said, and everyone who had known him well enough to speak for him had either been dead or inexplicably unavailable. (Looking at you, Professor Wolf Wolf.) This expounding on how Sirius is a devious evil-doer and totally a spy you guys, this was all self-serving conjecture. Fudge couldn't just come out and say they had no idea why he'd done what he'd done — people might ask questions and realize he'd been innocent the whole time, can't have that. Admitting one of the most infamous criminals in recent memory had no motive for his supposed crimes weakened his Ministry's legitimacy, it was to his advantage to invent a narrative like this.

She might even acknowledge the effort if anyone couldn't easily falsify his claims by looking up the original issues of the Prophet back in '81. Blaise called her a bad liar, this idiot was fucking terrible.

Lyra kept listening for a little longer, but it didn't sound like there was anything more particularly interesting. Going off about how Sirius was super evil, blah blah. There was a bit about how Hagrid had been the one to pull Harry out of the wreckage of the Potters' home, which, okay, that sort of explained Hagrid's soft spot for him. (It didn't explain why Hagrid had been sent in the first place, just raised more questions, really.) Apparently, Hagrid had a motorbike which Sirius had enchanted to fly, and that was just so fucking awesome, she'd have to see if Sirius could make her a new one at some point.

She was just about to cut off the eavesdropping charm, certain there would be nothing else worth listening to, when they started talking about the incident in Edinburgh. And good thing she hadn't, because the decade-old puzzle quite abruptly solved itself.

When she'd first heard that Sirius had (allegedly) killed thirteen people with a single curse, she'd been faintly impressed. Somewhat less so when she'd heard all but one had been muggles — mages had an innate resistance to magic, even if you got the drop on them they were still harder to kill than muggles — but still, taking out thirteen people with one spell was impressive, people didn't throw around that kind of magic every day. It was somewhat less impressive when she'd learned it had been an incendiary curse hitting a gas line under the street. Sure, knowing exactly where the thing was to hit it that accurately through a couple feet of concrete was still kind of neat. It was a different kind of impressive, more one of cleverness than skill. Not bad all the same.

The account she'd read in the Prophet, though, had lacked details. Fudge had been on the scene, as part of his responsibilities as a Deputy Director in the DMAC. He mostly focused on Sirius's little breakdown, but he did mention that this Peter Pettigrew bloke, the one wizard killed in the attack, there'd been very little left of him. His robes, plenty of blood, and a finger.

...A finger? An intact finger? That was just...

Why the fuck was everyone else so bloody stupid?!

You would think people at the DMAC would be used to seeing the results of explosions, but apparently not. For fuck's sake, with the scale of devastation they were talking about here, there should hardly be anything left — enough charred and twisted remains to identify with forensic magic, sure, but unless the robes had some pretty serious fire-resistant enchantments on them they should have been burned away completely. And an intact finger? Really?!

It was so bloody obvious what had happened. The original Secret Keeper, when Dumbledore had performed the ritual, had been Sirius. As an extra layer of protection, Lily had transferred the Secret to this Pettigrew bloke. Pettigrew then gave the Secret to Not-Professor Riddle, he attacked
the Potters, and walked right into Lily's trap like a bloody idiot. Boom, no more Dark Lord. Sirius tracked Pettigrew to Edinburgh for a good spot of vengeance. Pettigrew blew up the street, faking his death to frame Sirius for the whole thing, and vanished. Dumbledore, believing Sirius to be the Secret Keeper, fingered him for the traitor, and since Sirius was too busy having a breakdown to defend himself he was carted off to Azkaban, no questions asked.

Lyra had to swallow back the urge to set things on fire. Was she the only person in the entire bloody country who knew how to use her brain?! Honestly...

Not long later, the idiots were wrapping up their idiotic conversation, and Lyra dismissed her eavesdropping charm. Well, that had been interesting. Not particularly useful, in the end. She'd been a little concerned how exactly they were going to manage to exonerate Sirius — sure, they could just get him an interview with one DLE official or another and his innocence would be self-evident, but the Kiss-on-sight order did complicate things. It was a little difficult to have a conversation with someone who'd just had his soul sucked out. The easy solution was to track down this Pettigrew bloke and offer him up, since there wasn't a Kiss-on-sight order on him, what with everyone thinking he was a hero and also dead.

Problem was, Lyra was already having difficulty tracking down Sirius, and he was a member of the House — the Family Magic was fragile, yes, but she could still use their common blood to make finding him a whole lot easier. Theoretically. There were no shortcuts like that she could use with Pettigrew, she had no leads and no options.

So, it would be a convenient solution, if she had any idea at all how to exploit it. Just, shit.

She didn't have very long at all to consider the problem before she was distracted. Harry, who had gone rather peculiarly silent and still at some point in the last few minutes, suddenly jerked up to his feet, the movement awkward and wooden. Then he turned, dazedly started for the door.

Okay, what the hell. Lyra slapped a few sickles on the table — she hadn't bothered counting them, but it was probably more than enough — and jumped to follow him out the door. By the time she was out on the street, Harry had enough of a head start it took a moment to find him, the place too filthy with cloaked figures for her to pick him out very easily. (That he was one of the very few people wearing the Hogwarts-standard cloak helped.) He was far enough ahead that by the time she caught up he was leaving the village, aimlessly wandering past the station and out into the forest, his stiff pace cutting a messy trough through the snow.

Once they were past the treeline, and could then be expected to have some measure of privacy, Lyra dragged him to a halt by the elbow, hard enough he stumbled a couple steps. "Okay, Potter, you don't wear silent and brooding nearly as well as you think you do."

Harry glared at her, but, well, he didn't wear that nearly as well as he thought he did either. It was sort of precious, actually, that Harry thought he could be at all threatening — honestly, she'd felt more intimidated by house elves (a long time ago, obviously) than this boy could ever manage on his best day. "You told me he was innocent."

She blinked. "Because he is."

"Did you even know about the, the Fidelius thing?"

"Well, no, I didn't even know the magic existed before, but that doesn't—"

His voice abruptly rising a few notches, he snarled, "He was the only one who could have done it, Lyra!"
"Why the fuck would Fudge know who—"

"It was him!"

"So say people who—"

"D'you know what I hear every time I get close to a dementor? I hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort not to kill me."

Lyra was distracted from the rest of whatever Harry was saying with that thought. He... He could remember it? He would have been, what, fifteen months old at the time? That should not be possible. It was well-established fact, had been for centuries in certain circles, that the human mind didn't develop to the point of proper sentience until a child was at least three or four — infants were useless in most ritual contexts for that very reason, they didn't mean anything, had no will of their own. (The exception was when a sacrifice of potential was being made, but even that only worked for very specific purposes.) A person remembering something from when they were barely a year old, that...that just didn't happen.

In ordinary circumstances, anyway — it was possible for a powerful magical event to create a sort of echo in a person's soul, which could theoretically be perceived by the person in question as a memory of the like Harry described. That was extremely unlikely with someone so young, though. Unless... Unless whatever Lily had done, the trap that had half-killed Not-Professor Riddle was still there, her one-target curse was still bound to Harry to this day. That...

Well, that was fascinating. It really was quite unfortunate Lily was dead, because she did sound seriously fucking impressive.

When she did finally manage to stop thinking about that and pull herself back to the present moment, Harry was in the middle of a very dramatic rant. All pacing and yelling and gesturing like he was trying to fling acid off his fingers or something, face gone almost Weasley red. He was worked up enough his aura was even flaring with it a bit, sparking almost visibly, hot magic pinching at her skin every few syllables. Which was also sort of interesting, she hadn't gotten the impression Harry was quite powerful enough for that. It would almost be impressive if this little episode of his weren't idiotic and so very boring.

Lyra reached for her wand to silence him, then stopped. Silencing him would get him to shut the fuck up for a second, but it wouldn't really solve the problem. She needed him to calm down and listen to her so she could reverse the damage the conversation they'd listened in on had apparently done — silencing was good for making people stop being annoying, but it didn't make them any less angry. If anything, it would only make it worse. So, silencing was out.

Unfortunately, that was pretty much the only argument-resolution strategy Lyra had. The only one suited to deescalation, that is — she had all kinds of tactics to blow up arguments, but get everyone to calm down, no, that was not her strong suit. It wasn't where her talents lay. And she'd never really had to work on that, if she'd ever needed a conversation to go nice and smoothly she'd just throw a Zabini at it. But she had no idea where the nearest Zabini was at the moment, and she doubted silencing Harry until she could find one would—

Oh! She didn't necessarily need a Zabini present. She could just do a Zabini thing. It might not work, she couldn't even verbalize exactly why it'd worked on her that one time, and she couldn't say she had a whole lot of experience in pulling a Zabini in any case. That was what Zabinis were for. But she might as well give it a shot.

So, the next time Harry's frenetic, silly person pacing had him coming back her direction, she
darted in close, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him full on the lips.

(Eris, being Eris, set to cackling in the back of her head. Not that Lyra disagreed, the full-body twitch and his strangled *eep* were really quite hilarious.)

Lyra had absolutely no idea what she was doing, of course. For all the times Zee had just randomly out and kissed her, and those were many, Bella had never been inclined to do it herself, she'd never once initiated it. She really didn't *get* the kissing thing. But, she'd been the target of it enough she could just sort of...try to Zee. Sure.

Luckily she didn't have to strain her memory for long at all — it only took seconds for the tingly magic on the air to fade away, for the sharp tension in Harry's body to soften. She lingered for a second (*no* idea what she was doing, honestly) before pulling away a little, trying to contort her face into the most Zee smile she could. Which was probably a catastrophic failure, she'd never really practiced Zee's weird soft flirty thing. (She'd actually always found it a bit silly and ridiculous.)

But it looked like it'd worked. Harry had shut up, was just blankly staring at her, mouth half-open like he wanted to say something but couldn't quite recall how the English language worked at the moment.

And Eris was still giggling back there, which, okay, it wasn't *that* funny, Lyra didn't get it.

*I know you don't, my little bellatrice. That's why it's so funny.*

*Fine, be mysterious, then.* "So," she said, trying to keep the Zee-smile from slipping into a smirk, "are we listening now?"

Harry blinked. "Uh..."

"Right. Don't just take the things people say at face value, Harry, put them in their proper context. McGonagall and Fudge say Sirius was the Potters' Secret Keeper, but *how* do they know that? Were they there? Did they participate in the ritual themselves? No, they heard about it from a third party. Probably Dumbledore."

It took a second for Harry to find his words, throat bobbing as he swallowed a couple times. "Ah, Dumbledore *was* there, though..."

"Yes, for the original ritual, he was. But he seems to be forgetting that your mother was a completely awesome ritualist. See, it was a trick. Sirius went around being loud and obnoxious, as so many of my House are wont to do, making it so bloody obvious that he was the Secret Keeper. But, Lady Potter had switched the Secret to this Pettigrew bloke, without telling anyone. That way, if Sirius gets captured, they can't get the Secret out of him, because he *doesn't have it*, Pettigrew could hide away irrelevant and ignored, and your family would be safe."

"But..." His face was twitching with a faint, indistinct frown, his confusion not quite prominent enough to show properly on his face. "Dumbledore didn't... And all that stuff Fudge said about..."

"Obviously Dumbledore wasn't informed. For the first ritual, *he told McGonagall*. Honestly, what the fuck does Minerva McGonagall have to do with anything? You can't just go blabbing to random people about this kind of stuff, Harry, doing shit like that could have easily gotten your parents killed. He'd proven your parents couldn't trust him to keep his stupid mouth shut, so they didn't tell him."

Harry's eyes had somehow gone even wider than they'd been a moment ago. "Uuhhhh..."
"And how the fuck could Fudge possibly know what Sirius had been thinking at the time? You've read the *Prophet* articles just as I have — Sirius was never interviewed, and never gave *any* statement, of any kind. Fudge made all of that up."

"Why would he do that?"

Lyra had to work to keep the nice smile on her face, because that was a *seriously* stupid thing to ask. "Harry, he's the Minister of Magic. Sirius is the first person *ever* to escape from Azkaban. He was there for *supposedly* committing horrible crimes. Crimes he has *no motive for*. If people start asking questions about what happened back in Eighty-One, they might *realize* that. Which could be *extremely* politically damaging for Fudge. The stories about Sirius he has been telling ever since he broke out are designed to cover his own ass. There are no facts in there anywhere, he's making it up as he goes.

"Those people have absolutely *no idea* what they're talking about, Harry. It's all lies. Sirius *is* innocent, no matter what nonsense idiots tell themselves."

The last hints of resistance evaporated away shockingly quickly. No, when she thought about it, that wasn't surprising — Harry had known Sirius was innocent a half an hour ago, he'd returned to reality just as quickly as he'd left it, had a certain symmetry. His shoulders slumped a little, forehead dropping enough he might have knocked into hers if she hadn't pulled out of the way. "I'm sorry, it just... It just hit me, is all. I mean, him being my godfather and all, if he gets cleared, I could..."

Lyra frowned. "You could what?"

So quietly she could hardly pick the words out, even inches from his face, Harry muttered, "I wouldn't have to go back."

She was just about to ask *back where*, when it clicked. It was common knowledge that Harry lived with muggles, relatives of his mother's. Nobody knew exactly who or where, or even why, but that wasn't really the point. Harry had never said...well, *anything* about them at all, at least not to her. This was the first comment on his situation he'd made. It would probably be a concerning one, if she were capable of feeling such things. Regardless, the implication was...interesting.

Of course, it was also an opportunity, to build that whole mutual experience solidarity thing that Zee had said could be so useful in getting people to like you. It wasn't even entirely a lie. She did have to mull over exactly how to put it for a second — she was dealing with multiple layers of lies about her background — but she was *pretty sure* this wouldn't bring the whole thing crashing down. "You don't have to spell it out, I get it. I didn't exactly have a stellar home life, before coming here. If it were possible to go back you couldn't pay me enough to make me."

She did feel *slightly* bad about leaving Meda alone back there, when it occurred to her. But there was nothing she could do about that now, so there was really no point in dwelling on it.

"I know." Harry flinched a little. "Ah, I mean, I, you know, saw the scars. Not the duel ones, the, the ones on your back."

What did he— *Oh*, right, those. It hadn't even occurred to her at the time he might draw the obvious conclusion. He could be more clever than she gave him credit for, he didn't show it most of the time. "Right. Anyway, yeah, minor insanity, it happens. Well, honestly, what I *don't* get is why you don't just kill them. I couldn't, he'd just curse the shit out of me if I tried, but yours are
muggles. It should be easy."

And Harry's eyes had gone wide and mouth dropped open with shock again. "I— just— What?!"

Lyra shrugged. "Maybe I'm missing something, whatever. If you can't just kill them, you can avoid them whenever possible, there's nothing stopping you there. Shit, you can come home with me for winter break, if you like."

Once again, Harry seemed to have entirely lost the ability to speak.

"What the fuck, Bella?!

Before the sentence, so much as that could be called a sentence, had even entirely finished, Lyra had already whipped around to face the unfamiliar voice, her wand in her hand and pointed. She'd been half-intending to curse and ask questions later, but she was struck dumb the instant she saw him.

Because there was only one person that could be. Long hair dirty and matted, so thin she could make out the lines of tendons against his bones, torn robes hanging half off him. Wild eyes in a skeletal face, dark eyes, Black eyes. He looked little like he did in the various photos she'd seen, even less like her baby cousin she vaguely remembered (children were boring). He was completely unfamiliar, but she had absolutely no doubt who he was.

"Sirius," she said, letting her wand arm drop to her side. "I've been looking for you, you know."

He hardly seemed to hear her, eyes frantically flicking between her and Harry as he stepped closer, nearly tripping over shaky feet. She noticed he wasn't wearing shoes, which, there was snow bloody everywhere, come on. "I don't get it, I don't— Why are you here, Bella, with Harry, and— What are you doing?! At Hogwarts and, and you're a bloody kid again, and—Gryffindor, what the fuck, just— Did I see you kissing Harry a second ago?"

Lyra ticked up a single eyebrow. "I was under the impression going to Hogwarts and being in Gryffindor were normal things for a thirteen-year-old witch to be doing. And, yes, that did just happen."

"A normal thing to—" Sirius barked out a laugh, sharp and half-mad, a shake of his head looking over-exaggerated with all that hair. "You're completely mad, Bellatrix, you know that."

She'd certainly been told often enough. "The name's Lyra, actually."

"You can't pull that shit with me, Bella. The dementors haven't fucked me that hard."

It took every ounce of willpower Lyra had to hold in a giggle at the idea of all the inmates and dementors of Azkaban holding one big orgy. "Ah, no, really. I know I look like Bellatrix, but we've never met, the two of us." That was even true, more or less — she'd hardly even been in the same room with her Sirius for more than a few minutes total. And he'd been, what, three years old at the time, he didn't count as a person to be met at that point anyway.

And Sirius just glared at her, one born of disbelief and irritation. "Uh-huh. Sure. What the fuck are you doing with Harry? If you think I'll let you do any—"

Lyra sighed. "Well, this conversation got remarkably boring remarkably quickly. Cherri?"

The house elf popped into existence at Lyra's feet, instantly started asking if she needed anything in elvish before breaking off, glancing at Harry and Sirius, then repeating itself in awful broken
But Lyra wasn't listening, didn't even let the thing finish its irritating sentence. "Grab Sirius and pop him off to Ancient House for me. Make sure he gets a bath, and eats and everything, just don't let him leave."

Sirius was yelling some kind of protest at her, but she entirely failed to care.

The elf stared up at her for a moment, wide eyes slowly blinking. It glanced back at Sirius, looking somewhat anxious, before turning back to Lyra, fingers working in obvious uncertainty. "Is Mistress ordering Cherri to—"

"What did I say about the English?" Lyra sighed, rubbing at the side of her forehead. Only a few seconds, and this shit was already giving her a headache. Or maybe that was Sirius and Harry yelling. Whatever. "Look, he might not realize it, but Sirius is not in his right mind."

("That's rich coming from you, Bella—")

("—talk to her like that! And why do you keep calling her 'Bella'?!")

"There are dementors all over the place, and I don't know about you, but I would rather not have a Lord Black with his soul sucked out because he was bumbling around like a fucking idiot. Just, take care of him like you would anyone ill, or, I don't know, a small child, and don't let him leave."

The elf hesitated another long moment, wavering back and forth on its toes, as though teetering on the edge of a cliff. Then it straightened, its fingers stopped twitching, and it nodded up at Lyra. "Yes, Mistress. Cherri will do as Mistress commands."

There was an odd twinge, less one in Lyra's body than one in her magic. Subtle, hardly noticeable, like a ward tripping rather more quietly than in alarm. Lyra frowned — what the hell was that?

Sirius tried to dodge the elf, but he barely had time to take a step back before Cherri was on him. A slightly louder pop, and they were gone.

A grin stretching on her face, Lyra turned back to Harry. "Well. This was a very productive day. I've changed my mind, going out to Hogsmeade was a brilliant idea."

"It was your idea, you know."

"Obviously I'm fucking brilliant, Harry. I just captured notorious mass-murderer Sirius Black single-handedly."

Harry sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Did I mention I enjoy anti-climaxes? I enjoy anti-climaxes.

"Liz" is Elizabeth Potter, James's elder half-sister (headcanon, not official). She was mentioned briefly in my previous fics, mostly for not really getting along with James and being killed by Voldemort in 1980. (In my fics where Harry is a girl she's actually named after her.) In Bella's second year she would have been a Slytherin prefect,
hence Lyra unthinkingly mentioning her.

Am I the only one who has massive problems with Dumbledore and Harry's conversation at the end of *Secrets*? The takeaway is *supposed* to be that it's a person's choices/actions that makes them who they are; Harry is different than Tom because they made different choices. But, the choice they're talking about is going into Slytherin. Seemingly unintentionally, this conversation *validated* the completely irrational demonization of a quarter of the entire population, because they didn't have the good sense to choose to not be put in Slytherin. I mean, really, one would think Dumbledore should try to tell Harry that there's nothing inherently wrong with being in Slytherin (in fact, I think that is JKR's intent, however clumsily executed), but it's not the message he gets across, and it's *not* the lesson Harry comes away with — every single Slytherin without exception throughout the rest of the series continue to be portrayed as inherently morally compromised, as though that fundamental premise weren't just questioned in the *second book of the series*. Bothers me. —Lysandra

Hey, look, an entire Lysandra chapter! (I don't really have any comments, but at least this time it's because I didn't write the thing, rather than because I forgot all the comments I wanted to make between writing and publishing. Yay?) Poor Harry, it's really not his fault he's a silly moo, all those mixed signals xD Also, yes, the whole 'Slytherin is the house of evil children' thing is very annoying. —Leigha

For the people still waiting for an *Echoes* update, I haven't abandoned it. I've been distracted with things like medical problems and (futilely) trying to keep up with Leigha's output in this fic. (Also distracted with maybe picking up *TLG* again, because I'm insane.) It'll be posted when it's done. —Lysandra
By the time Lyra had finally gotten around to inviting Harry to the Zabinis' for Yule, there was almost no time to plan anything. She had already told Cissy that she preferred to do her own ritual for the holiday, which she thought Cissy had been more or less expecting. Yule was about independence as much as anything else, after all. But with only two days until they were due to arrive in London anyway, she hadn't bothered sending a letter to Zee. And then she'd thought it would be more amusing to wait and see how long it took for Blaise to figure out that Harry was coming home with them. Which turned out to be right around the time he followed them over to the bank of fireplaces to floo out of King's Cross.

"Right, wait a couple minutes after I go so I can make sure you don't get bounced."

"Who are you— Potter? What are you doing over here?"

Blaise's expression of confusion and surprise was just as amusing as Lyra had expected it to be.

"Er... Lyra invited me to spend the holiday with her?"

The confusion vanished. "Did she tell you she's staying at ours?"

"Does that matter?" she asked innocently.

"Suppose that depends on if you RSVP'd with a plus one."

"What?"

"Oh, bugger. No, I sent that ages before I thought to bring Harry." She examined his school robes and muggle trainers for a moment before deciding that he probably didn't own dress robes, and Blaise was far too tall for him to borrow something. She sighed in defeat. "I really hate shopping. Especially between Yule and Christmas. D'you think I could get someone to come to the manor for a fitting?"

"Lyra," Harry said, annoyance not quite hidden behind his deliberately even tone. "What are you talking about?"

"My mum's getting married on Christmas," Blaise said. "Since Lyra didn't see fit to mention she was bringing home a stray, and you obviously don't own proper robes, you're going to have to get some in the next week. You know this means we're going to have to redo the seating chart last-minute."

"Mira doesn't have people for that?"

"Not people who are well-versed in the political situations that need to be taken into account on both sides of the pond. She tried to get Narcissa to do it, but she begged off on the grounds that she didn't know any of the Americans."

"Um, Mrs. Zabini doesn't know I'm coming home with you? I don't want to impose. I could just...find something else to do with myself for the day, you know."
"No, she won't mind, though. Just don't use magic in the kitchen. And of course you'll come to the wedding. Have you ever been to Ravenna?"

Harry made a small, half-choked little gasp before managing to say, "Is that in Italy?"

"Yeah, Mira has this gorgeous little estate in the hills outside the town."

"But, I don't have a passport. And I...don't think you can just go and invite people to other people's weddings." He didn't sound entirely certain about that.

Blaise sighed. "Normally, no. But this is Lyra we're talking about. And it's not like Mum hasn't already had plenty of weddings to be her special day. We'll figure it out later, come on," he said, heading toward the nearest open fireplace.

"Plenty of weddings?" Harry repeated. "You did hear me say I don't have a passport, right? Lyra."

"Tell you later, and yes, but I have no idea what that is, so I assume it's not as important as you think. Like I was saying, give me a minute to get myself oriented so I can invite you in—"

Blaise apparently heard her that time. "Are you even authorized to invite people through our wards?"

Floo security was notoriously difficult, since it was kind of hard to have visitors if you had to know exactly who was coming and when, or key them into the wards ahead of time. The obvious solution was to integrate a ward which briefly intercepted potential visitors, allowing anyone on a specific list of trusted individuals — normally the residents of a house — a few seconds to approve their entry before they were automatically redirected to the next nearest public access grate. There were similar wards for overland entrances, of course, but they tended to be far more secure, since a potential intruder would have more than a second or two at a time to attempt to break them.

"Since August. How do you think I got into your kitchen? It's a pretty minor step from being keyed in and permanently recognized to adding yourself to the verification list."

It wasn't really that easy — it had taken her the better part of two hours to figure out how to do it without the system alerting Zee to what she was doing. Not that she thought Zee would refuse to add her to the list if she asked, it was just that not asking made it more challenging, and she'd been itching for a challenge after the first week or so of sitting around waiting for school to start. But it was probably easier than it should have been. It had taken her far longer to break the system at Ancient House.

Blaise groaned. "Don't change anything else, okay? Mum might not care about you bringing Potter home with you, but she's very protective of her wards. She has to maintain them herself because of the muggle rooms." Hmm. Well, that would explain why they were so simple, comparatively speaking. They weren't bad, they'd still keep out unwanted guests and malicious magics, prevent scrying and so on, they just weren't anywhere near as thoroughly interwoven as Ciardha's work. "Potter, you can just come through with me."

"Come with you through the floo? Isn't that, well... I mean, I've only done it once, but it was kind of...spinny."

"As long as we stay close enough together, it's fine. A little disorientating, sure, but not like, side-along apparition bad. Just keep your eyes closed and keep walking. Come on," he said, wrapping an arm around Harry's shoulders and marching him toward the fire. Harry looked back at Lyra with an expression that might have been desperation, or might have been some sort of silent accusation.
"Zabini Residence," Blaise said firmly, tossing a pinch of floo powder and dragging Harry with him into the flames.

Lyra gave them a few seconds to clear the landing space on the other side, then followed.

Zee had apparently been waiting for them, sitting in an armchair with a folder full of muggle papers that she'd left on the side-table at their entrance.

Blaise had gotten as far as, "...mother, Mirabella Zabini," in his introductions.

"Mira," she said, extending a hand which Harry grasped, looking slightly confused.

"You can call him Harry," Lyra said, as he just stood there, saying nothing at all. Really, how was it possible to be this bad at introductions? "Everyone does. I'm not entirely convinced he knows they shouldn't."

He startled slightly as she poked him in the ribs. "What should they call me, then?" he asked, before apparently realizing that he was still in the middle of being introduced. "Uh, nice to meet you, Mrs.—"

"Mira," she said firmly, patting his hand before letting it go.

"Er...right."

"People, acquaintances, should just call you Potter," Lyra explained, pulling her bookbag from her pocket and un-shrinking it. "Mister Potter if they're super formal like Snape."

Apparently no one cared about this. "Go change for supper," Zee suggested. "Blaise, you can give Harry any of the rooms in your corridor. And point out the muggle rooms while you're at it."

"Will you be changing for supper?" Blaise asked, raising an eyebrow at his mother's very short, very shiny lavender robe. It covered all the so-called "necessary bits", but was even more risqué than her muggle work clothes.

"If you'd written ahead to tell me you were bringing a guest, I would have already done so, dear," she said lightly, leading the way out of the room.

"I blame Lyra."

"I'm shocked, truly."

"Hey, I'm not always to blame!" Lyra called after them, trying her best to sound offended.

Neither Zabini justified her attempt with a response, and Harry only muttered, "I'm pretty sure you are..."

Harry wasn't really sure what he'd been expecting when Lyra had invited him home with her for the holidays. Maybe that they'd have a chance at some point to talk about Sirius Black, for starters, and possibly that seeing her house would reveal some insight into the mystery that surrounded her — where she'd come from and who her parents were, and so on. Maybe that he'd even manage to work up the nerve at some point to ask her why she'd kissed him, and whether they were...a thing now. He certainly hadn't expected her to drag him to Blaise Zabini's house without even telling his mum.

And if he'd had to imagine what Zabini's house would be like, he certainly wouldn't have imagined...this. Ignoring his mother even (as best he could, she had a way of being...incredibly,
uncomfortably *distracting*, even when she was wearing real clothes and not the skimpy robe she'd had on when they'd arrived), it was just... *completely* different from anywhere else he'd been in Magical Britain. Based on Hogwarts and Diagon Alley and the Burrow, he wouldn't have even guessed that anything like the Zabinis' house could even exist.

For one thing, there were whole rooms where no magic was allowed, rooms that looked every bit as lived in as any other room in the house — even the kitchen, it could have been transfigured straight out of one of Aunt Petunia's housekeeping magazines. Except it obviously wasn't. Everything was muggle-made, and it actually *worked* — the fridge, the espresso machine — they even had a *microwave*. There was a bloody *computer* in Mira's office, and a television bigger than the Dursleys' in the den.

And there were servants. (Which Harry was distinctly uncomfortable about — he'd never been waited on in his life, it was weird to think that there were people around just to cook for him and clean up his messes and do the shopping.) He probably *would* have guessed the Zabinis had money, should have expected some kind of "help", but if he'd thought of it at all, he probably would have guessed they'd have a house elf, like Dobby. But they didn't. All the servants were muggles. Muggles who apparently knew all about magic (was that even legal?) and had no problem with it. Harry had really only talked to the cook, and only for a few minutes before she left for the night, but she seemed happy and well-paid, treating Blaise and Lyra like her own kids. Maybe slightly spoilt kids, but not like they were really the boss of her. Even with Mira, they seemed like friends, almost.

(*Almost* because while Mary, the cook, did know about magic, she apparently *didn't* know that Mira was getting married, which was just ridiculous. Lyra said it was so no one would get too suspicious about the number of men who'd died soon after marrying Mira, and Blaise hadn't contradicted her. He... *thought* they were messing with him, just playing along with the serial killer rumors about Mira. Probably.)

Which, well, maybe that shouldn't be so surprising, but he supposed that, again, if he'd ever considered it, he might have expected something more like he imagined the Malfoys' house to be, with beaten down, oppressed house elves, and nothing muggle anywhere. Zabini — Blaise — had never been the same sort of obnoxious bully as Malfoy, but he hadn't ever really been friendly, either, even with the other Slytherins. Just... kind of cold and disinterested, lurking in the background and making sarcastic comments, sometimes, in Potions or flying lessons in first year. Like a younger Snape, maybe, but less greasy, and not out to get Harry. And he just wouldn't have expected someone like *that* to be nice to their "staff" (they didn't call themselves servants) and suggest they put on the new Indiana Jones movie after dinner.

He *knew* he wouldn't have expected the Zabinis to be so much more comfortable with muggle technology than the Weasleys — he'd never really noticed before, how silly and... *shallow*, Mr. Weasley's muggle obsession was. If having something like a computer in a wizarding house was possible... Well, maybe *that* was a matter of money. But even if Mr. Weasley couldn't afford a computer, Harry couldn't help but think that he should at least be able to learn how electricity worked. Not that they *needed* it, but he'd think, if Mr. Weasley really cared so much about muggle technology, he'd *want* it. And Mrs. Weasley *definitely* didn't talk about Hermione's parents with as much respect as Mira seemed to have for Mary. Which was *weird*, because Harry had definitely been under the impression that the Zabinis were a Dark family, like Malfoy and Nott, and he knew *their* fathers had been Death Eaters.

Everything was clean and posh and organized — pretty much what he imagined Aunt Petunia wished her house was — but without the unpleasant sense that heads would roll if a single blanket or coffee table book was moved out of place. Compared to the chaos of the Burrow it was almost
lonely — he couldn't imagine living here by himself, or with just one other person — but it was also probably both the most relaxing and...luxurious place he'd ever been, especially in Magical Britain.

There was magic, in the rooms where it was allowed — cushioning charms and light globes and charms to move the air around so it didn't get that stale, un-lived-in smell like the unused classrooms at Hogwarts, and probably a dozen other things Harry hadn't even noticed because it was all so...so understated. He hadn't had any idea that magic even could be this, well, quiet. Diagon Alley was so in-your-face with its advertising and lights and color and people, and everything about Hogwarts was just obviously magical — moving staircases and portraits everywhere — and both of those were amazing in their own way, but this was more...peaceful, he supposed, was the word he was looking for.

Like, okay, there was a magical painting in the room Blaise had offered him. But it wasn't a portrait like at Hogwarts. It was a still-life. Fruit and flowers arranged on a table according to some principles he just kind of assumed must exist — he didn't know what they might be. Just looking at it for a second, it looked like any other stereotypical painting of a basket of fruit or whatever. But if you watched it, the petals of the flowers fluttered in some invisible breeze, and shadows shifted from one side of the table to the other, the light and colors changing almost imperceptibly, so if you looked at it an hour later, everything was more gold-edged and orangey and shadowed than it had been before, like maybe it was sunset instead of midday, and it hardly looked like the same painting at all.

It was still magic, but so different from anything Harry had seen before that it almost seemed like it belonged to an entirely different world than the rest of Magical Britain. And the whole house was like that.

The other thing, the one that stood out the most, really, was that Mira seemed to care almost as little about the whole Boy Who Lived thing as Lyra. She'd said something about it when Lyra was asking if she could bring someone in to measure him for robes for the wedding instead of dragging him out shopping, but just in the way that, oh, yes, it might be for the best not to cause a scene by dragging him out to the Alley. Which, come to think of it, Zabini, Blaise — it was hard to remember to think of him as "Blaise" — hadn't either. And they, unlike Lyra, definitely weren't entirely insane and completely out of touch with anything considered important by the majority of Magical Britain, which had him wondering, now, if everyone else he'd ever met had just been incredibly rude. Granted, he hadn't spoken to Blaise until this year, so Blaise had definitely already known who he was, had had time to get used to the idea, but still.

Lyra had told him last night that they would be celebrating Yule today. Like so many other things Lyra decided to do, she hadn't really given him much choice in the matter. Not like he would have said no, any more than when she just assumed he'd sneak out to Hogsmeade or go to Mira's wedding with her, but he still really had no idea what the holiday was supposed to be about. He'd read the book she'd given him, before Hermione had borrowed it, but it hadn't been very specific about the holidays, just talked about what the Powers were in general. Which was really confusing. Kind of like gods but not? It didn't help that the book sounded like it had been written by Shakespeare. It didn't rhyme, but wherefore and forsooth wouldn't have seemed out of place. And neither Lyra nor Blaise had given him any real instruction as to what he was supposed to do. Blaise didn't really do the whole religion thing (his words), and Lyra had just told them to spend the day reflecting on the past year and what the Solitary and Infernal Powers meant to them (which was basically nothing) and the part they played in their lives (could be anything), and then meet her around sunset...somewhere.

Which, well, the sun had very nearly set, and Harry hadn't seen anyone since Mira had left for
work in the morning. He'd been wandering around, poking his head into parlors and bedrooms for at least half an hour — the house was peaceful and having both muggle and magical rooms was awesome, but it really was unreasonably large for a family of two — and he was starting to get a bit annoyed.

"Harry?"

That sounded like...Hermione? He turned to see her stepping out of the room with the Floo. "Hermione?"

"Well spotted," Blaise said, following her out into the corridor. "I presume Lyra didn't tell either of you what's going on?"

"If she didn't tell you, what makes you think she'd tell us?" Hermione asked.

Blaise smirked. "She did tell me."

She pouted at him. Harry tried to recall whether he'd ever seen Hermione pout before. It was a very Lyra expression. "She told Narcissa Malfoy she was going to do her own ritual when we were in the Hospital Wing last month, and as we were leaving school, she told me I should come over if I wanted to see. Harry, you didn't tell me how horrible the Knight Bus is," she added with a shudder.

It had been pretty awful, but, "Hey, I was just glad to be out of Privet Drive. Er. So if you took the bus, why the floo?"

"Because Lyra didn't give me a bloody address, just the Floo directory, so I had to go to the Leaky Cauldron first, then floo here. I'm still kind of surprised my parents let me come."

"I wrote them," Lyra said out of nowhere, suddenly skipping down the corridor toward them. "Great opportunity to experience a traditional aspect of magical culture, very educational and so on." She paused to consider for a moment. "It probably helped that your mum recognized Mira's name. She said she called her office to confirm that I wasn't just making things up. If your mum asks, Mira was here all night, and not off at the Festa Morgana having fun without us."

Hermione looked slightly outraged at this, but Lyra just shrugged. "Everything's ready, you can come in, now."

"Please tell me you did something that will forever excuse me from having Justin over to duel," Blaise said, leading the way back down the corridor and into a large, open room.

The room, presumably for dueling, was very plain. The floor was tiled with some lightly textured, grey stone, and the walls were simple wooden panels. It was mostly empty — aside from a small table and a handful of armchairs, which looked like Lyra had stolen from other rooms (none of them matched) — the only furniture was a record player and a small shelf of records in one corner. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he entered, the air somehow...tingly. Like static, sort of. But not.

"Just chalk? You disappoint me, Black."

Harry looked around. While he'd been standing in the doorway like an idiot, trying to figure out why the air was suddenly so weird, the rest of them had wandered over to the other side of the room, and were standing around something Lyra had apparently drawn on the floor. As he drew closer, he saw it was a circle, more or less, its edges defined by chalk runes and Greek letters. There was a large, reddish clay bowl in the middle, with a small snake curled up in it (Harry
thought it was asleep). Off to one side, there were three squat, unlit candles; a bottle of dark, swirling something; a potions knife; and a set of panpipes.

Lyra, barefoot in the loose trousers and tunic she always seemed to wear on the weekends, sank smoothly to the floor beside these, outside the circle, facing the bowl. "If lies make you happy. Have a seat, everyone. Around the circle," she specified, pointing to a spot as Hermione made to sit beside her. She moved with a small, annoyed huff.

Harry wondered, not for the first time, why she'd been so obviously irritated with Lyra for the past few weeks. They were still talking, but— He didn't know, Hermione seemed somehow short-tempered lately. Lyra had been inexplicably busy (well, not so inexplicably, she'd been in detention a lot), so he hadn't seen them together much, but whenever he did, she was snapping at Lyra almost as much as she did at Ron. Well, as much as she would have done last year. This year she'd hardly spoken to him at all. Harry was starting to think they were never going to make up. Not just in a tired of waiting for something you know is going to happen eventually sort of way, but in a very serious, what did they actually ever have in common in the first place sort of way.

He shook his head, trying to ignore the guilty thought that he still hadn't told Ron or Hermione about running into Sirius Black on the way back from Hogsmeade. He wanted to talk to Lyra about it first, find out where he was, if she'd talked to him yet, and what he'd said, but they literally hadn't had a single minute alone in the past three days. "So, uh... What are we doing?" he asked, trying to distract himself.

Lyra hummed to herself for a moment, obviously considering exactly what to say before she spoke. "Right. So, today is Yule, winter solstice, the longest night. It's the point in the year when the Dark Powers are at their greatest strength. You all know that much at least, right?" The other three nodded, Blaise looking as bored as ever and Hermione leaning forward eagerly. "Okay. On Yule, there are two Dark Powers that are specifically celebrated, in addition to more general rituals recognizing the Dark as a whole. Those are the Solitary Power, and the Infernal Power. The Solitary Power governs independence, self-reliance, selfishness, that sort of thing."

Harry wished she'd told him that earlier, he probably could have spent all day thinking about how having to be self-reliant had shaped his life, if he'd actually known what he was supposed to be doing.

"The Infernal Power governs, well, all sorts of things, really. Anything that's entirely outside human perception and understanding. Other dimensions, alternate universes, the idea of magic itself. The impossible, basically. It's probably the Power that comes closest to the heart of capital-M Magic, and due to its nature, is the most difficult for most people to really comprehend. The light Intangible Power governs the past and future, emotion, basically things that are within human perception, but...not physical. It's also honored today, but, well, I'm not a light witch." Somehow, Harry didn't think anyone who had ever met Lyra would be surprised to hear that. She shrugged lightly. "So I'm going to pay my respects to the Dark, and then we're going to invoke an aspect of the Infernal Power."

"Which aspect?" Hermione asked immediately.

Lyra grinned. "Hermes, in his role as a transgresser of boundaries and guide between the planes of reality."

"Did you tell my parents you were going to drag me off to another plane of reality on this very educational opportunity to witness traditional magical culture?" Hermione asked, looking rather doubtful about the whole idea of it, though Harry thought it sounded kind of fascinating. Blaise (of course) was as hard to read as ever.
Lyra laughed. "Don't worry, we're not going anywhere."

Then she scooted slightly further from the circle and pulled a small bag from her pocket. "Powdered onyx and hematite," she explained before Hermione could ask what it was. "Now, don't distract me." She poured the black powder out of the bag in a spiralling sort of eight-sided design. The lines were far too neat and perfect to be natural, but Harry didn't know if that was an effect of the ritual, or some kind of wandless magic on Lyra's part.

She placed the three candles around the design and lit them with what was definitely wandless magic, murmuring something in a language he didn't recognize as she did so. The candles themselves all looked identical, but the fires were different. One burned an electric blue that reminded him of the cold candles at Nick's Death-Day Party. One was green, but not the same green as the Floo — it was brighter than that, somehow, and it made him want to reach out and touch it. (That was probably a very bad idea.) The last one... The wick blackened, and the wax began to melt. If he looked very carefully, there was a sort of shimmer in the air, like a heat-haze over asphalt in the summer. But there didn't seem to be an actual flame, which was just disconcerting.

It wasn't nearly as weird, though, as what happened when she uncorked the bottle and upended it over the design, between the candles. The liquid that had been inside, Harry didn't know what it was, pooled in midair, forming a perfect sphere of darkness that hovered about a foot above the floor, drinking in the light like a hole in the very fabric of the universe.

And then Lyra began to speak. "Dark Powers, hear me. I call out to you at this, the precipice of your greatest strength, to pay my respects on behalf of myself and my family, and to beg your indulgence and support in the year to come." Which was an odd thing to say, Harry thought, because she didn't really sound like she was begging, or even much more solemn than usual. She could have been answering a question in class. "I make this offering of myself to the ones who dwell in the space between the stars..."

He hadn't noticed her pick up the knife, but it was suddenly in her hand, cutting some pattern into her left palm. Harry looked up to see whether the others thought this was as disturbing as he did. Hermione looked like she was literally biting her tongue to keep from interrupting. Blaise seemed interested, but not surprised, though, so Harry assumed this was the sort of thing that was expected in Dark Magic rituals — or else just normal Lyra insanity.

Blood began to pool in the hollow of her hand, and she lifted it over the sphere, letting it trickle into the... Was it actually some sort of hole in the universe? Bright red drops seemed to fall into it, and keep falling, their color glinting in its depths, growing smaller and smaller, as though fading into the distance, until they finally disappeared entirely.

"For Chaos," she said, her voice so quiet Harry could hardly hear her, only a few feet away. "For Reality... For Domination... For Wisdom..." For each Power she named, another spot of red fell and disappeared into the darkness. "For Change... For Independence... For Mystery... For Death." She paused, letting the last one fade away.

"Powers of Darkness, accept this sacrifice, symbol of my devotion. Before my ancestors, my Patron and the stars, I reaffirm my allegiance to You and to the Dark. On behalf of the Eternal House, this I swear: while we may falter, we shall not fall. Covenant or no Covenant, the House of Black continues to serve the Dark." And then she abandoned what were clearly set ritual phrases, along with all pretense of formality, giving the ball of darkness, or hole in the universe, or whatever it was, a wry grin. "And if Sirius has a problem with that, he can fucking bite me."

Well...he was a dog. He just might...
Harry stifled a slightly hysterical snort of laughter as best he could, but Lyra definitely heard it anyway. She turned toward him slightly, mischief dancing in her eyes for a brief moment before turning back to her ritual.

"Dark Powers, recognize my offering and confer upon me your blessing as we enter into the waning half of the cycle, that I might improve myself and better serve Your will as we mortals play out the Grand Design."

And then she reached out with the same hand she'd cut earlier — most of the blood had vanished at some point (or maybe there had never been as much as he thought?), leaving only the shape of an unfamiliar rune carved in vivid red lines. Harry wasn't really sure what he was seeing, then. It looked, almost, like the dark spot was a hole, her hand extending into it, but like a solid, living thing it seemed to writhe, shrinking and disappearing — no, he realized, recoiling slightly from the sight, it wasn't disappearing, it was somehow being drawn into Lyra's hand.

Hermione seemed to realize this at the same moment he did, reaching out as though to do something, to stop it, somehow, but Blaise grabbed her shoulder, holding her back. When she started to say something, he shushed her with an absolutely forbidding glare. Harry agreed — who knew what would happen if they interrupted...whatever this was?

Lyra closed her eyes and let out a long, pained-sounding hiss as the darkness spread through her veins — he could see it, her skin pale and translucent, liquid black nothingness creeping beneath it up her arm until it vanished into her sleeve. The last of it disappeared into her palm, the cut there healing smoothly, as though it had never been, trapping the darkness inside of her.

They waited almost another minute, Harry holding his breath and Hermione biting her lip as they watched the black lines on her arm fade away. Even Blaise looked slightly concerned.

He didn't stop Hermione when she tried to speak again. "Should we..." she whispered, a hand twitching toward Lyra's shoulder.

No, I don't think you should, Harry started to say, though he hardly managed to get the first two words out before Lyra's eyes snapped open, entirely, inhumanly black, the same flat absence of color that she had allowed — invited — into herself. She looked around at them, meeting each of their eyes in turn. Hermione squeaked, leaning away. Blaise raised an eyebrow at her. Harry felt himself freeze, ice forming in his veins — not exactly like running into a dementor, but bloody well close enough. He was sure he was going to have nightmares about an eyeless Lyra hunting him down, to what end he didn't know.

She cocked her head to one side slightly, as though asking a question, or perhaps listening to an answer, and blinked. When she opened her eyes again, the terrifying blackness was gone.

She shook her head slightly as though to clear it and grinned. "Well that's interesting." She laughed slightly, blowing out the candles and collecting the powder back into its bag with a swirl and a wave of her wand.

"Dare I ask what's interesting?" Blaise asked.

She smirked at him. "I don't know, do you?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. (Harry sometimes thought that Slytherins could hold an entire conversation in smirks and raised eyebrows.)

"Just...news from home, you could say," she said, evasively, Harry thought, though Blaise's eyes
widened in understanding and he nodded slightly.

"What was that — that stuff?" Hermione asked, though Harry thought the better question was, "Where's home?"

Lyra shrugged. "Home is everywhere and nowhere. And that stuff was a tricky little bit of alchemy — essence of shadows, darkness distilled."

Hermione just stared at her, mouth gaping slightly — presumably that actually meant something to her. All it meant to Harry was that he had to ask, "Are you sure you're human?" again.

She grinned at him, tilted her head slightly to the side, just as she had before the darkness vanished from her eyes. "More or less. Maybe more and less, tonight."

And then she hopped to her feet, carefully stepped into the circle to tap the edge of the bowl with her wand, removing some spell, Harry thought, as the snake immediately uncoiled, giving a sleepy, confused sort of hiss. She returned to her spot and picked up the panpipes just as it poked its head over the rim of the bowl, asking the question on everyone else's mind: "What's going on?"

"No bloody clue," Harry hissed back, over the jaunty, playful tune Lyra had begun. It echoed strangely, one line not quite fading away before she began the next, almost like a duet with herself.

After a few seconds, the air grew tingly again. Harry felt something like a breeze — though it wasn't really a breeze — swirl around him before focusing on the snake at the center of the circle. Lyra stopped playing. Looked around. Grinned. "Her-mes," she called in a childish, sing-song voice. "Come play with me!"

Harry blinked, and in that instant, a teenager, no more than a couple years older than they were, appeared before them, the snake coiled around his neck. He looked like he could be some cousin of Mira's, with his dark hair and olive skin tone, and apparently he found Lyra absolutely hilarious.

After a few seconds he stopped laughing, though there was still a good deal of amusement in his voice as he pulled her to her feet and kissed her forehead. "Little sister, that was the worst invocation I've ever heard."

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?"

"Only because it's you."

"Well, yeah, but I am me, and the pomp and circumstance have always seemed a bit silly, especially when I'm just inviting someone over to chat. Here, this is Harry, Blaise, and Hermione," she said, tugging the...god? (He didn't really look very godlike, or sound like one, honestly.) ...out of the circle and pointing to each of the others in turn. "Guys, this is Hermes, god of thresholds and thieves, music, medicine, messages, trade, luck, uh...borders, boundaries, breaking boundaries... Basically the Jack of All Trades of the Greek pantheon. I've invited him to hang out with us for a while this evening, because, well, why not?"

"Lord Hermes," Blaise said, recovering from his shock at least enough to nod politely in greeting (which was certainly more than Harry felt up to at the moment — Hermione was still gaping as well) before his eyes shifted back to Lyra. "You are absurd, you know that, right? Ridiculous and absolutely insane. And you really can't keep inviting people over without telling me first!"

"Psh, you love me."

He gave a long-suffering groan as he pulled himself to his feet and bowed deeply. "Please, Lord
Hermes, be welcome in my home," he said, suddenly sounding very proper. "I most humbly beg your forgiveness for the lack of refreshment. Someone neglected to mention the possibility of your manifestation this evening. If you'd care to wait...?"

The...god...chuckled. "No need. Consider the offer of hospitality made and accepted. And if I expected any formality at all, I wouldn't have responded to that one."

He pointed at Lyra, who stuck out her tongue at him, which just—if there was really a god standing there in front of them, Harry had no bloody clue how even Lyra could get away with that. And yet she did. Of course she did. The fleeting, ridiculous thought occurred to him that maybe, if gods looked as normal as that, Lyra was secretly one of them. That could explain everything, he thought, rather giddily. And Hermes did call her sister.

Blaise (perhaps not noticing Lyra...being Lyra, or perhaps already accustomed to the idea that she could get away with things like sticking her tongue out at a bloody god) gave a slight sigh of relief, tension seeping from his posture as he gestured toward the small collection of chairs she had accumulated. "Shall we sit, then?"

They did. Lyra made a detour to put on a Led Zeppelin album — Harry didn't know which one — and immediately struck up a conversation about the music with Blaise and the visiting god, the three of them relaxing into the situation with every appearance of ease, laughing and joking and making sarcastic quips as though Hermes was just...anyone, and they were killing time between classes. Hermione, at least, seemed to be at least as thrown by this whole thing as Harry was, though, which was somewhat...reassuring? Not that it was a good thing that she was uncomfortable with it, too, just. This had to be the most surreal thing that had happened to him since he'd found out magic existed.

Just, sitting around and listening to Lyra trying to wheedle information about whatever "interesting" thing she'd seen "at home" out of the god without actually giving anything away (and Hermione trying to wheedle information about 'home' from her) and Blaise making witty asides and trading innuendos with both Lyra and Hermes, muggle rock music blaring in the background, quietly wondering what the point of the (now silent) snake was, or when he was going to have a chance to ask Lyra about his escaped convict godfather (who he was almost certain she was now hiding from the Ministry), or Hermione if she had any idea what the fuck was going on... It was all just completely mad...

But then, what else was new? Everything Lyra touched went completely mad. Clearly she was secretly the god of absurdity, he decided (though he also resolved never to tell anyone how reasonable that little flight of fancy actually sounded). The only thing he—or anyone else—could really be expected to do, he thought, was hold on to what remained of their sanity for dear life and enjoy the ride.

Lyra Black was terrifying.

Theo had known as soon as he met her that she wasn't muggleborn, before she'd even started talking. The way she held herself, even when she was standing perfectly still, perfectly balanced, alert and poised to draw her wand at the slightest provocation spoke volumes. And her magic was dark. Really dark. Never used light magic in her life dark, which seemed rather improbable for a muggleborn or muggle-raised...whatever. (And it was possible he was imagining it, but he thought there was something even darker than usual about her today.)

He'd known she hadn't been raised by a cursebreaker, either. She obviously did know quite a bit about magical theory and wardcrafting, and she could certainly fight like she'd been trained by a
bloody mercenary, but there was a sense of... *entitlement*, he supposed was the word, that *only* came from knowing your place in the world was inherently superior to that of everyone around you by right. Blaise was the *only* non-noble Theo had ever met who came even *close* to pulling it off, and even *he* didn't do it unconsciously. Lyra *did*.

He'd never really considered any explanation for her existence other than that she was born and raised in one of the noble houses.

Before their duel, she had only been slightly mysterious. After, he had known she was terrifying. For several long seconds, just before she'd stunned him, he'd legitimately thought she was going to kill him, and that was after she completely shrugged off his nightmare curse and pulled down his most effective shield charm with a fucking *wandless* dispel. She was ridiculously powerful — like, adult-level powerful — and fucking *relentless*, and he was fairly certain she'd been *holding back*. Not as much as with Justin or Malfoy, obviously, but he knew when he was outmatched. She had slipped up a few times, using curses that were illegal, so he would bet *anything* that she knew *much* more dangerous spells, but really had been limiting herself to things she could heal.

Which meant, not only had she been raised in one of the noble houses, but it had been one of the ones with an attitude toward child-rearing that hadn't been popular since his father's generation. The sort that began training their children at the age of three in everything from basic charms and magic sensing to self defense and occlumency to social graces and history — expected them to more or less be able to take care of themselves by the time they were moved out of the nursery, and act like proper little lords and ladies representing their House by the time they went off to school. House Black would definitely fit the description, assuming there were any Blacks left.

Nothing he'd seen in the past few months had done anything to change that initial impression. She knew far too much about *everything*, from languages to magical theory to practical wardcrafting to battlefield healing to navigating the gods-b demeaned Castle — including, apparently, how to get into the fucking common room without the password — seriously, what the fuck?! It was unreasonable — maybe even impossible — even for someone who *had* been trained from a stupidly young age.

And that wasn't even considering the fact that she was just... well, kind of fucked in the head, to put it bluntly. She made Blaise look normal, and Theo was pretty sure Blaise had helped kill his last two step-fathers. If Lilian Moon was to be believed, Lyra was immune to pain and utterly fearless, facing down an enraged hippogriff with her arm half torn off, without so much as screaming. Apparently boggarts couldn't even tell she *existed*, and then there was the whole dementor thing.

At first he'd thought the rumor going around about her talking to the bloody things on the train was just that — a rumor, details twisted and blown out of proportion, playing along when he and Blaise asked her about it for a laugh. But after the quidditch match, well... She'd been sitting with the Gryffindors, so he hadn't seen it, but according to Justin (who got it from Dean Thomas), she hadn't been bothered by them at all, just stood there shouting at them and throwing curses and cackling like a bloody crazy person. Which Theo *might* have thought was just exaggeration, but she'd skipped over to the Slytherin table at dinner as peppy and intensely *Lyra* as ever, complaining about how the dementors had made her housemates all boring and mopey and making fun of Blaise for being affected by them and consequently even more touchy-feely than usual.

Granted, ignoring fear and pain and the effects of creatures like boggarts and dementors was perfectly possible if you were a fucking *master* occlumens, but Theo was *pretty sure* even Snape couldn't just ignore a hundred bloody dementors swarming around at once. Besides, anyone *that* good at mind arts would have to have some degree of self-control, and Lyra just *didn't*. 
She had no concept of subtlety (or even any ability to keep track of what lies she'd told to whom) and honestly seemed to enjoy enraging everyone around her — Theo was fairly certain she'd had more detentions already than anyone else in their year, and she'd only been here for one term!

And now she was standing in his father's study.

This was a terrible idea. It had been insane for Theo to agree to it, and it was probably going to get him killed. Cadmus Nott was not precisely a paragon of self-control at the best of times, and if there was one thing Lyra was good at, it was poking at the people around her until they lost all sense of reason entirely.

(If it hadn't been for what had happened last night, he probably would have lost his nerve and called the whole thing off, sent her right back through the floo this morning and resigned himself to never bringing any of the Black books home.)

In fact, Theo was a little amazed that they'd gotten this far — he'd half-expected they wouldn't get through introductions without her offending Father so severely that he kicked her out and gave Theo an impromptu 'dueling lesson' to work off his rage. But she'd been standing there politely for at least five minutes now, listening to him blather with a degree of impassive composure that made Theo wonder whether the girl in front of him wasn't actually Daphne in disguise.

Well, it would have if she hadn't been facing the old bastard down with a smirk that said (regardless of the fact that she was actually wearing proper formal robes and hadn't done or said anything so far that wasn't perfectly acceptable behavior for a young lady of her social standing) it was only a matter of time until she tired of listening to him ranting on at her about mudbloods and "the downfall of Wizarding Britain as we know it" and dropped the act.

It was bloody nerve-wracking, just waiting for the facade to snap.

"...don't even celebrate the Old Holidays — thrice-bedamned Christmas, pardon my language, but — You, girl, did you celebrate Yule? Or have you been corrupted by those Light fools and Progressives up at the School?"

Theo only barely managed not to laugh at that, because after last night, he was almost certain that at least part of the weirdness that was Lyra Black (most of the more impossible parts, really) could be explained by the fact that she followed the Powers more closely than perhaps anyone else he had ever met.

Becoming a Black Mage wasn't exactly considered a valid career path in this day and age. It was more the sort of thing little kids declared they were going to be when they grew up, but later grew out of as they became more enmeshed in the mundane world, with responsibilities and relationships tying them down. Theo, however, had always had a fascination with esoteric magic and the idea of going beyond what everyone thought (or knew) was possible — not for personal gain, just because...because he couldn't imagine what else his purpose in life might be, other than to do magic — to become magic, or an extension of it, at least. To lose himself in it, surpassing mortal limitations — to be overtaken by Magic, a tool and a medium for it to express itself.

He loved Magic.

And he really didn't think he was going to grow out of it.

So last night, he had invoked the Infernal Power, asking it to guide him in his quest to more fully understand Magic and the nature of the Unknowable. He had reached out to it, asking for help, asking it to show him a way to become closer to it, to help him seek it out.
And it had responded, sent him a vision of...well, of Lyra Black (and Blaise, Granger, and Potter, but clearly Lyra was the only of them who knew what they were doing), invoking Hermes and then just...sitting around and talking about music and alternate universes and the nature of time, like casually inviting a god over to hang out was a thing people did.

But it wasn't their (entirely insane) conversation that had captured Theo's attention. It was the invocation itself and the way the Aspect responded, showing up despite the childish, arrogant simplicity of the thing, just...teasing. And familiar, as though they were old friends who just happened to have run into each other. It had called her little sister, which he was pretty sure meant she was already a Black Mage, or well along the path to becoming one, but the way she acted about the whole thing, like it was any other day, suggested she was long since accustomed to walking with gods.

Which neatly explained why she was so unnaturally powerful and immune to the effects of Dark creatures — and meant that there was no way in any of the seven hells that he was going to let the opportunity to get closer to her slip by, even if that meant running the risk that she might mortally offend his father and inadvertently get the shit beat out of him, and possibly (eventually) following her into complete insanity. (People did seem to find Black Mages a bit mad, in general, but he'd long since decided that was a price he would be willing to pay.)

Her smirk grew broader, as though she'd somehow heard that last thought, though when she spoke, it was clear she was addressing Father's question about the holiday. "The House of Black serves the Dark, as ever."

"Good girl, keeping the Old Ways alive — have to preserve our culture, or what else are we? No better than mudbloods!"

Let's go! Theo mouthed at her from his place beside his father, strategically out of his line of sight. She saw him. He knew she did. But it seemed she was constitutionally incapable of quitting while they were ahead.

"Oh, I don't know," she said lightly, pasting a cool society smile on her face and completely ignoring the frantic no, stop hand signals Theo was giving her. "I suspect actions mean far more to the Powers than one's pedigree. The mudblood who sat beside me to invoke Mystery last night, for example, has done more to honor Them and advance Their cause than any wizard who wastes his time attempting to limit the influence of those who matter less than nothing."

Gods fucking damn it! Now they were going to be here for fucking ever.

They'd just come through the floo, and Theo was still staring at Lyra as though she'd done something incredibly suspicious, which was just ironic, because politely discussing politics with Lord Nott was probably the most conventional thing she had done since she'd arrived in this timeline. Well, she had been polite, at least. Nott had rather lost his temper for a few minutes, there.

"Did you just pick a fight with my father, and lose on purpose?"

Cadmus Nott had been in Bella's year in Slytherin. She recalled him as a loud, pushy, self-important child, who had been relatively easily cowed when he chose to challenge Zee's supremacy over their class. He had grown into a disgusting man, resentment and thwarted entitlement evident in his every expression and gesture. It was even more obvious in the way Theo, normally quiet and observant, but confident enough to pull off a constant sardonic smirk, flinched every time Cadmus turned to look at him, suddenly nervous and far more timid than she'd ever seen him.
Quite frankly, he had reminded her of Cygnus almost immediately.

It would have been so easy to just give the former Death Eater a little nudge, just make a suggestion — he’d crack, do something irredeemably stupid, she could see it. She didn't know what, exactly, but the potential was definitely there, and she'd been doing this long enough now to know that it almost certainly would not end well for him... and by all the gods, she'd wanted to.

So tempting...

But that would almost certainly have resulted in his refusing to let Theo come with her. Which would mean no books for Theo, which would mean no training for Gin, which would mean no light magic badass for Lyra to use in the eventual confrontation with Not-Professor Riddle. So she had refrained from antagonizing the stupid fuck any more than necessary. (Blaise was full of shite — she was totally capable of considering the consequences of her actions, assuming she had a reason to care.)

Of course, some antagonization had been necessary. Since there was no way she could possibly convince Cadmus that she would be a good influence on Theo (which was what Zee had done to convince Cygnus to let Bella spend time with her), she’d had to make him think that he could be a good influence on her instead. And by "good" she meant "batshit crazy", because Lyra agreed with Narcissa's very reasonable political position — that the Dark would make a lot more headway if they stopped trying to persecute muggleborns, and instead began trying to sway muggleborns to their side and teach them to be proper witches and wizards — and Cadmus Nott was the most vehemently opposed of any member of the Allied Dark. If he could convince Narcissa's own ward to join the opposition when she came of age and assumed her own seat in the Wizengamot, it would be a major coup for his arm of the bloc. (Not that Lyra necessarily thought Cadmus would still have any influence to speak of in three years, but he was almost certainly acting under the assumption that he would.)

"Well, no. I picked a fight with him and I won. See, now he's never going to have a problem with you hanging out with me, because the more time I spend with you, the more opportunities you have to try to drag me over there so he can delude himself into thinking he's convincing me that Narcissa's filled my head with rubbish ideas."

And it had been easy.

The strategy was one Zee had outlined in the wake of her first meeting with Cygnus, when Bella had asked what she would have done if Cygnus had thought she would be a bad influence on Bella. (Purely hypothetical — there was no universe in which Cygnus would actually consider Zee's behavior worse than Bella's in any way, at least when they were twelve.) And Auntie Walburga always said it was easiest to encourage people to see what they already wanted to see.

Theo raised an eyebrow at her. "You're more subtle than people give you credit for, aren't you?"

Lyra smirked. "No, not really. Your father's just a bloody moron." That actually startled a laugh out of the boy. "So, I figure you can start with the library here," she said, opening the door and casting a handful of light-globes into the room. "And I'll get Cherri to start bringing in all the books from the other properties. They won't be organized, probably won't all even fit in here, but there's plenty of bedrooms no one's using. You're keyed into the wards so you can come over whenever, just, you know, make sure you don't get cursed by anything when you're here alone."

"Um, sure. Sounds good. More than good, actually..." Theo had stopped staring at Lyra, and was now staring at the Library.
It was one of the largest rooms in the house, excluding the ballroom, of course. Dark, heavy wooden shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, even over the door, and about half of the floorspace was given over to free-standing display cabinets. Most of these held more books and scrolls, the ones that were considered too advanced or dangerously cursed for even children of the House of Black to read unsupervised, though one had yet to be filled, its empty shelf space taken up by enchanted curios instead. The other side of the room was dominated by a massive baroque desk, a quartet of armchairs, and a sofa. Lyra suspected it had been used as a sort of lecture theater, back when the children of the House had all been educated together rather than by their individual families, if only because she was certain there had never been enough people in here at once to warrant that much furniture as long as she'd been alive.

"The things in the cabinets are more dangerous than the things on the open shelves — cursed or poisoned — but they're not locked or warded or anything. Some of the books on the shelves are cursed, too, but they won't kill you. Uh, there's a loo down the corridor to the left if you need it..." She paused, trying to think of anything else he might need to know.

"Wait, you're leaving me here alone?"

"They're just books, I think you can handle it."

"No, I mean, Father would never allow a guest to wander around the house unsupervised. Aren't you worried I'll take something, or go poking around the rest of the house?"

Lyra shrugged. "Everything's spelled so the wards won't let you take them out of the room without the proper pass-key charm. I don't think you'd be able to crack it, at least not without alerting me, so no, not really. Same thing for anything actually valuable and the house wards. And I really don't care if you poke around, the whole house has been shut up for decades, though, so there's nothing much to see."

Not that she thought he would. Theo was almost as big a nerd as Hermione when it came to books, and a much bigger one about dark magic, and esoteric magic in general. She'd be very surprised if he decided to waste potential research time wandering around an abandoned mansion.

"And in any case, I have other things to do today than babysit you, so I suppose it's a chance I'll just have to take."

Theo looked seriously nonplussed by that one. "Like what?"

Like throwing a battery of healer's evaluation charms at Sirius, and questioning him about what the fuck he thought he was doing, escaping from Azkaban before she could break him out. Speaking of which, there was a non-negligible chance that either Theo or Sirius might stumble across the other if they were both left here unsupervised.

Was that a problem? Theo could always stun Sirius if he was making a nuisance of himself, and the very idea that he would turn him in to the Aurors was laughable. For one thing, that would immediately sabotage their whole book-lending arrangement, but more importantly, Theo had absolutely no respect for the rule of law in Magical Britain whatsoever. She gathered from a few comments he'd made over the course of the term (and a few things Blaise had told her) that he thought their failure to imprison his father — accepting his Imperius Defense and a large bribe in place of actual evidence — was all the proof he needed that the Ministry and the Aurors were, as a whole, completely useless.

Not to mention, she'd already explained to all of Blaise's clique that Sirius had never had a trial, and Theo was a normal person, which meant he thought the idea that anyone would be locked up with
dementors without a trial was a heinous crime against humanity.

It probably wouldn't hurt to give him a head's up, though. "I need to talk to Sirius."

"Sirius? As in escaped convict Sirius Black?"

"Uh, yeah. There's only the one left, you know. I caught him last week, he's around here somewhere." She gave him a knowing smirk. "I trust you won't be calling the Aurors on me."

Theo stared at her for a few seconds, then shook his head slightly. Smirked back. "No, I won't. Can't say I ever really gave a damn about the whole thing."

"Good, keep it to yourself. Now that's settled... Cherri!"

The elf appeared with a pop, bowing so low its nose almost touched the floor. "Mistress is calling Cherri?"

Oh, no, not this again! What...oh. Theo. Right. "Stop. Until and unless you learn proper English, I don't want to hear it. When you're in my presence, you will only speak Elvish. Consider that a standing order, even if there are other humans around. I really don't give a fuck if they can't understand you, you only take my orders anyway."

Cherri nodded frantically. "Yes, mistress! How can I be of service?"

"You are still keyed into the wards on all the Black properties, right?"

"I believe so. The magics of the House of Black are broken apart, but each one should still recognize your blood and magic, and as your bonded elf, they should therefore recognize me as well."

Huh. Well, that more or less made sense. She had assumed that the elf would still be keyed in herself, but her reading as a sort of extension of Lyra's will and magic worked equally well. She'd have to look into exactly how that worked later. "Good. I need you to go to each of the other properties and bring all of the books here, to Ancient House. Put them in the bedrooms nearest to the library. Bring shelves from the other properties too, if you need them. Don't worry about organizing them as a single collection, just keep whatever order they're already in. And there's no rush, just get it done by... There's a school holiday in March, right?" she asked Theo.

He just stood there, staring at her (as though he ever did anything else, this was Theo) for several seconds before saying, "You speak House Elf?"

In point of fact, she preferred not to actually speak House Elvish — humans could make all of the necessary sounds, but they were even more of a strain on the throat than Gobbledygook. She certainly understood it well enough, though. It was her first language, though she preferred not to admit it. "Obviously. When is spring break?"

"I think it's the first week of April, this year, just... Who speaks House Elf?"

"You mean, besides me? No idea, really." Presumably there were some other children who had been raised almost exclusively by their house elves, and probably a few omniglots? Not important.

"How long has it been since someone's told you you're fucking weird?"

"A couple hours." By Harry, over breakfast, for preferring coffee to tea. "Why?"
"You're fucking weird."

Lyra rolled her eyes at him. "Old news. Cherri, get it done before the last week of March. If you have any trouble, come to me and let me know."

"Yes mistress, consider it done!"

She gave the elf a nod of acknowledgment. "Sorry, Theo, you'll have to make due with just the main library for now."

"I'm sure I'll suffer through." Was that actually a genuine smile on his face? Lyra wasn't sure if she'd ever seen him really smile before.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, mistress?"

"No, that's it. Oh! Wait! Before you go, where is Sirius? I need to talk to him..."

The elf looked slightly offended. "I brought him to the nursery, as you instructed, mistress."

Oh. Oh, that was too good! Just— She started laughing, couldn't help it. "Perfect. You may go."

The elf disappeared with a pop.

"Do I even want to know what's so funny?"

"I told Cherri to take care of Sirius and make sure he didn't leave the house, you know, basically just treat him like a small child. And she apparently decided that meant the appropriate place to keep him is in the nursery," Lyra explained, still sniggering. "So, are we good?"

"Well, I was going to ask you what you did for Yule, but yes, I'll be fine, go deal with your demented Head of House."

She couldn't help the smirk that stole across her face, thinking of the ritual the previous night. She really did need to see to Sirius, but then again, he had waited this long — another half hour or so hardly made a difference, so far as she could see. And Theo was quite possibly the only person she knew who was the right kind of magic theory nerd to appreciate her little Yule ritual. Blaise certainly hadn't, and Harry and Hermione had even less understanding of ritual magic than he did. She hadn't even bothered trying to explain it to them.

"He can wait," she said, skipping over to flop in one of the chairs, kicking her feet over the arm. Theo followed her, of course. "What do you know about shadow walking?"

He gave her a rather blank look, clearly not understanding what this had to do with anything. "Um... It's a vampire thing? Becoming one with the shadows and moving from one to another, more or less?"

"Yeah, well, humans can do it too, theoretically. You just have to develop a strong enough affinity for darkness and shadow to step through your shadow to the plane they call the Dark. Most humans really don't have that strong an affinity for shadows, even if they're actually dedicated to the Dark."

"So more like elementalism?"

"Kind of like elementalism mixed with apparition. Supposedly it's really easy to get lost when you're under the Dark. Navigation is more sympathetic than apparation — the accounts I've read say you have to orient yourself toward a confluence of events, rather than an actual place. But then
you just thrust yourself back into our plane like any apparition. Which is easy because we belong on the mundane plane, but getting to Dark Space in the first place is really, really difficult. Like, most people take years to get it, even with guidance from someone who knows what they're doing."

Theo smirked. "I presume your Yule ritual had something to do with being too impatient for that."

"Uh, yeah."

She hadn't really known what would happen, drawing the essence of darkness, blessed by the Powers and infused with some small part of their strength, into herself.

She had initially intended to simply augment the affinity she already had to the Dark. She'd come across an old Egyptian text that suggested an elemental affinity could be sort of forced by subsuming the essence of the element, which, it wasn't permanent, and it was a bit dangerous — it was easy to be overwhelmed by the element in question, the example in the text was spontaneous combustion in a failed attempt to subsume Fire. But Lyra did have some experience with subsumation, and Eris hadn't told her not to do it, so she assumed that whatever the consequences might be, they weren't potentially fatal. And how neat would it be to be able to shadow walk? (There were hardly any wards against it, for one thing.) Once she had the trick of it down, it really shouldn't matter if the 'forced' affinity faded significantly.

Integrating it into her plan to call on the Dark at Yule had been a last-minute idea, something along the lines that it certainly couldn't hurt to ask for their blessing, especially since it was Yule and other planes of existence were pretty much Mystery's thing.

It had turned out to be...not entirely unlike the results of the Blacks' usual Yule ritual, but...more. More than she thought just trying to subsume the essence of shadows alone would have been, of course, but also more than subsuming a human life — and she was pretty sure that wasn't just because she'd always had to share in that energy, distributed among all the participants by the Family Magic. The Dark Powers, in blessing the essence of shadow, had imbued it with their power — not much, just a drop, but taking even just that into herself was just... It was so much more, she had no words.

It had rushed through her, power like lightning, flooding her, overwhelming her — the blessing of the Dark sinking into her soul even as the essence of shadows became one with her mortal form, drawn to the magic in her blood and the connection to Eris, deep in her mind.

She could still feel it, if she concentrated, every heartbeat pumping it through her veins, pushing it deeper into her flesh, marking her, physically, from the inside out, not just a creature of darkness in mind and magic, but body as well.

But those first moments...

For a brief space of time, she'd had their attention, all of them — she knew they'd heard her when she had taken up the challenge this world had presented, daring the whole damn universe to try to stop her ensuring the survival of her House, even without the guarantee of the Covenant, and against the opposition of its (nominal) Head.

And they had approved.

She had been granted the briefest of insights, a momentary glimpse of another world, a confluence of events which called them more strongly in their strange perception than any other in that moment, and she had recognized it. Arcturus knelt in the Ritual Room before Eris, and
Lyra knew that this was the world she had left behind.

She could feel the tension, the *fascination*, with which the Dark watched, and understood that this little shard of Chaos (and Destruction and Mystery, but mostly Chaos) was doing something far bolder than any of them had ever done before, weighting the balance of influence in that world so heavily in their favor that it might never be restored, falling into Darkness entirely. It was a rare thing that either pole managed to gain such unshakeable superiority over the other that it could claim every future of a given world. That was not certain yet, of course, but the first step had been made, and they were *watching*.

Exactly *what* Eris had done, she hadn't said, yet. Whatever it was, she had invested an *awful* lot of herself in it to change the path of the entire timeline, leaving the connection between herself and Lyra weak, her presence hardly *present* at all, though slowly growing stronger again. Hopefully in a few days, she'd be back enough to brag about it.

"Care to elaborate on that?" Theo sounded rather impatient...which made sense, because she'd gotten lost in thought and completely forgotten they were having a conversation. Oops.

"What was I saying?"

"You found some way to cheat at shadow walking."

Lyra grinned. "Yeah, or, I think so, at least. What do you know about subsumation?"

As it turned out, dragging Harry to Zee's wedding had been a *great* idea, specifically because the seating arrangements had had to be changed last minute.

See, before, Lyra had been assigned to sit at the high table, with Zee and...whatever the soon to be late Mr. Zabini's name was (Zee had told her, multiple times, even, but Lyra didn't really care enough to remember it — it wasn't like he was going to be around that long, anyway); the groom's parents (who were muggles); Zee's parents (who were just *stunningly* normal, she had no idea how it was possible that Zee was actually their daughter); Zee's brother and his husband; four other people from the groom's side of the thing; and Blaise.

Now Daphne was sitting at the high table (which Blaise said she was pleased about, though Lyra honestly couldn't tell), and Lyra was in the second rank, reserved for non-immediate family and very close friends. Which, really, all the people Zee had invited probably counted.

Quite a bit of negotiation had gone into the arrangement — Zee *really* wanted Lyra somewhere she couldn't do too much damage. (At some point, Other Bella had told her that she really liked weddings, because there was just something about them that seemed to encourage marital strife. Which was absolutely true, and incidentally how Narcissa had been conceived.) She had tried to seat Lyra and Harry at the table Daphne had been pulled from, with the Malfoys and the Greengrasses and Strykes. But that sounded *incredibly* boring, especially when Zee knew so many interesting people she could sit with instead, so Lyra had pointed out that Harry and Draco hated each other. (Draco didn't much like Astoria Greengrass either, but neither that nor the fact that she was only eleven had stopped Zee eventually inviting her to take her older sister's seat.)

Since the Tonkses weren't coming and Zee couldn't think of anyone else who could potentially dissuade Lyra from exploiting all the very tempting potential for chaos all around her (which, who did she think she was kidding, really?), she had instead agreed to pull together an entire table of people whom Lyra had suggested sounded interesting enough to *not* attempt to break them over the course of dinner, or else whom Zee thought could resist her efforts.
That list included Zee's Auntie Adara (an Italian metamorph currently wearing the face of a blue-eyed blonde); a vampire called Liesel (swathed head to toe in heavy robes, though she had removed her veil after the sun had set); a Miskatonic scholar originally from Greece; an Acquisitions Agent from the Polish National Library; a muggleborn Irish cursebreaker who specialized in mind magic; and a very androgynous, dark-skinned Spaniard whose eyes were far too orange to be human. And Harry, of course.

The ceremony was very simple, compared to most weddings Bella had been to. Neither the Zabinis nor...the groom's family were any sort of nobility, so they'd completely left out any joining-of-the-houses stuff. Plus the groom's family were muggles, so they'd reduced the actual joining ritual to something more similar to a muggle ceremony, and cut out the Blessing of the Union entirely. It wasn't like Zee wanted more kids, anyway.

She'd spent most of it (quietly) explaining various points to Harry, who had apparently never been to a wedding before, even a muggle one, and yet still held certain expectations, like Zee wearing a white dress and a veil instead of the ridiculously elaborate golden robes she'd chosen, or that she and whatsisname would live together after the ceremony. After explaining that white veils were only worn at funerals (by the family of the spouse of the deceased), and that Zee and the groom still had their respective businesses to run on either side of the pond, this was really just formalizing their arrangement to stay together whenever they happened to be on the same continent and do whatever and whomever they liked when they weren't (which might actually mean this one would last more than a few months), she'd had to go through the symbolism of handfasting — and explain that most ritual magic didn't actually require blood, since he'd only seen this and the bit she'd done on Yule — and why Zee was given a necklace at the end, instead of a ring...and then why it wasn't creepy that it (and the ring she'd given whatsisname) was enchanted so it couldn't be taken off without his (or her) permission. (Though Lyra could probably crack it if she really wanted to, whatsisname had enchanted it himself, and there wasn't a lot of surface area to work with, so the binding couldn't be all that complex.)

By the time they got to the rooftop patio garden thing where the reception was being held, everyone else at their table had already arrived, seated themselves, and taken up introductions. Lyra and Harry joined them. (Harry looking rather confused and awkward, as he had since they'd ported in this morning. He hadn't even seemed to enjoy the tour Blaise gave them, which was just ridiculous, because Ravenna was undoubtedly the prettiest place Lyra had ever been.)

"Ah, you must be Lyra Black, Mira's goddaughter, yes?" Adara said, apparently taking on the role of hostess. She had equally obviously decided they were going to be informal, which was perfectly fine with Lyra. She nodded. "And that would make this Harry Potter, a friend of Lyra's from school," she added, presumably for the benefit of the others. "My name is Adara Zabini, I'm an aunt of the bride. This—" (She gestured to the vampire on her right.) "—is Liesel, a friend of the family. Next we have Yavin Anastassiadis—" (The Miskatonic scholar.) "—who I believe is a cousin of the groom?"

He nodded. "Incidentally, I was invited by Mirabella. I met her at an Education Symposium a few years ago."

"Oh, I see! This is Kaja Kowalczy—" (The Librarian) "—and Dominic Prieto—" (the orange-eyed man) "—who are friends of Mirabella." (Probably lovers, or ex-lovers, this was Zee they were talking about.) "And finally, Claire O'Rourke, who I believe knows Mirabella from school."

"Only just," the cursebreaker said. "She was a seventh-year when I started. We met again years later through professional contacts."
"Do you understand anything they're saying?" Harry asked, not quite under his breath.

Lyra turned to stare at him. "You— Are you saying you don't?"

"I don't speak French. That is French, right?"

"Yes, it's French! Everybody speaks French! How can you— Ugh! Damn it, Dumbledore! Does anyone know a good two-way translation spell? I really don't want to have to translate all night."

There was a bit of tittering and muttering amongst the others. Yavin smirked. "I have one, but it's a bit...dark, for British tastes."

"Harry's so appallingly ignorant, I doubt he would notice."

"Please, expand," Claire said, her eyes narrowed slightly suspiciously.

"It's an adaptation of a mind magic spell intended to mimic the method by which omniglots learn languages, subsuming the knowledge to respond from one's conversational partners."

"Isn't that intended to be cast upon oneself?" the Librarian asked.

Apparently the man hadn't considered that. "Well, yes..."

"I hardly think a third-year Hogwarts student would be able to cast such a thing," Claire noted.

"Couldn't you just invert it? Reverse the terms and cast it on Harry, so that it pushes the necessary information at him, instead of pulling it?"

The entire table turned to stare at Lyra. "I...suppose," Yavin said. "Possibly."

"I really don't think it should be that hard. Do you know the arithmancy for it? Here, write it down." She conjured a sheet of parchment and passed it across the table.

The scholar, obviously humoring her, sketched out the spell formula, the others talking amongst themselves as the antipasti arrived.

"Um, Lyra, what's going on?"

Of course, Harry hadn't managed to follow anything. "We're trying to come up with a translation charm for you."

"Oh."

"You don't have to look so surprised, you know."

"No, it's just— Yeah, I would like to be able to understand what's going on, but you don't all have to go out of your way..."

"Don't be ridiculous, half the people here do this sort of thing for fun." Or at least she presumed the various scholars at the table would do this sort of thing for fun. Lyra herself would.

Yavin passed the parchment back just as Lyra was about halfway through her charcuterie, which was very good, but not nearly as interesting. "This doesn't look too complicated, actually."

It was admittedly more complicated than the charms she knew to translate written documents, which drew from the caster's knowledge of the language to interpret and alter the text, but on a
scale of other mind magic spells she'd looked at, it wasn't that bad. And it was fairly easy to identify the elements that signified the pseudo-legilimency and reverse their orientation without disrupting it so badly that it wouldn't be castable, then add a little reciprocal bit, like from the written version she knew for the responses, and then streamline the whole thing, just a tad...

"Here, how does that look?" she asked, passing it back. At some point, the *antipasti* had been cleared away and replaced with the *primi* — she hadn't even noticed. Oops.

Harry had almost finished his. "What is this stuff, anyway?"

"There was a menu card around here somewhere," Claire answered. "But I can't seem to find it..."

"It's a truffle risotto," Dominic volunteered. "One of my favorites."

"Wait — if you all speak English, why are you looking for a translation spell?"

"Liesel, Kaja, and Yavin don't speak English," Adara said simply. "You were raised by non-magical people, yes? French is the universal language of trade and government in the alliance the British call the International Confederation, so it is far more widely-spoken in our world than English."

"Oh."

"So you know everyone here, Adara?" Lyra asked. She herself had met the metamorph once before, visiting the Zabinis the summer after her first year, though she didn't expect Adara would remember her, if that same meeting had occurred in this universe.

"Most of them," she said, her gaze shifting to look over the room. "I do enjoy travelling, and Mirabella and I have similar tastes. In places and people."

Lyra only just managed to contain a snort of laughter at that. Zee had told her after Adara had happened to drop in on her brother, Zee's father, while Bella was visiting Zee, that her aunt was actually the infamous metamorph (and legilimens) called Lady Grace, a thief and con artist of the highest order. Which Bella had doubted at the time, but Mira had confirmed it while they'd been discussing potential dinner partners.

"I didn't know Mirabella had a goddaughter, though," she added.

"Nor did I," Dominic said. "And you seem very familiar, but I don't believe Bellatrix ever had a child."

Lyra shrugged. This had almost been bound to come up at some point, meeting people who had known Zee for ages, and thus probably Other Bella, too. "My past is not open for discussion. I only recently arrived in Magical Britain, however."

"Is Mira actually your godmother?" Harry sounded surprised. "And, Bellatrix?"

"It's complicated." According to Zee, she probably *would* have been godmother to Other Bella's children, assuming she'd ever had any, which, Dominic was right, she hadn't. "Bellatrix is a Black, a first cousin to Sirius. She and Mira were friends at Hogwarts."

Orange eyes narrowed in suspicion, but thankfully, before she had to think of anything else to say on the subject of not talking about her past, Yavin finished with her alteration to his spell. "Yes, *I think this would work. Though one would have to be a mind mage to cast it, to control the flow of knowledge from one mind to the other."
"Well, I can't do it, then, I'm pants at mind magic."

"Let me see," Claire demanded. "I'll do it, if it's not too dangerous."

"So, what exactly does this spell do?" Harry asked.

"It's a translation thing. It would let you understand the French in a conversation as one of us hears it, and translate your responses for you in real time using the caster's knowledge. It's very neat."

"That sounds a lot like what you told me about legilimency." He sounded rather wary.

"It is, a bit. But far more focused. And honestly, if Claire wanted to legilimize you, she wouldn't need a spell to do it."

Harry's eyes darted over to the cursebreaker, who seemed to be very focused on the arithmancy in front of her. "That's...not really reassuring."

"The spell won't make you any more vulnerable than you already are, is the point. And you'd get to understand what everyone else is saying, so I really see no down-side, here."

He frowned, but after a moment, admitted, "Well, when you put it like that..."

"Good, that's settled, then. What do you think, Claire?"

"Well...it should work. You're sure you're okay with this?" she asked Harry.

He hesitated slightly, but nodded. "Go ahead, I'm ready."

He looked as though he was steeling himself for a physical blow, eyes closed, face set. Lyra sniggered. "Relax, Harry," she said, even as Claire pointed her wand at him.

"Did it work?" she asked, apparently after the spell had been cast — there hadn't been a spell-glow, there rarely was with mind magic — and it seemed to be a subtle enough charm that Harry hadn't reacted to the impact.

"I...think so? This is so weird..."

It apparently had no impact on his accent, which was atrocious, but that was French. "Ha! Yes! Good job, Claire."

"This is odd. I should send a copy to Severus, I'm sure he'd get a laugh out of it."

Lyra was sure he wouldn't, if only because he would object to her getting other people to cast untested spell alterations on Harry, who didn't know enough about anything to object. But that didn't really matter right now.

Now that Harry could understand what was going on, she could ask the question she'd been wondering about since she'd first set eyes on Dominic: "So, Nicky, are you Blaise's sire?"

His eyes narrowed again, possibly in annoyance as Kaja said, "Are you? I didn't know that... Are you still...together?"

Ha! And Zee thought I wouldn't be able to work with these people...
So, this is the first of three Winter Break chapters...which were initially planned as one chapter, but as anyone who's read any of my fics knows, a lot of shit tends to happen over Winter Break, and a ninety-odd page chapter seemed excessive. A couple of points to clarify for these scenes:

Some of you may recall that it's a Very Bad Idea to invite other Powers (or other aspects of specific Powers) into Other Bella's head. It is, however, acceptable for Lyra to call on the Dark as a whole, since Eris is derived from it. The way dedication works, Lyra is devoted to Eris, but also to Chaos and the Dark as a whole to lesser degrees. So Lyra doesn't ruin everything with her Yule shenanigans.

Also, Theo is correct that Little Sister (or Brother) is a term the Powers tend to use to address Black Mages, which they see as extensions of their fellow Powers. The Powers don't necessarily have a linear idea of time, however, so it doesn't refer to someone who's actually dedicated or at a certain point in the process of learning about the Powers so much as someone who is, or is definitely going to be dedicated.

As far as child-rearing goes, most mages from Bella/Cadmus Nott's generation rebelled the way they were raised by going much easier on their own kids. This was in part due to a study that came out in the 1970s which showed that forcing children to attempt to do magic too early could inhibit their magical development (which is part of my headcanon explanation for why Neville's family thought he was a squib) and led to more major accidents as the children didn't always have the necessary control to handle a wand safely. Of course, many of them (like Cadmus Nott) were physically and emotionally abused as kids in the name of training, and grew up to be physically and emotionally abusive parents, even if they didn't put their kids through quite the same insane program of early education that they were forced into.

Yes, Dominic is Blaise's sire (term purebloods use for the biological father of a bastard). And no, he's not entirely human. Mira was actually telling the truth about the incubus thing.

—Leigha
"Just relax, Harry. Ancient House!"

Lyra grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him into the floo, ignoring his protests that he was relaxed. They quickly became coughing and sputtering as he got ash in his mouth.

"You should practice that."

"What?" he asked, panting slightly.

"You floo like a five-year-old," she said, smirking slightly. "State your destination, walk through the fire. It's not that hard, really. Just don't breathe in the fire, don't stop moving, and don't trip over your own feet trying to get out of the grate on the other end."

Harry glared at her. "Sorry we all can't be, y'know, perfectly graceful all the time. Flooing is just stupid. Think I'll just fly everywhere from now on, thanks."

Seemed like a complete waste of time to Lyra (well, maybe not if she had a flying motorbike...), but whatever. "Come on, it's this way."

"So, uh. Did he say anything last time you were here? About, well, what happened, or why he escaped, or...anything?"

"Actually, no. I think he took exception to being kidnapped. Or maybe to being kept in the nursery. Either way, he ambushed me in dog form as soon as I opened the door. I had to stun him to do the medical assessment charms I got Tonks to teach me, and I'm pretty sure the results were wrong because he was still a dog."

Granted, he was still emaciated and nutritionally deficient as a dog, but the numbers she had come up with were absolutely unreasonable for a human, and the soul evaluation she'd done to try to determine how much damage the dementors might have done to his magic had been...completely weird. Not that she had much experience with these things, but she was pretty sure there should be at least some indication that he was a wizard (rather than a squib) since he could still do the animagus transformation.

"He attacked you?!"

Was that outrage on Harry's voice? It wasn't like he'd managed to do any damage, and honestly, Lyra kind of thought he'd had every right to fight against his captivity. "I'd probably have attacked me, if I was in his place," she pointed out. "But he seemed concerned about you in Hogsmeade, so I'm hoping he'll stay human to talk to you."

"Are you sure he even knows who I am? He seemed to think you were someone else — Bellatrix, wasn't it? Is that the same Bellatrix Blaise's dad was talking about at the wedding?"

Lyra frowned slightly. "Yes, Sirius's cousin. I do look quite a lot like her, but she's about thirty years older than me, and as far as I know, still in Azkaban."

"Er. Azkaban?"
Lyra sighed to express her exasperation with Harry's complete lack of social awareness. "You might have heard of her as Bellatrix Lestrange. She's rather notorious for her role in the war." She was quite certain he had heard of her, since she'd seen him reading Prophet articles about Sirius more than once, and his connections to 'other' Death Eaters were mentioned obnoxiously frequently, as though half the Wizengamot didn't have a cousin or brother who'd been on the losing side of the war.

Apparently the fact that she really didn't want to get into a discussion of Other Bella at the moment came across clearly enough, because Harry restricted his response to a brief, "Erm, right," and subsided into silence for the minute or so it took to reach the nursery.

"Sirius," she said, tapping at the door. "It's Lyra. I need to talk to you." She could (very faintly) hear him growling at her from inside the room. "I've brought your godson with me. Say something, Harry."

"Uh...hi?"

His weak effort seemed to be sufficient to convince Sirius that he was actually here, since there was a pop, and a moment later, "Harry? Jamie's Harry?"

"Yes, Jamie's Harry. I'm opening the door now."

Sirius was far cleaner than he had been out in the forest. His hair had been washed and combed. It was now cut to his shoulders, rather than forming a matted half-cape to his elbows. He was clean shaven, and Cherri had obviously gone to some effort in finding him robes that actually fit. There was still a half-starved, slightly skeletal look about him, but that was less noticeable in proper robes, and there was enough color in his cheeks that he didn't look quite so much like a poorly animated inferius anymore.

He was glaring at the doorway warily, poised to dodge, his hands twitching ever so slightly, as though he was just waiting for an attack. This faded almost immediately, though, as he registered that Harry was, in fact, present. He whined softly, tears filling his eyes, and crept forward, slowly at first but then closed the space between them with surprising suddenness, enveloping Harry in a hug, muttering something into his hair that Lyra couldn't quite make out.

While Harry's reaction (another of those shocked little eeps, wide-eyed panic and a bit of flailing as he tried to free his arms) was amusing enough she would have let it go on a bit just to see what happened, the opportunity this presented was too good to pass up. "Stupefy."

She was standing so close to Sirius that he didn't even have a chance to look up, let alone attempt to avoid her spell. He crumpled to the ground immediately, nearly pulling Harry over with him.

"Good work, Harry."

"Why did you stun him?"

"Well, I hardly think he'd let me cast a bunch of medical divinations on him if he were conscious, and it really has to be done. Now, quiet." She immediately began performing the diagnosis charms, their results making much more sense this time around.

Just under seven stone sounded a lot better than five and a half (even if it was still dangerously low weight for a man of Sirius's stature), and the malnutrition wasn't as bad as she'd expected — Cherri must have been forcing nutrient potions on him all week. There were no intestinal parasites to deal with, as there had been in his dog form, but there were several lingering curses (including two
different tracking spells, not that they'd stand up to the wards on any of the Black properties), and side-effects from curse damage that had never been properly removed. One of these, she noted with amusement, was apparently a sterility curse placed by Other Bella, keyed to her own magical signature to prevent anyone else removing it. She wondered exactly what he'd done to annoy her that badly. Not that it mattered, she unravelled it along with all the others.

The magic analysis showed a strange sort of... The only way she could really interpret it was scarring, which she was sure would have some effect on his ability to cast the full range of magics, but shouldn't entirely inhibit his spellcasting, and another tracking charm — or rather, a beacon of some sort — very dark magic, unlike anything she'd felt before, projecting a pulse every ten seconds or so. It was almost as weird as the fact that she hadn't seen any evidence of this in him as a dog. She'd have to try to find better soul analytics to figure out what was going on there. As for the beacon thing, it really didn't look like human magic, or house elf, and it definitely wasn't a goblin spell. Did dementors have some way to...mark their property?

Neat.

Didn't mean she was going to leave it there, though.

There was only one way she knew of to get rid of magic anchored in the soul. Well, two, actually, but one of them was intended to be cast by the person under the spell, and she was absolutely certain Sirius wasn't capable of it — letting the power of the Dark flood him and burn out everything in its path. The other way was a neat little trick Ciardha had told her about when they were talking about soul magic traps in Egyptian ruins.

She'd never had a reason to try it, but it didn't seem that complicated. It was technically necromancy, a spell designed to enable the caster to perceive and interact with spirits, but it could be used on a living person to manipulate their soul (and anything attached to it) as though it were a solid thing. Which meant a cursebreaker could physically disentangle a soul magic curse from its subject and rip it out. Or, well, it felt physical, supposedly. It wasn't really, more like the soul-magic equivalent of the legilimency spell. There was some risk that the curse would "flip" and transfer itself to her soul, of course, but she wasn't that concerned. She could invoke the Dark to destroy it. Or just leave it, then set dementors on fire and laugh as they showed up looking for Sirius. That could be fun.

But first she had to isolate the thing. She closed her eyes and hummed the "incantation" under her breath. She didn't know why so much soul magic involved music. She wasn't complaining, it made the spells much easier to remember than memorizing a five-minute recitation in Arabic or whatever, but that wasn't really important. The harder part of this particular spell was stilling the mind, sinking deeply enough into oneself to "inhabit the magic" in one's own soul. If Lyra hadn't had her connection to Eris to show her where and how to focus, she was pretty sure she wouldn't have been able to do it at all, because she was terrible at meditating. In any case, it was kind of like freeform magic, inducing a trance state and pulling your magic to the surface of your mind as you rose from meditation, but far more difficult — normal freeform magic was at least partially instinctive, allowing magic to accomplish whatever you wanted without getting too caught up in the details of it. Keeping hold of it, keeping it wrapped around your soul to give yourself metaphysical "hands" was much...slipperier. When she thought she had the right state of mind and magic in place, she opened her eyes.

Everything was swirls of light and color, almost like mage-sight, but focused on living energy, rather than magic. Granted, the two tended to overlap quite a lot, but magic was always moving, flowing from one point to another. Soul energy was less...purposeful. It did still move, but it was...self-contained. Sirius, for example, was swirling reds and blues, held close to his body. There
was an oddly frozen, sort of crystalized area (the scarring she had seen, she presumed), and a feeling of depth that she hadn't expected, no idea what to make of that, and the object of this whole project, a pulsing black cancre in the midst of the red and blue. It looked, she thought, surprisingly superficial. She would have expected it to be rooted more deeply, somehow, but then, maybe this was just the dementor equivalent of a point me charm. It wasn't as though they'd expect humans, most of whom weren't even aware of their own souls, to go around using soul magic to just sort of...scrape it off.

Which seemed like as good a course of action as any other.

She reached out, her "hands" tendrils of an electric sort of bluish-violet, shot through with a blackness quite distinct from that of the beacon spell. She really didn't know how to describe it. English didn't have words for the qualities she was perceiving. She knew it was Eris's influence, though, and entirely different from the dementors' stamp on Sirius. (Dementors were creatures of corruption — Destructive, not Chaotic.) The stuff of Sirius's soul recoiled from her as though repelled by a lodestone, or as though it knew she was trying to help it — the dementor-mark was unmoved, the sudden retreat of everything around it offering it up as though on a pedestal.

Which made it the simplest thing in the world to stretch herself forward, one "hand" honed to a blade-like edge, and slice it away.

Or it would have done, if coming into contact with the foreignness of Sirius's soul and the dementor spell hadn't immediately disrupted her hold on her magic, the brightly colored vision vanishing and her own soul immediately recoiling into her body with a snap she felt ought to have been audible.

"Well, fuck," she said aloud, blinking away swirling afterimages and unexpected exhaustion. Freeform magic, of course, was tiring, but this was worse. Her head felt like she'd just been memorizing new vocabulary for about twelve hours straight, her own thoughts slow and awkward and somewhat foreign. She certainly wasn't going to be able to make another attempt at that today. "I guess that's the best I can do for now."

It must have been quite some time, because Harry had clearly lost interest in the process, preferring to wander around the room, poking at the furnishings. "Oh, can I talk now, then?" he said, somewhat sarcastically.

"Did you have something to say?"

Apparently not, because he just glared at her and cast a reviving charm on Sirius, who immediately realized that he was lying on the floor at wandpoint and scrambled away, transforming himself as he went. He ended up growling at them from the small space between the bed and the nearest wall, crouched and cornered.

"That's really not necessary," she said, summoning a chair for herself. "I didn't even do anything to you, you know."

"Well, you did stun him," Harry pointed out, entirely unhelpfully.

"Just to do the medical diagnostics and get rid of the curses he still had on him. Except, well... One of them was a really weird tracking spell — I didn't think dementors could do magic, you know, aside from the whole soul-sucking thing — but I can't imagine what else it might have been. I need to practice a bit more before I can get that one, I think." Or maybe she could just have Tonks do it, once she told Meda that she had Sirius in custody — he was a proper Healer and all. "Other than that, I don't think they did any permanent damage to you. I'd have to get a mind-healer in here to
know for sure, but that's not really an option until we get your name cleared." She paused for a yawn, but neither of the others took the opportunity to interject. "Are you going to attack me again if I give you a wand?"

That offer was either so tempting or so startling that Sirius changed back to human form. "What— Why are you doing this, Bella?" he asked, his voice rough and hesitant.

"It's Lyra. And because for better or worse, you're the official Head of House Black."

He shook his head violently. "No — I never wanted it. I'm not! Can't be— If I was the Head of the House, that elf — she would've let me go when I ordered her to."

"Well, that's what you get for breaking the thrice-cursed Family Magic. It likes me better. Anyone outside the House would recognize you as the Head, though, which — and I can't believe I'm saying this — is actually a good thing, if only because you're at least a bloody adult and can get things done, at least once I get your name cleared."

Sirius seemed to relax a bit, taking a seat on the edge of the bed and shaking his head. "I won't attack you."

She tossed a small, magically expanded bag onto the duvet beside him. "See if any of those work for you, then."

He upended it, spilling two dozen wands onto the bed. "Where—?"

"Raided the Vault for heirlooms."

He nodded, turning to the task of finding the one that best suited him. It probably wouldn't be a perfect match, but certainly better than nothing.

"How exactly are you planning on doing that?" Harry asked, dragging over a chair of his own. "Clearing his name?"

Lyra shrugged. "Andromeda's working on it. I have a meeting scheduled next week to talk to her about it."

That actually had nothing to do with capturing Sirius. Meda had owled Lyra asking for a meeting, a week or so before the end of term. She and Dora had apparently been pulling together the foundations for a trial in absentia since shortly after she'd arrived in this universe insisting that Sirius was innocent, and according to Meda, they needed to talk about how to proceed from this point. Which was great. Lyra hadn't expected it at all — she'd been planning to wait until she had Sirius in hand before attempting to get at the legal side of things, but if they'd been working on it since August, that meant they were months ahead of where she'd expected to be at this point. If all went well, they might be able to have him cleared by the end of next summer.

Sirius looked up from the wealth of wands, startled. "Meda's here? Wait! You— you said her name! But you hate her!"

Because apparently that was a more important topic than the idea of getting his bloody name cleared of all charges. Lyra rolled her eyes. "No, I don't. Why would I?"

"She— she left! She— You— You forbade me and Reg and Cissy to speak of her!"

She groaned. "I'm not Bellatrix, Siri. It's Lyra. Say it with me: Ly–ra."
He shook his head. "You're not, I know you, you're her — you, I mean. Bellatrix. What are you up
to? Why are you here? Why am I here?"

This was rather frustrating. Lyra rose to pace rather than attempt to sit patiently while driving this
simple fact into his head. "The last three questions have a single, very simple answer — I'm trying
to revive the House. And it's Lyra, gods and powers, how many times do I have to tell you?"

Sirius's eyes narrowed. "Whatever you say, Bellatrix."

"I'm not Bellatrix! She's still in Azkaban!"

This appeared to confuse him for a moment, but then he shook his head again. "I don't know how
you got out, who you left in your place, or why you're here — or why you're a kid again, either. But
I do know you."

Lyra made an inarticulate noise of frustration, turning on her heel to pace back the other way, a
move which coincidentally presented an opening for Sirius to throw a piercing hex at her back. She
wasn't so distracted by her irritation that she didn't feel it coming, though. She ducked, allowing it
to put a hole in the wall on the other side of the room, casting a shield to deflect the follow-up
curse that didn't come.

He just sat there with a smug smirk on his face as Harry leapt to his feet, wand in hand. "Did you
just try to curse her in the back?! Why would you— She's trying to save your bloody life, you
know!"

Sirius snorted. "The day the Blackheart falls to a piercing hex in the back, I'll snap my own wand.
Found one," he added, waggling said wand at her.

Lyra couldn't help laughing at that — perhaps he would be entertaining after all — which of course
made Harry look at her as though she was every bit as mad as Sirius himself.

"She's not Bellatrix! You just— He almost killed you!" he shouted, on his feet, wand in hand, as
though he was going to protect her from Sirius. That was just...adorable, really.

"Relax, Harry, it's fine. He didn't come close, and I'm pretty sure he didn't mean anything by it. I'm
still not Bellatrix, though."

"Oh, come off it, I saw you set a dementor on fire!"

Oh, right. He had been at the quidditch match, hadn't he. "I fail to see how that implies I'm anyone
other than myself," she pointed out.

"It doesn't. Because you're very obviously you — which is to say, Bellatrix!"

"Oh, come on, are you telling me you've never wanted to set a dementor on fire?!"

"Well no, but that's not the point—" Sirius growled in frustration.

"You set a dementor on fire?" Harry interrupted, his eyes very wide. Sirius pointed at him
wordlessly, as though this was proof of...something.

"Yes. I did warn them, or one of them, at least."

"You... What?"

"On the train. Suppose it's just as well I didn't manage to kill the one at the quidditch match,
though. Maybe this time they'll spread the word."

"It didn't die? Damn."

She giggled at the degree of disappointment Sirius managed to force into that last word. Harry, on the other hand, just sounded annoyed. "You know a spell to set dementors on fire, and you told me to go study _occlumency_?!"

"You _should_ study occlumency. Have you talked to Blaise about that yet?" He flushed and shook his head. Lyra rolled her eyes at him. "Well, I can pretty much guarantee you won't be able to pull off that particular spell."

"Why _not_?" He glowered, clearly annoyed.

It was Sirius who answered. "It's dark. _Very_ dark. Dark enough it hurt to sit next to her casting it."

Harry crossed his arms, pouting at the two of them in turn. "I could be a dark wizard! If it meant I could set dementors on fire, I mean."

Lyra couldn't help laughing again at that one. "It's also one of the more complex spells I know, a transmutation with a secondary transfiguration worked in to bleed off the excess energy. Just learn occlumency, it will be easier. Anyway, now that we're talking like rational people — for a certain value of rational — I just want to make sure I have this straight before I talk to Andromeda about it. You weren't really the Potters' Secret Keeper, were you?"

Sirius seemed to be slightly thrown by the abrupt change of topic, but quickly recovered. "What? No– no! I would never, could never betray them, betray _James_."

"You told the aurors you were responsible for their deaths, though," Harry pointed out, sounding rather more skeptical than Lyra thought he really was. "In Edinburgh, after the fight with Pettigrew."

Sirius seemed to sink in on himself. "I was. I am. I– I was weak. I couldn't do it, couldn't sit by and hold the Secret while everyone else died. I was the one who wanted to switch Secret Keepers — I was the one who insisted on Peter — he was perfect, no one would suspect — but the Rat, that little _traitor_ — no one _did_ suspect — he– he betrayed them — sold them to _him_. I'll kill him, I swear it! He betrayed them, and it's all my fault." There were tears in Sirius's eyes again.

"You _do_ realize that's logically inconsistent, don't you?"

"Shut up, Bella." "_Lyra._" "If it weren't for me, if I'd been– been _better_, if we'd used Moony, or Alice, like Lily said, they could still be alive."

Lyra snorted at that. "_Maybe_. But if Voldemort hadn't walked into Lily's trap in Godric's Hollow, how many more people would've died, do you think, before Dumbles caved and invited in the ICW to clean up his mess? A few hundred? A thousand? Because if my understanding of the war is at all accurate, the minute Lily Potter retired from the battlefield, there was no one on the Light side who had a hope of foiling Voldie's ritual attacks."

Sirius's mouth was moving silently as he apparently tried to work his way through that idea. Harry simply gaped at her.

"_What_?"

"My– my mum was _that_ good a fighter? That important to the war?"
"Yes! Dark Powers, how do you not know this?! Okay, granted, no one really talks about it, but if you read between the lines, it's all there in the Prophet! You did read the articles after that battle where she raised all the dead and set them on the Death Eaters, didn't you?"

"I, erm... I didn't really read any of the articles about her. They were all so, so racist and terrible, she was always 'Lily Evans, muggleborn' even after she married my dad! And the things they kept hinting at, that she was a dark witch, and talking like had done some sort of illegal something to get so good at magic, they were just terrible."

Both Lyra and Sirius stared silently in the wake of this little outburst. Sirius was the first to speak. "Uh, Harry — can I call you Harry?" Harry nodded stiffly. "Evans, your mum... She was a dark witch, and she did do illegal magic — rituals, mostly. If it wasn't for her, we'd — the Order — we'd all be dead three times over. But she wasn't Light, not really."

Harry obviously didn't know what to say about that, though Lyra had to correct him on one point. "She can't have been a dark witch, she used White rituals just as much as Black — well, assuming she was responsible for the Battle of Artemis, and I can't think of anyone else on your side who could've called down the moon like that."

Sirius just shook his head. "Her magic was just weird. Light and dark all mixed up. But she was definitely politically dark. She'd've followed that slimy little Snape right into Moldy Volde's camp if it weren't for his whole muggleborn genocide thing."

Lyra raised an eyebrow at that. "Snape? As in, Severus Snape?"

"Yeah, that's him. Snivelly little skulker."

"Huh. Guess that explains why he tipped Dumbledore off..."

Harry made a little gak sound, staring at the two of them wide-eyed.

"Okay, there, Harry?"

"Snape — my mum was friends with Snape? As in, greasy dungeon bat, Head of Slytherin Snape?!"

Lyra rolled her eyes at him. "That's what you choose to focus on, here?"

Sirius, however, seemed to agree that this was a shocking development. He nodded seriously. "If she hadn't been muggleborn, Lily would've been a Slytherin herself, I'm sure of it."

Harry apparently found himself momentarily speechless at the thought, though Lyra snorted with half-suppressed laughter. It sounded like Sirius hadn't liked Lily very much at all, telling her son all these 'bad' things about her only a few minutes after they met. Not that she really thought there was anything wrong with being a Slytherin, or a dark (or Dark) witch, or doing illegal magics — she'd be an enormous hypocrite if she did.

Then, Lyra's earlier statement seemed to register with Sirius. "What do you mean, he tipped Dumbledore off?"

"He was Dumbledore's spy, wasn't he? That's in the papers, too. And I kind of doubt he had more than one — Riddle is a legimens, and there aren't that many masters of mind magic around, so..."

"Riddle?"
"Voldemort," Lyra and Harry said together. Though Harry went on to add, "How do you know that?"

Lyra didn't actually remember whether she had a legitimate source for that information, but she did know at least one other person who'd figured it out herself. "Uh...Gin told me? Can we focus here, please? I need to know what was going on with the whole Fidelius, switching Secret Keepers thing. And why did you break out of Azkaban anyway? I mean, yeah, it's got to be really boring being stuck with just dementors for company, but why would you sit around for twelve years before deciding to leave?"

Harry shook his head. "Better question: how did you get out? Do you know some other way to— to fight them off? The dementors?"

Of course, Sirius chose to answer Harry's question first, staring off into the middle ground, his fingers playing anxiously with the wand he'd chosen. "I— I don't know how I kept my sanity, not really. I knew I was innocent, that wasn't a happy thought, so they couldn't suck it out of me, and... It's— Animal emotions aren't the same as a human's, not as complex. When it got too bad, I changed into Padfoot — into a dog. So that gave me some respite. And then I — Fudge, the minister, he gave me his paper when he inspected the prison this year, and there was a picture — your bloody elf took it, but there was a picture, and Peter was in it, Wormtail, and the caption, it said he'd be at Hogwarts. With you. And I knew— I knew you weren't safe, I had to stop him, had to finish him off before he could — before he could hurt you, or, or..." he trailed off, tears in his eyes again.

"Peter? Peter Pettigrew? He's at Hogwarts? But— Who?"

"The rat, he's a rat, in Gryffindor, with you, with the Weasley boy."

He didn't mean...the Penultimate Weasley's pet rat?

"You mean Scabbers? But..." Harry trailed off, obviously confused.

"Pettigrew was an animagus, wasn't he?" Lyra guessed. "A rat, and you saw this picture in the paper and you thought it was him—"

"It was him! I saw him transform — so many times, I'd know him anywhere, it was him! And I— I had to get out, I had to kill him, had to stop him. It was— It became an obsession. It gave me strength, enough to slip past the guards as Padfoot. I was skinny, skinny enough to fit through the bars, and I swam, there's a lighthouse, see, I knew if I could make it there, I could find you, make sure you were safe, kill that traitorous rat, finally! I— I'm your godfather, did you know that?"

Harry nodded wordlessly.

"I should have protected you, I should never have let Hagrid take you, but I had to kill him, and now I'm going to. Bella, you have to let me go, I need to kill him! For James, and Lily. I need to, please!"

Lyra snorted at that. "No chance. If the Penultimate Weasley's pet rat is an animagus at all — which I doubt — if he was I can't imagine he'd've let Hermione's cat hunt him all year. Why not just pop back to human form and give it a good kick? But even if that rat is your rat, you can't kill it — finding Pettigrew is the best chance we have to get your name cleared, idiot. And it's Lyra," she added belatedly.

"It's him, it is — I swear it! That cat, he's part kneezle, he found me in the forest, knew I wasn't a
normal dog — he knows the rat's not a normal rat, either! He's been hunting it for me, but Peter always was good at slipping out of trouble— But we'll get him, it is him, I know it!

"Erm...right," Harry said. He obviously didn't believe it any more than Lyra did, and Sirius obviously knew it. "So...you broke out of Azkaban to...hunt down a rat. That you saw in the paper."

Sirius scowled at them. "I broke out of Azkaban to commit the murder I was locked up for in the first place! I'm going to enjoy it, too — when I get my hands on that little—"

Lyra cut him off with a flick of her wand. "You won't. You're going to stay in hiding until your trial is concluded in absentia, then spend some time at St. Mungo's until you're declared fit and of sound mind — you can work on faking that for—"

It only took about five seconds for Sirius to break her jinx. "God damn it, Trixie—"

Okay, what, since when could Siri get away with calling her that? She'd just hexed him for it six months a— Er, thirty years ago. Right.

"—just because you're apparently a teenager again doesn't mean I'm a fucking child! Going around silencing me and telling your bloody elf to put me in the gods-bedamned nursery! It isn't funny! I'm twenty-three years old!"

Well that was wrong. And far more concerning, really, than his insistence that she was Other Bella.

"Er, what?"

"She always used to do that, that fucking tacitus, whenever we were annoying her," Sirius explained, putting on a petulant pout.

"The man who raised me used to do it to me," Lyra lied. "I presume it's a fairly widespread method of dealing with childish ravings. How old are you, again?"

"Twent—" Sirius froze, his frown deepening as he caught his mistake. "Thirty-three. I'm thirty-three."

"Actually, it's December, so you're thirty-four. And apparently the dementors ruined your sense of humor, because Cherri putting you in here is fucking hilarious, full stop."

"Fuck you, Bella."

Lyra did her best impression of a scandalized teenager. "You're thirty-four, that's way too old for me! And also, it's Lyra."

Whatever Sirius was about to say was derailed by a curious sort of choking noise from Harry. "Are you okay?" he asked, moving to pat his godson on the back.

Harry, coughing and sputtering slightly, managed to croak out "Fine, I'm fine..."

Lyra rolled her eyes at the pair of them. "Anyway, as I was saying, if Pettigrew is still alive, and we somehow manage to track him down—"

"He's the rat! The Weasley boy's rat! It's missing a toe! He cut off his finger before he blew up the street! It's him! If you won't let me out of here, you have to get him — he'll revert when you kill him, that will prove it!"
"You can't just kill Scabbers." Harry didn't quite sound like he believed Sirius, but he obviously assumed she wouldn't hesitate to kill a rat to determine whether it was an animagus.

Which was absolutely correct, except for the tiny issue that, "If I kill him, he can't be forced to testify."

"But if he's dead and in one piece, it will at least prove I didn't blow him up in Edinburgh!"

"No, it will just prove that he managed to frame you for his murder in Eighty-One because he knew he couldn't take you in a fair fight and you had to be punished for betraying the Potters. Besides, it's way too easy to fake a dead body — I guarantee introducing a corpse into evidence in defense of a Black would only make things worse."

Not that it was really easy, but there were definitely ways to do it, and the family reputation for practicing the necessary arts would almost certainly be brought up by their opponents in the Wizengamot. Which, to be fair, there was a bit of precedent for the House of Black to fabricate evidence. Lyra was fairly certain Cissy had to have falsified some kind of 'proof' of Lucius being imperiused to keep him out of Azkaban, and there was one trial in the 1800s that had been particularly farcical...

Sirius obviously knew the instance she was thinking of — he winced visibly. "Fine, you've made your point. Just capture him, then... And maybe we can...you know — play with him a bit before you turn him in? Just obliviate him after, no one would have to know..."

Lyra sighed. "Sure, if you want his memory so damaged that he's unfit for trial. I'm pants at mind magic, and I suspect you'd get carried away. Besides, I thought you didn't do dark magic, our little white sheep."

Sirius's eyes darkened. "There are other ways — knives, you used to like knives..."

"Not Bellatrix," she reminded him again. Though, she would admit that the idea of knives held a certain appeal...

Harry spoke over her, looking between the two of them with...suspicion? Concern? Whatever, one of those frowny, narrow-eyed expressions, anyway. "Just to be clear, you are talking about torturing him? Pettigrew?"

Sirius froze briefly before — very slowly, perhaps as though he was trying to sus out whether this was an acceptable response — saying, "No, of course not, that would be...wrong. Very wrong, torturing the man who betrayed your parents and got me locked up with dementors for the last twelve years. Wouldn't dream of it."

In Lyra's opinion, whatever negative expression was on Harry's face only intensified — he had to have recognized that as sarcasm — but he seemed willing to drop the subject. "Erm. Right."

"Not like it matters, we don't even know where Pettigrew is—"

"He's up in Gryffindor Tower! With the Weasley boy!"

"Gods and Powers, Siri, shut up, I heard you the first time! I'll look into it! If it's him — which quite frankly I doubt — I'll capture him. Andromeda will take care of the legalities. All you have to do is stay here and try to get your head back on straight."

"Promise? Swear it!"
"Fine, yes, I swear, you fucking lunatic, by the Dark, even — why wouldn't I follow through on this? In case you've forgotten, it is in my interests to get you cleared."

Sirius nodded, but he still seemed rather anxious. "You have to do it right away, as soon as you get back! He can't stay there, not with Harry..."

"Oh, come on!" Harry objected. "It's not like I'm a little kid, okay? I'm the same age as Lyra! I'm perfectly capable of defending myself against a rat! And if Scabbers is Pettigrew, he's been in my room for the last two and a half years, and he hasn't done anything, he spends most of his bloody time asleep!"

"Yeah, well, there's really nothing in it for him to do something to you now, what with Riddle missing and powerless, so I can't say I'm surprised. Still, no real reason to put it off. Anyway, I think that's everything I wanted to talk to you about. If I think of anything else, I'll send a letter with Cherri. I'll instruct her to carry messages for you as well, to me or Harry."

"And Meda," Sirius insisted.

"After I tell her I have you in custody." Not that she'd actually decided yet whether that would be in their best interests, seeing as it was Meda who'd told Cissy who she was and where she'd come from. It might be best to ensure she had some plausible deniability as their advocate, anyway.

He nodded. "Fine."

"Fine. So if that's it, I have other things to do today. Harry?"

"Er. I thought I might stay and, um, talk. For a bit."

Sirius grinned, nodding enthusiastically, more excited and alert than she'd seen him yet. She shrugged. "Suit yourself. I'll see you later. Assuming you don't manage to kill yourself flooing back," she added with a smirk.

Harry made a rude hand gesture at her, which she ignored, nodding farewell to her cousin. "Sirius."

"Bella," he responded evenly, as though she'd never corrected him at all. Since it clearly wasn't having any effect whatsoever, she decided to ignore him as well, turning on her heel and heading for the door — after all, as long as everyone thought he was delusional and confused, there was no real harm in letting him use her real name.

The door closed behind her with a soft click, cutting off some eager question about quidditch.

"Er, Zabini — Blaise, I mean — can I ask you something?"

Zabini, lounging on the sofa in the muggle-style den, looked up (briefly) from his book, just long enough to catch Harry's eye and smirk. "It appears so."

Right. That had been a question, hadn't it. Arse. "Uh. You know about my, um. Dementor problem?" (That hadn't really been the question Harry wanted to ask either, but he was getting there.)

"Everyone knows about your dementor problem."

Of course they did, Malfoy hadn't shut up about it since the first day of term. It wasn't his biggest problem at the moment — there was the whole Sirius...situation, for one. He kind of felt
like he should be doing something to help with that, if only because, well... Didn't he usually have to take care of problems himself? Honestly, the whole thing with Quirrell being possessed and the Philosopher's Stone, and then the Chamber of bloody Secrets — it was like everyone else at Hogwarts was completely fucking useless most of the time. But, well. He was very quickly coming to understand that there was a lot more to Magical Britain than just Hogwarts, and getting Sirius's name cleared wasn't the sort of thing he could just charge into head on and hope for the best, so he really had no idea what he could do, let alone should do.

Lyra assured him she would handle it, but— How did he want to put this... Getting Sirius a trial, which would likely involve working with other people, inside the legal system, didn't really seem like the sort of thing she would be any better at than Harry would be. And he was pretty sure she knew it, too. Talking to Sirius seemed to have put her in a fixing-things mood, but since there wasn't much she could do about his situation, either, she'd decided to focus all her attention on Harry for the past few days. Which was the other problem that was bigger — or at least more...immediate — than his dementor problem.

He could imagine situations where he wouldn't mind at all, having all Lyra's attention on him. Er...probably — she could be a bit overwhelming, kind of like Hermione, in a way. But those situations definitely wouldn't involve her constantly...he didn't know, treating him like a lost puppy she had to take care of. He still had no idea why she had kissed him or what she'd meant by it (which he couldn't help but keep coming back to, even if he hadn't quite found the right time to ask her about it), but he was starting to get the impression that she didn't think of him as a functional person, let alone a person she'd like to kiss again.

See, as Harry was now well aware, there were an incredible number of things Lyra thought any thirteen-year-old wizard ought to know, and since he obviously hadn't been "properly educated" she'd decided to correct that oversight, regardless of whether he had an opinion on the matter.

Some of the things were relatively simple — talking to the Gringotts goblin who managed the Potter accounts, for example, to get an idea of what he actually owned, how it was managed, and how to use it (including how banknotes worked), had only taken a single afternoon (though his head was spinning by the end of it, he'd never imagined he would have that much money, ever). Acquiring a wardrobe that met her standards (which did not include ratty, hand-me-down trainers, no matter how comfortable they were) had taken most of an entire day. Harry had never liked shopping, and having to constantly change his clothes didn't make it any more fun than when he'd just had to stand around and try not to laugh at the ridiculous outfits Aunt Petunia chose for Dudley. Now that it was over, he wouldn't have to do it again for a year — two, maybe, if he was lucky.

But other things, like his not knowing a damn thing about the Potters or the history of Magical Britain, or French (or bloody Gobbledygook, which just — seriously?!), or how to shape his public reputation (she'd spent an entire morning analyzing exactly how the different factions of Magical British society likely viewed him, based on things the Prophet had printed over the past two and a half years), or how national and international politics worked, or even the basics of Magical British law, would take a lot more work to "correct". They'd spent most of yesterday at a bookstore — she'd given him homework. Granted, it was only reading about some of the more famous Potters (and Longbottoms, apparently he and Neville were distantly related), which was actually pretty interesting, but he was starting to get a bit annoyed with how pushy she was being about all of it.

Okay, maybe definitely already a bit more than a bit.

The only part he'd actually enjoyed so far was the dueling practice they'd been doing in the evenings — of course, being Lyra, she made him feel like an incompetent idiot pretty much the
whole time, but he had learned six new jinxes in the past two days. ("Expelliarmus has about three too many syllables to be useful in an actual fight. You're not very strong — not compared to an adult wizard, I mean. So if you don't want to get your arse handed to you in about two seconds flat, you have to be fast.")

As for the rest of it... Well, it was good to know that he could spend money, if he wanted to, he supposed, but most of it was kind of useless, as far as he was concerned. He was thirteen, why should he care about law and politics? It wasn't like he actually ever got to make decisions for himself, anyway — he spent all his bloody time at Hogwarts or with the bloody Dursleys. (He would much rather have spent that time talking to Sirius more — he could be a bit scatterbrained and... confused, sometimes, but he'd told Harry more about his parents in that one afternoon, after Lyra had left, than everyone else he'd ever met put together.)

There was one other thing, though, that she kept insisting was a good thing for him to try to learn that he actually agreed with her about: occlumency. Not only would it help with the dementors (hopefully), but the idea that anyone could just read his mind whenever they liked was seriously creepy. Well, not anyone, but anyone who could do legilimency, and it wasn't like they went around wearing some sort of legilimency club badges or something. And while Lyra had admitted that there were books about it, and other ways to practice besides letting someone use legilimency on you, Harry knew himself well enough to know that just reading about occlumency would be completely useless for him. He never got things just by reading about them. And practicing on a boggart would be worse than useless, because he was sure the bloody thing would turn into a dementor as soon as it saw him, and then he'd pass out. Again.

So if Harry actually wanted to do this, there was really only one thing to do.

He just kept putting it off, because, well... It was bloody creepy, okay, the idea of Zabini mucking about in his head. Granted, he knew him better now than he had a week ago, but that wasn't saying much. It wasn't like they were really friends — not that he thought he'd have been comfortable if it was Ron or Hermione or Lyra, either, but that wasn't the point. Blaise obviously wasn't as bad as he'd thought before coming here — it was actually really cool of him and Mira to put him up after Lyra dragged him here without telling them — but he definitely was a bit of an arse. Plus, Harry had no idea what he would want in return. He could pay him, but he somehow doubted the guy was hurting for pocket money. Just a hunch.

Zabini looked up from his book again, raised an eyebrow. "I presume that wasn't actually the question you wanted to ask me," he said drily.

Oh. Right. Harry had just been standing here, getting lost in his own thoughts, trying to work up the nerve to ask this random bloke he hardly knew to go fishing around in his head, and coincidentally staring off into space in his general direction like he was the creepy one, here. "Could you— That is, Lyra said I should ask you if you'd be willing to teach me occlumency. So. Um. Would you?"

A rather troubled expression fell over Blaise's features. He sat up, pointing at the other end of the couch. "Sit."

"Um..." Harry hesitated.

"Oh, just sit down, I'm not going to go legilimizing you right now — we're just going to have a talk about what, exactly, Lyra told you, and if you know what you'd actually be getting into, learning occlumency."

Harry sat. "She said that's why she doesn't have a problem with the dementors, but she didn't learn
it the normal way, or something, so she couldn't teach me, but you're a legilimens, so you could."

"Uh, yeah. Keep that to yourself, by the way. People get weird if they know you can read their minds," he said, lips quirking to the side, the barest hint of a smirk. Harry frowned. He had the impression Blaise was laughing at him. "But if that's the only reason you want to learn, I can tell you right now, it won't be worth it. It would take years before you were even close to being able to fight off the dementors' aura, and even then, it's not like it goes away, you just learn how to not let it get to you. Mostly."

"But, Lyra—"

"Lyra's a special case. She doesn't actually practice occlumency, she did a ritual when she was a kid that happened to give her an unnatural immunity to mind magic as a side effect. And no, before you ask, it's not the sort of thing she could just replicate on you."

Harry felt his eyes narrow in suspicion. Blaise obviously knew much more about Lyra than he was letting on — that comment in particular almost seemed to suggest they'd known each other when they were younger, before she'd come to Hogwarts.

"Theoretically, you might be able to learn enough occlumency to direct your emotions enough that you wouldn't pass out, and could cast the Patronus charm more easily — that's how most people deal with dementors, you know."

"I know, Lupin was teaching the sixth and seventh years. I thought about asking him, but if it's a NEWT-level charm, I probably wouldn't be able to do it...")"

Blaise shrugged. "The power requirement isn't actually that bad, and it's light magic, so there's not really a strong control aspect — the emotion shapes the spell for you. The hard part is actually feeling the emotion you need to pull it off while facing down a dementor. Which, theoretically, learning occlumency would help with. But occlumency alone won't be enough."

"So, I need to learn the Patronus, then."

Another shrug. "Pretty much. Well, you should probably try to learn it even if you decide not to learn occlumency. There are other spells to fight them off, but they're all way more difficult."

Probably including any spells that would set one of the horrible things on fire. Harry sighed. He had half-suspected that this would be the case. It couldn't possibly be easy to fight off dementors — if it were, everyone would do it. "I'll ask Lupin when we get back to school, then, I guess."

He stood to leave, but before he could take a single step away from the sofa, Blaise said, "So, you don't want to learn occlumency, then?"

Well, yes, he did, but since Blaise hadn't given him a straight answer about that, Harry had kind of assumed he meant 'no'. "Er. I thought you didn't want to teach me."

The other boy gave Harry yet another incredibly casual, one-shouldered shrug, as though he couldn't actually care less whether they did this or not. "I will if you want me to. It's just... You shouldn't start something like this without knowing what you're getting into, and what you're getting out of it. Occlumency is definitely a good skill to have, if only for basic self-defense. You really don't want to see what a legilimens can do to an unware mind, and if you're dueling a legilimens and you don't know occlumency, you're screwed. The other main uses are to improve your self-control and memory, though there are also more advanced tricks like maintaining two separate thoughts at the same time, so you can cast two different spells at once, and things like
Okay, that actually sounded really cool — much cooler than Lyra had made it sound, at least. "And, um. The down-side?"

"Well, for one, you'll owe me, obviously."

"What _would_ I owe you, exactly?" A not insignificant part of the reason Harry had hesitated so long over this was that he had no idea what Blaise might actually _want_.

He made a sort of waffling motion with one hand. "Exactly doesn't really apply. This is the sort of thing that you can't really quantify, you know? It's more like setting the foundation for an ongoing business relationship than a simple one-time transaction."

*Why*, Harry wondered, *couldn't he just give me a straight answer? Bloody Slytherin... "Sooo..."

"So, if I do this for you, it's generally understood that you'll do something just as big for me, eventually, or a bunch of smaller favors, maybe. But this is a really big favor, so it's far more likely that I'll ask you for something, and then do something else for you before we're really even, and it goes back and forth. Keep up the alliance long enough, and you get to the point where the exact balance doesn't matter nearly as much as the accumulation of history and anticipated continuation of future benefits on both sides."

Right, so like being friends, but pretending not to be because Slytherins were bloody stupid. He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay. I think I can handle that."

"Well, I didn't really think that would be a deal breaker. The bigger issue, I suspect, is that I'll have access to all of your memories, your deepest secrets, darkest fears. I'll likely know you better than you know yourself, and, well..." Zabini's lips twitched into another smirk. "You don't really seem like the trusting sort."

Harry swallowed hard. That _was_ the largest part of the reason he still wasn't entirely sure about this whole idea. But, how had Lyra put it? He wouldn't be _letting_ Blaise do anything? Honestly, just being able to stop anyone _else_ from being able to sneak into his memories whenever they liked was enough for him to want to learn occlumency, even if it _didn't_ help with the dementors. One person knowing everything, and Harry knowing that he knew, was far less terrifying a prospect than unknown numbers of potential mind-readers knowing god knew what, and Harry having no idea, especially now that he knew things that could get other people in trouble.

Or rather, now that he _knew_ he knew things. He'd really had no idea how much trouble impersonating Crabbe and Goyle last year could have gotten him and Ron into. Even back in first year, he'd known about Hagrid's dragon, which was illegal. And now he knew about Sirius, and whatever Lyra had done on Yule — Hermione had said that had to have been black magic, which was _very_ illegal. Even knowing about Mira's muggle staff could get them all in trouble, if the wrong people found out about them. Quite frankly, he was a bit surprised how little Lyra seemed to care about the potential security risks of letting him know _anything_, because it was probably only a matter of time until someone read his mind and he and all his friends ended up in Azkaban.

"I, um. I knew that, actually. Lyra told me."

Blaise looked faintly surprised at that. "And you asked anyway? I may have underestimated you, Potter. All right, then. Yes, I'll teach you."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. But, um. Could I just — Whatever you see in my head, can we _not_ talk
about it?"

The other boy snorted faintly. "Fine by me. I have more than enough weird 'talking about our feelings' conversations with Lyra."

Harry let out a snort of laughter. Something about that statement just struck him as being incredibly odd. Not that he didn't suspect that Lyra's past was maybe just as bad or worse than his — he had seen those scars on her back, after all, and she'd mentioned on their way back from Hogsmeade (when she had advocated straight-up murdering the Dursleys) that her home life hadn't been great, which, knowing her, could mean anything — she just didn't seem like the type to talk about it, any more than he was.

"Besides, I can pretty much guarantee there's nothing in your head, or in your past, that I haven't seen before."

"Wait — you don't mean that literally, do you?"

"No, I don't just go around legilimizing people. Snape would kill me, and most people are boring, anyway. I'm just saying, you're probably the least fucked-up person I know."

Which was at least as weird as Lyra telling Sylvia that he was the most normal human she knew. "I'd wait until after you've actually...you know, to say that," Harry said, trying not to sound as self-conscious as he felt.

Blaise rolled his eyes. "I don't even have to look in your mind to know your secrets. You're really bad at hiding them."

"What?" Harry exclaimed, suddenly feeling unreasonably anxious.

The Slytherin grinned, mocking. "I thought you didn't want to talk about this."

"Yeah, well, that's before you said you knew what I didn't want to talk about, and now I really want to know if you actually know, or you're just doing that 'I know everything' thing, again," he said defensively.

"'That 'I know everything' thing'?" Blaise repeated, giving him an amused smirk. "There's an 'I know everything' thing?"

Harry glared down at him. This really wasn't a laughing matter. "Yes. So do you actually know, or not?"

Blaise caught his eye for a brief moment, gave him a long, evaluating sort of look, then, apparently seeing something in his expression (or not), shrugged again. "Well, not the details, specifically, but it's clear as bloody daylight your guardians are abusive, or at the very least criminally neglectful."

The light, casual words landed like a punch to the gut.

He— They weren't — not really. The Dursleys had never liked Harry, had never treated him well, that was true, but— He wouldn't call it abuse — That made it sound like, like he was some pathetic little kid who needed to be — to be rescued, or something, and he— He just didn't, okay! He was — He could take care of himself, no one had ever helped him, no one had come to take him away, and he didn't need them to! He wasn't a victim, that's what you called it, wasn't it, a victim of abuse — and he wasn't, he was fine, he could handle it — it wasn't that bad — Dudley was a bully, yeah, and there was the Cupboard...and the locks on his door after first year, but. He'd mostly learned what not to do to avoid a beating, and it wasn't like they ever touched him or anything — surely it
wasn't really abuse if it wasn't that bad.

There was a small, stubborn voice in the back of his mind, whispering that he wouldn't be panicking like this if it really wasn't. He pushed the stray thought away, telling himself it was just the idea of anyone thinking that he was — that the Dursleys had abused him. That was all it was, he just didn't want people thinking he was some poor, abused kid, that was all! But...

(Lying to himself was a skill Harry had never fully mastered.)

No! He fought against the rising heat and tightness in his chest (He can't know, he just can't!) the cold sweeping over the rest of him (It can't be that obvious, I—), lightheaded dizziness making him feel as though this couldn't be happening (No, I'm fine, it's nothing, really!) or maybe as though it was happening to someone else, very far away. Shock. This had to be what shock felt like. He sat down rather too quickly, suddenly too focused on trying to keep the panic and horror from his face to stand.

He was pretty sure he failed miserably, but Blaise ignored it, still talking in that same light, almost disinterested tone, as though his casual intuitions of Harry's worst secrets were hardly worth mentioning. "It's more than just that 'I never really fit in anywhere' lack of confidence that muggleborns usually have. More like knowing exactly where your place is because you've been beaten into it your entire life. Kind of surprised you weren't a Slytherin, actually."

"Uh, what?" Harry managed to squeak out — change of subject — Slytherin, yes. Slytherin was good. (You could be great, you know...) "But — why?"

He got the very uncomfortable impression that Zabini knew exactly what he was thinking, that little half-smirk he gave him before saying, "You mean, besides your little talking to snakes trick? Self-reliance is one the key Slytherin traits. It's a house for survivors." (Survivor — that was a good word, much better than victim.) "Well, anyone who wants to better themselves and their circumstances, really. Not that you haven't managed to live up to the Gryffindor reputation for stupid recklessness over the past couple years, but that goes along with not having any self-esteem to speak of."

"Hey!" Harry objected, trying very hard to focus on feeling offended at the faintly scornful tone of that last sentence, rather than light-headed and panicky about everything that had come before. "I have..." He trailed off as Zabini raised an eyebrow in pre-emptive disbelief.

"You let literally everyone you know walk all over you."

Good. This was good. He could argue, be angry. Angry wasn't scared or weak, wasn't the sort of thing that had to be hidden to keep him safe (but it wasn't that bad, really). "I do not!"

"You really do. Lyra, Weasley, even Granger, when she's not completely wrapped up in her own inferiority complex. When was the last time you told any of them to piss off?"

"Well, I... I yelled at Lyra once!" Yes, idiot, think about that, instead of... that. Just — think about how annoying she's been lately. You wouldn't even be talking to Zabini if it weren't for her nagging.

"And I'm sure you still ended up doing what she wanted you to anyway—" Which, well, he had, but that wasn't the point! —just like you've been letting her drag you all around the past three days even though it's obvious you don't want to go shopping and shite."

"Why is she being so obsessive about all that, anyway?" Harry asked, only slightly desperate to
change the subject. It wasn't just that he really didn't want to talk about himself anymore, she really was getting on his nerves.

Zabini still knew exactly what Harry was doing, he could tell. (He was pretty sure he wasn't just being paranoid about that.) But he didn't seem inclined to push the issue. "Well, If you asked her, it'd be something like...because Sirius Black is your godfather, which means more to mages than you probably think. He essentially counts as an adoptive parent to you, in her mind. So you're basically a Black."

Lyra had told Harry that before, but— Just keep talking, about anything that's not them. "What does that have to do with— with clothes and politics and learning bloody French?"

"I'm getting there. You basically being a Black isn't just a feature of Lyra being Lyra, it's a socially recognized relationship — how well you take on your role in the greater world of Magical Britain reflects directly on the House of Black. And you really don't know anything. You should have been learning French and politics and how to dress yourself when you were three. That you didn't, that you don't really know what you're doing in public, reflects poorly on the Blacks."

Wait— What? That made no sense at all. And he was at least pretty sure he hadn't been so preoccupied that he'd missed some key part of what Zabini was saying. "But Sirius has been locked up, and he isn't even my guardian!"

"Yes, well, it reflects even more poorly on Dumbledore, but the people who follow him don't care so much about that sort of thing, and the people who do care already hate him. Point is, now that Lyra's here and trying to rebuild the House of Black, she has a responsibility to make sure you know everything you need to know to eventually take over as the leader of your own House someday."

"That's ridiculous— She's not responsible for me! She's the same age as us! We're kids."

It was incredibly irritating, the way people (Mira, Blaise, Sirius, even the people they'd sat with at Mira's wedding reception) kept treating Lyra like an adult while he was treated like an ignorant child (by Lyra as well as the rest of them).

"In noble, pureblood culture, that really doesn't matter. Besides, does she act like you're the same age? I can't tell you much about her past, or where she came from, but I can tell you she never really got a childhood."

Harry glowered at him. "Yeah, well, neither did I," he snapped. Apparently it didn't matter, since he already bloody well knew. "What difference does that make?"

"I don't mean she didn't have a childhood like her childhood was a shitty, abusive mess like yours —" (Harry studiously ignored that jibe.) "—or some sort of weird ongoing psychological experiment like mine, I mean she literally has never been treated like a child. She was raised to take over her House, which means she's had adult responsibilities and expectations thrown at her since she was old enough to wipe her own arse. Which, if your parents had lived, you probably would have been, too. Being the last descendent of a Noble house is kind of a big deal."

Yeah, not touching that. Lyra had tried to explain already that it was important to learn all of these things because Lord Potter, he just couldn't wrap his head around the concept. He considered asking what else Blaise knew about her childhood — he was rabidly curious about where she had bloody come from, and he was sure Blaise knew — but he suspected that would only alert the other boy to the fact he'd just let something slip that Harry hadn't already known. "Weird psychological experiment?"
"You have met my mother, right?" Blaise shook his head, waving a hand dismissively. "Not important. Point is, this is all the rationalization for Lyra trying to help you assimilate and catch up. If I had to guess what the actual reason is? Because she really doesn't understand you. At all. And that bugs her. All this stuff, learning French and politics and how to make a good impression, that's how you gain power in our world, and she really can't conceive of anyone not wanting to gain power."

"Yeah, well, not all of us are Slytherins, you know." Actually, he thought Blaise had to be completely off the mark on that one, because Lyra herself wasn't even a bloody Slytherin.

"Yeah, but we all want to have enough power and influence to make our own choices, be able to just tell people to piss off when they won't leave you alone, and so on. Not really that ambitious, just having some control over your life. And I think you want that, too, but you really don't know how to get it."

...Okay, maybe not so far off the mark, then. Harry really had to wonder if Zabini was reading his mind right now, because that sounded...eerily plausible.

"Which makes sense, given that you were raised by middle-class muggles who didn't give a damn about you. But Lyra thinks it's perfectly obvious how these things are connected, so she sees reluctance to learn all this stuff and the way you really don't care about being Lord Potter to be a rejection of the opportunity to gain some control over your life. Which, you have to admit, is completely illogical — and you may have noticed, she hates it when people act illogically."

Er. Yes, Harry had noticed that. Not that he would have put it in those words, exactly, but being literally backed into a corner by a naked Lyra was a difficult thing to forget. "She, uh...told you, about the um...clothing conversation, then?"

Zabini just gave him a knowing smirk. "Well, you were being a bit stupid about it."

"What, like you wouldn't? I mean..."

"It's really not a big deal. And I'm not just saying that because my mum likes to walk around in her knickers."

Harry had absolutely nothing to say on the subject of Mirabella Zabini's knickers. Or her uncomfortably distracting tiny housecoat. From the way Zabini was grinning, he definitely knew what Harry was thinking.

"Are you reading my mind right now?"

"I really don't need to."

"Shut up," Harry muttered, suddenly very aware of how hot his face was.

Zabini grinned.

Harry had a feeling this occlumency thing was going to be even worse than he'd thought. "You're really enjoying this too much, you know," he said, as evenly as he could.

Zabini just grinned wider.

Samuel Connors had never really liked Mirabella Zabini, not from the moment Jack had introduced
her as his new girlfriend. She'd struck him, back then — almost seven years ago, now — as a flighty ditz just itching to snare herself a rich, older man. He'd thought less of Jack for dating her. Even as he learned more about her, like that she'd already outlived one husband (already had a small fortune of her own), had become an uncommonly successful venture capitalist after his death (couldn't be as empty-headed as she seemed), and had a seven-year-old son she hardly ever talked about (had to be older than her mid-twenties), there was just something about her he'd never really trusted. Something off.

She was too... It was too easy to trust her, he thought. She was too smooth, too...too perfect for Jack in every possible way, like she had somehow sussed out exactly what he wanted in a woman, and gone out of her way to become it. Like her whole persona had to be an act of some sort. If someone had walked into his office even today and told him that she was really a grifter playing some complicated long con on them all, he'd probably believe them. Even though she'd never once slipped in her act in the seven-ish years he'd known her, even though her tenure as the CEO of his and Jack's company had included the best years they'd had since it was founded, even though everyone who worked with her (from the Board to the VPs to their clients and partners) loved her, and there was no reason whatsoever to believe it, he probably would, because there was just something that didn't quite add up.

What that thing was, he had no idea. He wasn't a people person, he was a bloody engineer. But he was sure there was something. She made him even more uneasy (and in a different way) than people usually did.

She went through way too many kitchen appliances, for one thing. (Yes, he knew that was a ridiculous thing to consider suspicious, and no, he didn't care — it was absolutely true. How that woman kept shorting out microwaves and electric ranges he would never understand.)

So when she had asked him for a meeting the Monday after Christmas, he'd been naturally suspicious. She knew he didn't like her — he'd even be willing to bet that she knew why far better than he did himself. She'd clearly gone out of her way to try to befriend him over the years. She had assured him at her wedding to Jack that she had no intention of disrupting their friendship, asked him to give the eulogy at his funeral. She'd shuffled him aside when it came to determining the new CEO so deftly that he hadn't even noticed — not that he was complaining, why would he want to deal with people all day when he could stay in R&D? She generally acted like they were friends, inviting him to her son's birthday party every year and asking him to come over to help with her appliance problems, as though he would eventually admit defeat if she just acted like she'd already won him over.

It was never going to happen. There was just something...almost patronizing, he supposed, about the way he always felt like she was managing him. And everyone else, really. She made him uneasy, and that was that.

Or so he had thought, before Monday.

Before she'd, well...

Before she'd sworn him to secrecy and told him that she was a witch.

That wasn't really the purpose of the meeting, that had been to pitch an idea for a new project, something she had described, completely seriously, as the greatest and most important puzzle of his life.

Magic was real. (Magic is just science that we don't understand, yet.)
He was slightly surprised how well he'd taken it.

Magic was real, and Mirabella wanted him to look into ways to...to make it more accessible to everyone, not just people like her, who had some innate talent for...whatever it really was. To find ways to use it to improve their own technologies. To become the forerunner of—of an entire new science, a science that defied the laws of physics as he knew them, a science that seemed only to be limited by...well, he had no idea, really. That was kind of the point.

Because, she said, there were forces at work in her world (the world of magic, supposedly hiding in plain sight behind some grand masquerade, with the assistance of a worldwide government conspiracy at the highest levels) which would inevitably lead to the exposure of magic to the non-magical population at large, not to mention the advances in technology over the past decade — the days of the "Statute of Secrecy" were numbered, even if no one else knew it yet. She intended for them to be ahead of the curve when the day finally came that it all fell apart.

"And," she'd said, calmly sipping tea on the other side of his desk, "if we want to have the slightest hope of shaping the process of that revelation and retaining some semblance of order as the world at large readjusts to the idea of magic, well. We have a lot of work to do."

Of course, she hadn't been able to offer proof.

Or rather, she had offered proof, with the caveat that it would probably fry everything electronic within a twenty foot radius, which seemed like a very good reason not to take her up on it. In lieu of that, she suggested he come to her private New Year's party, at her home, where, apparently, there would be many other "mages" who would offer him all the proof he could possibly want. As awkward and unintuitive as it seemed, he would probably be more skeptical if he hadn't already distrusted her. He'd already known there was something off about her, he couldn't see what she possibly had to gain by lying to him about this, and he'd known her long enough that he was fairly confident she wasn't schizophrenic (which had, admittedly, been his first hypothesis).

He'd only been here for five minutes — long enough to be led to the salon she'd chosen to use for the evening, obtain a drink, and find his way to an unobtrusive corner (where he could safely avoid the other guests — he really hated parties, especially when he was abandoned to mingle) — and he already had enough proof to begin questioning his own sanity.

He'd never been in this part of the house before, and there wasn't anything very obviously unusual about it, the furniture and books and paintings all looked normal enough.

But the lights weren't electric.

They weren't anything, as far as he could tell.

They just were, a dozen glowing spheres hovering about a foot below the ceiling with no visible means of support. He hadn't noticed them immediately, but he'd been staring at the nearest one in shock for well over a minute now. He couldn't seem to look away.

"Sam? What are you doing here?"

He blinked. Mirabella's son was standing in front of him. Blaise. Sam liked Blaise considerably more than Mirabella, if only because he never tried to engage Sam in silly conversations about nothing. That he hardly acted like any other child Sam had ever met, even when he was seven or eight, also helped. He had a girl with him tonight.

"Lyra, this is Sam, he's the head of Research and Development at Mum's company. Sam, this is
Lyra, she's a friend of mine from school."

"Uh, hi. How do you do..." he said, going to take a sip to distract himself from the awkward way she was just staring at him, her head cocked slightly to one side as though she didn't quite know what to make of him, but discovering his glass to be empty.

Odd. He didn't recall finishing it.

"If he works for Mira, does that mean he's a muggle?" she asked.

"Yes. I didn't think he knew about magic. I'm going to find Mum. Try not to break him before I get back."

"What's a muggle?" Sam tried to ask, but Blaise was already gone, leaving him with the girl — he'd already forgotten her name.

She was still staring at him. He squirmed — didn't this kid ever blink? "A muggle is a non-magical person," she explained, then grinned, showing, he thought, far too many teeth. "A non-magical human, specifically. I do love it when Mira decides to break the rules."

"Uh, what?" he said absently, his eyes straying back to the lights, wondering if he could drag a chair over to see one up close. "Wait, did you say human? As in, there are non-humans?"

"You're not supposed to know about magic. And yes." Her grin grew even wider. "Would you like to meet one?"

Well, that would be proof, wouldn't it...not that he was really doubting magic so much as his own eyes, at the moment. "Are you seeing this? These light things?"

She made a face at him. "Fine, we'll start with something simpler."

She pulled a wooden...wand, he supposed, from her sleeve (It couldn't have possibly fit there, could it? It was definitely longer than her forearm...) and began to wave it around the two of them, muttering something under her breath. A glowing wall appeared around them before fading into invisibility.

"What are you...?"

"Palings. Privacy charms. Avoidance charms. Now we won't be interrupted by boring people, or Blaise. Pretty sure explaining magic counts as breaking you."

"So, magic... Mirabella was serious? I think I need to sit down," he muttered. There were no chairs over here.

"No, stay here," the girl insisted, blocking his path. "I'll have to re-do the palings if you cross them. I'll get one. Accio!"

A nearby armchair slid toward them. A few people's heads turned, watching it move, though they apparently lost interest all at once as it came to a rest just beside Sam. He leaned hard against the wall behind him. The girl was laughing at him.

"I always did think it would be fun to break the Statute," she said, still giggling. "But this is better than I expected. I've hardly done anything yet, you know. Go on, sit down."

He sat. It wasn't as though he had much of a choice, his knees were suddenly refusing to hold his
"What, the Summoning Charm? It's just a simple physical force spell, creates an attraction between
the caster and an object. Well, a bit more than that, really, there's a weak element to anchor the
caster so you don't accidentally summon yourself into a wall or something, and there's a limit on
the area that you can pull from that's dependent on how precisely you know the location of the
thing you're summoning and the amount of power you put into it. I can show you the arithmancy, if
you want." She shrugged. "It's not complicated."

"Let's... Let's start with something simpler," he managed to say. "The lights. How do the lights
work?"

"Uh, simplest explanation? Transforming magical energy into visible light."

"But— What is it — magic?"

The girl raised an eyebrow at him. "How much time do you have?" Apparently no answer was
required, since she waved the magic wand again, muttered a word, and a stack of paper and a
simple charcoal pencil appeared in mid-air. She caught them as they fell and pointed the wand at
the paper. "Rigesco!" A blue...light-like something — it moved too slowly to be actual light —
sank into the pages, obviously stiffening them, as she proceeded to sit with her back to his chair,
propping them up on one knee as though there was an invisible clipboard behind them. "So, we live
in what's called the mundane plane," she said, beginning to draw some sort of diagram.

Some time later, they were surrounded by stiff sheets of paper, Sam's mind was spinning, and the
girl was talking about something called charms — a sub-discipline of magic, he gathered, which
she frequently contrasted with transfigurations — the transformation of magical energy to physical
force or light, and the theoretical modeling of the charm responsible for the light globes floating
near the ceiling. She'd cast it several times as part of her explanation, there were now three within
his reach, differing slightly in the intensity and color of the light produced. He'd waved his hand
through one, encountering no resistance, no change in temperature or other indication he had
touched anything at all, though the disturbance had produced a series of ripples within the space of
the charm, creating patterns of greater density of light and shadow on the walls until it stabilized
again.

They were interrupted by Mirabella stalking into the room and saying loudly, "I know you're in
here, Lyra!" It seemed the barrier the girl had put up around them was only invisible from this side,
or perhaps made them invisible, since Mirabella didn't seem able to immediately identify their
location. Everyone else had apparently moved to another room — Sam hadn't noticed them go. She
stood in the middle of the room waving a magic wand of her own for several minutes before
stalking over to their corner. About five feet away, she stopped to wave the wand again.

"Lyra! What exactly do you think you're doing?" she snapped a few seconds later, glaring at the
girl at her feet.

The girl looked up, tilted her head to one side. "I'm not the one who invited a muggle to the party."

"I know that — I invited him. That's not what I asked."

"Well, no, but I thought that should be obvious. I'm teaching your muggle basic magical theory,
since you apparently didn't bother."

"He didn't even believe magic was real until he got here! I'm sorry about her, Sam, Lyra can be a
bit...overzealous."
"Ignore Mira, Sam, she's terrible at arithmancy, anyway, I doubt she has any idea how half the spells she does work. So, the initial charm acts as a catalyst of sorts, to transform ambient magical energy into light, focused on a sphere, the diameter of which is defined by—" Her words were cut off, briefly, by a quick flick of Mirabella's wand. When her voice returned half a second later, it was with a very offended sounding, "Rude much, Zee? If you wanted to explain magic, you shouldn't have left him standing around unattended. Though as I said," she added, apparently addressing Sam, "I'm way better at this sort of thing."

"I didn't— No, I don't have to justify myself to you," she said, sounding more annoyed and off-balance than Sam had imagined she could sound. "Sam, would you like another drink?" She plucked his empty glass from his hand without waiting for a response, crossing to the bar to refill it, pouring one for herself as well. "Lyra — Harry, Blaise and his friends are in the television room. I suggest you join them."

"But I only got halfway through explaining the light globe charm, he's just going to be more confused if I leave off now. The focal point is defined by this part of the arithmantic formula," she added, underlining the appropriate phrase. "Ambient magical energy is drawn toward this point at a rate dependent on—"

"Lyra! There are some things I need to discuss with Sam. Please excuse us."

Sam could hear the pout in the girl's voice as she said, "Fine. But you should know you're no fun at all. Here," she scribbled one last line on a stiffened sheet of paper (Lyra Black, Hogwarts) gathering the others with a wave of her hand. "Write me if you have questions, I'll be at Hogwarts after the first week of January." Mirabella raised an eyebrow at her. "What? His questions are interesting. No one ever talks about the real fundamentals of magical theory, and we didn't even get to transfiguration at all. Anyway," She rose to her feet, turning to Sam. "These will last a day or so before the conjuration fails, you should copy anything you want to keep before then."

She dropped the stack of pages on his lap and made a crude gesture at Mirabella before flouncing off without giving him an actual address. Which was rather annoying, because he didn't really doubt that he would have questions — he already had questions, and even if Mirabella did answer them, he would still welcome a second source of information, for confirmation, if nothing else.

Mirabella handed him a brandy on the rocks with a sigh. "So, I take it Lyra managed to convince you that magic is, in fact, real?"

All Sam could do was nod. "How am I supposed to write her? She didn't give me an address."

Mirabella hovered behind him to look over his shoulder at the last page, snorted slightly. "Well, you'd need a post owl to send something directly to Hogwarts. I presume she'll realize that eventually."

Post owl? As in, a messenger bird? That was just absurd. And didn't answer his question at all. It appeared, in fact, that Mirabella had no intention of answering him at all, as she immediately moved on to a new topic.

"Well, now that we've established that magic is real, I'll be introducing you to an artificer called Devin Troy — I have it on good authority she'd be interested in working on magitech from our side of it — the magical side, that is. One of my contacts in Accidental Magic, you know. We'll probably have to design a new laboratory. There's a property in Kent that might suit, but we'll have to consult with Devin on the warding specifications."

"Okay, yes, fine. But about this light charm?" Sam poked the nearest example again, sending
shivers of light across the ceiling. "Where does the energy come from?"

Mirabella clicked her tongue. "Something, something, ambient magic?"

"That sounded like a question, and definitely wasn't an answer."

"Okay, yes, fine, I have no idea how it works. I was planning on Devin explaining the technical details — not really my area of expertise."

That was an understatement if ever Sam had heard one. "Why can't that girl explain the technical details?"

"That girl is thirteen. She's not even taking Arithmancy, and she has no practical experience in object enchanting."

"So? She seemed to know what she was talking about." Granted, she seemed to have little to no idea how physics worked (beyond the most elementary understanding) but she seemed to be very familiar with the theoretical basis of magic.

"She does," Mirabella admitted. "But she's... There are better teachers, let's leave it at that."

*Let's leave it at that* was Mirabella-speak for *shut up, Sam, I don't want to hear it.*

So, fine, he'd shut up about it. But there was no way he was just going to *leave it.* And much as he hated parties he wasn't going to leave *here* either, not until he obtained the girl's actual contact information. It hadn't escaped his notice that Mirabella had yet to approach this other witch about the project, and there was no way he was waiting however long it took her to do so to get the rest of that explanation.

This was, after all, the greatest and most important puzzle he was ever likely to encounter in his life.

Chapter End Notes

*Hey, another winter holiday chapter! (Part 2 of 3)*

*There are some parts of this one I'm not too sure about, including Harry's little freak out in the second scene, but eh. I tried.*

*Other notes: You may have noted that Lyra sometimes uses the word "soul" as though it's interchangeable with "magic", but not always. This is because wizards don't really have a solid conception of the "soul" and what it is. So she thinks of it differently based on the context and things she's been told or read about that situation. It doesn't bother her, really (though it would REALLY bother Hermione).*

*Also, before anyone complains about yet another "blatantly explaining Lyra's motivations scene" I would like to point out this one is more about Blaise pointing out Harry's issues and making him confront his own motivation (or lack thereof) without making him all defensive. (Though making him panic about the abuse was pretty much just for fun. Blaise isn't really a nice person any more than Lyra is, and Harry did ask for it...) —Leigha*
"Granger residence, Hermione speaking. May I ask who's calling?"

"Hello, Hermione," a very distinctive voice responded. She wasn't quite certain how to describe it, but there was a somewhat...almost musical quality to it, smoother and more...confident, she supposed, than any other boy she knew. As soon as she heard it, she knew she really didn't need him to identify himself, though of course he did anyway, since she'd already asked. "It's Blaise."

"Um, hi?" Honestly, she couldn't imagine why he was calling — or, for that matter, "How did you get my number?"

Blaise chuckled. "You are in the telephone directory, you know."

Which, well, she did know that, she just hadn't expected anyone from school to know what a phone book was, let alone use it to find her. "Oh, yes, of course. And, um...why are you calling?"

"Do you have plans today?"

The Grangers had returned from visiting Hermione's father's family in France on New Year's Day, and her parents had gone back to work today. Hermione had thought to spend the day curled up in bed with a novel, but that wasn't really plans, per se. Still, it was the first day she'd had to herself since coming home from school, and she hesitated to give it up.

Especially since she was fairly certain that the only reason Zabini would call her was because Lyra had asked him to invite her to do something with them, and Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about that. Spending more time with Lyra.

She had almost stopped being mad at her about blowing the two of them up with her stupid, impulsive attempt to do runic casting, but she was definitely still mad about her getting the time turner confiscated. Lyra said she'd asked Snape and he said they could have it back after the holiday, since they had no legitimate reason to need it at all if there were no classes to attend — that was the excuse for it, after all — but Hermione would believe that when she saw it.

And it really, really bothered her that Lyra had spent the better part of six (subjective) months lying to Hermione about who she was and where she came from. Not so much because she thought she had any more right to know than anyone else, she probably wouldn't have believed it if Lyra had just come out and told her, anyway, because it was so bloody impossible, but — It just bothered her, on a fundamental level, being lied to. The fact that it was enormously obvious that Lyra was lying didn't really help, it was just the principle of the thing — giving people bad information was wrong. Rubbing Hermione's face in the fact that she was being lied to almost made it worse.

But that wasn't the reason she was so ambivalent about hanging out with Lyra outside of school (where she arguably couldn't be avoided). She just...wasn't sure how she felt about the other girl. Well, no, she was sure, she felt that Lyra was dangerous. But she hadn't managed to decide yet whether that meant she should try to actively distance herself from her. (Not that she had even the faintest idea how she might do that, if she did decide she ought to.)

After all, she'd thought Lyra was dangerous ever since she'd reduced Malfoy to tears in the middle of the Great Hall and then dragged her off to discuss their transfiguration homework as though it
meant nothing to her (which, apparently it probably hadn't), and Hermione had still kept spending
the vast majority of her free time with her. After a few months of time turning, she'd even started
actively seeking her out in the third shift, just because, well...it was amazing to have so much free
time — Hermione had *never* had that much time to do whatever she wanted, ever — but it was
also *lonely*, spending what amounted to half of her waking hours hiding away so no one would
realize what there were two Hermiones about. Granted, she'd spent most of her life alone and
friendless, but she'd grown accustomed to having other people around *shockingly* quickly.

And for the most part, Lyra hadn't been a poor companion to pass the time. Yes, she had bullied
Hermione into going to the Bookstore more than once, but the idea of magic being restricted
really was stupid, and Hermione *did* like learning new things, so she couldn't be *too* upset over that.
Lyra was always willing to discuss whatever she was reading, and could not only keep up, but
could make well-reasoned arguments when their opinions differed on, say, the value of spending
nearly a month on theory — as they had in Hermione's first-year Charms class — versus jumping
straight into performing magic — as in their first Transfiguration lesson. (Lyra, unsurprisingly, had
been in favor of Professor McGonagall's approach, but that might have just been for the sake of the
argument — she really *did* like Theory.) And, though Hermione didn't like to think about it too
much, Lyra *kept buying her books*. Hundreds — *thousands* — of pounds worth of books. And she'd
never asked for anything in return. Which was just absurd, but also very, *very* nice, and more than
a bit suspicious, really, she'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop even before the whole...*not
doing emotions* conversation.

Which, well. She was trying to wrap her head around the idea that the girl who was, for all intents
and purposes, her best friend, was a bloody psychopath. She was trying to look at it — at *Lyra* —
objectively. But she was starting to think that she was biased in favor of Lyra simply because, no
matter how much she might annoy or even outright *enrage* Hermione (or physically *blow her up*),
she was *interesting* and *smart* and Hermione *wanted* to keep being her friend, if only because, well,
aside from Harry, she'd never really *had* friends, and she *liked* Lyra, at least most of the time.

So she found herself thinking things like, *it's not her fault* — if even half the things Lyra had said
so casually about her childhood were true... Hermione really didn't like to think about it, but to be
treated like *that*, by her own family, her own *father*, that could break *anyone*. And, well, she
couldn't be *sure* that Lyra had been telling the truth about any of that, but everything she and Blaise
had told her was consistent with everything Lyra and Lady Malfoy had discussed, and Lyra was
hardly capable of developing consistent lies. Besides, one *would* think that Lady Malfoy would
recognize Lyra as her sister. Lyra had even referenced their childhood in that conversation, and
Hermione was fairly certain she'd had no reason to lie *then*, probably *couldn't* have, given that she
was talking to someone who *knew* whether or not she was referencing a thing that had actually
happened.

Or things like, *it could be worse* — she'd already known Lyra wasn't a (normal) human.
She *could* have been a changeling or some kind of demon. Though, technically, she was pretty sure
that because she was from another dimension, Lyra *was* a demon, by at least one definition — not
the point. She could be one of the dark creatures Hermione had considered that actually *preyed on
humans for food*. That had been a very real possibility, and Hermione had kept putting off deciding
what she would do if that was the case, hoping it wouldn't happen. And it *hadn't*, but now she had
to decide what to do about *this*.

If it *had* turned out that Lyra was actually some sort of malicious dark creature, Hermione thought
she probably would have felt the need to tell someone — Professor McGonagall, maybe — to
make sure the authorities were aware and all the proper precautions were in place. She *had* asked
Professor Flitwick about Professor Lupin being a werewolf, and he had confirmed that he'd done
the wards on Professor Lupin's office, and she had nothing to worry about. But this...*this* wasn't
exactly the same thing. It wasn't like Lyra was automatically a danger to everyone around her just by virtue of their being in proximity to each other. She wasn't going to go around literally ripping people's hearts out or stealing their memories. But, well...

Did she want to continue associating with Lyra, knowing that she was never going to learn from her mistakes, and would probably periodically blow things up in Hermione's face (both metaphorically and literally) as long as she stuck around? If she did, did she have a moral obligation to try to...curb her more dangerous impulses? Somehow, she thought that would go over rather poorly. Not to mention ineffectively. But she wasn't sure she could just...sit by and watch as Lyra did...whatever came into her head, as far as Hermione could tell. If her only goals had been to revive the House of Black and kill whatever was left of Voldemort, maybe it wouldn't bother her, but she'd admitted that she basically worshipped Chaos (which, in hindsight, seemed perfectly obvious). Which implied that she would cause trouble just for the sake of it, if she felt so inclined. And knowing Lyra, she probably would. This was the girl who thought it was fun to make enemies of two thirds of their dorm on the very first night she was in the Castle.

So Hermione had spent the past few weeks, between the failed runic casting incident and Yule, trying and failing to decide what to do, hiding behind her anger about the time turner confiscation (and generally being busy, given that she suddenly had far fewer hours available) as an excuse to avoid Lyra as much as possible while she fretted over it.

And over that period, she supposed she had more or less managed to come to terms with it (in a rather weak, non-decision to just take things one day at a time sort of way). She'd resolved to just keep in mind that she might one day come to a point that she wouldn't be able to just stand by and watch Lyra bugger things up for the fun of it, and try not to get too invested in their friendship. (Because, all other things aside, Lyra certainly wouldn't. Did that even really count as friendship? Could one actually be friends with Lyra?) She might have to do something about Lyra someday, but she hadn't really done anything that Hermione felt the need to act on yet.

So when Lyra had caught her on the way down to the train and told her that she was doing that ritual of hers, and Hermione should come, if she really wanted to learn more about the Powers, she'd agreed. And now she was even more conflicted, because well... She'd re-read the book Lyra had given Harry about the Powers, after she had said she followed Chaos, and seeing her practicing what was very clearly black magic, it wasn't hard to put two and two together.

She was almost positive Lyra was a Black Mage. That that was the 'ill-advised ritual magic' she'd done as a child to protect herself from the Imperius, dedicating herself to one of the Dark Powers.

What that meant, exactly, she wasn't sure, the book didn't really go into detail, but it certainly sounded intimidating, as though Lyra was actually a priestess or prophet of Chaos, or something like that. And again, what that meant wasn't clear — Were there rites to perform? Did Chaos talk to her, give her commands? Was she going to try to convert Hermione? — but after that ritual, she was positive that it meant Lyra was even more unnerving than she'd thought, and quite possibly not as human as she claimed, all psychopathic tendencies aside. She might have been born human, sure, but Hermione was pretty sure humans couldn't just go around absorbing distilled darkness into their own bloodstream — or at least, not without serious consequences. And Lyra had seemed perfectly normal afterward, or at least as normal as she ever was. (Or at least, Hermione thought she was, it was a bit difficult to focus on anything other than the fact that she had casually invoked a bloody god to sit around and have a chat and that she'd apparently gotten news from home, which, since she was from another universe, meant she'd somehow seen or heard something from another universe.)

So now she was hesitating again, because while she might be more or less okay with (more like
resigned to) the not doing emotions thing (especially in light of Lyra's childhood) and generally making a religion out of annoying people (which would at least theoretically let Hermione predict Lyra's behavior to an extent), talking to gods, or believing you talked to gods was...

Well, that was insane. There was no other word for it.

Because as far as Hermione could tell, there was no more proof that The Powers existed as anything other than a model to conceptualize and interact with free magic than there was for the existence of God. No proof that they were anything external to the human or humans interacting with them, with agency of their own. So it was entirely possible — likely, even — that Lyra had actually just found a way to, to short-circuit the way mages normally interacted with magic, given herself some sort of brain damage, and now had something she called a Power in her head (which Hermione was pretty sure should be called an auditory hallucination), telling her to do god only knew what. The whole 'summoning Hermes' thing could easily have been magic taking on a form Lyra dictated, either consciously or as some sort of delusion made manifest. That certainly seemed more likely than a Greek god sitting around talking to a bunch of teenagers for a couple of hours, especially since that whole conversation had taken place in English.

Hermione had spent the whole week she and her parents had been in France trying to figure out if this theoretically made Lyra more unpredictable and unstable than she'd already thought, and what it meant for their relationship — not that they were in a relationship (she tried to ignore the way she felt uncomfortably warm just thinking that to herself), just. Whatever this not-quite-friendship thing they'd been doing ought to be called. And she...really didn't know. But it somehow felt more dangerous to associate with someone who was possibly delusional rather than just a psychopath (which at least indicated fairly clearly that Lyra was rational and therefore could be reasoned with). So now she was having second thoughts about continuing their...association, again.

She sighed, trying to put the dilemma aside for the moment. "That depends on why you're calling."

Blaise laughed. "Care to come to a bookstore with us?"

"Us? You and Lyra? And, do you mean the Bookstore, or...?"

"And Harry, if he wants to come, and no, a muggle bookstore. And maybe a movie — Justin said Jurassic Park was awesome."

Called it, but, well that was just...odd. Not the movie part, she'd heard good things about it, too, though it was supposedly a bit on the violent side. "Why are you going to a muggle bookstore?"

And then there was a commotion of some sort on the other end of the line — she heard something that sounded very much like Lyra saying, "Give it, I'll explain!" from several feet away, and then, "Hang on a second, I'm putting you on speaker."

The thought struck her that it was very odd that Blaise Zabini, of all people, was not only capable of using a telephone, but familiar enough with it to casually say something like I'm putting you on speaker. Lyra had told her he was more familiar with muggle culture than most of their yearmates, and he had mentioned attending a muggle prep school before Hogwarts, but somehow Hermione hadn't imagined that meant he used muggle technology on a regular basis.

(Hermione's feelings on Zabini weren't nearly as complicated as those about Lyra, but she wasn't entirely certain what to think of him, either. "I'm more like Lyra than you, but more from habit and inclination," he'd said — who just decided to be a bloody sociopath? How was that even possible? Especially since he was clearly capable of some degree of empathy — he hadn't been wrong about anything he'd told Lyra about how Hermione was feeling about her...revelations about her
childhood. She was fairly certain that being empathetic and refusing to acknowledge it was just called *being an arse.*

"There."

"Did it work? Can you hear me, Hermione?"

"Hi, Lyra."

Blaise chuckled again. "Don't sound so excited, Maïa."

Since when did Hermione have a nickname?

"Yes, hi, whatever. I need better physics books, Sam said something about quantum."

Hermione wasn't sure, but the idea of Lyra studying quantum physics might be the worst idea she'd ever heard. She couldn't even imagine what she might be trying to do. "Why? And—"

Lyra answered the first question before Hermione managed to get the second one all the way out. "I'm trying to explain magic to Sam."

"—who's Sam?"

"Sam is the head of Research and Development at LES," Blaise explained.

Which just... "Really, Lyra? You have heard of the Statute of Secrecy, yes?"

"Hey, it wasn't my idea. I'm just explaining the technical details since it apparently didn't occur to Mira that her muggle Ravenclaw would want a proper explanation of magical theory, and she apparently hasn't gotten anyone else in on it yet who has any understanding of arithmancy whatsoever. And besides, the Statute of Secrecy is absolutely idiotic, I refuse to follow stupid laws."

Hermione snorted. She wasn't even going to touch that discussion. They'd already had three (and a half) debates about the merits of Secrecy, and in any case, Lyra did follow it, at least insofar as she didn't go around using magic in front of muggles indiscriminately. "And you know enough about magical theory to explain the technical details?"

"Uh, yes? But he kept trying to compare things I was telling him to muggle science things I've never heard of, so. Physics books. Are you in?"

"I don't know, Lyra..." Hermione hesitated. She felt inexplicably uneasy about the idea — not only about Lyra having information on quantum physics (she'd probably figure out how to transfigure antimatter or something and annihilate the bloody school), but on a comprehensive discussion of magical theory making its way into the muggle world. Not that she thought this person would spread it around (she didn't know much about Blaise's mother, but she was a Department Head at the Ministry, so Hermione was sure this man was trustworthy, and Ms. Zabini must have a good reason for telling him about magic), but it was the sort of thing that could bring the Statute down around their ears, if it got into the wrong hands.

Okay, maybe that was a perfectly explicable reason.

"I'll give you copies of everything I send to Sam."

Which— *Damn it, Lyra! Okay.*
See, the thing was, Hermione didn't really know anything about magical theory beyond what they'd covered in Charms and Transfiguration, and everything she'd been able to find in the library (even in the Restricted Section) had been either incomprehensible gibberish (advanced arithmancy was very unlike any maths she'd ever seen) or fuzzy metaphysical philosophizing. Hermione had long since (reluctantly) accepted the fact that (regardless of her sanity or lack thereof) Lyra was leagues beyond her in Arithmancy (enough that she'd probably never catch up), so if she was willing to write out an explanation of Magic that she thought a muggle should understand, Hermione was definitely interested.

Who knew, it might even give some insight into Lyra's own...connection with Magic, and the degree to which it affected her perception of the world around them. (Hermione really wanted some sort of indication that Lyra wasn't really as delusional as the whole Powers thing suggested. She was pretty sure that as long as she acknowledged that, she was still being objective...ish.)

Besides, Hermione somehow doubted that refusing to cooperate would stop Lyra from going out and finding the information she needed on her own. Granted, it might take her quite a lot longer, but she could be very persistent when she wanted to be, and it hadn't escaped Hermione's notice that the more anyone tried to stand in the way of Lyra doing something, the more motivated she was to do it.

Of course, Hermione knew herself well enough to recognize when she was just trying to rationalize something she really wanted to do for selfish reasons, but that didn't stop her being pretty good at it, if she did say so herself. She might as well take the bribe, she decided — it wasn't like she would be doing anything more than speeding up the process of Lyra destroying the world by a couple of weeks.

"Ugh, fine. My parents are at work, I'll have to call and ask if I can go."

Not that she really expected they'd say no. It had been somewhat disorienting (okay, extremely disorienting) that they had agreed to let her go to the Yule ritual at the Zabinis' house so quickly. Dad had been a bit reluctant — they hadn't even met Ms. Zabini — but Hermione did spend nine months of the year at a boarding school hundreds of miles away in what amounted to another bloody country. If she was responsible enough to do that, she was obviously responsible enough to spend an evening at a friend's house. She was quite certain the same logic would apply to her accompanying them to Foyles, or more likely, one of the university bookstores.

Not that she had made that argument, she'd half been hoping that they'd say no and give her a convenient excuse not to go, given her aforementioned ambivalence about continuing to associate with Lyra. Mum was just thrilled that Hermione had made friends who actually wanted to see her outside of school (which was a bit...well, it was true she'd never really had friends before, she was well aware of that, it just seemed rude, somehow, to point it out as she had), and had therefore practically insisted she go.

Of course, Mum didn't really know anything about Lyra. Yes, she'd made it into a rather absurd percentage of the letters Hermione had written over the course of the term, but that was almost entirely because Hermione had been time turning and hadn't been speaking to Ron (who always did his best to monopolize Harry's time, even when they weren't fighting), and therefore had spent far more time with Lyra than anyone else.

But ever since the troll incident back in first year, Hermione had taken to...very selectively editing the news that made it into her letters. At first, she just didn't want them to worry, or even withdraw her from school if they thought it was too dangerous, but there had been more and more things she didn't want them to know — they had no idea that she'd accidentally turned herself halfway into a
cat almost a year ago exactly, or spent over two months petrified last spring. Which, on the one hand, it was absolutely horrifying that no one else had told her parents — they'd just held the letters Mum had written for her until she was unpetrified, Mum still thought Hermione had been deliberately ignoring her for all those weeks — but it was also kind of convenient, since she was sure they would have found some way to pull her out of Hogwarts after that.

So she hadn't told her parents about Lyra forcing her to abuse the time turner; or their day trips to an illegal bookstore in London; or Lyra blowing up the common room; or sneaking into the Restricted Section and reading about Dark (and illegal) magic; or Lyra blowing the two of them up just a month ago; or the fact that she was apparently the alter ego of one of the most notorious psychopaths in recent Magical British history, from an alternate timeline and three decades in the past; or anything about her suspicions that Lyra was a Black Mage and all that implied.

All Mum knew was that Hermione had a new roommate who was actually smart enough to keep up with her, and she'd somehow convinced Professor McGonagall to let them have their own room because the other girls were such bullies (because she had told Mum about Lavender and Parvati being horrible, that was normal enough drama that she'd judged it safe to share). Mum knew that Lyra was a transfer student, but she didn't know she was a compulsive liar (albeit a really bad one). Mum knew that Lyra was related to the mass murderer Sirius Black the Grangers had seen on the news over the summer, but she didn't know Lyra insisted he was innocent, and fully planned to help him evade the authorities if she somehow managed to find him before the dementors. She knew that Lyra was edging Hermione out of the top spot in their class without even trying (which was incredibly annoying), but she didn't know that Lyra was so unnaturally good at magic that Hermione had spent the better part of the term wondering if she was human at all.

Oh, and since Lyra had written to them directly, her parents were convinced she was a responsible, studious young lady who was interested in sharing the traditions of Magical Britain with Hermione. Which wasn't untrue, exactly, but seemed rather disingenuous, since she'd never really seen Lyra study anything that wasn't illegal and/or stupidly advanced ward-crafting, and the 'traditions' she wanted to share were definitely highly illegal black magic and incredibly disturbing. (She'd had to flat out lie about Yule, because there was no way she was telling her parents about anything that had happened that evening.)

Also, responsible and Lyra Black should never be mentioned in the same sentence.

Still, given that they had a completely inaccurate impression of Lyra (and Hermione couldn't bring herself to correct it, since it was largely her own fault), Hermione was sure her parents wouldn't object to Lyra dragging her off to a bookstore for the day, or even the movies.

Apparently Lyra agreed. "Hurry up, we'll be there in — what, Blaise, about an hour?"

"That sounds about right. I'll call a car as soon as we ring off, they should be able to meet us at the Bodleian in forty-five minutes or so."

"A car?" Hermione repeated.

"There's a public floo at a cafe in Oxford, about five minutes' walk from the main library. But I presume your house isn't within walking distance of that or a bookstore, so yes, a car." That sounded sarcastic, even for Zabini.

"Well, no, it's not, I just didn't realize... Never mind."

Lyra demanded her address over the sound of Zabini sniggering in the background, and within a few seconds, they had rung off, leaving Hermione staring at the phone, wondering absentely what
her parents would say if she told them exactly why she wanted to go out with her...friends. She supposed that was the best word, even though she was still extremely conflicted about Lyra, and couldn't really say she thought much of Zabini at all. At least Harry would almost certainly be coming, too. (He was just as bad as Hermione when it came to allowing himself to be dragged around by Lyra.)

She sighed, dialing the number for the clinic. On the plus side, going to see a movie was a perfectly normal thing she could tell her parents about, though she'd probably leave out the trip to the bookstore entirely, lest she be questioned about what sort of books Lyra was looking for. Hiding the better part of everything that happened in her life was beginning to seem a lot more difficult than she'd initially thought. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to tell her parents anything at all by the end of the year.

When had life become so complicated?

"You know it's really weird asking me to come to your office for a meeting and all," Lyra said, flopping into one of the visitor's chairs in front of Meda's desk. "I could've just come to your house, you know."

Meda hardly seemed to have heard her, riffling through a thick file, occasionally pausing to check one of the reference books from the shelf behind her. "You could have, yes, but this is business."

"And what business is this, exactly? Something about getting Sirius a trial, you implied in your letter."

"Hmm, yes. I prefer to wait for Dora before we get into the specifics."

"Dora? What's she got to do with it?"

Meda looked up at that, raised an eyebrow. "Who do you think started researching the circumstances of Sirius's incarceration? She is an Auror, and it is a major miscarriage of justice."

Huh. Lyra had...not expected that. It made sense, she supposed, but she hadn't realized Dora felt any sort of familial duty or loyalty toward the House of Black. Of course, it was clear Meda herself had never quite given up her Black roots, even if she was a class traitor (of which Lyra wholeheartedly approved), so perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that she'd raised her daughter with the standard brainwashing.

Only a few seconds later, nearly twenty minutes after their scheduled meeting time, Dora burst through the doorway. "Sorry I'm late! Penderghast just would not leave me alone. Somehow he found out you taught me the Black style of duelling, and now he wants me to teach him!"

"Hope you told him where he could stick his dueling knife. It's fine, by the way, I only got here five minutes ago."

"Of course I did, I hate that kid, he's so annoying," Dora complained. Seemed a bit hypocritical of her to call anyone else a kid, since she herself was quickly shrinking into a form that looked even younger than Lyra — small enough that she could sit comfortably cross-legged in her chair.

"You both got here earlier than I expected." That sneaky bitch, scheduling things early on purpose... "And I hardly see how it matters, Lyra. Your counterpart taught a rather absurd number of Death Eaters the style. It's not really a family secret anymore." Meda closed her file with a snap and exchanged it for a much thicker one. "In any case, that's not what we're here to talk about."
Dora jumped in with an enthusiastic grin. "Right! So, Mum may have told you, I started looking into the Sirius Black case pretty much as soon as you told me he'd been remanded to Azkaban without a trial. As far as I can tell, he fell through the cracks when Crouch was forced to step down as the head of the DLE, and after that, most everyone either assumed he had a closed trial, since he'd basically admitted his guilt according to the official report of his arrest, or else had been court-martialed, the whole thing handled internally and kind of hushed up since he was an Auror."

"But it wasn't." Lyra sighed, completely unsurprised by this. The degree of bureaucratic incompetence (or deliberate obfuscation and very competently performed false bureaucratic incompetence, which almost seemed more likely), was pretty much exactly what she expected from the Ministry.

"Nope, there's no record of any kind, anywhere, of any sort of trial. He's officially been in holding awaiting a trial since the third of November, Nineteen Eighty-One." Dora's grin had become a rather grim expression. "But there's never even been an attempt to actually get him a trial — I don't really know why—"

Meda clicked her tongue impatiently, cutting her off. "Politics, dear. The higher-ranked Death Eaters likely would have known that Sirius wasn't one of them, but they'd hardly risk their own freedom to defend his innocence, given that he had been one of the most effective Light fighters. Walburga and Narcissa considered him a Blood Traitor, and Arcturus had no political influence to speak of after Bellatrix's trial, so none of them would or could come to his defense. Plus there would have been significant pressure from both the Light and Dark to allow the House of Black to crumble — we did have our enemies. And of course the Aurors would have considered him an absolute traitor, so there would have been no help there."

Dora winced. "Er, yeah, some of the Seniors weren't too happy with me for looking into it even after this long, but I've got my badge, now, so I just told them to go fuck themselves." Meda frowned at her daughter, but Lyra utterly failed to stifle a snort of laughter. The girl ignored them both. "Sirius had his own enemies, too — people he'd fought against, people who thought he'd personally betrayed them. Any of them could have stolen or destroyed his case file. It could even have been some kid he bullied in school. I managed to track down a wizard who was in the year ahead of him at Hogwarts, and apparently he and Potter had a tendency to go a bit overboard with their pranks."

Ah, yes, Lyra did recall McGonagall comparing the two of them to the Weasley twins.

"Anyway, Sirius was only condemned on one occasion, by Snape, which, you've both met him, it was obviously sarcastic — what was the exact quote, Mum? I know I got you the interview transcript."

Meda flipped to a page in her file. "Auror Moody asked, 'Bellatrix Lestrange, known to the Death Eaters as Bellatrix Black or Lady Blackheart, was the right hand of You Know Who?' and Snape responded, 'No, you dolts, it was her cousin, Sirius. Of course it was Bellatrix!!"

"Right. And then the Prophet got hold of it out of context, and everything went completely out of control."

"He was under a truth potion at that time," Meda pointed out. "Which would generally preclude sarcastic responses—"

"He's a mind mage," Lyra interrupted. "You know how hard it is to compel an occlumens to do anything."
Meda glared her into silence. "I am aware, yes. However, that fact was not widely known at the time, so it's not entirely surprising that it was taken at face value by the Prophet. Knowing that, and based on the context, it's quite clear the statement was not intended to be taken seriously. It should be a simple enough prospect to have the statement dismissed as evidence. Especially since Snape's facetious claim was not supported by any other Death Eater's testimony."

Dora made a face as she picked up her report again. "None of it holds up, there's not even a consensus on how long he'd supposedly been a spy, they just condemned him on the strength of his family's reputation."

"To be fair, the Black family reputation was...rather impressive." Also to be fair, that reputation was established when they'd had a whole lot more Black Mages in the family, and reinforced mostly by stories about Lord Henry and the first Nymphadora, but still.

Meda nodded. "And from what I gather, many on the side of the Light perceived the Dark Lord as being at the height of his power in Eighty-One, and many had thought that the Ministry was on the verge of collapse. To people who had known of him as a child, impulsively joining the Dark wouldn't have seemed terribly out of character. He was cruel and vengeful as a boy, callous and distant, positively horrid to Narcissa — but then, the House rather encouraged such traits in its heirs." That was an understatement if Lyra had ever heard one. "And the Black Madness is a well-documented phenomenon."

"Yeah, well, according to Moody, the Order — you know about the Order of the Phoenix?" Dora asked, cutting herself off.

Sirius had mentioned it in passing, but he hadn't exactly elaborated on it. "I've heard the term, but no, not really."

"Professor Dumbledore set up this resistance movement, they tried to limit the damage the Death Eaters caused with their raids, showed up to fight in the major battles, tried to get muggleborns out of the country, that sort of thing. Sirius was one of them."

"Interesting... So, kind of like a Circle of Agastya, but Light?" Speaking of which, she wondered if a Circle had been convened to address the war. She kind of assumed not, since proper dark mages were generally more effective than any of Not-Professor Riddle's adversaries seemed to have been. Perhaps there just hadn't been a clear leader amongst the uncorrupted Dark to call for it. Certainly none of the Blacks could have done it.

Dora looked confused, but Meda nodded. "Somewhat more hierarchical, but yes, essentially."

"Yeah, well, I've never heard of that Circle thing, but anyway, according to Moody, the Order thought, in hindsight, that there were clues he'd known more about the Dark than he let on — he had never informed on Bellatrix and the people she trained, for example, when he was younger and still associated with them in the summers, and by the time he did reveal said information, it was already known from other sources. He was one of those pushing to escalate the war, which Dumbledore in particular saw as something that would play into the enemy's hands. No one ever saw him use dark magic, but many thought it suspicious that he knew so much about it — that he couldn't possibly not be using it when they weren't looking. And he was almost ridiculously over the top in his fervency against the Death Eaters."

"Which is obviously absurd for many reasons, but then no one has ever accused Dumbledore's followers of being especially intelligent or rational," Meda added drily.

Dora glared at her mother. "Hey! Dumbledore's a great man!"
"A great man who did nothing to ensure that Sirius had a trial over the past twelve years. D'you think he thought it was justice, to leave him sitting with the dementors for his betrayal?" Lyra asked, her tone as innocently curious as she could manage. The glare disappeared, replaced with doubt. Ha. Point to me. "Did Moody say anything about the Fidelius?"

Her niece grabbed the file from her mother, flipped through what were apparently her notes. "Uh, yeah. He was kind of vague on how it worked, but Sirius was the only one who could reveal the Potters' location, right? Apparently he went around giving people the Secret in person the first time, but they had to renew it for some reason, Moody didn't remember. The second time they were just shown a note with the Secret written down."

"Ha! I knew it!" Of course, Sirius had already confirmed this, but Sirius was easily confused at the moment. It was excellent news that they had a witness statement supporting it, so Lyra still thought it worth exclaiming over.

"Er, what?"

"Sirius was a decoy — the real secret keeper was that Peter Pettigrew he supposedly killed, he betrayed them and set Sirius up to take the fall. And now we have proof that the Secret Keeper could've been switched without anyone knowing!"

"Er, good." Dora nodded. "We'll come back to that. Anyway, it was open knowledge that Sirius didn't care for the way Dumbledore was running the Order — he could have been looking for a way out because he thought Dumbledore was going to lead them all to their deaths. And there were some people, including Moody, who thought that Sirius was jealous of James's relationship with Lily. It didn't seem unreasonable to think that impulsive, short-sighted Sirius Black might have decided to betray them sometime in the past two years due to unrequited love for his best friend and the stress of the war."

Lyra raised an eyebrow at that — love seemed like a really stupid reason to betray the person you loved, but what did she know? "So, what was that about Pettigrew?"

"Uh, they only found his finger?"

Meda and Dora gave her identically blank stares.

"Oh, come on! You're supposed to be an Auror — how many incendiary curses — no, how many curses, period — do you know of that would completely destroy a man's body, except for one finger? Not to mention his robes were barely scorched. It was obviously a set-up."

Mother and daughter exchanged a look. Dora went unnaturally pale. "How did nobody see that?"

Meda nearly whispered.

That was probably rhetorical, but Lyra decided to take it at face value. "My guess? They didn't want to see it. But the important part is, Pettigrew could still be alive somewhere — if we could find him and compel him to testify, Sirius's name would almost certainly be cleared."

Meda nodded, recovering her equilibrium. "So, I take this to mean that you do want to proceed with the case?"

"Uh, yeah? Obviously?"

Her sister smirked slightly. "Well, I've spent the last month pouring over the Black Family Law and all the relevant precedents. You're the last recognized member of the House, so I'm going to need your signature on a few things…"

After all the relevant paperwork was concluded, Lyra grinned. "So now you're my advocate, does
that mean our conversations are privileged? Like, if, hypothetically, I happened to have a bit of information on where Sirius or Pettigrew might be, could I tell you, or would it be better not to?"

Before Meda could answer, Dora groaned loudly. "What part of I am an Auror do you not understand?"

Lyra grinned. "I said hypothetically. You could hypothetically leave the room, first."

Dora just groaned again.

Lyra was having a very strange dream. Not that it was a bad one. She just felt... quite a lot more present than she generally did when she was asleep.

Eris?

"Good morning, my little bellatrice," the goddess said 'aloud', manifesting out of the nothingness before her.

Oh, have you finally decided to tell me what you did over Yule? Eris had been 'back' enough to talk to Lyra for nearly a week now, but she'd refused to give Lyra even a hint as to what she'd done. It was incredibly annoying. And also rather out of character. Normally the goddess loved to brag about her latest exploits.

"I heard that, ducky. I do not brag."

You totally do. So...?

Eris cackled. "Hmm, well, yes, I do, don't I? As for what I did, I thought I'd show you — birthday present."

Oh, right, I forgot about that. Not exactly unusual, it wasn't as though fourteen was an especially important age. There had been a family ritual, coming of age thing last year, but Zee had had to remind her of her twelfth when they'd returned to school the year before.

The blue-haired apparition clicked its tongue, shaking its head in a parody of disbelief. "You, forget your birthday? Perish the thought!"

Sigh, Lyra thought at her, very deliberately, causing her to break out in giggles again.

"First I think a bit of background might be in order... We'll start here."

Here was Arcturus Black's personal study, which emerged from the blankness around them in much the same way Eris's avatar had. It was a small room at the northwest corner of the Keep, windows behind the desk and in the wall on the left as one entered letting in enough light that it really shouldn't have seemed as dark as it always did. Everything from the tapestries on the walls to the bookshelves behind the enormous desk was intended to make its inhabitant seem more intimidating, which was probably necessary because while the Patriarch of House Black had once been a formidable man, slaughtering his way across Spain to get to the Dark Lord who had killed his wife and children, that was a long time ago. For as long as Lyra could recall, he'd been a broken shell of a wizard, hardly concerned with the goings-on within the House or even maintaining their political power outside of it.

As far as she could tell, he spent most of his time here, when he wasn't at some family gathering or mandatory public function. It was certainly the only place she'd ever seen him, and she'd seen him
quite a lot more often than any other member of the house under the age of about fifty or so. Every few months Cygnus or Walburga would complain to him that she was getting out of control (again) and he would invite her to tea and remind her of the deal he and Eris had come to when she was seven — wherein she avoided spreading too much chaos too near the Family, and he didn't disown her and kick her out, or otherwise make it impossible for her to protect Meda (and later Cissy). And she would be more careful to keep her little diversions quiet for a few weeks, until she had another idea that was just too good to resist. And then the cycle would repeat, though it had admittedly happened far less often since she'd gone to school, presumably because Professor Riddle wasn't as much of a whiny twat as Cygnus. Or possibly because he found her antics just as amusing as she did herself. It really could go either way.

But in any case, Arcturus was exactly where she expected him to be: seated in his heavy, leather-backed armchair behind his enormous black-stained desk. She would have been surprised if he wasn't, though she couldn't really imagine what the hell he did with all the hours he spent in here, supposedly working. Not like the Family ever really saw any results of his so-called work, and — she shifted her focus just slightly, to examine the book he was reading — yeah, modern history of Persia? She couldn't think of a single way that could possibly be relevant to any of the Blacks' interests. The closest thing was, what? Uncle Castor's stake in a now-defunct flying carpet importer? Sterling use of time.

An elf knocked briefly on the closed door before popping into the center of the open space. Arcturus set his book aside, glaring at it, but it was undeterred. "House Head Arcturus, sir, there is..."

Gods and Powers, she hated listening to elves try to speak English. Can we fast-forward through this part?

Eris rolled her eyes, but the...memory? It kind of seemed like it had to be a memory, though Lyra couldn't imagine Eris had been paying that much attention to a universe Bella wasn't even in anymore — it wasn't quite like they were seeing things from the goddess's perspective, either. Or at least, Lyra wasn't. It was nothing like when Eris had showed her Other Bella's dedication — for one thing, she was pretty sure this was all playing out in her own head, like using a pensieve.

"Almost right. Yes, we're in your mind. This is more of an illusory recreation of a specific space of time based on my awareness of it in hindsight than an actual memory. Far more accurate than a pensieve, though."

Right, basically a memory, then. From a human perspective, being able to reconstruct things that happened in the past and remembering them were practically interchangeable. Well, not in Divs, or at least, not in Divs as taught by anyone sober, but— Not the point. (Eris's amusement radiated through her perception.) The not-exactly-but-really-for-all-intents-and-purposes memory stuttered, skipping forward a minute or two, the elf disappearing from the room, leaving Arcturus to stare moodily at the door.

A few seconds later, Meda opened it, eyes red from crying and hands balled into fists, clutching the loose ends of her sleeves, a level of distress Lyra had never seen in her before.

What. Did. He. Do? She thought at Eris, each idea distinct, outlined with cold rage and implacable hatred.

Eris sent another wave of amusement coursing through her, which, really?! Whatever Cygnus had done, it wasn't a laughing matter! She drew together an avatar for herself to more clearly express her anger. "I fucking swear, Eris, if he touched her, we're going back. I swore I'd fucking kill him for her and I will, if it takes me another thirty years to figure it out!"
Not that she thought it *would* — some of the concepts in the muggle physics books she'd found were...very interesting, when juxtaposed with some of the recent developments in the study of time travel. She had a few good ideas of where to *start*, if she was going to try to go back.

"Oh, relax, ducky. It's *funny* because Cygnus hasn't done anything at all — just watch."

Lyra glowered at her patron, but bit her tongue as Meda took a seat before Arcturus, fidgeting and hesitating to answer his question about why she was there. Eventually, after an impossibly long moment of suspense — Eris had better not be drawing this out on purpose — she said, "It's about Bella."

"What has she done this time?" Arcturus asked, his tone of resignation *very* familiar.

He actually flinched as Meda nearly shouted, "Bella didn't do anything!" then realized who she was talking to. "I didn't— I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I'm sorry."

The old man rather uncharacteristically waved off her breach of etiquette. "No matter. What happened?"

"I think..." Meda's voice quavered, as though she was about to burst into tears. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, obviously trying to steady herself. It didn't work. She barely managed to keep her composure as she said, "She's gone. I think, I think he killed her. Father."

Eris burst into laughter. Lyra just stared, shocked.

What— *REALLY*? They just— She just— I don't know whether I should be touched or insulted, *honestly*, knowing that I would've killed him eventually...

"Well, it *is* a relatively reasonable explanation for where you disappeared to. And look at old Archie, he's terrified of what I might do to him, letting his house get so out of hand that one of my dedicates was killed by her own father." Eris tutted, then fell back into giggles.

It was true, Arcturus's face had gone a shade rather reminiscent of old porridge as the implications of Meda's accusation apparently occurred to him. "How do you know? Did you see it yourself? Could she not simply be somewhere else? With the Zabini girl, perhaps."

"No, she wouldn't leave," Meda insisted. "She promised, she wouldn't leave me with them. She promised."

Lyra winced slightly. It wasn't like she'd *meant* to, but she *had* broken that particular promise. Or rather, she *had* meant to, but to do so in such a way that it would render the entire timeline she'd left obsolete. (It wasn't really *breaking* a promise if you arranged things so that you could never have made it in the first place.)

"Oh, really, do you think so little of me?" Eris said, faking offence. "I *did* swear to help you protect her, if you recall, and since you've been removed from a position to do so in service to me, well... You'll see."

A furrow of concern began to develop across Arcturus's forehead. "When did you last see her?"

Meda hesitated, fidgeting a bit more under his penetrating stare. Had she ever spoken to him directly before? Lyra couldn't remember, but she was inclined to think not. It was probably understandable that she was nervous, sitting there in front of the person who (theoretically) held the most absolute influence over the course of her life, accusing the person who held the most direct power over her of murdering the only person who'd ever protected her. Arcturus was
basically the only hope Meda had of getting "justice" for Bella's "death" and she had no reason at all to think he would care, given his record of intervention in their lives (or, more to the point, the lack thereof).

"Andromeda?"

Meda flinched, but finally spoke. "Er, Lammas?"

Arcturus frowned openly at that. Meda shrank into her chair, as far from him as she could get. "Lammas was almost a month ago."

"I wasn't sure anything had happened!" Meda's voice was loud again, defensive, but it only took a few more words before she faltered again, tears appearing in her eyes. "I thought she'd just run off for a bit, gone to Zee's, with Monroe, or...doing whatever it is she does."

So, basically what Arcturus had thought at first, too. Lyra somehow doubted he'd have done anything but wait anyway, if Meda had come to him with this information weeks ago. "Worthless bastard," she muttered under her breath.

"I didn't think about it, she's gone a lot sometimes, I just thought... But she didn't come back! I waited, and waited, and she didn't come back, and I'm scared, and I asked Father, and—"

"What did he say?"

"I...don't remember, really. It's not important," Meda insisted. Her body language betrayed her, though, as she curled herself into a ball in her chair, seemingly entirely unaware of her own actions. "He didn't admit it, if that's what you're asking."

"What did he do to you when you asked?" For the first time Lyra had ever heard, Arcturus actually sounded as though he might do something. As though he would be forced to face the fact that the House of Black was rotting from within, and it was all his fucking fault.

Meda couldn't meet his eyes. Her voice became thinner and softer, as though there was a clear danger before her, and she had nowhere to run — as though she was trying to hide in plain sight. "Nothing bad. Not like Bella."

Arcturus's frown grew deeper, cutting harsh lines into his face. "What does he do to her?" He asked, in a tone of— Was that horror? Did he— He actually believed Cygnus had done it, didn't he! And this was the sort of thing even he couldn't overlook — Bella was, for better or worse, a very noticeable person — it would quickly become clear that she'd disappeared, if it wasn't already. She was kind of surprised Zee hadn't started poking around when she stopped answering her letters.

Meda slowly, haltingly began to speak, but Lyra wasn't concerned with what Cygnus had done to her. "What did he do to Meda?" she asked Eris again, her tone carefully even, but the weight of her rage so heavy around them it nearly choked her.

Eris sighed, rolled her eyes. "Nothing he hadn't done before."

Lyra made a conscious effort to relax. He hadn't touched her, then. Hadn't put her under the Imperius.

But for Meda to act like that... It had been the Crucius, it had to have been. She'd only been under it once before. Bella had been so angry when Meda finally told her about it that she'd nearly run away from Hogwarts and stabbed his fucking eyes out that very night. For once, she had been the
She conjured a knife with an errant thought and, without another word, stalked over to stand behind Arcturus's chair, grabbed his hair to pull back his head, and slit his useless, thrice-bedamned neck.

Eris did a credible job of playing out her little fantasy, hot, arterial blood spraying across a silent, wide-eyed Meda as he twitched and jerked against her grip, the life going out of him.

The tableau froze too soon, and Lyra wasn't nearly as satisfied as she would have been to see Cygnus's corpse splayed out across his desk, or if she'd been able to do it for real.

"Don't go getting too distracted, now, my little bellatrice." Eris shot Lyra a teasing grin. "We haven't gotten to the good part yet. But I promise, that was the last time he ever laid a finger on her, let alone a curse."

"Show me."

The goddess cackled, dark delight and malice coursing through them. "If you insist."

The room shifted. Eris had abandoned her avatar, and Lyra was no longer in Arcturus's study, but a ritual room — not one she recognized, but then, the Blacks had dozens of properties she'd never visited, let alone attended a ritual at. Cygnus was naked, bound to a plain wooden chair in the center of...

"Is that a summoning circle?" Lyra had never used one, never had a reason to go invoking demons, but it looked an awful lot like the ones she'd seen in some of the books in the cabinets in the library at Ancient House. Elements to weaken planar boundaries; compulsions to obey the summoner and speak the truth; bindings to hold the creature invoked within the circle...and an epithet for Eris in the place where she'd expect to see the name of a demon. "That's kind of insulting, isn't it?"

Eris sniggered, her response more thought than speech. Yes, well, your dear uncle Archie never did understand the finer points of high ritual. He got the important part right, though.

The old man looked his captive in the eye as he drew a knife lightly across his throat. It must have been cursed, because it cut far more deeply than Lyra would have expected, blood welling forth slowly enough — some other enchantment on him to draw out his suffering, or part of the ritual? — that she could see the full extent of the gaping wound. It had clearly managed to sever his windpipe. Desperate, useless gasps bubbled through his bloody throat, mouth working silently as he tried (and failed) to scream.

Lyra grinned. If she couldn't do that herself, getting to see it like this was almost as good. She really should ask Meda how Other Bella had done it. Maybe if she said please, she'd share the memory. It was Lyra's birthday, after all.

Arcturus dropped the knife, stepped backward out of the circle, sat in a nearby chair, which just...not only was he attempting to summon a goddess as though she was some mere demon, but he planned on sitting in comfort while he waited for her arrival? Well, she had to give him this: he was at least ballsy enough to negotiate with the Powers. That was the trait that distinguished truly great ritualists from everyone else, according to Eris. Unwavering self-confidence. Well, that and an unhealthy disregard for personal safety.

Eris formed a body for herself, face to face with Cygnus. The tattooed face seemed strangely
familiar, though Lyra was quite certain she'd never seen this particular manifestation before. Even the blue-haired, khol-eyed form she wore most often was never exactly the same twice.

"Not really," she said. It was only when she elaborated that Lyra realized she was referring to her estimation of Arcturus's confidence. "He's scared shitless, that—" She waved at the old man in his chair without looking at him. "—is ignorance, not nerve."

Then there was a sort of...flicker, and Arcturus gasped, apparently able to see her now. She grinned down at Cygnus, her mouth stretching inhumanly wide, showing far too many narrow, pointed teeth.

"Is this for me?" she asked, burying a hand in Cygnus's hair, wrenching his head back to see his face much as Lyra had just done to Arcturus (and coincidentally exacerbating the wound in his neck). "Why, Arcturus, I'm touched. And here I didn't bring anything for you." Lyra, very familiar with that light, teasing tone, snorted in amusement at what was clearly a joke. Arcturus didn't, his eyes growing wide as he stiffened in his chair. No sense of humor, clearly.

A shiver of agreement and amusement emanated from the goddess. *Hmm... I think we need a bit of background music to properly set the scene,* she thought at Lyra. Her grin stretched impossibly wider and with the barest extension of power, restored Cygnus's vocal cords as well as...

"What was *that?*

*Hmm? Oh, well. Mortal bodies aren't really meant to touch chaos in its purest form. It's at war with itself, now, some bits running rampant, growing and dividing all out of control while others wither, subsumed to feed the rest."

Was that smugness Lyra detected? She thought it was. Though with good reason. That was *really* neat. Maybe she could convince Eris to do it to something she could dissect afterward, just to see what it looked like.

*It would be more fun if you found a way to do it yourself.*

Well, fine, then. Maybe she would.

Eris ignored this as she paced slowly, deliberately toward Arcturus, staring down at him, now, as though he were some sort of exotic insect, pinned to a card for her amusement.

He shrank back into his chair, reminding Lyra of Meda in his office, but to his credit, kept his head up. His voice was even reasonably steady when he said, "As long as I have you here, my Lady, I was hoping we could talk."

"Yes, you do think you have me, don't you." Eris paused, just at the chain of runes defining the line of the circle. She glanced downward for a second, then back up at him, derisive amusement quirking her lips. "Is this supposed to be a binding circle, Arcturus? And here I thought you would know better. This magic works on demons, not—"

The world flickered again, Eris's form going strangely...foggy, though *fog* wasn't quite the right word — shadowed might have been closer — and blurry around the edges.

*Yes, well, mortal bodies aren't really meant to touch true darkness either. You did anticipate that there would be some side effects to that little exercise over Yule, did you not?*

Well, yes, but— Wait, did that mean she'd just seen Eris step into the shadow plane?
No, I just pulled a bit of obscurity into this realm to hide myself from mortal eyes.

Sure enough, Arcturus was looking around, trying and failing to hide his panic as he lost sight of Eris. For a brief moment, Lyra indulged in simply observing his reaction, but her thoughts froze as she realized the implications of that statement. ...Does that mean I'm not quite mortal anymore?

Eris laughed at her surprise. Ducky, you haven't been properly mortal for the last seven years.

...Oh.

She supposed that made sense, she'd just never really thought about it before. She had, of course, long since recognized that she didn't have much in common with the vast majority of humanity — that would be a bit difficult to miss. And she knew that Eris had changed her on a fundamental level, altered her soul to channel far more magic than she ought to be able to, but... she supposed she hadn't considered that to be one of the defining factors of mortality.

Extreme magical exposure does tend to have strange effects on mortals — dedicates often live far longer than other mages—

Except all the dedicates in the generations immediately following the Covenant, Lyra pointed out. None of them had lived more than thirty or forty years. Most were hunted down and killed by a (reasonably) fearful public, though some were murdered by other Blacks for various offences.

Yes, yes, unless they're murdered, of course. But that wasn't what I meant, anyway. You're not immortal in the sense that you can't or won't eventually die a natural death, but not mortal, in that you are in some ways an extension of me, and as such not an entirely mundane creature.

There was something else there, a hint of something Eris wasn't saying, but Lyra had no idea what it could be, and she clearly had no intention of revealing it now, as she failed to elaborate or address the implied, unspoken question in that thought.

Eris's avatar, still oddly blurred — obscured, apparently — winked at Lyra's. "Nope. I daresay I'll tell you eventually, but we were in the middle of something..."

That was true, Arcturus seemed to be getting anxious what with Eris disappearing on him, making as though to lever himself out of his chair.

Lyra sighed. "Fine, be all mysterious, then."

"Thank you, I will. Now, where was I... Oh, yes. This magic works on demons, not—

"—things like me," she whispered into his ear, before dropping the obscuring magic and blatantly invading his personal space, trapping him between arm and leg and chair, her eyes only inches from his own, staring at him in a way he obviously found somewhat terrifying. (Which seemed like an odd response — Lyra thought Eris's eyes were pretty, their colour shifting constantly, regardless of what the rest of her looked like, but she was used to other people not appreciating things she did, so.)

Context is everything, ducky. But humans do find that sort of thing unnerving. Ask your niece if you don't believe me. "You think to contain me, with chalk and blood and mortal magic? The arrogance doesn't surprise me, not really — it is only human to have an overinflated sense of your own power and importance, don't you think? But I do have to wonder..." (Arcturus swallowed hard, drew in a breath which he obviously held.) "You called me in hopes to stay my wrath against you and yours, and you open your negotiation by attempting to confine me against my will? And here I thought you were supposed to be a politician."
And then she waited as he clearly scrambled to formulate a sentence which would not further offend her. Not that it mattered, Lyra was fairly certain Eris would say whatever she had planned regardless, leading him into doing exactly what she wanted him to do. Whether that meant acting far more offended than she really was (it was actually kind of difficult to offend Eris — aspects of Chaos tended not to care much for protocol) or 'forgiving' his arrogance would be far more dependent on that end than the degree of respect he managed to scrape together.

Arcturus's eyes darted from side to side, lingering for a moment upon Cygnus's still screaming form, writhing in its bonds before he found his voice again. "I, I meant no offense, my Lady," he stuttered. "That circle was simply included in the description of the ritual I found. I didn't intend to —"

"No, I suppose you didn't." Eris radiated boredom and disappointment. Apparently she'd have preferred bravado to grovelling. Understandably — grovelling was rather dull. But she assumed a less antagonistic pose, perched on the armrest of his chair, smirking down at him. "Mind of a politician, yes, it was clever of you." Lyra didn't really see how— "See, Cygnus means nothing to you. You would have found some way to eliminate him anyway, for his crimes against a child of the House of Black." —yes, that. It was just too obvious. Throwing Cygnus to Eris would be the absolute least Arcturus should do, if he had really killed Bella.

I'm getting there, Eris thought at her. So impatient...

"But, since that child was my bellatrice, you fear my anger — and rightly so," she whispered aloud, the amusement from her silent comment carrying over in her voice. "You think, you can give him to me, and my vengeance will be sated. But Cygnus is not the only one who wronged her. His crimes were only possible because you, Lord Black, failed to uphold your responsibilities to your family."

"I know." Arcturus's voice was low, almost preoccupied, as though the thoughts behind his quiet acceptance of his failure were more demanding of his attention than Eris's continued presence.

Clearly she thought so, too, drawing pale, black-tipped fingers across his cheek. He trembled at her touch. "You should know, Arcturus Black, that you have Bellatrix to thank for your life, for your House enduring unhindered as long as it has. You taught her well, before I got to her. Even after Cygnus, her loyalty to the House of Black was too strong, too central to her understanding of who and what she was, for me to strip it from her."

That, Lyra thought, was not entirely true. She wasn't loyal to the House so much as she recognized the benefits of maintaining her place in it. She accepted the responsibilities that went along with that position — even if she was no longer the Heir (or rather, had briefly not been the Heir), as the First Daughter of the House it was her duty to protect the interests of the younger children — because she judged them a reasonable cost to pay for the advantages her position afforded her.

Justify it however you like, but we both know that you would act first to protect your House, and only afterward consider the costs and benefits, Eris thought, even as she continued to speak to Arcturus. "That, and her love for little Meda, is all that has kept you safe these years. I would not...entertain myself with you and yours while it would harm her, no matter how much I wish to. But now she is gone, and I am free to do as I will."

Lyra rolled her eyes. The benefits are pretty much always going to outweigh the costs unless the cost is literally my death. It's not like I actually need to think it through before each and every decision.

Eris quoted her own words from her Yule ritual. "On behalf of the Eternal House, this I swear:
while we may falter, we shall not fall."

Yes, and?

The goddess just sent another wave of amusement at her, without elaborating on her point. "But I don't think that will be a problem, hmm? You understand the weight of what you've done, don't you? You mean to make amends for your crimes, and, just perhaps, you are willing to sacrifice enough. So, my little Lord…" Lifting her hand from his face with a last little tap at his nose, Eris leaned back a bit, smile turning a little crooked. "...let us see how this goes. What will you offer me to buy my peace?"

Arcturus hesitated. Again, Lyra was pretty sure it didn't matter what he actually said, Eris would reject whatever he offered until she got exactly what she wanted. Apparently he knew that, too, because he relented preemptively. "I would be glad offer you whatever you think is fair, my Lady."

Eris grinned, hopping off the chair, and went to stand over Cygnus as his torture continued, presumably to give the impression she hadn't decided what she wanted before she even responded to the "summons." His screams had been reduced to moans, coughing weakly and wheezing around the blood that had to be nearly filling his lungs by now, his body twisted and misshapen by the chaotic effect Eris had released upon him.

"Five hundred years ago, we formed a pact with your ancestors," she eventually said (just as Cygnus breathed his last), her tone light, conversational. "That was long ago. The circumstances have changed, both for the House of Black and for us, for the world, in those five hundred years."

She turned back toward Arcturus, her face alight with potential. "Perhaps it is time we make a new Covenant."

"You didn't!" Lyra exclaimed. The men and the room faded out around her.

"Oh, I did. And he did. That's what happened on Yule. I could show you that as well, but it was really nothing but a lot of tedious talk. The long and short of it is, every Black in that universe is now bound to dedicate themselves to one of us by the time they reach the age of seventeen."

There were no words to express Lyra's shock. The raw emotion surrounded them, echoing through her mind, twined through with awe.

Demanding every descendant of an entire House as dedicates? It was unprecedented.

For a bloodline to be born with an inherent tendency toward the dark (or light) was one thing (though even that was exceedingly rare) — every mage practicing magic from the dark end of the spectrum (and neglecting the light) strengthened the influence of the Dark in the abstract, but dedicates... They were the hands of their patrons upon the mortal plane. Just as Lyra made it her business to spread chaos in the name of her Lady, so too would the others, for Madness or Destruction or Domination...

No wonder the Dark thought it possible that they would soon dominate all the futures of that universe.

"Hmm, yes. That universe should become rather interesting over the next generation or two." Eris's smug self-delight shivered through Lyra's mind. If she'd been properly awake, she was certain giddy giggles would be forcing themselves past her lips. "Those who are already grown have one year to make their Choices. Those who choose not to dedicate themselves must be sacrificed to us, lest we withdraw our favor from the House. Of course, I expect that many of them will simply be cast out of the House instead, but there is little enough to be done about that. If they will not serve,
their descendants will not share in the Gift, so it comes to the same point."

"I presume you've also renegotiated the dedication arrangement?"

The original Covenant was two-fold. Firstly, Onyx and Mela (then the last two living members of the family) offered the dedication of all their descendants to the Dark, giving the Dark a claim on their magic even before they were born. In exchange, Mela asked that the family line be preserved and Onyx that they be gifted with magic to raise them above all others — princes among wizards, was the phrase Orion had used in telling the tale. So long as the House of Black served the Dark, the House would never die.

What he hadn't told her, at least when she first learned the story (only weeks before her seventh birthday), was that while the Powers had agreed to raise Onyx and Mela themselves to a level of power far beyond that of a normal witch or wizard, their children were not guaranteed the same. Moreover, there were consequences to changing a human as Onyx and Mela had been changed.

Consequences Lyra herself was intimately familiar with — the second half of the Covenant guaranteed that any descendant of Onyx and Mela who wished to achieve the same degree of power as they, would, upon their personal dedication to one of the Powers, above and beyond their familial arrangement. In exchange, they offered their humanity — some would say their sanity — as the price to be paid.

In many respects, their connection was much like that of any other Dedicate to their Patron, but in others...

Lyra was given to understand that it was usual for a Patron to give new Dedicates a gift. Generally, however, that gift was not an inhuman ability to channel and control magic, but some more mundane favor — to See, perhaps, or a favorable outcome in a certain ritual (many Dedicates promised their service in order to salvage rituals gone wrong). The only cost was their service, and they communicated...more sporadically? Other Dedicates' Patrons didn't just live at the back of their minds, anyway, constantly in contact.

The House of Black, however, had asked for power, and the cost of that was, well, the better part of the fifteenth century.

"Why would we do that?" Eris asked, smirking broadly.

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her. "Well, I suppose it would cause rather a lot of chaos to suddenly have three dozen mad Blacks running around, but I'd expect a more...measured approach to be more effective in the long term."

Honestly, Chaos was one of the more pro-social Dark Powers, comparatively speaking. If it had been Death or Destruction constantly whispering in the back of her mind, she was fairly certain she would have carved a more Angelos-like path for herself — gone on a murder spree, and consequently been hunted down and killed long before now. The Powers might be able to guarantee that the Family wouldn't entirely die out, even if they did all go entirely mad, but too many incidents like that would likely severely limit the growth of the House, and therefore the Dark Powers' influence through potential Black children.

Eris laughed. "Yes, we did. Or rather, we simply eliminated the second half of the Old Covenant. Each new Dedication will be a matter between Dedicate and Patron, no standard sacrifice of humanity for power. Though I expect some will still ask for that."

"Maybe. Probably not this generation, though." Anyone who was willing to make the Choice under
the terms of the original Covenant had already done so. Which was, so far as she knew, just herself. The family history had made it very clear that making the Choice was not in the best interests of the House, generally speaking, and every child of the House of Black was raised to put the interests of the House ahead of their own.

*Time is of little consequence, on a scale of gods,* Eris thought with a sort of indifferent amusement. *This generation or two generations from now hardly matters, now that events have been set in motion.*

Lyra giggled. *True enough.* "Speaking of events set in motion, what else happened in that world after I left?" She hadn't given much thought to the potential consequences beforehand — why would she have? She'd expected that timeline to be entirely destroyed by her actions in the past. But now that Eris had reminded her that there were consequences, she was curious.

"Hmm, well. It hasn't all played out, yet — yes, it's thirty years ago, but the disturbance we caused in the Tapestry hasn't really...settled. It's still becoming, you might say, at much the same rate time passes here. Time is complicated like that." Her avatar shrugged. Lyra nodded. Even if time itself wasn't complicated, the way she and Eris experienced it was vastly different, anyway. "There's one meeting, though, that you might find amusing."

Lyra didn't even need to articulate the vague sense of inquiry she felt — Eris had already started creating another non-memory around them. They seemed to be at Hogwarts, now, in one of the passageways between the main entrance hall and Slytherin.

A pair of familiar voices was approaching, still out of sight around the next corner. "So, Master Monroe — when Professor Riddle asked me to show you to up to the Castle, he didn't mention it was you I'd be meeting. Would it be impertinent of me to ask why you're here?"

"Oh, most likely. Are you ever not impertinent, Miss Zabini?"

Zee gave Lyra's former tutor a cheeky grin as she led him into their corridor. "Only when I can't avoid it. So...?"

Zee had changed her hairstyle since the last time Lyra had seen her — an elaborate, Roman-looking pile of tiny plaits, instead of last year's pinned-up Victorian curls — and Ciardha looked older than she remembered. Well, he'd been old forever, but... Maybe it was the beard. She was pretty sure that was new. Made his face look thinner. Or maybe she just hadn't looked at him all that closely for a while, because he seemed shorter, too. Still quite a bit taller than she was, of course, and Zee, too, but not as much as she expected. His muggle-style dragonhide jacket hung more loosely on his shoulders, and there was more silver in his dark hair. The lines around his hazel eyes seemed deeper than they had the last time she'd noticed.

They crinkled in amusement at Zee's agreeable response, though that was only to be expected — Zee was very good at people. Ciardha had met her several times, now, and still (inexplicably) seemed to think she was a nice, normal girl, despite all the time she spent with Bella. "I'll give you three guesses, my dear, and the first two don't count."

"Bella," she said immediately. Lyra would have been surprised if she hadn't. Zee wasn't stupid, and there was only one thing — or rather, person — that Ciardha and Professor Riddle had in common. "Do you know what happened to her?" she asked, slightly too quickly, slowing to fall in beside Ciardha and pouting up at him. "No one will tell me anything!"

"I very much hope I'm here to find that out," he replied, a grim furrow appearing across his forehead.
Her tone changed then, becoming noticeably less confident. "Yes, well, I suppose if anyone was likely to know, it would be Professor Riddle, but he's been, well...characteristically unforthcoming, you could say." She gave a heavy sigh, then added rather doubtfully, "Maybe you'll have better luck getting him to talk."

"I should think the fact that he agreed to this meeting is a promising indication of such."

"If you— If he tells you, will you..." Zee slowed to a stop a few yards away from Professor Riddle's office, forcing Ciardha to turn back to see her, the light of a nearby torch falling across her wide, tear-filled eyes. She wiped a sleeve across her face before they could fall, sniffed, then composed herself with an obvious effort of will. "I'm sorry, sir, it's just— She's my best friend, and no one will tell me what's happened, where she is. The only thing I've heard is—" Her voice became low and hesitant. "I heard she might be dead. I need to know."

Ciardha, normally a relatively stoic man, but unfamiliar with Zee's wiles, softened. He reached out to pat her shoulder. "If I find out, I'll tell you, one way or the other," he said gently.

Zee gave him a hesitant smile, somehow managing to make it seem a bit scared, as though she wasn't sure she really wanted to know. She really was very good at this. "Thank you, sir. I– I really appreciate it."

Then Professor Riddle stuck his head out of his office. "Zabini, I told you to bring Monroe to me, not chat him up in the corridor and extract favors unknown through blatant emotional manipulation."

Zee whirled around to glare at him, arms crossed, every hint of sorrow replaced by annoyance and a very familiar pout — the one that said she was extremely put out by not getting her way. "Well, I wouldn't have to if you'd just tell me what happened to Bella! I know you know."

The Professor hissed something in Parsel, the phrase Lyra liked to think of as whatever the snakey equivalent to 'Gods and Powers save me from having to deal with idiot children' might be — exasperation with the stupidity that constantly surrounded him, basically. It came up a lot when people asked questions in class. "You know no such thing," he snapped. "Monroe," he added, with a nod to the older wizard.

"Riddle." Ciardha's tone was rather stern and cold. Lyra somehow always managed to forget he didn't like Professor Riddle much. She didn't really know why — he was definitely the best professor she had at Hogwarts, and he was generally pretty amusing. They were both dark wizards (though Riddle was much more of a Dark Arts nerd than Ciardha), and politically Dark, there was no reason they shouldn't get along. And yet every time they'd seen each other, once even before she started school, when they'd run into each other at the Bookstore, Ciardha acted as though Riddle had done something to personally offend him. Which wouldn't be entirely out of the question (Riddle had a tendency to annoy people when he didn't have a reason to charm them, it was part of what made him amusing), but so far as she and Eris could tell, there was no real lever to exploit, there. Professor Riddle simply didn't care what Ciardha thought of him, and Ciardha was too professional to allow his personal opinion of the Professor to affect their interactions. So she couldn't even poke at it, and then guess the cause of the underlying tension from their reactions.

And, she suddenly realized, she was probably going to have to resign herself, now, to never figuring it out, seeing as, in this universe, Ciardha was dead and Professor Riddle was, well, not.

Bugger.
Eris echoed her annoyance as they followed Riddle, Ciardha, and Zee into Riddle's office. Ciardha gave Zee a funny look as she entered behind him and Riddle.

"Tea?" the professor offered, before turning around, realizing Zee was still there, and letting out another Hiss of Annoyance (there were several different ones). "Zabini, I don't recall inviting you into my office."

"Well, that's the nice thing about not being a vampire, isn't it, sir," she said, taking an equally uninvited seat and raising an eyebrow as if daring him to physically remove her — because she certainly wasn't about to leave of her own volition. Lyra giggled. Not only was the vampire joke particularly well-delivered, but barging into a meeting with Riddle and Monroe was just unexpected of her. She would probably have done exactly that, but Zee was hardly ever so bold.

You don't really think only you learned anything through that particular association, do you? Eris asked, probably rhetorically.

But, well...kind of yeah, actually. Lyra was acutely aware of how much she had learned from Zee about normal people — almost everything she knew about unscripted interactions with anyone who wasn't a Black, Ciardha, or one of Ciardha's associates. Walburga had tried to teach her how to manage people, but Walburga thought that Bella should instinctively know a lot of things she simply didn't (mostly about normal human motivations and communication), so that had just been incredibly frustrating for both of them. Zee, on the other hand, seemed to think explicitly breaking down all the factors at play in any given interaction and all the little details of posture and expression and tone that communicated them, was a completely natural and reasonable thing to do. Bella had therefore spent the better part of two years exploiting her as an endless source of such information...to a degree she suspected most people would have considered unreasonable. She was pretty sure the only reason Zee had gone along with it was that she liked to show off.

She took Eris's shiver of amusement to be an indication of agreement. You were simply more explicit about your inquiries, she informed Lyra. Zee has been mimicking your attitude and style to a degree almost since you met.

Really? Lyra hadn't noticed.

No one is surprised.

Oh, shut up.

Riddle glared at Zee for a moment, then turned to Ciardha. "Apologies, Monroe, it appears I must delay our meeting in order to attend to a disciplinary matter within my House."

"Oh, let her stay," the old wizard said, sounding fairly amused by Zee's continued impertinence. "She has as much right to listen to this conversation as anyone."

Riddle very much looked as though he disagreed. After a long, considering moment he said, "Fine," giving Zee a glare which Lyra recognized as an indication that he may not be about to punish her now, but he would get to it eventually. She didn't think it had ever been directed at Zee before — it was mostly reserved for Dumbledore, actually — but if she knew what it meant, Zee definitely had to know as well. She did a masterful job of hiding any indication that she cared, tucking one foot neatly behind the other and folding her hands in her lap, posture excessively correct — a sure sign she was pleased with herself, though she stopped short of adding a smug grin.
Riddle ignored her, taking a chair for himself and gesturing to another. "Monroe?"

Ciardha stayed on his feet, pacing before the fire. "Spare me the pleasantries, Riddle. You know why I'm here. She's not dead."

Riddle raised an eyebrow at him. "The Black Patriarch seems to believe she is."

Zee flinched slightly, but Ciardha just scoffed. "Arcturus Black is a bloody idiot. And you know as well as I do that that pathetic waste of magic he calls nephew could never have killed Bella."

"And yet..." Riddle raised an eyebrow, made a sort of 'do you see her anywhere' gesture with a lazy wave of one hand.

"I know she's not here, you fucking twat. What I want to know is where she is."

Riddle's eyes narrowed. "Beyond the Veil? Some muggle Hell? Being reincarnated as a particularly vicious kitten?" he suggested. "How should I know?"

A particularly vicious kitten? Really?! Lyra glowered at the not-Dark Lord.

"Well, you are our Head of House, sir," Zee said, to all appearances serious.

The men just stared at her for a long moment.

"Yes, Miss Zabini, every Hogwarts Head of House is gifted with omnipotence upon their investiture in said position, including a full and certain understanding of what happens when one dies."

"She's not dead," Ciardha snapped. "And certainly not by her father's hand. Her Patron would never have allowed it."

"Patron?" Zee repeated, honest confusion on her face.

Riddle clicked his tongue. "Yes, Zabini, her Patron — the goddess she serves. Some aspect of Chaos I imagine, though I've never cared to ask."

"Eris," Ciardha volunteered.

Did I know he knew that? Lyra asked the goddess in question.

Which one?

Uh...both, actually.

Eris chuckled. I believe Arcturus told Ciardha when the House of Black contracted him to teach you. And I wouldn't be surprised if Riddle's been in contact with any number of Aspects who might have mentioned you in passing. He is one of the more popular ritualists in this part of the world, she added, making a face at the thought.

At Zee's very obvious continued lack of understanding, the professor rolled his eyes. "I'll explain in class — I could have sworn we covered black mages, but, well..."

But, well, Professor Riddle tended to get rather side-tracked on occasion. Lyra wouldn't be surprised if he had planned to cover them, but in the lesson where she'd've expected it to come up, he'd spent most of the period explaining why it was absolutely moronic that High Ritual was illegal.
Apparently he recalled that particular lesson as well, because he muttered, "Never mind," before moving on. "Even black mages are not immortal."

"Believe me, Riddle, I'm well aware of that."

The professor's eyes narrowed again. "Then I fail to see the reason for your insistence that Bella Black cannot be dead — nor, for that matter, do I see the reason for your implication that I must know something about it."

"You're our Head of House!" Zee said again.

"What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?"

"If Bella was dead, you would've announced it to the House at the beginning of the year, or whenever you found out. But you didn't, you just let us all wonder with the rumors going around, so you must have had a reason to think they weren't true, or you would've just confirmed them! Ergo, you know something. Sir."

Ciardha looked surprised by that analysis. Riddle just looked annoyed. "My reasoning was that if anyone would have opportunity and motive to learn what she was planning, if there was anyone she would have asked for information or assistance, it would have been you. But the girl has a valid point. The only reason you wouldn't make a definitive statement would be if you thought you might be publicly contradicted."

"Well, it pains me to disappoint you, but I had no idea what she was planning, nor, to be frank, did I have any motive whatsoever to investigate said plan, beyond determining that it had no potential consequences for any of us beyond her absence."

"She's not dead, then? I knew it!" Zee exclaimed triumphantly.

"She might as well be." Riddle seemed faintly amused. "I doubt she has any intention of coming back."

"So you do know where she is."

Riddle shrugged. "Not here."

"Obviously." Lyra didn't think she'd ever heard Ciardha quite that sarcastic before. "Care to elaborate on that?"

"Not particularly."

"Riddle..."

"That's all I know, Monroe. Black has removed herself from our universe. I can't tell you where she is, I can't tell you why she left, I can't tell you whether or when she might return, though I stand by my estimation regarding her complete lack of any plans to do so. Or any plans at all... I can tell you, however, that the Dark finds this development very, very interesting — and it is in Their interests, and therefore ours, to allow events to take their course as they have begun rather than correcting the assumption that Black is dead."

"But you're sure she's not dead?" Zee's expression was far too complex for Lyra to interpret.

"I'm sure she wasn't dead as of Lammas, but that was six weeks ago — there are doubtless any number of ways she could have managed to kill herself since then."
Zee scowled into the middle distance for a second before hissing, "That fucking cunt! She just up and left, without even warning me? Without saying goodbye? Damn it, Bella! We had plans! What am I supposed to do now?!

Riddle seemed to be trying not to laugh. "Somehow I'm certain you'll manage."

Zee's scowl morphed seamlessly into a pout. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not nearly as intimidating as Bella. Everything would have been much easier if she'd stuck around."

"Oh, no, you'll have to rely on cunning and manipulation to achieve primacy over your housemates instead of the threat of any opposition becoming one of Black's playthings. What ever will you do?"

Zee glared at him, had already opened her mouth to respond, but before she could speak, she was cut off by Ciardha, who had been staring very intensely at Riddle since he had informed them of the Powers' interest in the matter of Bella's disappearance. "Are you...?" he began, his voice laced with heavy suspicion. "How...? Which Power do you serve, Riddle?"

The professor gave him a lazy smile that reminded Lyra of Blaise. "Commitment isn't really my forte, Monroe."

To be fair, "commitment" wasn't the forte of most ritualists. Very few mages, even among those who regularly practiced high ritual — or maybe especially among those who regularly practiced high ritual — ever dedicated themselves to a single Power. Not only did dedicating yourself mean taking on a life-long mission to advance the interests of your Patron, but it also meant not being on speaking terms with several other Powers — a sacrifice most successful ritualists weren't willing to make.

Ciardha's eyes narrowed. "But you do consult them. You asked them about her."

Riddle shrugged. "I've been known to ask the occasional question, but it was hardly necessary in this case — it's been...strongly suggested, shall I say, that I impress upon you the importance of allowing the misconception about Black's fate to stand. Both of you," he added, sending a very stern glare at Zee.

"Why?"

"Suggested by whom, Riddle?"

The professor ignored Ciardha's question in favor of answering Zee's. "I haven't been apprised of the particulars, but it seems Chaos is attempting to destabilize the Balance itself in favor of the Dark."

Who did tell him? Bella asked, slightly annoyed, because— Had he said it had only been six weeks since Lammas? So he'd known about this whole plan for about three and a half months longer than she had! And she was actually involved!

Eris sent a wave of exasperation at her. Probably Nut. Mystery isn't quite as invested in this as we are, but they've been cooperating with the plan and would have the perspective to see the necessity of insuring the claim of your death is not too closely examined before Yule. Nut more than many of the others has an interest in the future of your House — I'd be surprised if several of our new Dedicates don't choose to give themselves to the Space Between the Stars, and she's never been shy about approaching the odd mortal if it suited her ends. And you were barely involved.

Bella sent a very explicit wave of disbelief at the goddess in response to that last thought. You just
like keeping secrets.

Well, yes, that too.

Zee pouted at Riddle, apparently confused. "Okay. But what does that actually mean?"

It was Ciardha who answered, apparently somewhat shaken by the implications of the Plan. "A Dark Revolution. A true Dark Revolution."

Riddle grinned. "If it works, it means Dark magic — and dark wizards — will be in ascendance over the Light, potentially to such an overwhelming extent that the Light will never recover, though that is, of course a best-case scenario. In the short term it means very little. In the long term?" He shrugged. "It could mean anything. Immediately, however, it means that you will drop the question of what happened to Bella Black."

He didn't add a threatening or else, but Zee's eyes went very wide anyway. She nodded slightly, accepting that there would most likely be dire consequences if she didn't promptly begin to act as though Bella really was dead.

Ciardha wasn't exactly the sort to bow to implied (or explicit) threats from someone like Professor Riddle — he'd killed far too many dark lords to be easily intimidated, and Professor Riddle was just an enormous dork in this universe — but he was a very intelligent, pragmatic man. Intelligent enough to realize the threat wasn't really coming from Professor Riddle, and pragmatic enough to question how serious a threat it actually was before deciding whether to acquiesce to the demands behind it.

"Who told you?" he repeated. After all, if it had been, say, Eris, she could have just been fucking with Riddle, and Ciardha by extension, on the whole Dark Revolution, destabilizing the Balance thing. There would be consequences for failing to obey a command, however, regardless of her motivation in issuing it.

The same could be said for most of the Dark Powers, though. Not that all of them would give mortals facetious commands just to fuck with them, but they weren't exactly unwilling to deceive them to accomplish their own ends. That didn't change the fact that any sane man would do as the gods ordered him, regardless of the reason given or its legitimacy.

Riddle, apparently well aware of that fact, and for some reason unwilling to reveal his source, rolled his eyes. "Does it matter, Monroe? I believe what I've been told. You either believe me or you don't. Admittedly, I could be lying, but I can't imagine a reason I would want to. You can't possibly believe I care enough for your sentiments or those of Miss Zabini to assure you that Miss Black is still alive, especially as I've already mentioned you're hardly likely to see her again. For all intents and purposes, in this universe, she is dead. Worse maybe, since you can't use necromancy to summon her back, but in any case... I can't help but fail to see the point of your question."

Which was a very good point, really. After grinding his teeth impotently for a minute or so, Ciardha appeared to accept the argument, or at least the fact that he would never know whether Riddle — master legilimens that he was — was telling the truth about anything, ever. He threw up his hands and stalked over to Riddle's side-table, helping himself to the firewhisky, poured one for each of them. He even gave Zee a half-measure.

She sniffed at it warily as he made a (rather sarcastic) toast. "To Bellatrix, then. May she find peace beyond this mortal plane, and long may she be remembered."

Riddle raised an eyebrow, but threw back his drink before saying lightly, "I suspect peace is out of
the question for any Dedicate of Chaos, but she's certainly unforgettable."

Zee, right in the middle of swallowing, coughed and sputtered. Lyra laughed along with her. Even Monroe smiled — for all he disliked Riddle, he wasn't wrong.

So all the loose ends are tied up in my old universe, then?

For the moment. The Blacks will be dedicating themselves over the course of the next year, after which I imagine things will quickly become more interesting, but yes. Meda is well, Cygnus is dead, Arcturus is actually attempting to do his duty by his House, and those few people who knew you well enough to question your disappearance have been informed as to the likelihood of your return — or rather, lack thereof. There's certainly nothing left for you to concern yourself with in that world.

Well. Okay, then. She hadn't been terribly concerned about what had happened in the other world after she left, but it was reassuring to know that Meda would be taken care of in her absence. And Eris wasn't wrong, that last conversation had been amusing. But the one she really enjoyed... Can we watch Cygnus die again?

Eris laughed, the memory-scape already re-forming around them.

Best birthday present.

Anything for you, my bellatrice.

"Thank you, Mary," Mirabella said, nodding as the cook set the tea tray on the coffee table in the lounge.

"Thanks, Mary."

"Mmm, yeah, thanks," Lyra echoed around a chocolate biscuit.

"You're very welcome. And I just wanted to say have a good term, you two. I think you'll be gone before I arrive tomorrow, yes?"

Blaise nodded. "Train leaves at eleven."

"Okay, well, I thought so. I've already made up lunches and snacks for you to take with you." She turned a fond smile from Blaise to Lyra (who clearly had no idea what to do or say, sitting there, wide eyed, like a deer in the headlights, as the Americans would say), then back to Blaise. "Stand up and give me a hug, I'm on my way out."

He rolled his eyes at her, then rose with a good-natured complaint. "Always mothering me, Mary."

This was only slightly hyperbolic — Mary had worked for them almost since he and Mirabella had moved into this house, hired shortly after Jonathan died. Blaise couldn't really remember a time when she hadn't been around. She'd been the one to spoil him with treats and listen to his complaints about Husbands Five and Six, the one who'd told Mira that Five was acting inappropriately toward him. (Blaise, of course, hadn't recognized his behavior as unacceptable at the age of seven.) There had always been things he couldn't tell her, of course, things she wouldn't understand. She still didn't know exactly what Coco was, for example, or that Blaise could feel her thoughts and emotions if he didn't make the effort not to do so. But he had been relatively forthcoming about everything he could tell her, and when he had started to come into his legitimacy, it had quickly become clear that she had always felt more conventionally "maternal"
toward him than Mirabella. (Of course, she wasn't quite old enough to really be his mother, but the fiercely protective, nurturing fondness she held for him was comparable to what other mothers felt for their children.)

"Well, someone has to," she mumbled into his shoulder, squeezing him tightly. Her tone wasn't quite open disapproval — it never was — but Blaise was quite certain she found Mirabella's parenting somewhat...lacking. An understandable perspective, given that even wizards tended to find child-occlumens peculiar (Mira's parents found him hilariously unnerving), and Mira had raised him with a rather skewed perspective on other people and relationships as well. That very upbringing, however, had strongly inclined him to prefer Mira's hands-off approach to childcare than these little conventional acts of fondness Mary insisted on instigating all the time.

He rolled his eyes again, this time catching his mother's over Mary's shoulder. She gave him a knowing smirk, one which said, this is your own fault, you deal with it. Which it was, but in his defense, he hadn't had any idea how Mary would react to his childish lack of guile at the age of four. He didn't really think he could be blamed for not knowing how people worked back then, anyway — at that age, he'd almost exclusively been exposed to Mirabella and a faceless series of randomly selected au pairs, none of whom had lasted longer than a month or two. In any case, he didn't really mind enough to "deal with it" anyway. He wasn't averse to hugs, or touching people in general, it just seemed...dishonest to let Mary believe that his actions were due to some reciprocated fondness rather than simply humoring her. And Mary was one of the few people he actually thought deserved not to be lied to (though of course that didn't mean he wouldn't).

"Stay safe, and have a good term. You'll be home for Easter?" she asked before finally releasing him.

"First week of April," Lyra said, which was a mistake on her part, but she'd realize that momentarily.

"Yes, yes, I'll see you then. And you, too, Lyra, it's always lovely having more people around this big old house." And then she stepped over to Lyra's end of the sofa, holding her arms out in a clear offer of a hug for her too.

The expression on Lyra's face was the funniest one Blaise thought he'd ever seen her make, mingled surprise and displeasure fighting for dominance, not quite entirely hidden behind a mask of confusion.

"Go on, Lyra, give Mary a hug," he goaded her, just for the glare she threw at him. He grinned.

She scowled, then turned back to Mary. "Uh, no thanks."

Mary's disappointment was almost palpable. "Oh...okay, then. Have a good trip, and tell Harry I said goodbye," she said, patting Blaise on the shoulder as she headed for the door. "Bye, Mira."

"See you tomorrow, Mary."

As soon as she was gone, Blaise raised an eyebrow at Lyra. "You know she thinks you hate her now, right?"

"What? Why? It's nothing personal, I just don't hug people."

"You hug me," he said, just to annoy her, scooting over to her side and draping an arm over her shoulders.

"I let you hug me, there's a difference," she insisted, glaring at him from six inches away, her lips
set in a tempting pout. Mirabella started snickering uncontrollably, distracting him from the temptation to kiss her.

"Something to add, mother?"

"No, no, I just remembered Bella saying the same thing to me when we were your age, it's nothing, never mind."

Most people, Blaise thought, would probably find it extremely odd that he and Mirabella had such similar taste in girls as to (attempt) to develop a relationship with the same one, at the same age, albeit thirty years apart. Admittedly, based on Mary's reactions over the past nine years, most people would find nearly every aspect of his relationship with Mirabella extremely odd. Personally, Blaise found it very convenient. He'd had more than one discussion with Mira about exactly what Bella (and therefore presumably Lyra too) preferred in a lover and companion, gathering hints for his inevitable seduction of the girl still tucked under his arm.

"Right, well, since I've got both of you here, and Harry's busy meditating— Did I tell you I asked Blaise to teach him occlumency?"

"You did not." Mirabella smirked and raised a questioning eyebrow at Blaise, taking a sip of her tea.

Really, it wasn't that ridiculous. He gave her a tiny nod, tipping his head ever so slightly to the side in a silent, What, you don't think I can do it?

Granted, he was still learning himself — he'd come into his legilimency early, well before he started Hogwarts, but that didn't mean he was an expert at actually using it, or at least, using it subtly, rather than in a way "reminiscent of a drunken buffoon bumbling around a china shop." He was certainly good enough to teach basic occlumency, though. If and when Potter progressed to the point that he might be interested in learning to counter more subtle attacks, Blaise himself would likely have improved his technique substantially. And if he hadn't, he could always pass Potter off to a more experienced teacher to refine his skills.

Lyra continued to speak, oblivious to their wordless exchange. "Yeah, well, it seemed like a good idea since, you know, he's basically defenseless."

"And Harry obviously realized that you are a paragon of good, sensible advice, immediately overcoming his obvious discomfort with the very idea of trusting anyone, let alone allowing them access to the deepest recesses of his mind, to learn occlumency." Mira then gave Blaise the barest shake of her head and an almost-invisible half-smile — the left corner of her lips twitching briefly upward, which (ruling out the question she'd just implied to Lyra on the basis that she wouldn't ask it twice) he took to mean that she had actually been questioning why he had actually agreed to teach Potter, rather than whether he was capable of doing so.

He flicked his eyes toward the ceiling, not quite rolling them, then blinked slowly: Isn't that obvious? (Politics — it would be a bit of a coup to establish a close, long-term relationship with a future Lord of the Wizengamot, especially one as naive and impressionable as Potter.)

"Hey, I give great advice!"

Mira laughed. "By your own standards, I suppose you must." Then she caught Blaise's eye before flicking her own over to Lyra's face and back, grinning like a cat in cream and taking another sip of her tea.
He glared back, flipped a two-fingered salute at her with his free hand, well out of Lyra's line of sight. *Oh, shut up, I didn't do it just because she asked me to!* Though if he was being honest with himself, that *had* been a contributing factor. There was something undeniably appealing about Lyra's reckless, impulsive approach to life, not to mention the inherent allure of interacting with anyone whose mind was completely closed to him. It was very rare that anyone ever managed to entirely conceal their intentions and surprise him, which was a shame, because life without novelty tended to become *insufferably boring*.

Mira just gave him an infuriatingly *knowing* smirk in response. Bitch.

"Well, who else's standards would you *expect* me to use?"

"*Expect* is a strong word..."

"He's hoping it will help him fight off the dementor aura," Blaise explained, addressing the implied question Lyra had ignored and effectively ending his private conversation with his mother. There was really nothing to say to that smirk anyway.

He neglected to add that Potter was concerned he would inadvertently reveal all their secrets to any passing legilimens. (He hadn't actually spoken of that particular concern, just projected it clearly enough that Blaise had been able to pick it up without actively invading his mind, so it seemed the polite course of action not to mention it.) Honestly, Blaise thought that was a much better reason than the dementor thing. Most legilimens weren't quite as ethical as Snape. Even *Blaise* would peek a bit more if he didn't *know* Snape would find out. (And find some way to make him regret it.) It was just *interesting*, comparing the ways different people thought and felt. Not to mention it made adapting to new circumstances and expectations much easier, both in the muggle world and in his first year at Hogwarts. Most of his peers were rather different from Daphne and Theo, who were the only other children he'd known well before starting at Highgate.

"Speaking of, do they bother you? The dementors? Personally I don't see what the big deal is, but even Blaise thinks they suck."

Blaise rolled his eyes. Lyra, so far as he could tell (which was not nearly so well as he would be able to tell with anyone else), found dementors *annoying*, because they had a distinct tendency to make everyone around her boring and interrupt anything she might happen to be doing at the time. The fact that they flat-out ignored (or possibly didn't comprehend) her threats of violence against them and their unusual resistance to fire magic made the idea of trying to hurt them appealing, and since they were bloody *dementors*, absolutely no one objected to her practicing the darkest curses she knew on them. Well, the dementors might, if she actually managed to master a spell that *did* have an effect on them, but her opinion on the matter was something along the lines that if they were going to make everyone else boring, it was their responsibility to entertain her, and they could all worry about the consequences later. Plus, Blaise wasn't entirely certain that dementors perceived Lyra as a sapient being — given her lack of emotional affect, they probably had little interest in her existence, and quite possibly wouldn't understand that she was responsible for cursing them...so he didn't see much harm in her continuing to do so whenever she had the chance.

That conclusion might have been slightly influenced by the fact that she wasn't wrong, he really *didn't* like the dementors, but more because of what they did to the general emotional atmosphere of Hogwarts than their direct effects on himself. Yes, they raised vaguely unpleasant memories of Five, but he had several very closely linked *good* memories of Five, as well. Memories involving knives, and fiendfire. Of course, his mother had had to obliviate Mary and the others of Five's existence after he "mysteriously disappeared", but Blaise thought that a small price
to pay for the thrill of being included in the family business. (In hindsight, the sense of pride he'd felt at his mother allowing him to participate in an adult activity like murder was a bit precious.)

But in any case, it wasn't terribly difficult for him to move from the negative memories to the positive. Both his initial emotional response to Five's actions — extreme confusion and the discomfort that always accompanied situations where he hadn't been certain what he was meant to be doing — and the thrill of pride and vicious, heady awareness of exercising power he associated with Five's death were relatively neutral emotions to dementors. He didn't think he'd ever personally felt the sort of existential horror, sorrow, and misery dementors fed on (or the true, pure happiness, safety, and joy that repulsed them). It was far more unnerving to be surrounded by other people projecting strong negative emotions than it was to be periodically reminded of Five. He really didn't enjoy that at all.

Mira shrugged with habitual elegance. "I can't say I've ever had the opportunity to find out. Nor do I particularly care to."

Blaise was pretty sure her reaction to dementors would be overwhelming hatred and fury (her instinctive reaction to feeling helpless or disregarded, which were the emotions the dementors were most likely to initially evoke in her). But she hadn't asked, so he didn't volunteer that opinion.

"What were you planning to say, before that little tangent of yours?"

"Oh! I wanted to revise who knows what, make sure you're both up to speed. Things are going to take off a bit from here, I think, so it'd be best if we were all starting from the same point."

"Very well, then..." Mirabella nodded, gestured with her spoon for Lyra to continue.

"Right. So, how many backstories do we have, now?"

Blaise sighed. "Are we counting the muggleborn one?"

"No, everyone knows that's a lie. Except the Penultimate Weasley. Maybe. Gin might've clued him in. Not important."

She hadn't. Red and the Penultimate Weasley hadn't exactly been a sterling example of fraternal affection even before Red had begun to be periodically spotted publicly associating with Slytherins. Now the Penultimate Weasley seemed to consider her damn near a blood traitor — between that and Potter becoming less dependent on his companionship, the increasingly isolated Weasley Six was starting to look like dementor food even when there were no dementors around. It was kind of hard for Blaise to miss when they shared a Potions lab for several hours every week, but he didn't think anyone else had noticed yet. Well, Snape obviously, but Weasleys as a whole were Not Snape's Problem.

"Did you ever really expect that to work?" Mira asked, raising an eyebrow at Lyra.

"Well, it would have fooled most of the important people at home."

"I assume by that you mean the nobility? Purebloods who have never actually spoken to a muggleborn before?"

"Well, yeah. And people I didn't actually have to talk to, like the entire Ministry."

Mira gave a tiny shake of her head. "No, it wouldn't have. You may not act like one of them, but you're far too comfortable with our world to be muggleborn."
Lyra glared at her. "Well, you could've said something back in August, you know."

"Wait, what did you put on the forms for the Ministry if you didn't think the muggleborn story would hold?" Blaise asked. He'd told his allies at one point that they'd told the Ministry Lyra was muggleborn, but he'd never actually seen the paperwork, he'd simply assumed that his mother would have used the backstory Lyra told her she intended to spread around. (In hindsight, of course, that seemed rather silly, since Mirabella was clearly capable of judging Lyra's capabilities more accurately than Lyra herself, but he hadn't quite realized that then.)

"I had her registered as a daughter of House Black, without specifying her parentage. Not a common option, but one that has been traditionally used to reclaim magical children of squibs, or when a child has been disowned by their parents, but not the House. I believe Sirius was in such a position until he became the last potential heir of the House. Of course, adoptees are similarly integrated into the House structure. It seemed a reasonable option to employ."

Lyra frowned slightly. "Well, I suppose..." She sighed. "Sometimes I forget you're not really a noble."

Mira grinned — as well she should. For any member of a common house (and a relatively undistinguished, foreign one at that) to be mistaken for noble, by a noble, was a rather high compliment. But then, Blaise was fairly certain that Mira had learned most of what she knew about the Magical British ruling class from her Bellatrix (at least initially), so it wasn't terribly unexpected that Lyra would see many familiar indications of her native class in Mira's behavior.

"Being a Ward of the House has a connotation of being illegitimate since they don't have a place on the family tree — adoptees do, you know, since we always used blood adoptions — and unknown or unpublicised parentage makes Wards rather useless for marriage alliances. But I guess since Cissy made it clear I am a Black, no harm done."

Not to mention as the only viable heir to the House, and one who was pathetically incapable of hiding her unreasonable degree of magical competence at that, she would have no trouble finding a marriage alliance, unspecified parentage aside. The fact that she was as incapable of hiding the fact that she was a bit mad, even on a scale of the House of Black, would certainly be a turn-off for some of the Noble Houses, but most of those were Light, and would never consider an alliance with the House of Black anyway, even if it was just Lyra left. It hardly mattered, though — Blaise doubted she was likely to decide she needed a marriage alliance in any case. Even Mira had admitted that eventually, though Daphne still wasn't entirely convinced.

"I presumed it was what your Paterfamilias would have done if you'd actually managed to make it to the Nineteen Thirties."

"Nah, there were enough cadets at that point to claim I was a distant but legitimate cousin newly arrived from France or the Americas. Anyway, not important. The point is, no one believes the muggleborn story, even the Ministry."

"Almost no one believes the Travelling Cursebreaker story, either," Blaise volunteered.

"I think most of the Gryffindors do."

He snorted. "Fine, no one with a brain. Calling Malfoy out for that duel would've given it away, even if everything about you didn't scream nobility."

"It can't be that obvious." (It really was. Blaise couldn't believe he'd ever thought she might be able to pull off pretending to be muggleborn.) "I've never met another noble who acts anything like I do
on a regular basis."

Mirabella gave her a rather soft smile, which was just odd to see, she didn't normally do soft. "Consciously, no, but unconsciously? Everything from the way you hold yourself to your accent to your clothing choices is Magical British pureblood nobility."

Lyra pouted at the two of them. "Fine, then. Most of the students — all the idiots, which is most of them—" (Blaise couldn't really argue with that. Even the ones who weren't idiots were self-centered teenagers who honestly couldn't care less about anyone other than themselves.) "— believe the raised-by-a-cursebreaker story. You two, the Tonkses, Cissy, Snape, and Hermione know who I really am."

"You told Hermione?"

"No, Meda told Cissy, who told Hermione, because she's apparently just as much of a brat at thirty-four as she was at four." Lyra directed a brief glare up at Blaise, the glamour she used to lighten her eyes shimmering just slightly, in a way he never failed to find distracting. He had to force himself not to stare, focusing very deliberately on the topic at hand. Apparently she'd expected him to fill Mira in on that little development.

His mother chuckled. "Perhaps not quite so much."

"Whatever." Blaise fancied he could hear Lyra rolling her eyes, there. "The Aurors apparently think I'm Cassiopeia thanks to Dora. Uh...Other Bella apparently thinks I'm some potions experiment of Snape's?"

"Why would she think that?"

"Well, Dora said she had to babysit Snape when he went to ask her about me, and she decided to disguise herself as me. Other Bella obviously recognized who she was supposed to be, but since Dora's not exactly a dark witch, it was pretty clear she wasn't. Which means she also wasn't Cassiopeia or the Original Nymphadora, assuming she's still around somewhere. She basically just dismissed the idea that Dora was a metamorph at all because they're so rare. Balance of probability was that Snape was fucking with her for some unfathomable reason. Oh! And Snape told the Aurors I was Other Bella's daughter, but probably none of them believed it because Moody knew she never had a kid. But he also implied Dumbledore thinks that's who I am."

Well, both of those were news to Blaise. "There's a few rumors going around to that effect," he noted — he simply hadn't thought there was a (reasonably) legitimate source like Snape behind them. "Either that or you're Sirius's daughter. Or both."

Lyra giggled. "Anyway, it's pretty open knowledge I'm working to revive the House, I'd be surprised if anyone doesn't know that, regardless of where they think I came from. Only...Gin, Snape, Cissy, and Hermione know that I'm planning on tracking down whatever's left of Not-Professor Riddle and murdering him. Possibly torturing him first, if it seems feasible."

"I knew that."

"I didn't," Mirabella said, a faint tone of surprise on her voice, more noticeable than when she'd exclaimed over Hermione's knowledge of Lyra's true identity. "Might I ask why?"

Lyra was clearly more surprised than Mira. Blaise surmised she thought she had told his mother about that long-term goal. It had come up between them before they'd even left for school, though she hadn't elaborated on a reason, beyond the Dark Lord "fucking over" Other Bella and the House
of Black, at least until her impulsive decision to enlist the Weasley girl.

This was an ongoing source of amusement for everyone except Theo, because she'd practically been stalking him since he agreed to teach her to fight. So far, he had taught her the Protego shield charm, and assigned her the task of it seven thousand times — both because this was the fastest way to master a spell silently, or even wandlessly, and because it required almost no effort on Theo's part — so now Red kept showing up randomly between classes, glaring at everyone (Blaise was fairly certain Theo hadn't explained the point of the endless repetition), and hissing a number before stalking off. Last Blaise had heard, she was somewhere around fifty-eight hundred. Theo was going to have to teach her a second spell soon.

"He used compulsions on Other Bella from her fifth birthday until... Actually, I'm not sure he ever stopped."

Mira's eyes grew very wide — obviously she had not been expecting that. She covered her surprise well, though, after that first moment. Her voice was steady and even as she observed, "Well, that explains rather a lot, doesn't it?"

"I know, right?! According to Cissy, Other Bella loved him — she's sitting in Azkaban right now, voluntarily, because she thinks that's what he would have wanted. I just — I can't even — It's so..." She trailed off, shaking her head, abject confusion written across her features. "Apparently it started early enough it was already established by the time I made my covenant with Eris, she couldn't get rid of it without breaking Other Bella's mind. She might just have to go for it eventually, though. It got way worse over time, she can't even talk to her anymore. It's just...wrong. So I'm going to kill him. And I'm going to make it painful. And don't you dare say I can't, this is not up for discussion."

Mirabella gave her another smile, this one hard and sharp and dangerous. "Why would I do that? I have never held any fondness for the Dark Lord, and I daresay what I feel for Bellatrix is the closest I will ever find to love."

"What?!" Both witches turned to Blaise at his outburst, but he felt it was warranted. Mira hadn't actually said she loved Bella, but he'd never heard her come even that close to admitting her feelings for...anyone. Not honestly, at least, sincerely believing that what she felt about that person was in some way legitimately analogous to the way other people felt about their romantic partners.

Mirabella gave him a rather rueful, nostalgic smile. "For lack of a better term. I am very fond of Bella."

She dropped the mental defenses she kept up to prevent his casually observing any passing thought, allowing him to examine the nuances of that sentiment, rather than just the usual emotional bleed-through. (For reasons that made Blaise suspect Mira was telling the truth about his sire, hardly anyone was good enough at occlumency to fully conceal their emotions from him — even Snape could only do it by completely suppressing his reactions, rather than attempting to mask them.)

Her feelings toward his godmother were more like her feelings for Blaise himself than anything romantic. Possessiveness and pride, mostly. Trust — and of course wariness that her trust might be betrayed. That was almost gone, worn down over years of demonstrated loyalty and keeping shared secrets, though she had felt that Bellatrix had betrayed her by abandoning her to go to Azkaban for Riddle. It didn't show on her face at all, but the triumphant vindication she felt on learning that she had actually been stolen by Riddle's nefarious compulsions was strong enough in comparison to everything else she was feeling that it was giving Blaise a bit of a headache, like someone yelling in his ear.
More than any of that, though, she seemed to think of Bellatrix as a source of...safety, kind of? No, that wasn't quite right. Unconditional acceptance, or rather, acceptance with very explicitly defined terms — he didn't care to hunt down the specifics — which she felt to be a sort of metaphorical refuge from, well...everyone else.

"She was... She was different from anyone I'd ever met. At first, she was just a challenge to win her over, but... I was able to be more honest with her than I had ever been with anyone else because she simply didn't care, and, well...we understood each other. You're young, still, but I should think that by now you have at least some idea how rare that is."

Blaise winced, just enough to make it clear that he had. He didn't resent Mirabella for the way she had raised him — he doubted whether she could have done anything differently if she had tried — but it had made it rather impossible to relate to other people, at least without resorting to legilimency. (And he'd be lying if he said spending time with Lyra — her straightforward approach to life uncomplicated by the usual emotional baggage and hang-ups — wasn't a welcome break from maintaining the mask he'd learned to wear for everyone else.)

She nodded, dropping her gaze, just for a moment — a silent acknowledgment of his unspoken recognition of that failing. She also used the brief lack of eye contact to disrupt his connection to her mind and restore her defenses. Not that he minded. He would have withdrawn soon, anyway — Mira's mind wasn't very loud or...intrusive, he supposed, compared to most people, just... She was overwhelmingly sharp. Not just decisive and analytical, constantly dissecting everyone around her (though she was), but her personality shifted constantly — not flowing slowly like normal people, but crystalizing, breaking, and re-forming, shards rearranged again and again to reflect specific traits that the people around her wanted to see in her. It was kind of beautiful, watching her transform herself, like standing at the center of a kaleidoscope, but it made Blaise feel uneasily as though he was going to lose himself in her, and get cut to pieces in the process.

"She was the only constant in my life until you were born, Blaise. Losing her to that...de Mort and his twisted ideology was— He dragged her down with him, into the madness that engulfed him over the last two years of the war. If you think I would not see him dead for that, you are sorely mistaken."

Lyra seemed rather taken aback by the fury which replaced Mira's nostalgic tone as she reached the end of that sentence. "Well, I think Cissy was more objecting to the idea that I could kill him, rather than whether she wanted me to, but I can't say I'm disappointed you approve."

Mirabella scoffed. "Psh, Cissy underestimates you because she never knew Bella when she was young. I daresay she has no idea how many people — well-protected, paranoid people — Bellatrix managed to assassinate before we left school."

"We may have to come back to that later," Lyra laughed, her light tone delightfully at odds with the topic of discussion. "At the moment, though..." She paused briefly, then began muttering, apparently to herself. "Okay, covered who I am, why I'm here, that just leaves... Progress!"

"Progress?" Mirabella echoed, faintly amused. "On which project? Or projects, I suppose?"

Lyra's face was turned away from him, and in any case too close to see clearly, but Blaise could hear her mischievous smirk. "Oh, well, let's see. Other Bella's still insane; I had to design an enchantment to spy on Trelawney and get the Weasley twins to plant it in her rooms since Snape stole my fucking time turner; and my house elf demolished the last remaining fragment of the Family Magic just before we left school, but I have finally managed to capture Sirius, so there's that. Oh! And I found a copy of Flanders' Metaphysics to send to Sam."
Mirabella’s forehead creased ever so slightly at that, visibly annoyed, but her emotions betrayed inexplicable concern. Blaise still wasn’t entirely sure why she was so concerned about Lyra educating Sam on...well, she had to have gone well past the basics of magical theory by this point, she’d been spending hours every day writing letters in response to Sam’s endless questions, and Flanders’ Metaphysics was an absolute brick — but still, if Mira was going to bring Sam into the know, she had to have expected he would demand a very comprehensive explanation of magic, and Lyra was certainly the most qualified out of the three of them to provide it. Not only did she actually like speculating about how magic worked on a technical level, but being a Black Mage meant she probably had a better understanding of how they actually used it, too.

And Mirabella certainly couldn’t have planned on explaining anything to Sam herself — every conversation Blaise had ever witnessed between the two of them ended in frustration and confusion on both sides. It was kind of hilarious, actually, because Mirabella was uncannily good at reading most people, especially for someone who claimed to have no talent for legilimency. Sam just deeply mistrusted anyone who was too easy to trust — under the entirely accurate assumption that they must somehow be manipulating him — and even if Mira was capable of interacting with anyone without trying to manipulate them, Sam would never believe it if she were to stop now.

At the moment, however, Blaise thought — and Mira apparently agreed — that the more important point, at the moment, was that Lyra had apparently managed to capture her rogue Head of House. A brief flicker of genuine surprise appeared on her face before she schooled her features back into serenity and raised an eyebrow in a more conventional expression of astonishment. "Who else knows?" she asked, probably wondering if she would need to do damage control to avoid Lyra being arrested for aiding and abetting him.

"Uh, Harry was there when I caught him — he just kind of showed up out of nowhere, actually. If I'd known all I had to do to get him out of hiding was kiss Harry, I'd have done it months ago."

"Why were you kissing Harry?" Blaise asked. He couldn't imagine it was because she fancied him.

"He was being all emotional and irrational and I'm really not good at calming people down, so I figured I'd just use the Zabini Approach."

"The Zabini Approach?" Blaise raised a questioning eyebrow at Mira, trying not to laugh.

"I presume she's referring to the first time I kissed her to distract her from running off to kill someone. Even Bella has trouble focusing on revenge while being thoroughly snogged."

She gave the pair of them a self-satisfied smirk, to which Lyra's only response was: "Try while being thoroughly confused, but whatever. It worked. When Sirius finally showed his face, I just had my elf pop in and take him into custody."

"Where was he?"

"Oh, you know, lurking around Hogsmeade trying to kill a rat that he thinks is an animagus." Lyra frowned. "I honestly don't know how much of that delusion is from the dementors, and how much is just Sirius — or if he's actually even delusional about that, I guess, though it does seem a bit absurd on the surface. He's absolutely convinced I'm Other Bella, by the way."

Blaise gave a snort of laughter at that. It wasn't an entirely unreasonable conclusion to come to, for someone who knew Bellatrix, and didn't know that travelling between universes was possible. If Sirius could escape from Azkaban, Blaise didn't see why Bellatrix shouldn't have been able to, if she was so inclined. "Presumably you're keeping him somewhere more difficult to escape from than Azkaban?" he asked.
"Hmm, yeah. Cherri is keeping him under house arrest, basically. At Ancient House. In the nursery, to be precise, which is just fucking hilarious, even if he doesn't think so. That elf is actually starting to grow on me. Oh! Theo also knows, I gave him access to the Library, so I thought I should warn him that he might run into Sirius there. Meda and Dora know, though I only, uh...strongly implied it. Hypothetically speaking, you know. Meda's going to appeal for a trial for him, to be held in absentia, so I thought she ought to know we have him as a potential source of information. Not that we can put him in the Chair, he's not really consistently coherent at the moment, but he can still point us in the right direction."

Mira sighed. "Just out of curiosity, what is the 'right' direction?"

"Well, I'm thinking we need to find Peter Pettigrew — apparently he's not dead, and he was the actual Secret Keeper, so if we could get him and make him testify..."

"Secret Keeper?" Mira echoed.

Lyra made a rather impatient, exasperated-sounding hiss. "Okay, from the beginning. I can do that. So, there's this thing called the Fidelius Charm — it's not really a charm, I'm pretty sure it's got to be a ritual, but that's not the point, really..."

She trailed off as Blaise extracted himself from her end of the sofa, gave him a questioning look. "My arm was falling asleep. Also, I've heard this already. I'm going to go check on Harry and finish packing."

Mira nodded in acknowledgment. Lyra just rolled her eyes and ignored him, going back to her explanation of the Fidelius Charm, a concept she'd ranted about at length on the way back to London, though he'd had no idea, then, how it was related to the whole Sirius project. "So, the Fidelius Charm, it's completely stupid, even ignoring the ridiculous misnomer..."

Yeah, he definitely didn't need to sit through this again.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, look, I took notes as I was going along this time!

Hermione's theory that Lyra is delusional and the Powers don't really exist is actually an internally consistent philosophy espoused by many intelligent, influential people including Dumbledore and the Unspeakables, but it's actually incorrect.

The name of Zee's company is Leinster Electromagnetic Systems.

The First Daughter of a House is the eldest unmarried witch in the main line of the family. She's responsible for acting as a sort of advocate for all the younger children, representing their interests, against the adults of the house if necessary. (This position could also belong to a First Son, it's not gender-specific.)

This just didn't fit into the narrative well, but I think it may be good to mention: Lyra's ability to channel and control magic was altered by Eris to essentially that of an average adult mage when she was seven. Her body and mind, however, continued to develop relatively normally, which means her magical abilities have increased over time much as would be expected of any child growing into their power. By the time
she's an adult, she will rank among the most powerful living mages. She will not be noticeably more powerful than them, but she could definitely give Dumbledore/Tom/Grindelwald, etc. a run for their money. At the moment, any of them could kick her arse easily, since she's only slightly more powerful than the average (adult) mage, and far less practiced at using magic. This does make her a bit ridiculously OP compared to other thirteen-year-olds, but she's spent so much of her life comparing herself to Cygnus (and Ciardha and Tom) that she doesn't really consider herself to be as ridiculous as she actually is.

Angelos, for those who have forgotten, is one of the "fun Blacks" from the generations immediately following the original dedication of the House to the Dark. She further dedicated herself to an aspect of the Infernal Power and killed her parents at a young age before disappearing from Europe. Lyra's Nameless Name is a reference to her.

Regarding Zee's theory that Professor Riddle must know something about Bella's disappearance, he actually just forgot that addressing the mysterious disappearance of one of his students was the sort of thing a Head of House was supposed to do, though that doesn't actually mean he doesn't know something.

Nut is an Egyptian goddess. Her name is pronounced like newt, not like the English word 'nut'.

Blaise is not entirely correct about the dementors' understanding of Lyra — they do know Other Bella, and she has made an effort to learn their language, so they know she's a sapient creature, they just don't realize she's human. Consequently, they think Lyra is another...whatever Bellatrix is. Which is technically absolutely correct.

—Leigha
She was in so much trouble

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione hadn't even gotten to the Staircase yet when Lyra appeared at her side, abruptly enough her feet nearly left the floor. "Come on, we're seeing him now." Without waiting for a response, Lyra looped her arm around Hermione's, hooking her by the elbow, and started dragging her off toward the dungeons.

It took a few steps to get her balance back — Lyra was stronger than she looked, she'd nearly yanked Hermione right over. She considered for a second trying to pull Lyra to a stop so she could explain herself but, Lyra being stronger than she looked, she didn't know if she could actually do that. So instead she just glared down at the top of Lyra's head. "Are you going to explain exactly who we're seeing, or do I have to guess?"

Lyra tilted her head up to shoot her a look, that one she used so often that seemed to say *I'm disappointed, I thought you were smarter than this.* "I was under the impression it would be best to get the time machine back as soon as possible."

Oh. With a little huff, Hermione said, "Well, fine, you can let go of me now."

By some miracle, Lyra actually obeyed — she did give Hermione another look, perhaps confused, but she released her arm in any case.

Lyra led them away from the stream of Slytherins headed to their dorms on the first basement level, turning toward the potions department. (They still called it that, despite there only being a single professor, most of the classrooms and labs and such sitting unoccupied.) Before long they were standing in front of Snape's office, Lyra's hand rising to knock on the door. She barely touched the thing, gentle taps with two knuckles, but for some reason it was surprisingly loud, sudden and harsh enough Hermione winced. Wandless magic, had to be. After a few seconds with no response, she knocked again. Then again, scowling a little, yelling, "Open up, Your Honor!" Of course she still used the 'proper' address, even when being obnoxious. "You have something that belongs to me!"

She felt her own face fall into a glare at Lyra referring to the time turner as something that *belongs to her,* but there was really no use in arguing over it at this point. Lyra *did* listen to reason, but only her own special brand of it, which at times held only a passing resemblance to familiar sane logic. Instead she just tapped Lyra on the shoulder, once she had her attention pointed at the floor in front of the door. "The lights are out inside. I don't think he's in there."

Lyra blinked at the floor for a second. Then she turned back to her, one eyebrow rising a tick. "Good catch, Maïa."

"Seriously, when the *hell* did she get a nickname?!"

"He's probably in his personal office, then, down in Slytherin."

"Oh, well..." Hermione had heard from...somewhere, at some point, that Snape had an office connected to the Slytherin common room, where Slytherins could find their head of house if they needed him for something. Which was rather aggravating, honestly, McGonagall hardly made any effort at all to make herself available to the Gryffindors. McGonagall was the far superior
professor, but it was common knowledge in the castle that Slytherins had far fewer complaints about their head of house than Gryffindors did. "We can just find him tomorrow, then..."

"Nah, we'll find him now." Again hooking her by the elbow, Lyra turned them back around, catching up in time to trail the last few stragglers further into the dungeons.

Hermione pretended to not notice the glares they were getting.

She'd never actually been this far into the dungeons before, hadn't even been sure exactly where the entrance to the Slytherin common room was, but she couldn't say she was surprised to learn it was completely inconspicuous. If it weren't for the few older Slytherins lingering in the hall, pinning the pair of them with suspicious eyes, she wouldn't have thought there was even anything here. Perhaps it was actually visible to Slytherins, but in any case, that the entrance was invisible to everyone else somehow seemed appropriately...Slytherin-ish.

Ignoring the looks they were getting, so smoothly they might as well have been alone in the corridor, Lyra walked right up to the wall. And she said...

For long seconds, Hermione could only stare, jerked back into action as Lyra roughly pulled her through a door that hadn't existed a moment ago. Had Lyra just...? She... "You're a Parselmouth?!

Honestly, measure that up against all the other patently absurd things about Lyra, and it was hardly even worth mentioning, but really...

Lyra smirked up at her. "Nope. Just know a few words here and there."

"You... But... How?!"

"Luna's mum was a Speaker. Turns out, there's a lot of places all over the castle you can get into just by hissing open at them. Very convenient."

Hermione had absolutely no words.

If Hermione had thought the stares they were getting just walking around the dungeons were bad, they didn't compare to the intensity with which so many eyes focused on them now. Though, she was rather surprised with how... Well, okay, if a Slytherin had randomly appeared in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione would expect...something of a confrontation. She doubted whoever it was would be able to get out without at least a few jinxes being flung at them. And, while quite nearly everyone in the common room — which was surprisingly pretty actually, with the glowing lights and the silver everywhere, Hermione had expected something more gloomy — was unabashedly staring at them, a few resentful mutters slipping back and forth, nobody came over to confront them. Of course, that could just be because she was with Lyra. She'd snuck in here before, Hermione knew, maybe they were just used to her by now.

But all the same, Hermione was still very aware of how Lyra had hold of her arm, how close they were standing. She found herself feeling unaccountably embarrassed.

Before long, Lyra had brought them to another door, just inside the entrance to the left. Again amplifying the sound somehow, Lyra knocked a few times, waited for a rather exasperated-sounding acknowledgement from inside before pushing it open.

"Surely whatever the issue is could wait—" Snape abruptly cut off, mouth snapping closed so quickly Hermione almost imagined she could hear his teeth clack together. He stared at them, blank and heavy, for long seconds. (Somehow, Lyra managed to not say anything annoying, or even anything at all.) Then, "Close the door."
Snape’s personal office was, she thought, unexpectedly ordinary. Hermione had only the potions classroom and his adjacent academic office to compare to, so, she thought her reaction wasn't unjustified. She assumed he had complete control over the... atmosphere of the three rooms in question, but they were wildly different. Both the classroom and his other office were... Well, the best word to describe them was probably "spooky" — bare walls and floor of dark, unadorned stone, the light insufficient, turning everything dark and the shadows long and thick, jars filled with... unsettling things filling all available space. It was like he was trying to creep out his students, she couldn't think of any other reasonable explanation (not that that was entirely reasonable to begin with).

But this place was, well, ordinary. Much what one would expect — a sizeable desk strewn with parchments and such, laden bookshelves concealing nearly every inch of the walls, a few little trinkets here and there she couldn't quite identify, but none stridently strange. The floor was even carpeted, a merrily-crackling hearth across from the desk, the air uncharacteristically warm and bright.

It was subtly unnerving. Somehow, in not being strange at all, it seemed all the more so.

Snape directed them to the chairs in front of his desk with a heavy glare and a sharp gesture, himself walking over to a glass-panelled cabinet nearer the hearth. There was a clinking that sounded rather like glass bottles tapping together — Hermione had the thought that Snape felt he needed a headache potion to deal with Lyra, which she could personally sympathise with. Lyra, carelessly slouching in the chair next to her, was contorted around to watch him. Her lips twitched with a badly-suppressed smirk. "Firewhiskey, neat."

Hermione jumped, turned to peek around the back of her chair. The cabinet was stocked with a small selection of large bottles, quite obviously liquor. She was somewhat surprised to note most of them appeared to be of muggle make, one label she even recognised as the same Armagnac her grandmother always kept around the house. Snape was the last professor she would expect to have anything muggle at all in his office.

Even in her own head, she didn't bother seriously questioning the fact that he apparently intended to be drinking during their meeting — by now she'd ceased expecting Hogwarts professors to live up to the professional standards she was used to.

But anyway, at Lyra's flat demand, Snape shot her a narrow-eyed look. "Miss Black, this is perhaps not the wisest moment to continue your campaign of irritating me as much as possible."

Lyra grinned. "You think this is as much as possible? You insult me, Your Honor. I would do much better if I were really trying."

Well, this was getting off to a great start...

Snape didn't respond to the taunt at all. Moving with that same smooth, eerie silence he somehow maintained twenty-four-seven, he swept in behind his desk, gracefully sank to a seat. He set a half-empty bottle of rum on the surface with a light thunk, then leaned casually back in his chair, angled slightly against them, appearing completely at ease. (Which was itself peculiar, Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen Snape at ease, there was always a dangerous sort of tension about him, it was unsettling.) Glass idly swirling in one hand, he opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could get anything out, Lyra snapped upright, reaching for the bottle. Her fingers were inches from it when it suddenly moved, sliding to the opposite side of the desk, well outside of her reach. She collapsed back into her seat, pouting over at Snape.
It took Hermione a few seconds to put it together, and when she did, an icy sense of anxiety dropped into her stomach. *Snape could cast magic wandlessly.* He’d hardly even twitched! It wasn’t *that* much of a surprise, when she thought about it — there had been signs, the way doors slammed closed behind him, directions sketching themselves onto the board — but she’d somehow never put it together before not. That was...

Okay, Hermione prided herself on being a (mostly) reasonable person, she tried to form her opinions solely from empirical facts. She had her own biases, of course, she was aware of that, but she *tried*, anyway. Harry had become convinced more than once over the last couple years that Snape was fomenting one nefarious plot or another, was out to get him personally. Which, okay, Snape was a cruel bully much of the time, there was no denying that, but believing he was *actively trying to kill a student* was a leap too far. Hermione had never gotten caught up in his paranoia, mostly. (She *had* set him on fire once, but that had seemed justified at the time.) She felt she was the only voice of reason Harry had far too often.

But, well... Just with that superficial little demonstration, it was obvious Snape was far more magically talented than she’d given him credit for. Lyra was almost scarily good, and she’d never done anything so smooth and precise, with no sign of effort at all. And Snape had had *a lot* more time to practice. Not to mention, Hermione was abruptly reminded of the *fact* that Snape had been a Death Eater — *everybody* knew that, it was common knowledge.

Perhaps Harry's persistent fear of Snape (not that he'd call it that) wasn't quite so irrational as Hermione tended to characterise it.

Without comment on what had just happened, Snape reached into a drawer, and set Hermione's time turner on the desk between them. Hermione twitched, held back the impulse to reach for it — if she’d been hopeless to steal it back from Lyra, thinking she could swipe it right under *Snape’s* nose was just insane. "Now would be the time to somehow convince me to allow this device back into your custody."

Hermione couldn't help it, she was speaking before she could second-guess herself. "Hey, it's *my* time turner. Uh, sir — why are you talking to *her?*"

His eyes flicked over to her, his gaze flat, empty. "Miss Granger. For all that the Headmaster and your head of house insist you are responsible, reasonable, and trustworthy—" Hermione tried not to bristle at the *obvious* implication that he disagreed. "—you have proven yourself quite incapable of resisting Miss Black's suggestion, and equally ineffective at moderating her more extreme behavior. Which was predictable from the beginning — anyone who has even casually observed you, Potter, and Weasley should have concluded that you can be easily swayed by even the meanest social validation. To be perfectly frank, Miss Granger, you have no meaningful influence over the purpose of this negotiation."

In isolation, she might have protested that last sentence, but she was far too distracted by the rest of it to get a word out. Because... Oh, she *hated* to admit it, but he was *right*. Not entirely, she didn't think, but he was far closer to the mark than she was comfortable with. For the most part, she’d had no success at all in *moderating Lyra’s more extreme behavior*, just as she’d failed more often than not with Harry and Ron before her. What Lyra got up to might be worse much of the time, but she’d *actively enabled* the boys when she felt it’d been justified. She’d *broken laws* for them, covered up their wrongdoing when she could. She’d always considered herself a good citizen before, had taken pride in it once upon a time, but since starting at Hogwarts she hardly hesitated, she just...

She liked to think she was a rational person, but she couldn’t help but wonder...
"Respectfully, Your Honor, that's expecting rather a lot of her. How many people do you think there are in this castle who can moderate my behavior?"

Hermione bit her lip to keep in a shocked laugh. At least Lyra was aware of how insane she was.

"And I think 'extreme' is a strong word."

Okay, at least she had some self-awareness...

Snape looked equally unimpressed. "If you don't consider it 'extreme' to lay yourself up in hospital for a week experimenting ineptly with illegal magics, or setting off explosions in the Gryffindor common room for no identifiable purpose but to cause your peers distress, perhaps you should reevaluate how you define the word."

"You know about that?" Honestly, Hermione had thought Lyra had gotten away with that one. She certainly hadn't been punished for it, there hadn't been any sign any of the staff were even suspicious of her in the immediate aftermath...

And that was another I thought you were smarter than this look, Snape's more subtle than Lyra's but no less transparent. "This conversation will go much more smoothly if you assume that I haven't missed any of your exploits."

"I doubt you know everything." Lyra completely ignored Hermione's warning look, her grin only stretching wider. "I mean, I'd have expected more lectures if you did, Your Honor."

"Do you believe me to be an idiot, Miss Black?" The cold, hard tone of his voice made it quite clear answering in the affirmative, even silently, would be a bad, bad idea. "I recognized that book confiscated from you after you so masterfully blew yourselves up. A few days afterward, I had an informative visit with a mutual friend who shall remain Nameless."

Hermione caught the subtle emphasis he put on the word. From there, the proper conclusion was obvious. Horror turning her voice thin and shaking, "Y-you... You know about that?"

But, of course, Lyra just shrugged. "Everyone knows about the Bookstore, Maïa. Well, practically every British mage who would know anything useful about proper memetic magic, anyway — there's really only one place in Britain to get books like that. It's an easy guess. And it is a guess, because," she said, turning back to Snape, "I doubt Odysseus would actually tell you anything useful. He does have a reputation for discretion to uphold."

"You realize you just confirmed the accusation."

"I did just say denying it would be an obvious lie, so, yes, Your Honor, I guess I did."

Snape let out a short scoff, so soft it was barely audible. He paused a moment to take a sip from his glass. "If I asked about you directly, perhaps he would have been more discreet. But I didn't have to ask directly. I merely pondered aloud over rumors I had heard about a metamorph seen traipsing about Knockturn while, seemingly, impersonating the Blackheart. He reacted strongly enough to be suggestive."

Hermione blinked. The... The Blackheart? Wasn't that the ridiculous epithet people had come up with for Bellatrix Lestrange? (Mages sometimes, honestly.) That was, just... Maybe Hermione was being a little paranoid, but that Snape would think to compare Lyra to her counterpart in their timeline was a little suspicious...

"Okay, that's bullshit, Odysseus doesn't give people away like that."
"He has no idea who you are, of course. I believe he subscribes to the metamorph theory, if more tentatively than others I've spoken with."

"Yeah, apparently that's a reasonable explanation for how...well, me I am. I'm told the Aurors are buying that one, even."

Hermione couldn't quite hold back a dark laugh. That Lyra was a metamorph had been one of her own theories before she'd learned the truth, one of the more convincing ones. It wouldn't even be that surprising — the House of Black was known to have produced a disproportionate number of metamorphs over the last centuries, a British metamorph was far more likely to be a Black than from any of the other families. Honestly, she sort of wished she'd been right about that one. Metamorphs were known for being rather odd, but she still thought that would be better than...whatever the proper word was.

Both Lyra and Snape shot her odd looks for a second, before clearly passing it off, turning back to each other. "I am willing to return this to you—"

"Good, then, let's get—"

"—with sufficient incentive."

Lyra froze, staring blankly back at Snape. Her eyes tipped away slightly, going a little out of focus. She did this a lot, actually, clearly getting wrapped up in her thoughts, though it never lasted very long. A grimace crossed her face, vanishing a second later. Then, with a bright, sharp grin, she turned back to Snape. "It's really you who should be offering me incentive. I can make your life very difficult if I want to."

"I believe we agreed some months ago that it would not be to your advantage to inconvenience me overmuch."

"No, we agreed that I wouldn't inconvenience you overmuch if you helped me kill Riddle."

Hermione tried not to react to the thought that Lyra had somehow recruited their Potions professor into her insane plot to kill the most feared Dark Lord in modern British history.

"I can make your life very difficult because I know things. Because of these things I know, you'd cooperate on that for your own reasons, and spreading them around would make it so you would have to, best chance to protect yourself. So, breaking that bargain wouldn't have any real consequences on my end."

Snape's face narrowed into an irritated glare. "I suppose that was intended to be subtle."

"You were Dumbledore's little spy, weren't you?" Lyra's smirk had turned crooked, teasing, her eyes nearly dancing with amusement. "Everyone knows you were a double-agent, of course. But the reason you turned is the real juicy part."

"It is no secret the Dark Lord had become quite insane by the end."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure that's it. I'm sure it has nothing to do with a certain pretty, red-headed muggleborn healer."

With a sudden harsh scowl, Snape growled, "Fuck you—" He abruptly cut off, one eye twitching just noticeably.

But he hadn't caught himself quite quickly enough. Hermione had been watching, she could see his
lips, she could guess which sound he'd been about to form. Helped along by how Snape didn't really seem to talk to Lyra like any other student, that he would actually go so far as to curse — which she hadn't heard him ever do with a student ever, no matter how angry he got — it was rather easy to put together.

Of course, that didn't mean it made any bloody sense. Her voice going high and screechy in her throat, Hermione said, "You know who she is?!

Snape glanced at her, a sardonic tilt to his eyebrows. "That should not be a surprise, Miss Granger. You might have guessed that I knew Miss Black's native counterpart, and she is quite obviously terrible at pretending to be anyone other than herself." His eyes flicked back to Lyra. "Though, I'd assumed you were at least intelligent enough to not tell your classmates."

"Hey, I didn't tell her, that's Cissy's fault."

"Narcissa knows?"

"Ah, yeah, and before you say anything, I didn't tell her either. Meda just assumed Cissy knew, and gave it away."

"Hmm." Head tilting a little, Snape paused to take a sip of his rum. "I suppose that explains it. She dropped a few subtle references when we met over the winter holiday. I hadn't put it together at the time, but she must have been fishing for hints that I was in the know."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure I told her that back in November. She was probably trying to hint she knew you, so you could stop being coy about it. Which is just bloody stupid, why can't peo —"

"Okay, wait!" Lyra cut off at Hermione's voice (coming just under a shout, she'd admit, she was freaking out a little), both her and Snape turning to stare at her. "I just... You're still going to give back the time turner? You, you know who she is, and it — doesn't give you pause, to hand over access to time travel to Bellatrix Lestrange?!"

"Black."

"Oh, shut up, Lyra!"

Lyra flinched back in clear surprise, eyes wide and slowly blinking.

The silence lingered for some seconds, Snape still looking perfectly calm, watching her passively, as though completely untouched by her outburst. (Which was, okay, a little embarrassing, but she felt that was justified, was Snape insane?) He stalled with another a sip of his damn rum before actually answering her. "There are different sorts of madness, Miss Granger. Bellatrix's particular variety is regularly predictable — in the general shape, if not in the fine details — given one has a proper understanding of her motivations. Whatever you may have been given to think over these months, her thinking is, more or less, entirely rational. The trick is to anticipate her presuppositions and her priorities which, granted, may seem utterly alien to most.

"If one understands what another person values, one can predict their behavior. Black's presence in this castle is necessitated by particular motivations, which control her most catastrophic impulses, more or less predictably. It may occur to her to use her appropriated time turner to enact a campaign of confusion and chaos, or perhaps to dismantle causality itself within the castle's walls. She may even find the thought quite tempting. However, so long as those impulses would sabotage her primary goals, she will contain herself."
Hermione fought down the absurd urge to pout back at him. Okay, that was...sort of true, she guessed. The few times she'd actually gotten Lyra to explain herself for once in her bloody life, her explanation was perfectly consistent. To put it simply, it wasn't the how that was completely mad, as one would expect from mundane insanity, it was the why.

Of course, most of the why seemed to be for the sole purpose of amusing herself, which was hardly reassuring...

For that matter, even some of the more insane things she was doing weren't that... They could be far more destructive, Hermione guessed, if she were really trying to do as much damage as possible. (Which, given that Lyra apparently worshipped Chaos itself, seemed like a good bet.) She'd set up an explosion in the common room, yes, for no apparent reason, but nobody had actually been hurt. Hermione suspected she'd been involved in several of the more strange incidents around the school, but there'd never been any permanent damage to the castle, none of the students had been seriously injured, or even put in that much pain, really. (The pranks she thought Lyra might have something to do with weren't even that bad by the Twins' standards.) Blowing themselves up, that had clearly been an accident — careless, not malicious. She was clearly doing something with Trelawney, ensuring some of her predictions come true for some unfathomable reason that could only make sense in Lyra logic, but...

Well, Hermione might be letting her personal opinion of Trelawney interfere with her judgement on that one. If Lyra wanted to mess with her, as far as Hermione was concerned, she could amuse herself to her heart's content. It's not like she was actually hurting her...

She hadn't really hurt anyone, so far as Hermione could tell. Irritated them, sure, terrified them a bit, but... And she certainly could, if she wanted to, Lyra was scary good with magic, and she clearly didn't care about the law or morality as a matter of principle. There must be some reason she was restraining herself. Hermione wasn't sure what it was, but she didn't think it particularly mattered.

Chances were it was completely insane anyway.

Although... If Lyra's thought process was (mostly) rational, if the things she said and did made sense when looked at from a certain perspective — which, well, they kind of did — did that mean... The stuff with the Powers, the (unconfirmed) suggestion Lyra was a black mage, was that...real? She'd assumed Lyra was just delusional, but reason and psychosis didn't tend to mesh very well. It was a bit absurd to consider directly, but...

If the Powers were real, if that boy she'd summoned had been an actual god, if Lyra was really a servant of a dark god of chaos, if all this was real... Well, in its own way, that was almost scarier than Lyra just having a peculiar case of schizophrenia. The consequences of all that were just...enormous. She didn't know how else to put it. It was just a lot to wrap her head around.

Of course, it was also possible that Lyra's delusions were just internally consistent, but that wasn't particularly reassuring either.

"Allowing Bellatrix access to this time turner will lead to a few irritating headaches, but it should not present any real threat to the school or its students." Snape's eyebrows tilted again — Hermione couldn't say exactly what about the expression gave her the feeling, but she couldn't help the sense she was being mocked. "Do you disagree? Are you suggesting I keep it?"

"No, I—" Hermione sighed, eyes tipping to the ceiling, mostly to cover her discomfort as she scrambled for words. "I'm just surprised. I thought... Well, I thought you would tell someone, at least. I mean, I assume the Headmaster doesn't know." If Dumbledore did know, she would have
expected him to do something. Lestrange was almost as reviled as Voldemort himself. If even a comparatively unthreatening, thirteen-year-old version of her were in his school she'd expect Dumbledore to take some kind of action to protect his students.

But, then, maybe not — back in first year, Harry had suggested Dumbledore had known, or at least strongly suspected, that Voldemort was possessing Quirrel the whole time. And he'd just...done...nothing. Even weakened as he had been, Voldemort was inarguably the greater threat, so, Hermione wasn't quite sure why she gave him that much credit.

Oddly, Lyra outright cackled. "Like that would ever happen. If he told Dumbledore, Dumbles would tell him to do something about it. And then I would have no reason not to make his life a living hell."

Snape scowled, but didn't directly address Lyra, instead keeping his eyes fixed on Hermione. "There are some dragons, Miss Granger, that are better left sleeping."

"Comparing me to a dragon now? Aww, that's so sweet — I love you too, Sev."

Something in Snape's bearing turned abruptly sharp, a dangerous air looming in the room, like lightning held an inch from striking. "You realize you are not making this easier for yourself."

"We already talked about this, you don't hold the power to be dictating terms to me right now. Not when I can go blabbing to your friends about you and Lily."

Since nobody was paying attention to her at the moment, Hermione didn't bother trying to stop herself from gaping. Lily? She meant...Lily Potter, Lily — Harry's mum, Lily? She and Snape had known each— Wait, what Lyra had been hinting at earlier, she— Snape had betrayed the Death Eaters and turned spy during the war, everybody knew that, but the reason he'd turned was to protect Harry's mum? That just... She didn't... How...

Huh. She had absolutely no idea what to do with that. Other than not tell Harry, yes, that sounded like a bad idea.

"That information isn't nearly so damaging as you believe it is."

"Really? So, your Death Eater friends would be just fine with your 'mudblood' best friend?" Best fr — "One who just so happened to be the most effective asset the Light had? The same one who — fun fact — drove your precious Dark Lord insane in the first place, and ultimately killed him? They're really cool with that?"

... Hermoine had no idea what to do with that, either.

"My close association with Lily Evans was known from the beginning. In fact, when your counterpart attempted to recruit her — which is also common knowledge, despite the blood purist rhetoric — I was the original point of contact. By the end of the war, the Dark held just as much hatred and fear for the Dark Lord as the Light did. Some I have spoken to have admitted to reluctant admiration and gratitude to Lily for liberating them from their enslavement to an unpredictable, sadistic, omnicidal maniac.

"So, no, spreading information that is already common knowledge will do me no particular harm. Nice try, though," he finished, lips twisting in a smirk.

Lyra's face sank into a pout. "Damn. All right, what do you want?"
"Giving in so easily, Bellatrix? I think I may be in shock."

"Oh, I'll find some way to get back at you for this, don't think this is over. I just have nothing right now. No point drawing out the inevitable."

In the end, the "negotiation" was really more a dictation of terms. And Snape's terms weren't easy either: he demanded Lyra mark all the essays he assigned to first through fifth year, excluding their own class, for the rest of the term. Was he even allowed to do that? She meant, he shouldn't be allowed to do that, but with how seriously unprofessional nearly everything about Hogwarts was, Hermione couldn't be certain there even was a rule against it. At first, Hermione nearly protested at the idea that Lyra could properly mark essays two years above them, but when she thought about it that was sort of silly — Lyra was significantly ahead in all their classes, and if she didn't know something she could always just look it up.

Of course, that didn't address the issue that Lyra would surely make blistering comments in the margins next to every error about how stupid the student must be to write such a thing. But that wasn't so different from what Snape did anyway, so it hardly mattered.

Hermione mostly kept her doubts to herself, since she doubted saying anything would make any difference. The argument went on quite a while without her anyway. Lyra, obviously, hadn't the slightest desire to spend hours a day marking Snape's essays for him, and tried to convince him to change his mind, or at least negotiate away a couple years' worth. Snape made a surprisingly reasonable argument about how he wasn't the one with a time turner, so Lyra had far more free time than he did, and if she was going to expect him to clean up her messes he should get something just as valuable in return. (Hermione caught the additional implication that there being true consequences for her actions might actually get Lyra to think through things before doing them, but he didn't spell it out.) Lyra said he'd clean her messes up anyway, for his own interests. Snape said the simplest solution for his interests would be to stand back and do nothing, and let her sabotage herself. She called his bluff. He said whether he was bluffing or not was completely immaterial, because the only way he would return the time turner was if she agreed to his terms — he'd confiscate it again if she failed to live up to them, of course — so she really had no choice in the matter.

There was a moment there, Lyra growing visibly frustrated every time Snape shut her down, when Hermione was all but certain Lyra was going to refuse. Which, that was completely unfair, it wasn't even Lyra's bloody time turner. Thankfully, though, Lyra swallowed her pride, acquiescing with a grimace. For a few quick minutes, they arranged how exactly this arrangement would work — the standards she'd have to follow, which references she should use, when and where she could find him if she had pressing questions, that sort of thing. Plus the lingering threat of punishment if Lyra cut corners or took advantage of the power she was being handed in any way, but that had been expected.

Finally, with a casual lack of ceremony, Snape pushed the time turner across the desk toward Lyra. She picked it up, jumped to her feet, said something rude about it not being a pleasure doing business with him, "your Honor," before turning on her heel and stomping off. Not wanting to be left alone in the Slytherin common room, Hermione muttered something far more honestly grateful, then scrambled after her.

After again walking through Slytherin without incident, Lyra tromped down the dungeon hall, glowering at the walls in silence. Well, mostly silence — it sounded like Lyra was muttering to herself, but Hermione couldn't pick up what she was saying. (She wasn't even certain it was English.) They were walking a few awkward minutes when Lyra abruptly jerked to halt, near the top of the stairs up into the Great Hall. "Here." She grabbed Hermione by the wrist, placed
something in her hand.

For a couple seconds, Hermione could only stare at the thing, blinking in dumb shock. *The time turner.* "I... What? You're giving it back? After all that, that *nonsense* last term, you're giving it back, just like that?"

Lyra shrugged. "Sure. I still expect you to bring me back with you, especially with Snape fobbing off half his job on me, but I don't see why you can't hold on to it."

"But, you..." Hermione grasped for words for a moment, but completely failed. She simply didn't know what to do with this. That was it, "I don't understand you at all."

Her eyes tipping up to the ceiling, Lyra let out a long, exasperated-sounding sigh. "Honestly, you and Harry are both so ridiculous. Fine, let's see if I can explain this without a Zabini on hand."

"You don't usually bother explaining yourself," Hermione said, a mulish tone sharp even to her own ears.

"No, but this is important."

As though it weren't *usually* important...

"How long have we known each other, Hermione?"

She blinked. "Uh... A little more than four months? Real time, anyway — it's closer to eight months if you count the time-turning."

Nodding to herself, Lyra said, "Right, about the time-turning — how long has it been since we came to our arrangement?"

Hermione struggled to keep a scowl off her face at the casual way Lyra referred to stealing the time turner and extorting her over it. "Four months real, eight relative."

"How long have you known about the illegal books I own and dark magic I've been studying?"

"Uuuhhhhh..." When had they gone to the Bookstore the first time, again? She'd had suspicions before then, of course, but... "Three and a half real, six and a half relative? I think?"

"And how long ago did you find out who I am and where I came from?"

"Two months." Hermione wouldn't be forgetting *that* conversation any time soon...

"And when did you first witness me practice high ritual magic — which, reminder, is very illegal in this country?"

She winced. "Two weeks ago." She wasn't likely to forget *that* either...

"Right." Lyra nodded again, then went abruptly, peculiarly still, her charmed purple eyes focused heavy on hers. There was something unusually intense about her gaze, a stare open and evaluating, it was uncomfortable. "And who have you told about any of this?"

"Uh..." Was she... Was this supposed to be a threat of some kind? Like, telling her you *better not* tell, without actually saying it? Because, it didn't really feel like it. For one thing, Lyra didn't tend to be that subtle when she was threatening people. And, she tended to grin like a maniac when she did it, creepy as hell. "Well, nobody."
"Exactly. You've probably noticed this about me, Hermione, but I don't trust easily. It doesn't come naturally to me."

Hermione wasn't sure if that were more funny or depressing. It was funny because, well, obviously, but with what she knew about Lyra's childhood it was... Honestly, it made perfect sense she wouldn't trust anyone after that.

"But, you ended up getting far more over on me than I intended. The time turner thing, that was calculated — you couldn't hit me without hitting yourself. Same with the books. Even the Yule ritual, arguably, since you did participate, if only peripherally. The other stuff, though..." Lyra shrugged. "You can make things very difficult for me, very easily. It would likely even be a net benefit for you, since if I were gone you'd get your time turner back, and you wouldn't have to worry about me making things more interesting than you're entirely comfortable with. Of course, you'd lose things too, but one could argue whether that's worth it or not. You can, you could have easily gotten me forced out of this school at any point in the last two months. But you haven't.

"I took some time over winter break to consider the associations and relationships I have available to me, and what the value of each is. Ours, I think, is worth reinforcing. You've demonstrated I can trust you, at least a little, so I thought I'd do something to acknowledge that. If we can keep this going long enough, well..." Lyra smiled, that crooked, toothy smile that always made Hermione feel a little uneasy. "You might find, over the coming years, that there are advantages to being on my good side."

Hermione wasn't sure she liked the implications of that. She knew Lyra was currently putting together some kind of plot to kill Voldemort — she'd even recruited Snape into it, somehow — but who knew what else she could be planning? Rather not think about that, honestly. Not worth fretting over that too much right now.

It was something else that struck her. It was that conversation in the Hospital Wing, after Hermione had been released, with Lyra and Blaise. Hermione had verbally doubted whether Lyra were even emotional capable of something like friendship, and Blaise had defined the concept in such a way that, yes, she was friends with his mother (or the version of Blaise's mother who was Lyra's age back in her time, she wasn't sure the distinction mattered). How had Blaise put it? Something about mutual support, affection, and trust...

"Are you..." When Hermione trailed off, unsure whether she wanted to actually ask — Lyra could just as easily mock her for being silly and sentimental, after all — but a sharply raised eyebrow prompted her on. "Are you trying to make friends with me?"

"Yep," she said, voice bright, popping the 'p' that way she had when she was particularly amused with herself. She grinned. "You should feel flattered, you know. If this works out, you'll be the second I've ever had."

"Are you counting Blaise?"

Lyra rolled her eyes. "Fine, third, then."

For a second, Hermione hesitated. Did she really want to admit this? Eh, Lyra had probably figured it out on her own anyway — or, she easily could, if she cared enough to pay attention. "You'd be my third too, actually." Honestly, she wasn't even sure if Ron should count...

"That works out nicely then, doesn't it?" Lyra said, still smiling at her like a crazy person.

This was a mistake. She couldn't shake the thought, the detached, rational thought, that Lyra was
too dangerous to closely associate with. Just, going along with this, even with all her doubts, would be a terrible, _terrible_ idea.

Despite herself, she couldn't help smiling back.

When it came down to it, capturing the rat was ridiculously easy. And why shouldn't it be? It was a bloody rat.

Harry was useful, providing valuable information on when the Penultimate Weasley had the rat with him, where the thing was when he didn't. Apparently, he didn't take it to classes — he had the first few weeks of first year, but Snape had torn into him something awful, and he'd since gotten out of the habit. (Which, who the fuck thought it was a good idea to bring a live animal into a potions lab? Some people, honestly.) When he _didn't_ have it in his pocket, the rat was usually left on his bed. It would wander around a little, but not much, the fat old thing suspiciously sedentary. Suspiciously because...well, animals, especially small mammals like rats, moved around a lot. They didn't just...sit in one place waiting for their owner to come back and feed them. They'd explore the area looking for food or shelter, out of pure instinct if nothing else. Sitting on the bed for hours at a time was very un-rat-like behaviour. Not to mention, according to the Twins, the rat had been in the family ever since Poncy Weasley found it in the garden during the first months of '82. Which made this thing especially long-lived for a rat, yes, but that just so happened to be a _couple months after the incident in Edinburgh_.

At first, Lyra had thought the idea that the Penultimate Weasley's boring pet had been Peter Pettigrew this whole time, just, absolutely bloody ridiculous. She'd thought Sirius had simply lost his mind. (His irrational certainty that she was his Bella was more evidence for that, he seemed completely incapable of letting that one go.) Of course, the thought that Sirius might just go nuts wasn't _that_ unexpected — long-term dementor exposure was less than healthy, and as a rule Blacks were hardly stable to begin with. She'd resolved to check the rat partially to humor him, and partially just to eliminate it as a possibility, on the (very unlikely) chance that he _hadn't_ lost it.

But now... Well, the rat was looking rather suspicious now, wasn't it?

Maybe she was just losing her mind now too. She meant, really, who the fuck would stay as a rat for _twelve years_? That just sounded..._really_ fucking boring. She couldn't imagine doing that even for a _few days_, it was, just, incomprehensible.

Eris pointed out Lyra was hardly a good standard by which to evaluate normal human behavior. Which, good point, she didn't have to sound so amused about it.

Anyway, snatching the thing wasn't complicated at all. After taking a couple days to brew some potions, instead of immediately going to sleep at the proper time in their afternoon shift, she waited for Hermione to drift off. (Going out while she was still awake or charming her under somehow would just lead to a tedious lecture later, not worth it when it was easy to avoid.) Once it was safe, Lyra snuck back out of bed, left for the stairs. There were a couple of upper-years in the common room, but that didn't particularly matter, she just ignored them, started up the boys' stairs. On the way up, she cast a notice-me-not on herself, just in case.

On the top floor, which she'd confirmed with Harry earlier was where the third-years slept, she paused behind the door. With a few circular waves of her wand, and an annoyingly lengthy incantation — it could be shortened quite a bit, of course, but she hadn't practiced this particular spell enough to manage the quicker version — she cast a variant on a stunning charm, the spellglow taking shape as a glowing, hissing orb at the tip of her wand.
Lyra pushed the door open, lobbed the red-purple ball of light into the third-years' dorm room, then yanked the door closed again. There was a flash of pale violet around the frame, but the spell was mostly contained.

Good — if she'd caught herself with it, and someone found her passed out here on the landing, she would be very irritated. Ciardha tagging her with this damn thing as many times as he had had been annoying enough. It hadn't taken very long into their lessons before Bella had gotten quick enough on her feet to dodge most of the narrower charms coming at her, so he'd progressed to wider-angle ones. This particular spell was basically an ordinary stunner that filled an entire bloody room. Standing still and throwing up a shield was, just, not at all intuitive to her, she'd had to fight to overcome her own instincts to get any good at it.

Which, of course, had been the whole point. Ciardha was a perceptive little shite like that.

Lyra pushed open the door and walked up to the Penultimate Weasley's bed — even if Harry hadn't told her which it was, it would be identifiable by the complete mess he'd made of his dresser and the nearby Chudley Cannons poster. (He never shut up about quidditch, and Lyra took every opportunity to prod him about how horrendous his favourite team was; not that Lyra gave a shite about professional quidditch, it was just funny watching him blow up.) And there the rat was, sitting out in the open on the pillow. She poked it, just to make sure it was unconscious, then picked it up and shoved it in a pocket.

Once she was back in her room, she dribbled a couple drops of a powerful sleeping potion down the thing's throat, then threw it in a carefully-warded desk drawer. (Far better than Hermione's, not that it really mattered, Hermione was a shite curse-breaker.) Then she went straight to sleep.

Things got more complicated from there. The third time through the afternoon, she'd intended to do a few basic analysis charms on the rat, to confirm it was an animagus. That should be easy enough — most analysis charms used for healing detected animagi as human, and there was even a charm explicitly designed to identify them. Problem was, half of them said the rat was, well, a normal rat, and the other half came up with complete nonsense.

Which...she wasn't sure she believed that. Ignore how bloody suspicious the thing was when she thought about it, there was an... It was hard to describe. There was some kind of magic clinging to the rat, something so dark it tingled. Small, yes, the volume of energy making up the spell wasn't impressive by any means, but intense. Seen through the soul magic seeing ritual thing she'd used with Sirius earlier, it was an oily black stain, tightly stitched into...

Into a soul which wasn't there. It was very strange to look at, actually. It was clear the magics were tightly braided together, so intricate she doubted she could unravel them even if she cared to try, but it... The threads reached into nothing, just...disappearing into the rat somehow. It was...

Well, it was bloody weird, was what it was.

Pondering the question, she was reminded of when she'd tried to use medical analysis charms on Sirius in dog form. They'd failed in much the same manner her spells were now. (Though, the curses on Sirius's soul had been hidden away too, but this thing wasn't for some reason.) Which... Okay, this wasn't supposed to happen with animagi — their human magic and soul should still be on the surface, easily detectable to one who knew how to look.

Had... Had they fucked up the animagus transformation somehow? That wasn't impossible, she guessed — they had been undertrained wizards attempting an incredibly complicated bit of magic, and different cultures did it differently to begin with. Sub-Saharan or American animagi might react to these analysis spells differently, the books she could find in the library didn't actually say.
Which meant she couldn't say definitively one way or the other whether this thing was Pettigrew, or even whether it was an animagus. It was definitely suspicious, but she had nothing more than that.

Which was irritating.

Well, she guessed this was what allies were for.

A day and/or six hours later, she made her way down toward Snape's personal office, again going through the Slytherin common room. Nobody even reacted to her inexplicably appearing somewhere she shouldn't be anymore — boring, she'd have to find some way to do something about that. Or, actually, now that she thought about it, it wasn't so inexplicable. Earlier in the week, when she'd come here with Hermione, there had still been Slytherins in the hall when she'd opened the door with parseltongue. So they all knew exactly how she was doing it now. Oops. Oh well.

They were still far too blasé about her presence, she should find some way to fix that anyhow.

Lyra barged through the door without bothering to knock. Pulling the door closed behind her, she said, "So, I've got a problem I think you might be able to help me with."

Sitting at his desk, leaning over a mess of parchment and splayed-open books, Snape shot her a sharp glare. "Yes, Bellatrix, just go ahead and walk in. I'm certain you couldn't possibly be interrupting anything."

She grinned. "If you don't want people walking in, you should lock your door." Lyra flounced over toward the desk and flopped into one of the chairs, slouching sideways to throw her legs over one of the armrests. "Also, it's Lyra. This universe already has a Bellatrix." Eris did intend to free Other Bella if at all possible, Snape should get used to making the distinction.

Somewhat to her disappointment, Snape just let out a brief, thin sigh. "What do you want?"

"Giving in so easily, Severus? I think I may be in shock."

His left eye twitched. "The sooner I deal with whatever brought you here the sooner you leave."

"True." Lyra reached into a pocket, pulled out the drugged rat, holding it suspended in the air by the tail. "Sirius is convinced this is Peter Pettigrew."

That might have been a hint of surprise, but it was hard to tell, he barely reacted at all. "You've recovered your wayward cousin, then."

She smirked. "Didn't you know? Here I thought you didn't miss any of my exploits." A scowl crossing his face, Snape moved to speak, but she moved on without pause. "Yes, I got my hands on him. My elf stuck him in the nursery, which is hilarious."

That was definitely a smirk, curving his lips for a moment before vanishing again. "And you're sure he's still there? He could just order the elf to let him leave."

"He can't, actually. Turns out, when Cherri obeyed my order to treat Siri like a disobedient child, I unintentionally usurped him as Lady Black. Shattering what little was left of the family magic in the process." Lifting one shoulder in a casual shrug, she muttered, "Oops. Anyway—" Lyra swung the rat around a few degrees, tossed it into the middle of the desk. It landed with a light thump, rolled over a couple times, coming to a stop atop one of Snape's parchments. "—I was hoping you could cast a Homorphus Charm on that. I never did learn that one, and this is too important to mess
A single, derisive eyebrow slowly worked its way up Snape's forehead. "Black tells you some random rat is a man believed twelve years dead — a man he himself is believed to have murdered — and you just believe him?" It was subtle, his voice almost entirely flat, but there was the slightest hint of incredulity, suggesting the two of them were absolutely insane without need to spell it out explicitly.

Lyra shrugged again. "Oh, I didn't believe him, thought he'd just lost it. But there's something seriously wrong with that rat. I still don't believe him, not really, just thought I'd check."

He fixed her with another doubtful look, but after a few seconds his eyes turned down toward the rat. For a moment, nothing happened, or at least nothing visible — Lyra felt the slight charge on the air, knew Snape was reaching out to it with his magic, prodding at it. His face narrowed with a frown. "This rat is Marked."

"Marked."

"The Dark Mark." Snape hesitated for a moment before, with the slightest wince, pushing his left sleeve up to his elbow, baring his forearm. Sketched into his skin with faint red lines, rather like a scar partially healed, was the outline of a scowling skull, a curling snake extending out from between jagged teeth. "Tom used it as an emblem of sorts. It was imprinted upon many of the Death Eaters, a complex magic that binds us all to him. Through it he can summon us to his location, individually or collectively, and he can even sense us, though I don't know how much he can get through it."

"Oh." Lyra had known Not-Professor Riddle had something of the like — Eris had shown her a memory of Other Bella being 'Marked' shortly after Lyra had arrived here — she just hadn't known what it did. Well, she'd felt it burrow itself into Other Bella's body and soul, binding her to her Lord in a way she'd found absolutely sickening, but she hadn't known the rest. "Neat."

Snape scowled, self-consciously smoothing his sleeve down over his arm again. "Of course you would think so. In any case, this cannot possibly be a rat. I haven't been able to reverse-engineer the magic precisely, but I am certain only beings can be Marked."

"So, you're saying Weasley's rat has been a Death Eater this whole time?" A gleeful grin spreading across her face, she said, "Oh, he's going to love that."

A peculiar stillness swept over Snape's face. "You mean...this is Ronald Weasley's rat."

"Yep."

His eyes flicked back down to it, eyes narrowing, lips peeling back from his teeth in a bloody scowl. "Well. Let's see who this is, shall we?"

Lyra raised an eyebrow at him. Okay? He was being rather...intense, all of a sudden. Which was strange and confusing, but it didn't particularly matter. A corner of his lip twisting with the hint of a disgusted scowl, Snape stood and picked the thing up by the tail. He moved around his desk, coming to drop the rat in the middle of the floor — dropped it from rather unnecessarily high, in fact, that was going to hurt when it woke up. Lyra didn't bother standing up, turned to kneel backward on her chair instead. His wand appearing in his hand out of a hidden wrist holster, Snape hesitated for a brief moment, the air snapping with invisible lightning before, with a sharp jab, the rat was obscured with a flash of blue light.
When her eyes cleared, a man was lying where the rat had been a second ago. His simple robes were stained and tattered, hardly holding together — which, he had been wearing them for twelve years, that made sense — balding hair matted and tangled, round face half-hidden with a scraggly, uneven beard. There was an odd yellowish tinge not only on his teeth, but in his skin as well. When Lyra thought about it, that made sense too — after all, humans couldn't really survive on a diet appropriate for rats very long. She was almost surprised the transformation hadn't killed him.

Snape drew in a hiss, his glare turning hard and cold, fingers whitening around his wand. "It is Pettigrew. The fucking idiot, what is he even doing here? There are few places he could hide he'd be more likely to be discovered."

She shrugged. "With the very little Sirius said about him, I didn't get the impression he's a sterling example of human brilliance."

Somewhat to her surprise, Snape snorted out a laugh. He almost smiled even — not a pleasant smile by any means, cold and sharp, but still, it was strange. "A perfectly accurate impression, I assure you. It appears your insufferable little cousin isn't nearly so insane as one might think."

"We haven't actually confirmed it was Pettigrew who did in the Potters yet." Sirius had claimed as much, and he was right about the rat, but that didn't mean he hadn't gotten anything else wrong. Normal people and dementors, and all that.

"Oh, it was him." Lyra recognized the frigid, simmering hatred in his eyes: Snape was holding back the urge to curse Pettigrew with something painful. "I'd had my suspicions at the time, but there was no way to confirm them. I was not aware he had been Marked. Given his self-imposed isolation and Black's accusations — especially that he was so absolute in his conviction he was able to resist the dementors long enough to escape — I believe there is no longer any reasonable cause for doubt."

"That's that, then, I guess." She could insist on interrogating him, but she'd already gotten most of the story from Sirius, she doubted she'd learn anything interesting. And there was only so much interrogating she could do before he'd be useless as a witness anyway. "Wanna hang on to him for a week or two for me?"

Slowly, Snape turned to her, one incredulous eyebrow stretching his forehead. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

She grinned. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about. I simply need time to arrange with Meda and Dora how exactly we're going to get him into DLE custody. So long as he's still competent enough to testify, it's really no concern of mine what happens to him in the meanwhile. Not that I'm suggesting anything will."

Again, he almost looked amused. She tallied herself up another point in her head. "No, of course not."

"Besides, Evans sounds fun. He deserves whatever he gets for getting her killed before I could meet her."

And there was his scowl again — that certainly hadn't lasted very long.

She didn't bother holding in a giggle. Pulling a bottle out of her pocket, she tossed it over at Snape; he caught it, seemingly by reflex, still glaring at her. "You'll be needing that."

Shooting her a peculiar look she couldn't quite read, Snape thumbed out the cork, sniffed the
contents. He reared back, eyes widening. Turning her something...surprised? That might be it. It was hard to tell, Lyra had never been as good at reading people as Zee, and Snape was especially obscure. "Did you dose him with Draught of Living Death?"

"Sure," she said, lifting one shoulder in a lazy shrug.

"You realize you could have easily killed him."

"Nah, I did the arithmancy to adjust the dose twice, just in case." Lyra twisted over the armrest, popping back to her feet. "Right. I'm gonna go drop by Meda's. Keep in mind I do need him to testify."

And that was a smirk. Not even smirking at her, exactly, more with her, sharing a joke instead of making one at her expense. Huh. Snape must be finally loosening up around her. That'd be good, maybe he'd be a bit less stuffy and boring now. "Unlike some people in this room, I am possessed of a modicum of self-control."

Tee hee. "That's why I came to you." Well, sort of — it was one of the reasons, at least. "You know, Severus," Lyra said, a grin pulling at her lips, "I have the feeling this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

He just scowled at her again.

"Pleasure doing business with you, too."

"So, Hermione — you're a girl, right?"

Hermione mostly managed to hold in her glare, enough Harry probably didn't notice. She felt her own eyes narrow, her hand tighten around the strap of her bookbag, but he usually didn't pay close enough attention to notice little things like that. (Well, either that, or he just didn't care, but it was possible she was getting paranoid from spending too much time around Lyra.) "Just picking up on this now, are we?" Wow, okay, that was quite a lot of sarcasm on her voice — apparently she'd been spending too much time around Blaise lately too.

Rolling his eyes — which was also rather annoying, but there was no real point to drawing attention to that — Harry groaned out, "Ha bloody ha. Can we maybe get to the point without insulting my intelligence for once?"

Despite herself, Hermione winced. "I'm sorry, I just..." She didn't know what she just, honestly. She didn't even entirely understand why she'd gotten as annoyed as she had. It wasn't like she— No, never mind, it didn't matter. "Did you want to talk to me about something?"

"Ah, yeah, can..." Harry drifted to a stop in the middle of the hallway. He'd found her in the library with questions about transfiguration — he wasn't just asking her to figure everything out for him anymore, it was an actual insightful question only tangentially related to the assignment, she'd been more than happy to talk it out — and followed along with her as she went back toward the tower. They were probably only two or three minutes away from the common room, but here Harry was lingering.

Looking very uncomfortable, at that. He was fidgeting, fingers working at the hems of his sleeves, not meeting her eyes, biting at his lip. Which was...weird. She'd seen Harry uncomfortable before, of course, but this particular kind of uncomfortable was new. She wasn't sure how to read it. "Harry?"
"Can we..." He started into motion again, jerkily at first, approaching the nearest door out of the hall.

Uh...okay?

The room Harry led her into wasn't particularly distinctive, there were dozens of them all over the castle — bare, unused classrooms, desks and chairs covered in decades of dust. Which still struck her as sort of odd. What was the point of all the unused space here? Had they all been used before, was the student population really so much smaller than it'd once been? It didn't matter that much, she guessed, it was just...weird.

Hermione let her bag slide to the floor, flinching as the impact raised a thin cloud of dust. Dammit, she was going to have to clean that off later. Sighing to herself, she turned back to Harry, still standing there looking uncomfortable. "Right. So, what is it?"

It took him a couple attempts, opening his mouth only to close it again, before Harry managed to decide what he wanted to say. "Er, you know Lyra, right?"

That was a silly question to ask — she did spend more time around her than anyone else these days. Harry couldn't have missed that. "It is sort of hard to miss her."

A faint, sardonic smile on his face, Harry said, "Yeah, no kidding. Just... You know her pretty well."

She frowned. "What did she do now?"

"Oh, she— she didn't do anything bad. I just..." Harry trailed off, somehow looking even more uncomfortable than he'd been a moment ago. Eyes turned away, slightly narrowed with a crooked grimace, feet shuffling just audibly. And he... Was he blushing? It was barely there, but, what the hell?

Slowly, like sinking into cold water inch by inch, a peculiar suspicion started taking shape in her head. "Harry."

He flinched, cringing away from her slightly before relaxing again. "She..." Hand coming up to rub at the back of his head, he muttered something under his breath, too quietly for Hermione to catch what. "That last Hogsmeade weekend before winter break, you know, we, er, snuck out to the village."

Lyra had mentioned that, actually. They'd used the free weekend as another excuse to sneak off to the Bookstore — Lyra had thought it was hilarious that the 'increased security' at the school was so thin she could slip past four times in one weekend. Hermione had considered bringing up that Harry wasn't supposed to be leaving the castle, but Lyra technically wasn't either, and it wasn't like she would take the threat of Sirius Black seriously, even if she didn't think he was innocent, which she did. (Honestly, Hermione was wondering about that herself now, but not the point.) Anyway, Harry had trailed off again. "What about it?"

"When I was... Well, we sort of..." Harry forced out a tight, irritated sigh. "She kissed me."

Hermione started, a hard unpleasant thud ringing through her. Like a weak electric shock, coming as almost painful tension before instantly fading again — though, it didn't entirely go away, leaving Hermione feeling stiff and uncomfortable. For long seconds, she just stared back in Harry's general direction, blankly blinking.

She'd just... They...
By the way Harry twitched, she'd probably said that out loud. (She hadn't meant to, but she was feeling odd and...fuzzy all of a sudden, couldn't help it.) "We were in the Three Broomsticks, you know, and the Minister was there, with Hagrid and McGonagall and Flitwick, and Lyra was...kind of...spying on them?" Harry got the words out slowly, grimacing with what looked like guilt. Over the eavesdropping or just for telling Hermione about Lyra doing something morally questionable, really couldn't tell.

Not that Hermione was particularly surprised — listening in on the Minister of Magic's private conversations was rather tame, by Lyra's standards. She hardly even cared about that. "Yes?"

"They were talking about the war, and that Hallowe'en, and how..." Harry trailed off, a peculiar frown crossing his face. "Never mind, that's not important."

No, that wasn't an obvious deflection at all...

"Anyway, point is, I heard something I...didn't take very well, and I kinda stormed off and was freaking out a little bit, and..." He started fidgeting again, eyes focused upward so resolutely he might as well be trying to talk to the ceiling. "She just kinda walked up to me and..." His face pinking a bit, he shrugged.

Lyra had hardly given Harry any warning, by the sound of it, she'd just...done it. Which, Hermione had to admit, certainly did sound like Lyra. It never seemed to cross her mind that she really should ask permission first, for some things, and she'd hardly ever seen her hesitate, not even for a second. Not to mention, Lyra seemed to have absolutely no respect for personal space. She just...

Hermione had mostly gotten used to it, time-turning with her. Mostly. Sometimes she still wished the chain on the thing was longer, they practically had to press right up against each other, that first second or two when Lyra just whipped in to throw the chain over her head (before she'd given it back, that is) was always uncomfortable, made all the worse by how completely nonchalant Lyra was about it all. And she'd developed an unnerving habit of waking Hermione up a couple minutes before her alarm went off — actually, Hermione didn't even set her alarm half the time — she assumed just to annoy her, because Lyra was impossible like that. And every time, she settled herself somewhere far too close, and when Hermione did wake up she was right there, and it was just—

No. No respect for personal space, none at all.

Just, kissing people might be a new one, but honestly she couldn't say she was that... Well, no, she was surprised actually, when she thought about it. She meant, she spent a fair amount of her time around Lyra, more than she did anyone else, and in all that time Hermione had never seen even the smallest sign that Lyra was even the slightest bit interested in anyone like that, at all. More than that — Hermione wasn't certain Lyra could like people in that particular way (or at all, really). Given the various discussions she'd had with Blaise and Lady Malfoy and Lyra herself about how her head worked, yeah, she was pretty sure that...sentiments of that sort were simply outside of Lyra's emotional range.

(Not that Hermione could say she minded. Lyra being...the way she was meant she would never want to... Well, the other girls in their year spent an inordinate amount of time gossiping about boys, which, that would just be completely intolerable — if she had a choice between that and Lyra's general insanity, she'd take the insanity, thanks.)

But if she could, if Hermione were to say Lyra liked anyone, it wouldn't be Harry. Figuring out
what was going on in Lyra's head wasn't exactly straightforward, but Hermione had the feeling
Lyra more...tolerated Harry. She just seemed to think he was exasperating, but she still— It was a
responsibility, that was it, like completing boring assignments for class, she dealt with Harry
because she felt she had to, for whatever inane pureblood reason, she didn't actually like him.

If Lyra liked anyone like that, Hermione would guess Sylvia. When Lyra came back from meeting
her she was always... She wasn't sure what the word for it was. Happy? Relaxed? She was always
a mess, of course, bits of twigs and leaves in her hair and her face smeared with dirt, and sometimes
odd blue spatters Hermione couldn't identify, but... It was hard to explain, really. Lyra hardly ever
smiled — she meant a real smile, not the blank polite smile purebloods always did or that
bloody grin — but she was always lighter after doing whatever she did with Sylvia, it was...odd,
honestly. If Lyra told Hermione she and Sylvia spent all their time out there snogging, she wouldn't
be surprised at all.

Uncomfortable, maybe. Hermione had finally managed to find a book in the restricted section that
properly addressed the subject of wilderfolk, and... Well, okay, there were nonhuman beings, like
goblins and veela and such, who were inarguably still people — the biological and cultural
differences were rather superficial, all things considered. But they... Wilderfolk were different, in a
way most other beings weren't. Not that Hermione had a, a problem with it, not the way the
average British mage would, it was just a little unnerving to think about.

Not to mention, the both of them were girls. Which... Okay, Hermione knew mages didn't care
about that nearly as much as muggles did. In fact, it was a total non-issue — they couldn't marry,
of course, but it was just a mild curiosity here, if even that. And, honestly, it didn't really bother
her. It was just slightly... She meant, she wasn't used to it, was all, her first reaction was still that it
was just kind of...weird.

Not bad. Just weird.

Hermione abruptly noticed Harry was saying something, she hadn't caught any of it. "I'm sorry,
what?" Her voice came out slightly off, she had to clear her throat.

"I mean... Well, it's just kinda weird, you know?" Still avoiding her eyes, Harry frowned up at the
ceiling, his lips twitching fitfully with unspoken words. "I just... I don't get it, I guess? I'm
confused, is all, I thought... I just thought, since you know Lyra so well, you might be able to tell
me what the hell's going on."

Oh, he wasn't asking for much, was he? Hermione was at best eighty per cent sure what Lyra was
thinking when it came to normal things. Randomly just kissing people, well, she couldn't even
begin to guess what that could be about.

It took far longer than it should to get the thought of Lyra kissing people out of her head.

"Right, er..." Hermione cleared her throat again. "Have you considered, just, asking her? You
might have noticed this, but she's rather...straightforward. I mean, if you ask her a direct question,
she'll give you a direct answer — as direct an answer as Lyra Black is capable of giving, anyway."

Harry seemed to be trapped between a smirk and a wince. "Ah... Well, yeah, I'd thought of that,
but... It's complicated because...because it's all bloody complicated. I mean, there's this ridiculous
house stuff that I don't get, and half the time I think she thinks I'm a helpless stupid child she needs
to take care of, and... And, it was just that one time, I stayed with her at the Zabinis' over all of
hols, and... Well, I guess, if I just come out and ask what the hell's going on with, you know, this,
she'll just say I'm being an idiot, and I get enough of that already, thanks."
Quite to her own surprise, Hermione felt her throat quickly tighten with anger. She wasn't even sure exactly why. She just... Lyra had...

Lyra had, just, kissed him, randomly one day — and Hermione was all but positive that had been Harry's first kiss, he would have told her, and he was only thirteen — and she'd, just, ignored the subject since. And she'd invited Harry to stay with her over hols — he hadn't said anything but Hermione knew how much that meant to him, to have somewhere, anywhere to go — she was generally decent to him — Harry might actually be the one person here Lyra was most consistently not horrible to, with the possible exception of Blaise — Hermione had her suspicions about his home life, she had the feeling he wasn't accustomed to being treated decently — she was quite possibly the most direct connection Harry had to his birth parents on the magical side, the only person Hermione knew to explicitly acknowledge they were related — Lyra had explained the family tree to Hermione at one point, and Bellatrix was actually more closely related to him than Lyra's obviously fake background — they were second cousins, which was bloody weird to think about — apparently she even vaguely remembered Harry's father as a child, from her original timeline, not that she'd told Harry that — and Harry had nothing, nothing but that damn invisibility cloak, she knew it meant something to him, no matter how much he might pretend otherwise — Harry hardly had any friends, really just Ronald and Lyra and Hermione herself — maybe Blaise should also count at this point — very few people talked to him like an actual person, not all wrapped up in this disturbingly messianic Boy Who Lived nonsense — and Lyra didn't get it, none of this meant anything to her, Harry hardly meant anything to her, and she— she—

Ooh, she was in so much trouble.

But before she could go off to give Lyra a piece of her mind, she had to finish dealing with Harry. "Honestly, Harry, you're giving me far too much credit — I have no idea what's going on in that girl's head half the time. If you want to know, you'll just have to ask her yourself." Harry seemed less than pleased with that answer, giving her a frustrated, mulish sort of glare. But, well, there wasn't a whole lot she could do about that. She picked up her bag and was out of the room before Harry could stop her.

(Not that she was certain he would try to stop her. She really had nothing further to offer him on the subject, he had to realise that.)

She hadn't even gotten very far, only to the first turn in the hallway, when she suddenly jerked to a halt. There was a problem with tracking down Lyra to yell at her over Harry: Hermione had little idea where to find her at this particular time of day. In the library, in the common room, off somewhere with the Weasley twins, holed up with her Slytherin friends... It could be any of them. Hell, she could be off pestering Snape again, it was impossible to guess with her.

That was Lyra-null, anyway. Lyra-prime would be in bed right now, which made her not an option — starting to intrude on her sleep would only incentivise Lyra to take likely disproportionate revenge, Hermione didn't want to cross that line. (Not to mention Hermione-prime would also be there, she tried her best to avoid getting anywhere near her other selves.) Lyra-two-prime should be down in the kitchens having lunch about now, but they usually ate together, so—

No, wait. Hermione-two-prime hadn't gone to lunch yet — she hadn't gotten any external confirmation that that was already a thing that was going to have happened — so if she, Hermione-null, simply decided that she wasn't going to take lunch with Lyra in the kitchens tonight, Hermione-two-prime should already not be there now.

Right.

By the time Hermione was crossing the second floor on the Grand Staircase, her initial anger was
fading away, and she was starting to wonder if confronting Lyra about this was *really* the best idea. For one thing, Hermione had never been the most...comfortable, with conflict. Which was kind of weird, that she wasn't used to it yet, with how much she'd always ended up arguing with the boys over almost everything, but it always made her, just... She didn't like fighting, was all. And, well, what if she made Lyra angry? She wasn't concerned Lyra would, she didn't know, do something bad — not *really*, anyway — but...

It sounded kind of pathetic putting it this way, even in her own head, but Hermione *really* didn't have very many friends. And, since returning to school last week, Lyra had been...less *caustic* than usual (with Hermione, at least). She wasn't *nice*, not by any stretch of imagination, but, that odd conversation they'd had after getting the time turner back, she was putting in an effort to not be so horrible all the time (to Hermione, at least). It wasn't actually that much of a difference, mostly seemed to boil down to not directly insulting her when she said or did something Lyra thought was irrational — Lyra hadn't been all that horrible with Hermione to begin with, honestly, not like she was with a lot of other people she'd seen.

(There was that one time the night they'd met, but Hermione was *positive* Lyra had already had all kinds of illicit who-even-knows-what in her trunk, she was just blunt and had no other way to ensure Hermione didn't go snooping around. Which wasn't *excusing* her for making a casual death threat to someone she'd just met, that was still insane, but it made perfect sense by Lyra logic.)

(Should she be worried that she was actually starting to follow Lyra logic?)

But, well, really, when it came down to it, was it really her business who Lyra went around kissing? Harry *was* her friend, yes, but it wasn't like she... She didn't know, she didn't know what she was trying to get at here. Lyra was being rather awful about it, but Lyra was *usually* awful to people, it wasn't like this was a unique situation, by any means. She couldn't even claim to herself without it feeling like a lie that Lyra was leading Harry on — there'd been that one kiss, yes, but by the sound of it Lyra hadn't even attempted to pretend that it meant anything. Which really wasn't a surprise, hardly anything really meant anything to her. If Harry weren't so socially stunted and completely bloody oblivious he probably wouldn't have made anything of it at all. Not that she could blame him for that — she was pretty sure she knew *exactly* who to blame for his issues, and it wasn't like anything involving Lyra was perfectly normal anyway.

She'd been rather angry a few minutes ago, she'd been determined to come down here and yell at Lyra, but... What exactly did she expect to get out of this? From what she understood, Lyra simply wouldn't ever feel guilty about anything, especially not something so relatively innocuous as this. And...well, there was nothing about Lyra's behaviour around Harry she would want her to change, particularly. Sure, maybe spell out for him exactly what their relationship was, just to eliminate any possibility of a misunderstanding, but in general, Lyra was actually pretty decent to Harry. Compared to most other people, anyway.

Really, she wasn't *trying* to make excuses for her, but Hermione wasn't even certain she could blame Lyra for Harry's confusion on the matter. She meant, if it was difficult for normal people to understand how Lyra's head worked, it only followed that it should be equally difficult for Lyra to understand normal people. Something that was done without malice couldn't really be considered properly malicious, could it. It simply might not have occurred to Lyra she could be giving Harry the wrong idea. Harry had said he'd been *freaking out a little bit* — he hadn't explained why, he'd been being strangely cagey around it, actually — and maybe it was just the best, most inoffensive method Lyra could think of to get his attention. Hell, *she* could have hexed him, that seemed a more natural thing for Lyra to do. If she *had* hexed him, would Hermione be more offended or less? It might be, just, *weird*, but kissing him really was comparatively harmless, all things considered.
Something about that was making Hermione a little uncomfortable.

By the time she got to the entrance to the kitchens, Hermione still hadn't decided if this was the right thing to do or not. But she had already decided she was going to do it. She could change her mind, of course, and future-Hermione would change her plans accordingly, but she was leery of too drastically altering plans once she made them. It was a bad habit to get into. After reading a bit of (anathema) research on the matter, and observing Lyra's more convoluted shenanigans, she'd come to the conclusion that time loops were the most stable when those involved didn't overanalyse their actions and motivations, and just did things as they came. The most consistently effective means to prevent a paradox was to not think about it too hard — even after the fact, thinking about the Lyra-inexplicably-blowing-up-the-common-room incident gave her a headache. It did go against her instincts, but Hermione had to admit it could be strangely liberating at times, to not worry about the consequences too much and just...do things.

Which meant she was absorbing through extended contact more of Lyra's mindset than could possibly be healthy, but she'd rather not think about that.

Not for the first time, she wished Hogwarts weren't so impractically enormous. If the school were a reasonable size, she would still be properly angry by the time she found Lyra, and she could have avoided this confusing moment of introspection entirely.

Casting out her doubts about what she was doing, Hermione tickled the pear, and stepped into the kitchens. She returned the greetings of a few of the more friendly elves, trying to keep any sign of discomfort off her face. She had managed to find a bit about elves — mostly in the Restricted Section, because of course everything actually informative about magical society was in there, and for no good reason she could identify — and while she did understand the situation was rather more complicated than she'd first assumed, that didn't mean she liked it. She doubted she ever would. It was just...

She had a long list of things about magical Britain that bothered her by now.

"There you are." Curiously, the floor of the kitchens was dominated by five tables, laid out in a direct mirror of the ones in the Great Hall overhead — as usual, Lyra was seated at the reflection of the professors' table, in Dumbledore's spot, because she thought she was funny. She was watching Hermione approach with a slightly exasperated expression, a spoon floating halfway to her mouth. "I was wondering if you were going to show up. Are you done avoiding me, then?"

Hermione was thrown off by the question enough that she froze, still a few steps away across the table. "I've been avoiding you?"

Taking a bite of her soup, Lyra threw her an unimpressed look — the one she'd seemingly borrowed from Snape, eyes cold and sharp, one brow sardonically raised. "What else would you call it? This shift you've hardly stuck around long enough to turn back, and..." Lyra's face went entirely blank. "You're not two-prime."

"Shit." After a few empty blinks up at her, Lyra shrugged, turned back down to her lunch. "I guess I'm about to find out what was going on, then. So?"

Something about the nonchalant way Lyra went back to eating, as though whatever Hermione had to say to her couldn't possibly be important, was just making Hermione angry again. She stalked closer, until she was looming over Lyra's shoulder. Not that she really felt like she had any height on her — Lyra always looked so together and supremely self-confident, Hermione ended up feeling
clumsy and small by comparison, which was annoying, because Hermione was actually taller than her. "I know about Harry."

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her, this time in confusion. "I was under the impression everyone here knows about Harry Potter," she said, the slightly off tone on "here" cueing that she meant in this timeline.

"You know what I mean."

"I really don't."

Well, okay, that was probably true — Hermione had thought to herself just a moment ago that Lyra probably didn't realise she'd done anything questionable. She took a slow breath, trying to force out her annoyance at herself for being so silly about this. "You can't just go around kissing people, Lyra."

"Okay..." If anything, Lyra seemed confused, her face scrunching a little, her voice consciously slow. "First, that's obviously a crock of shite, the Zabinis both do it all the time, and—"

"What do the Zabinis have to do with anything?"

Lyra blinked at her for a second, then shrugged again. "I can't tell you how many times I've caught Blaise snogging one Hufflepuff or another in a corner somewhere — and it is almost always Hufflepuffs, it's weird. And Zee, she kisses me all the time, whenever she can come up with an excuse it seems like, so—"

"Wait, you mean Blaise's mum—" Hermione cut herself off, not sure she really wanted to finish that question. She already knew Lyra had been sexually abused by her father — no matter how unnervingly nonchalant Lyra was about it — but she definitely seemed to actually like Zabini, as much as Lyra really liked anyone, so if...something was going on there, Hermione wasn't certain she wanted to...

"Yes, that one. I don't get what's so weird about that. Well, okay, it is weird, but that's normal Zabini behaviour, really."

It took great force of will for Hermione to keep herself from fidgeting. "I mean, it's just... Her son is our age, I..."

Lyra made what looked like a self-directed frown, her eyes not quite focused on Hermione. "I used the present tense, didn't I? I meant back home — we started Hogwarts the same year, you know. She hasn't done it since I got here. Which is sort of weird, but okay."

It hadn't taken very long for this conversation to derail completely. She'd gotten distracted from what she'd wanted to talk about, there were far too many things to unpack there — the surreal fact that Lyra had been born in the Fifties, that Blaise's mum had apparently just randomly kissed Lyra whenever she felt like it back in their second year, that the professors at the time apparently hadn't cared to do anything about that, that Lyra didn't seem to think there was anything unusual about it. But the one she stuck on was, "What do you— It's weird, she— Isn't Ms Zabini in her forties?!"

Blinking blankly up at her, with no sense of the inherent absurdity of it, Lyra said, "She's a couple months older than me, and it's Ninety-Four now, so, forty-four."

Jesus Christ, Lyra was born in Nineteen Fifty. Or, hell, it could have been Forty-Nine, Hermione didn't actually know when her real birthday was. She realised, yes, time travel, but it was easy to forget sometimes, Lyra appearing for all purposes to be her own age, it was...just...
"And? I don't really get why that should make a difference."

That was such a strange thing to say Hermione couldn't even process it for a second. "...Lyra, you're thirteen."

"Fourteen. So?"

"And she's..."

"...forty-four, yes. You say that like it should matter to me. Not that my opinion really matters — I don't know why she was doing it in the first place."

"I..." Nope. Nope, Hermione was not touching that. She didn't want to know what the hell had been going on between thirteen-year-old Ms Zabini and thirteen-year-old Lyra, it was none of her business and she did not care. "Just, no, back to what I was saying. You need to talk to Harry about it."

Lyra frowned. "I really don't see why Harry would care about Zee being silly thirty years ago. Also, he doesn't even know about the time travel, so that would take some explaining..."

"Stop playing dumb!"

"Hermione, I am trying to be nice—" Lyra's voice had gone stilted and cautious, though there was the barest note of derision as she said be nice, as though mocking the whole concept. "—but you really aren't making it easy for me. I am legitimately confused by this conversation. Don't assume I must know what you mean. Just say it plainly."

"Right, sorry." The half-insincere apology came out unthinkingly, but she didn't think it was just reflex. Hermione really shouldn't assume Lyra would get these kinds of things, she was being silly. "I just... You really should talk to Harry, about the kiss, that's all. And you can't just do stuff like that, Lyra, it's...a little cruel, really."

Lyra gave her another blank, confused look, slowly blinking. "What is there even to talk about? And, if you think kissing someone is 'cruel' we have very different definitions of the word."

And she still wasn't getting the point. Hermione struggled to find the proper words to even attempt to explain, but before she'd made much progress they transformed into a groan. Lyra had started grinning, bright and sharp and gleeful. Nothing good ever came of that grin.

Her voice with an odd bounce to it, Lyra said, "Maïa, are you jealous?"

Hermione scoffed, her eyes rolling all by themselves. "Harry's my best friend, Lyra, but I don't like him like that." Also, that nickname wasn't going anywhere, was it?

That only had her grin stretching wider, far more of her teeth visible than could be comfortable, her charmed purple eyes almost seeming to glimmer. "Got it backwards there, Maïa. Switch the object and the argument."

"What are you talk—" Hermione couldn't even finish the sentence before it clicked. Lyra didn't mean that Hermione was jealous over Harry. She meant Hermione was jealous over Lyra.

Lyra was suggesting that Hermione wanted to—

The shocked laugh forced its way out of her throat before she even realised it was coming, harsh enough Lyra started. Ignoring her own sudden uneasiness best she could, Hermione said, "You
know you're completely insane, right?"

"From a certain point of view, perhaps. But right now, of the two of us, you're the one acting erratic and irrational."

"I'm acting—" Hermione bit the sentence off before it get too far. Partially because what she'd been about to say wouldn't actually add anything at all, and partially because she'd just be proving Lyra's point, yelling things like that. She was being so silly, her embarrassment enough her face felt warm with it, and Lyra was still just grinning at her, seeming as pleased with herself as ever. "You're impossible, you know that."

"I don't think so. I think I'm perfectly straightforward, actually."

She couldn't help an involuntary moue of irritation — Hermione had said much the same thing to Harry not twenty minutes ago. "You know what I mean."

Lyra's grin tilted a little, edging closer to a smirk. "You keep saying that, and I keep telling you I really don't know what you mean. When it comes to personal things, at least — you really are the only person in our year who can hold up their end of a conversation with me on more academic topics. Which is interesting, didn't have someone like that back home. It's fun."

...Did Lyra just give her a compliment? Like, okay, Lyra had said things sort of like that before, but in a more...objective sort of way. That had almost sounded like...well, like a personal thing. Hermione had absolutely no idea what to do with that.

At Hermione's blank stare Lyra's grin returned full force. For just a second, at least, before it dimmed a bit, somehow absent, as though Lyra weren't paying the expression enough attention to properly maintain it. Her head tilting slightly, Lyra flatly stared up at her for a brief moment, her eyes temporarily narrowed in a cold sort of evaluation. Then, abruptly, the grin was back, heedless and bright as usual. "You're allowed, you know."

Hermione was too thrown off by the unnervingly quick shifts in Lyra's expression to follow what the hell she was talking about. "Allowed?"

"To kiss me. I won't stop you."

"You– but— Argh!" Somehow managing to stop herself from throwing her hands above her head, Hermione forced a long, frustrated hiss out between her teeth, fighting the odd, shivery tightness in her own throat. The amused grin from Lyra was not helping. "Could we get back to the subject at hand, please?"

"No, that was confusing and boring. This is the subject at hand now."

"I'm serious, Lyra, stop it."

"Stop what? Saying true things?" An annoying smugness settling into her smirk, Lyra said, "I know what it looks like when someone's thinking about kissing me, Maïa. I've seen it on Zee enough to be quite familiar with it by now."

Hermione forced out a scoff. "Yeah, you didn't understand why she kept doing it, but you still knew she was thinking about it, sure."

"That's just simple pattern recognition, I don't have to understand it. I don't understand why you want to kiss me — or why anyone would want to kiss anyone in general, really," she added in a lower mutter, rolling her eyes. "—and I don't understand why you're getting so flustered about it,
but these are both things that clearly happen. And, I notice, you keep saying I'm insane, or impossible, but you haven't actually denied it yet."

...She hadn't? Well, she didn't really think she would have to, it should be obvious she wasn't— Lyra was just being—

Oh, this was completely ridiculous! She was being so silly, really, this shouldn't be that hard to deal with, Lyra was just being her usual absurd self. She just had to say it was all nonsense, and they could move on, and Lyra could stop smirking at her all...

The words turned to ash on her tongue before they could even get out, an unpleasant wave of tingling washing over her. Because... she had thought about it, before. But it didn't mean anything, though! She couldn't help it, she spent more time with Lyra than with anyone else, and with how close they had to get for the time turner, and she was fourteen, so bloody stupid hormone shite was just going to happen, it was just— she didn't—

Argh, this was so bloody stupid!

And there Lyra was still just bloody smirking at her. After a couple seconds of awkward silence, Lyra pushed herself to her feet — Hermione reflexively retreated a step. Spreading her arms in a loose shrug, she said, "Go ahead, then." Her hands folding behind her back, Lyra propped her hip against the table. And, just, stood there, watching Hermione and smiling.

Waiting for her to take up the offer.

Instead, Hermione got the hell out of there.

She just, she couldn't deal with Lyra while she was... being like that. It was just, she— It was stupid, was what it was, silly and stupid and annoying, and if Lyra was going to be silly and stupid and annoying Hermione would just come back when she was done. Lyra did tend to have a very short attention span, she'd probably forget all about this a couple hours from now. Yes, th—that all was something that should be ignored completely, it wasn't worth even thinking about, and she could just, just, yes.

Of course, just deciding to dismiss...that didn't make her stop being distractingly uncomfortable right away, it wasn't until she was up a couple floors that she was starting to feel normal again. Which, well, that was just reasonable, she couldn't be expected to be entirely rational if Lyra was going to be... so very Lyra. That just... Lyra did enjoy making people uncomfortable. Given that she apparently worshiped Chaos it might even be a religious obligation. Lyra was just being Lyra, that was all. Just put it out of mind, everything would go back—

Hermione jerked to a halt, between the fifth and sixth floors. Her heart feeling oddly heavy far too high up her throat, she shook her sleeve back, stared down at her watch. She had to meet Lyra at their room to turn back in, wow, less than half an hour now. Her mind must have been wandering more than she'd thought going down to the kitchens and back, she hadn't realised that much time had passed. But, that would just be... uncomfortable, no, so soon after... that...

She could just— No, no, she couldn't skip turning back today and just deal with Lyra being annoyed about it later. She'd already met Lyra-two-prime in the kitchens, so, in a sense, she had already turned back with Lyra-null — at least, she had from Lyra-two-prime's perspective. In fact, before Hermione had even said a word, Lyra had said something about Hermione acting really weird...
Hermione huffed out a short sigh, running a hand through her hair — which got stuck in a thick knot of tangles after a few inches, damn it. She didn't have a choice, she'd just have to...deal with it. No problem. She could do that. She'd been tolerating Lyra being Lyra for months now. And, Lyra-null didn't even know about the...conversation she'd just had with Lyra-two-prime, so, it shouldn't even be difficult by Lyra standards. Just, yeah, act normal, no problem, none, there was nothing to act not-normal about.

Christ, what the hell was wrong with her...

After lingering in the mostly barren common room longer than was entirely necessary, Hermione finally tromped up to their room, with only about a minute to spare. Lyra was already here, of course, sitting on her bed, staring into space with that peculiarly absent sort of look she got sometimes. She was, Hermione noticed, already changed for bed, her hair let out of its plait to tumble in random curls over her shoulders. Irritatingly, she'd stolen some of Hermione's pyjamas again. Lyra had seemingly decided she liked some of Hermione's more muggle-ish clothes, had developed a nasty habit of swiping whatever she felt like without asking. In this case, her flannel pyjama bottoms, which had become a regular thing as winter had settled in — luckily, Hermione had two pairs, because she had the feeling she wouldn't be getting that one back.

Hermione was less annoyed about that than she was grateful that Lyra was wearing anything at all. Sometimes, before it'd started getting cold, she simply hadn't bothered.

"There you are!" Lyra had sprung up to her feet, staring at Hermione with a suspicious sort of frown. "I mean, Gods and Powers, Maïa, I almost thought you were going to be late. You, Hermione Granger, late."

A glare tried to settle on her face, but Hermione shoved it away. "Yes, well, things happen."

"If you say so. Nothing going on I need to worry about, is there?"

"No," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. Lyra was making far more of a deal about this than was entirely justifiable — she was just on time, really, she was allowed to get held up a little, honestly. Hermione whipped off her robes, trying to not think about how Lyra was standing there watching her (she was being ridiculous, she was still fully dressed under her robes, she always was, what was wrong with her), tossed the damn silly thing to hang off the back of her chair. Yanking at the chain under her collar, "Okay, come on, let's go."

A smirk twitching at her lips, Lyra made a casual, languid sort of shrug, shifting her hair in a slow wave. "You're talking like I was the one holding us up." She took a single step forward, into the middle of the room, folded her hands behind her back, one questioning eyebrow ticked up.

Abruptly, inexplicably, Hermione felt her mouth go dry.

Except, not inexplicably — this was exactly as future Lyra had been standing, when she'd— There wasn't a table there for her to lean against, of course, but with that crooked slouch, her hips cocked slightly to the side, her posture was exactly the same even without it, smiling up at her, teasingly, invitingly.

Had... Had she done that on purpose? Lyra-two-prime, she meant did she... She'd clearly come up with that particular angle of attack as...that conversation had gone along, but, had she meant to reference this moment, right now, knowing Hermione wouldn't have recognised it until later? That was, like, a delayed final shot in her campaign of teasing, that was so not fair, abusing time loops to mess with her, to use the significance of this moment retroactively to drive it in—
But, no, there was no significance to this moment, she was just being ridiculous. Lyra wasn't all-knowing, no matter how clever she might be, thinking she'd planned something like this after the fact (from her perspective) was giving her far too much credit. It was a coincidence, she was overthinking things like a crazy person. Stop it.

Forcing her own discomfort down as well as she could, Hermione took a few jerking steps forward, threw the chain over Lyra's head. Lyra ducked a little, instinctively, to ensure it got over properly, and when she straightened again Hermione leaned a bit away, also instinctively. But, as anxious and weird as she was feeling right now, she'd pulled away too far, the chain digging into the back of Hermione's neck, hard enough Lyra stumbled forward a half-step, her shoulder bumping into Hermione's chest for a second before backing away again. "Ah, watch it, Granger, that chain's gonna pull my hair out."

Avoiding Lyra's eyes, far too close to her own, Hermione mumbled an apology she didn't clearly hear herself. Twisting around so she could properly get both hands on the hourglass — which was not easy with them standing this close, Hermione never got used to it — she unlocked it with a flick of her thumb.

And got distracted by the time she'd counted to three. See, Lyra almost always had her cosmetic charms on around Hermione — sometimes she didn't, but that was just when she was...indecent, Hermione tried not to notice. She had noticed the scars before. It would be hard not to, they were bloody everywhere. She'd been tempted to ask about it before, but she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know, she'd never managed to work up the nerve. She meant, it was very possible some of them had comparatively innocent explanations — one on her arm Hermione recognised as that hippogriff scratch, and she had admitted the travelling cursebreaker lie was based in truth, he'd just been her tutor, magical combat training could get seriously brutal sometimes — but some of the other ones...

Hermione had seen Lyra's back. They were everywhere, some tiny nicks, others lines so thin and faded (old) they were barely visible, others longer, deeper, darkened, raised welts, completely impossible to miss, there were dozens of them, at least...

She'd been afraid to ask, but now she didn't have to. It refused to leave her head entirely, she still remembered the exact words Lyra had used. Flat and chillingly casual, she just...

(Honestly, Hermione tried not to think about that. It made things less...complicated, if she pretended Lyra's pre-Hogwarts life simply didn't exist.)

These were probably duelling scars. With the thin straps of her top — again, stolen from Hermione and transfigured to fit, mages didn't seem to wear cotton at all — leaving most of her shoulders bare, it was very obvious. It looked like...well, like burn scars. It wasn't quite so...intense as some of her other scars, it'd clearly been partially healed, but it was larger than most, a raised patch of rippling lines and curves, stretching over her left shoulder, partially down her arm, extending down her chest further than Hermione could see, interrupted with a few sharper lines from cutting curses of some kind. She couldn't help herself, Hermione's eyes followed the twisting lines of the layered mass, followed it up onto Lyra's neck.

And her face was right there.

Her eyes were grey, of course, they couldn't be actually purple, there simply wasn't such a thing. Though even then, it wasn't a normal grey — the "grey" of natural grey eyes was very light, basically a blue so pale it didn't look blue anymore, but this was an oddly dark colour, only a few shades off black, a few lighter, vaguely blueish flecks here and there. (Because, of course, absolutely nothing about Lyra could possibly be normal.) And there were even marks on her face,
but just a couple, an unnaturally smooth patch (another burn?) along her jaw, two thin lines over a cheek.

It was odd, when she thought about it, that Lyra hadn't gotten rid of all of those. The scars, she meant. Healing magic really could do some incredible things, mages were far more advanced with tissue regeneration than muggles were. Unless the damage was caused by seriously dark magic that had been consciously designed to resist the usual healing methods, all of these scars should be reversible. And it was odd, because, Lyra seemed rather vain, in general. Not so bad as, say, someone like Lavender, but she obviously put some effort into her appearance — hell, all the effort those cosmetic charms to hide her scars must take, every damn morning, and even going so far as to glamour her eyes, a pretty but completely unnatural colour, that was just...

It just seemed like it'd be easier, to get them properly healed, so she didn't have to carefully stack all those cosmetic charms. There had to be some reason she didn't, Hermione just couldn't imagine what it was. But it wasn't like it even mattered all that much, even if she didn't hide them away, yes, she would get a lot of attention over it Lyra would probably find annoying, but she'd still—

Hermione jumped as the hourglass was pulled out from between her fingers. Not even looking down at the thing, her fingers finishing the familiar process by memory, Lyra stared up at Hermione, a crooked, confused sort of look creasing her brow.

Even as they fell backward through time, Hermione felt her face go uncomfortably hot.

The world thumped back into stillness around them, and Hermione immediately reached for the chain, whipping it back over Lyra's head. "Goodnight." Without a backward glance, she dove for her bed, pulling the curtains closed behind her. She flopped back against her pillows, hands rubbing absently at her face.

Oh, had she really said goodnight? It was three in the afternoon! Ugh, this was so embarrassing...

Though that was hardly the most embarrassing thing that had just happened. She hadn't noticed it happening, but Hermione had gotten...distracted. She'd, just, stood there, staring at Lyra, long enough that Lyra had had to finish turning them back — good thing she had really, Hermione had entirely lost count, she would have messed it up...

It was nothing, though, she was just, just distractible, that's all. Hermione never had been very good at controlling the direction of her own thoughts — she could focus on something when she had significant motivation to, of course, but if she didn't have to her brain sort of just went where it felt like, she had very little say over the matter. And brains just do things, thoughts just happen, she couldn't be held responsible for what happened in here, really, it was all Lyra's fault, that nonsense she'd been blabbing on about, she couldn't be expected to— it wasn't...

She meant, the very thought was ridiculous. Hermione wouldn't, not over someone — Lyra was just—

Except, no, she didn't really believe that anymore. Lyra wasn't...evil felt like a weird word to use, but it was the best thing she could come up with. It was sort of silly to keep thinking to herself that she was. Lyra was dangerous, certainly, but so were a lot of people.

She'd tried to keep... She didn't know. It felt rather childish just thinking it to herself, but she'd always tried to be good, from all the way back in reception she'd been a bit of a... Well, the sort of thing Ron had complained about, that she was far too obsessive about the rules, and a bit too direct about nagging at other students who didn't follow them. She'd felt really guilty, at first, for how she'd...
Harry and Ron were a terrible influence. She never would have considered doing...well, half the absurd nonsense she'd gotten up to with those two her two previous years here. Honestly, it was ridiculous. But it'd always seemed reasonable at the time. She would feel bad about it afterward, and she did do her best to restrain the boys' more problematic impulses, but... It'd always seemed the right thing to do, nobody else was doing anything, the adults at this school were all bloody useless, and...

Well, she'd actually had friends, for pretty much the first time ever. It was...possible she'd let them drag her down more than was entirely rational. She just...

She couldn't even say she thought most of the explicitly illegal things she knew Lyra had done were really even that bad. Some of it, Hermione thought she was entirely in the right. The restricted magics, for example — it still irritated her just thinking of the organised campaign directed at the censorship of certain forms of knowledge magical society seemed to accept as, just, the reasonable thing to do. That, she, it didn't even— She just couldn't, blame it on her modern muggle sensibilities if they like, she couldn't get behind it, just on principle. It was wrong, it just was. And, she knew, just having some of the materials she did was a serious crime here — if they got caught, Hermione could spend literally the remainder of her natural life in Azkaban.

It was so stupid. So stupid she could hardly— it just—

What else had Lyra done, really? There was that ritual on the solstice, Hermione was certain that was very illegal, but that hadn't actually hurt anyone — it had been creepy, but nothing more than that. She'd blown the both of them up that one time, bad enough to hospitalise them, but that had been an accident. Most of the nonsense she got up to around the castle, it was juvenile, and frustrating, but was it really that bad? No one had been seriously injured, or even moderately injured, just...inconvenienced and bewildered. Nothing she'd done had been that bad even by the standards of the Weasley twins, and they weren't even semi-terrifying psychopaths.

It wasn't like Lyra was hurting people for her own amusement. She was just...annoying and confusing them. That was weird and absurd, but not really evil, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Of course, Hermione didn't doubt that Lyra would be perfectly willing to do horrible things if she felt she had to. But, well, Hermione had already demonstrated, just over the last couple years, that her own moral principles were less fixed than she would like to imagine. If she had to kill someone, to protect herself, or one of her friends — or, hell, if some genocidal maniac Death Eater wannabe were attacking perfect strangers — Hermione didn't doubt that she would do it. She might feel guilty about it afterward, but that was really the only difference.

No, she didn't honestly think Lyra was necessarily bad anymore. Frustrating, yes, but...

And she wasn't insane, not really. She'd halfway come to that conclusion a few days ago, though she hadn't really lingered on the thought. Because, see, psychosis didn't...really...work like that? She meant, generally, if someone was crazy, they were crazy — delusions as a rule weren't internally consistent, the logic didn't hold up. As absurd as some of the things Lyra did might seem, Snape wasn't wrong, she did follow her own strange sort of reason. Just, because of her, er, religious inclinations, she did things with the goal of messing with people.

Which was weird, yes, but not dangerously psychotic. It was no more inherently weird than many religions in the muggle world, really...

...Lyra wasn't insane. At least, it seemed quite possible she wasn't.
So, had... Had that been real, then? Back on the solstice, when... That whole thing with Lyra, just, inviting Hermes to come have a chat? That... If that wasn't... Well, that raised more questions than it answered, really.

She should probably go over that book on the Powers again...

So, okay, she didn't think Lyra was necessarily evil, and she didn't think Lyra was necessarily insane. But that was the problem. She... She should, with all the things she— She should care that she did and said and believed these things, it should matter, and it had at first, but she— Was she just getting used to it? Was that it? Or, or was she just that pathetic, that she could so easily abandon all the— Things she'd thought were important to her, the right way to be, first with the boys, and now with Lyra, was she just that shallow, that she would throw it all away, just because...

Because what? Okay, Lyra was...a friend, she guessed. She wasn't certain Lyra would honestly use that word, not at this point, but, Hermione did voluntarily spend a significant proportion of her time with her, and they did get along, mostly, rather more than she ever did with Ron or even Harry, she and Lyra had a far more similar mindset when it came to a lot of things, and, so, she didn't know what else to call that, really. Just because of that? Or, because Lyra was actually teaching her things, about how the magical world beyond Hogwarts actually worked, helped her get access to magic they simply didn't teach here? The sum of money Lyra had spent on books for her, it made Hermione uncomfortable to think about, it was a lot...

Or...

At some level, one she hadn't been fully conscious of, was she...?

Because, Lyra hadn't been entirely wrong.

Was that just the kind of person she was, to be so easily swayed by— by—

Hermione drew in a long, shuddering breath, let it out in a thin, even longer sigh, trying to shove down the hot stone rising in her throat. Lyra would still be awake, after all, and she didn't have a silencing charm up, she couldn't...

Ooh, she was in so much trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Look at that, a chapter written entirely by me. Been a while since that's happened. — Lysandra

Look at that, I'm not the only wordy bitch! — Leigha

Hermione is a very silly moo. But then, the teenage years are a time for moral identity crises and questioning your sexuality. Or was that just me?

And we just hard teased a couple more pairings. Is anyone keeping a tally? Cause I'm not.

(I mean, obviously we know what we're doing, I just like making readers squirm.)
—Lysandra
Harry knocked lightly on the door to Professor Lupin's office, feeling unaccountably nervous.

"Come in, it's open."

It was — barely, but Harry had thought maybe there was someone else in there, another student. It was Lupin's office hours, after all. He almost hadn't even knocked, thinking he could just come back later, but he'd already been putting it off long enough — at this rate, the Ministry would give up on catching his godfather before Harry learned to fend off a dementor.

He entered the office. Lupin was seated behind his desk, a basket of scrolls to one side and a bright red inkwell in front of him. "Er, I can come back later, Professor. If I'm interrupting."

"What? Oh! No, it's fine. More than fine. I don't think anyone actually likes marking — best argument I've ever heard for not assigning essays, really. Anyway, um. Have a seat, have a seat. What can I help you with, Mr. Potter?"

"Er, well... Stop being stupid, he's a teacher, he's supposed to teach you things! "I was wondering — That is..."

Lupin gave him a rather tired looking smile. "Whatever it is, you can just ask. I'm not going to bite."

Harry only just managed to contain a snort of highly inappropriate laughter — wasn't that rather morbid, a werewolf making jokes about biting people? Definitely funny, but probably the sort of thing he shouldn't laugh at.

Especially since Lupin didn't know Harry knew about him being a werewolf in the first place. Apparently it was kind of an open secret — all of bloody Slytherin knew, so Harry was surprised it hadn't been front page news already. Hermione had told Harry when he'd mentioned trying to find a good time to talk to Lupin about the Patronus — she thought he ought to do it as soon as possible when they got back to school, since that week was the dark of the moon and Lupin was likely to be less stressed then. Harry had gotten caught up in quidditch and homework and practicing meditating almost immediately, and had somehow managed to waste an entire week already. If he left it much longer, it was going to be almost the full moon again, and then he'd have an excuse to put it off for a couple more weeks, and—

Damn it, why was this so much harder than asking Blaise to teach him occlumency?!

Lupin was still looking at him, waiting patiently for him to spit it out. He looked so tired — Harry really shouldn't be taking his time with this, he'd find some other way— Except there is no other way — stop being weird about this!

"It's about the dementors, sir," he finally managed to say, dropping his bag on the nearest chair — he didn't think he could quite bring himself to sit, but he was going to do this, goddammit!

Lupin's expression grew darker. "Ah, yes. You want to know why they affect you so strongly?"

"Er, what?" Harry had passed out again, in the carriage back up to the Castle after the hols (right in the middle of a conversation about the invisible flying horses that Lyra and Blaise claimed were pulling the carriages), but he didn't think anyone besides Hermione, Lyra, and Blaise knew about that. He certainly hadn't told anyone. "Uh, no— I—"
"Oh, I'm sorry — I shouldn't have assumed... What was it, then?"

"Well, I um..." Actually, now that he brought it up... "Hang on, do you know why they...do that, to me?" Harry's personal theory was that there was just something wrong with him. Most of the times he'd run into dementors, he'd been with Lyra, so it was hard to keep from comparing himself to her. He mostly managed it though, on the basis that there was definitely something wrong with her, too — something that made her immune to dementors (lucky). Blaise was also a cheater, using occlumency against them. But even compared to other people, like Hermione, for example, Harry's reaction was particularly bad. Granted, he didn't know that they didn't make anyone else pass out, he was always a bit too unconscious to pay attention, but no one he'd talked to had admitted it, if they did.

Lupin sighed heavily, fiddling absently with his quill. "The dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past the others don't have. Dementors are among the foulest creatures to walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair... Even muggles feel their presence, though they can't see them. If you get too close to one, well — I hardly need to tell you about that. If it can, a dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself, soulless and evil, left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone a bit faint."

Harry tried not to glower. He wasn't sure about that middle part — Sirius had spent years with them, and he was, well, he was a bit mad, and seemed confused a lot of the time, but he still laughed. Still had lots of memories of Harry's parents to share with him — they weren't gone. But the first part sounded spot on, and it was kind of reassuring to think that it wasn't that he was somehow weaker than everyone else, just that, well — none of them had seen their mums murdered in front of them, had fucking Riddle try to kill them, had they.

Lupin was apparently one of those people who couldn't stand silence, still babbling about dementors and...Dumbledore? Harry had obviously missed something. "I was hoping you might be willing to teach me the Patronus Charm," he interrupted, blurting it out. "That's— that's why I came here, today. Not because of— I don't really care, about the dementors. I just— as long as I can make them leave me alone, I mean."

Lupin startled slightly, staring into Harry's face for a long moment, as if weighing the degree of determination he saw there. Eventually he sighed again. "I suppose one of the older students mentioned I'd been teaching that spell. Did they also tell you it's highly advanced magic?"

"They told me it was easier than learning how to set them on fire, and faster than learning occlumency," Harry said stubbornly. "I want to learn, even if— I want to try, at least."

A very funny expression had appeared on Lupin's face. "Anything would be easier than setting a dementor on fire, Harry. That's simply not possible." (Harry refrained from telling him to tell that to Lyra.) "But I suppose if you're determined... I must warn you, the spell may be too advanced for you. Many fully qualified wizards have difficulty with it — only a few of the NEWT students have managed it."

"I don't care, I still want to try." If Blaise was right and learning occlumency would help, he thought he might have better odds than some of the NEWT students, anyway, and he was almost positive he had more incentive. He'd practice day and night if he had to — hearing his mum murdered, over and over, he couldn't do it anymore. And with Sirius safely hidden away, there was no guessing how long the dementors might be around. Not that he'd wish Sirius back to Azkaban to save himself having to deal with the foul things — he wasn't sure he could wish that on anyone — but he knew he couldn't just ignore them and wait for them to go away. "How do you
do it? Can you just show me, and, I don't know — even if you don't want to teach me, I'll work it out on my own."

Lupin startled, spoke hastily. "I'm not saying I won't teach you, Harry." Oh, wasn't he? That wasn't the impression Harry had gotten. "I'm just saying this is very difficult magic — and not only in terms of power and control, like a complex transfiguration. The Patronus Charm is true light magic, like the Cheering Charm — have you done that with Flitwick yet?"

"Uh, no, not yet." Harry had seen it in the book, flipping through it at the beginning of the year, but he was pretty sure they weren't going to get to it until after Easter.

Lupin nodded. "Oh, um, never mind, then— My point was, the Patronus, like the Cheering Charm, requires you to maintain a very specific emotional state in order to cast it. Unlike the Cheering Charm, however... What do you think the Patronus does?"

"Er... It...chases away dementors? I guess?" Honestly, Harry didn't really know how the spell worked, just that it did.

"The Patronus is a projection — a construct — built of the very things a dementor feeds on — hope, happiness, and the desire to survive — but it cannot feel despair, so the dementors can't hurt it. It protects the caster, driving the dementor away. That...didn't quite seem to make sense to Harry, but he decided not to interrupt. "In order to cast the spell, you must immerse yourself completely in a single, perfectly happy memory, feeling the happiness of it as though you were there — a difficult enough feat for most wizards, even when not faced with a dementor pulling every happy thought from your head. Ideally you would practice casting the spell against the influence of a creature like a boggart in order to simulate the effect of a dementor on the mind, though of course the effect of a boggart is not quite the same, and far less powerful."

"Is that how you learned? Because I... I'm pretty sure my boggart would be a dementor, so..." So if there was any other way to practice, he'd prefer to try that first.

Lupin suddenly seemed rather cagey. "Erm, well, no. Not exactly... There are spells — dark, most of them, that, ah...have similarly negative mental effects. Potions, too, though those are highly restricted."

After a moment, Harry thought of an example. "You mean like whatever Lyra did to Malfoy in their duel? So I'd need someone to cast that on me, and then try to cast the Patronus through the effects." That shouldn't be too difficult, actually. He was pretty sure Lyra would curse him if he asked her to, he just had to learn the Patronus first.

The professor grimaced. "I really wouldn't recommend that — Miss Black—" He cut himself off before saying something Harry suspected Lyra would have found very amusing.

"Well I can't practice against a boggart — it would turn into a dementor and then I'd pass out! Again!" Honestly, he thought the spell option sounded pretty damn good.

Lupin groaned. "If you absolutely insist, I will cast one of the less...extreme emotional manipulations on you. But that brings me back to my original point — regardless of the source of the resistance, attempting to learn the Patronus, actually practicing it, is a very difficult prospect, not only magically, but emotionally. It can be very stressful, even traumatizing, depending on the method of resistance..."

He trailed off, giving Harry a rather concerned look, because Harry had let out a snort of unamused laughter at the idea that he might ever be exposed to something emotionally stressful or
even traumatizing, and he just couldn't stop. It was just—

"Er, Harry?"

After a moment, Harry managed to regain enough composure to speak. "I killed a basilisk last year. With a sword. I almost died. Literally — there was a bloody fang through my arm—" He pulled up his sleeve to show Lupin the scar. The professor, who'd seemed on the verge of interrupting, apparently forgot what he was going to say. "—if Fawkes hadn't been there... I faced down a possessed professor my first year. Somehow managed to burn him alive — accidental magic, I figure. I still have nightmares about him. And every time I get too close to a dementor, I hear my mother being murdered, begging Voldemort not to kill me. I'm pretty sure trying to learn this spell isn't even going to be in the top ten most potentially traumatizing things I've ever done."

Fuck, he'd just given Blaise fucking Zabini permission to go poking around his deepest secrets, and he really didn't doubt Blaise would take full advantage of that when they actually got to the proper legilimency, instead of just endless meditating — he was pretty damn positive that was way more potentially stressful and traumatizing than letting anyone cast any kind of spell on him that didn't let them see inside his head — and he was sure he could think of more things to add to the list if he really tried...

Blowing up Marge, and that time her bloody dogs had treed him — he still didn't like dogs (not counting Sirius and Sylvie, they were okay). When Dobby had used that hovering charm and he'd thought he was going to be chucked out of Hogwarts and have to stay with the Dursleys forever... Oh! And Dobby trying to "help" him by maiming him with a fucking bludger — though the most traumatizing part of that might have been Lockhart, actually. Seeing Lockhart obliviate himself — if Ron's wand hadn't been broken, that would have been them. He'd almost died so many times last year. Fucking Aragog...

Yeah, he was pretty sure learning the Patronus couldn't possibly be that bad, comparatively speaking.

Lupin let the silence stretch between them, staring at Harry, his jaw slack with shock. "Are you—" he began to ask, his tone so concerned and pitying that Harry couldn't help cutting him off.

"Are you going to help me, or not?" he demanded, a little surprised exactly how loud his voice was, how angry he sounded.

The professor seemed slightly taken aback — Harry realized belatedly that he was talking to (shouting at) a professor and had just enough time to wonder if he was about to lose five points for cheek or something before Lupin said, "Yes."

The single syllable was so different from anything he'd been expecting that Harry wasn't quite sure he'd heard it correctly. "What? Er — sir."

"Yes," Lupin said again. "I'll help you. I'll...need to speak to the Headmaster, first, but shall we say...Thursday, after dinner?"

Harry nodded eagerly. "Yes, sure, that's great. Uh. Thank you, sir. Er — here?" Lupin nodded. He looked rather conflicted about agreeing, but Harry really didn't care. "Okay, yeah. I'll be here." And then, with no idea what else to do or say, he suggested, "So, uh... I guess I'll just...go, then?"

The professor gave him a weak smile and an equally weak dismissal, waving toward the door. "Of course."
"Right. Er. Thank you, sir. Really." He grabbed his bag and escaped before Lupin could change his mind.

"Ready to begin, Harry?"

–Harry nodded, his face set in stubborn determination. He knew the incantation, he'd practiced it a few times, and the wand movement. He had a happy memory in mind — the first time he'd ever ridden a broom, he'd never felt so free! He was born to fly. And then, catching Neville's Remembrall, showing up Malfoy, the triumph... It was the happiest memory he could think of.

Blaise recalled that day as well, it had been satisfying, seeing Darling Draco's nose rubbed in his own inferiority. He always was a prat, he thought at Harry. That little stunt actually earned you a bit of good will in Slytherin, at least until we found out you'd gotten on the Gryffindor quidditch team instead of a month of detentions.

Harry's surprise and disbelief echoed through his mind, along with a sort of past-doubt, past-anxiety feeling. Blaise's best guess was that he'd thought all the Slytherins hated him, from the very beginning.

He met the inarticulate sentiment with amusement. They weren't all Death Eaters' kids. Only about a third of us.

–Harry closed his eyes and focused as clearly as he could on the rush of flight, the wind in his hair, diving, racing gravity for that little glass ball, glinting just beyond his fingertips.

–Lupin cast a spell — Harry, too focused on his memory, hadn't caught the incantation, but he definitely noticed when it hit, an invasive wave of fuzzy confusion pressing down upon him, interrupting his concentration.

–He panicked, his eyes snapping open. "Expecto patronum!" he shouted, desperately clinging to the swiftly vanishing threads of his memory.

–Predictably, nothing happened.

Pretty sure that was a confounding jinx, in case you were still wondering. Theo had spent most of the summer after first year practicing it on him, while Blaise practiced ignoring it.


Just think words, genius. He didn't really need to, Blaise was generally capable of figuring out what he was thinking anyway, but...

Oh. Um. Right. Yeah, I knew that, Lupin told me.

You realize you just thought the word um. Embarrassment and self-consciousness became distinctly noticeable, but Harry refrained from dignifying Blaise's observation with a response. Can you sense me? My presence in your mind? There hadn't really been any resistance to his intrusion at all, or to his directing Harry's attention to the memory of his first lesson with Lupin.

U— Kind of? Maybe? His uncertainty suggested he really had no idea whether he could or not. Which meant no.

Hmm... Blaise wasn't used to trying to make his presence obvious. He'd cast the legilimency charm, instead of infiltrating Harry's thoughts more subtly, but apparently that wasn't enough. (This was
what happened, only practicing with people who already knew occlumency.) He relaxed his own internal control, allowing excitement and fascination to tinge his mental presence. *What about now?*

*Yes. That was a much more decisive answer.*

*Okay. So you know how you push one emotion or thought away from your center of focus when we’re meditating? You need to try to do that to me. But instead of pushing me "back" like you would an unpleasant memory, you should try to push me "forward", isolating my presence in your present thoughts, then keep going, forcing my consciousness away from yours entirely.*

*Um. Okay. And...what are you going to do?*

*I'm going sight-seeing, just to give you some incentive. I'll be obvious about it, though.*

Harry attempted to object, but Blaise ignored him, skipping from the memory of Harry's first lesson with Lupin to asking about it in the first place. *If you want me to stop, you're going to have to stop me. That is kind of the entire point.*

Harry's focus on Blaise brought him to a stray thought that had apparently come up as Harry was talking to Lupin:

–*He'd just given Blaise fucking Zabini permission to go poking around his deepest secrets, and he really didn't doubt Blaise would take full advantage of that...*

He allowed a bit of amusement to tint the fascination he was still projecting. He had no intention of going after Harry's most deeply held secrets *now* — there would be absolutely no challenge in it at all. He was interested in the context of that thought, though.

–*Harry had let out a snort of unamused laughter at the idea that he might ever be exposed to something emotionally stressful or even traumatizing, and he just couldn't stop. It was just—*

–*"Er, Harry?"

–*After a moment, Harry managed to regain enough composure to speak. "I killed a basilisk last year. With a sword. I almost died. Literally — there was a bloody fang through my arm—" He pulled up his sleeve to show Lupin the scar. The professor, who'd seemed on the verge of interrupting, apparently forgot what he was going to say. "—if Fawkes hadn't been there...”*

Well, that was obviously slightly too far back, but it hardly mattered, there wasn't really a goal here other than to irritate Harry. And Blaise *had* been vaguely curious about what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets last year... Ah, *why not?* He thought teasingly, following the connection between the memory of talking to Lupin and the events of the Chamber.

–*He was propped against a column at the feet of a tall, haughty boy —Tom Riddle, Blaise recognized him from Ginevra's memories — blue eyes narrowed scornfully.*

–*"So ends the famous Harry Potter, all alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by his friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You'll be back with your dear mudblood mother soon, Harry... She bought you twelve years of borrowed time, but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must...”*

–*Defeat, exhaustion, acceptance — If this is dying, it's not so bad — and then...confusion, as the world slowly came back into focus. (Disappointment, just the faintest hint of it, quickly overridden by fear and the will to live—)*
Blaise was pretty sure he'd already seen what happened next, from the far more interesting perspective of the dying horcrux. What else did you talk about?

Harry, who very much did not want to think about the Chamber of Secrets, tried to push the memory away from Blaise's attention, but that wasn't going to work. He followed the temporal progression of memories backward until he found Riddle monologuing again.

--"To business, Harry. Twice in your past, in my future, we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. How did you survive? Tell me everything," he demanded, compelling Harry to obey (and tell the truth) with an impressive degree of subtlety. "The longer you talk, the longer you stay alive..."

--Harry's thoughts were racing as he tried desperately to control his panic, forcing himself to think logically, watching Ginny dying and Riddle's projection solidifying and deciding that his best chance was to fight sooner, rather than later.

--The compulsion demanded he speak, but it didn't stop him provoking the teenage horcrux. "No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me. I don't know myself. But I know why you couldn't kill me. Because my mother died to save me. My common, muggleborn mother! She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year! You're a wreck. You're barely alive!"

No, stop it! Harry shouted ineffectively, yanking at the memory, trying to separate Blaise from it, pushing at him, but he hadn't cut him off, yet. He didn't want Blaise to see what Riddle said next, it was...shameful, had made Harry doubt himself.

Oh, well now I really want to know. He projected malicious glee at Harry, a mental smirk.

--"That's where all your power got you! You're in hiding! You're ugly, you're foul—"

This isn't funny, Blaise!

Then make me stop.

--Riddle grimaced noticeably before forcing his face into an incredibly fake looking smile. "So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful countercharm."


--"I can see now... There is nothing special about you, after all."

NO! Harry "shouted". Get OUT!

And then something very weird happened. Harry threw himself against Blaise's intrusion into his mind, and—

--Mirabella Zabini, the enchanting, graceful witch who was Blaise's model for all that was right and good in the world (and coincidentally his mother), was in the process of chalking an elaborate symbol (a yantra) onto the plain surface of a wooden table.

Harry was confused. A second ago, he had been angry, defensive, but now he was just...confused. Lyra fucking kissing him out of nowhere level confused. (The memory of it flashed briefly through his consciousness.) But... Was that... How did he know what Blaise was thinking? That was Blaise, right? A tiny Blaise, he looked like he was about five years old. Blaise, can you hear me? What the fuck is going on?! His articulated thoughts were underscored with the same lack of comprehension, verging on panic, that permeated the rest of his mind.
Blaise watched quietly, sitting very still on the other end of the table, holding a sleeping (well, stunned) kitten and carefully not wiggling the table and messing up Mirabella’s lines. That was the only condition she had set when he asked to watch, and he really wanted to watch. He’d never seen this kind of magic before.

Blaise did his best to tramp down Harry’s fear, but he couldn’t really answer. For one thing, he was hardly less confused himself. Oh, he recognized what was happening. Kind of. Theoretically. Harry hadn’t actually managed to push Blaise out of his mind, or lead him away from the memory Riddle, but he had managed — somehow — to establish what Snape called “reciprocal legilimency.” Blaise was effectively inside Harry’s mind, and Harry had dragged them into Blaise’s mind, which was kind of like second-hand legilimency, and also kind of like just remembering the day he and Mirabella had summoned Coco. He had no idea how it had happened, or how to make it stop. He couldn’t even feel where his own mind ended, at the moment, and where Harry’s began. Fuck, this was weird...

So far it was kind of boring, lots of drawing circles with bits of string and measuring and straight-edges, but it was starting to look like the picture in the book, now. And Mirabella had promised it would be interesting soon. She’d also promised he could sacrifice the cat, since it was his birthday. And afterward, he’d be getting a new pet — a better pet! He was pretty sure this was the most excited he’d ever been in his life.

Secondly, Blaise was still legilimizing Harry, and he could tell he wasn’t focusing properly to pick up thoughts from outside the memory. He was far too caught up in thinking how completely weird it was to feel Little Blaise’s excitement, while watching his face betray only the smallest of smiles. He had always been good at controlling his expressions, and Mira had preferred her young son to appear calm and collected at all times.

Blaise, if you can hear me, you were a creepy fucking kid.

Finally, after what seemed like forever of adding runes at very specific spots in the design, Mirabella smiled. "I think that looks about right, don't you?"

Blaise nodded eagerly. "Is it time for the cat now?"

"Yes, dear, time for the cat." She flicked her fingers in a hand it over gesture, and when he did, gently placed it at the center of the design. She smoothed its soft, ink-black fur and cast an illusory dot right behind the right foreleg. "Right there," she said, handing him the knife. "Careful, it's very sharp."

A sort of shocked surprise washed through Harry. What the fuck—? Is he actually going to...? Yes, he was actually going to. Apparently Harry had missed some of the context of Tiny Blaise's excitement. That little wave of emotion, however, was of much greater interest than Harry’s fledgling attempt to interpret the details of Blaise’s memory-thoughts.

He gave her an angelic smile. "Don't worry, Mira, I won't hurt myself." He knelt beside the design and set the point of the knife on the dot, careful not to smudge the chalk between himself and the cat.

"Watch out for the lines, Blaise," Mirabella said anyway.

He nodded absenty, checked to make sure the knife was straight up-and-down, and leant into it, instead of trying to stab down at the target. He’d practiced in the kitchen with a piece of chicken, and decided this was better, easier to hit the mark — he didn't want to miss and mess everything
up! He forced the blade through flesh and bone (easier than he expected), until it dug into the wood beneath the kitten.

Harry recoiled in horror. Blaise suspected that if Harry had simply been legilimizing him, he would have thrown himself out of the memory. As it was, Blaise was sort of surrounding and entrapping him, but his reaction was more than strong enough to delineate the separation between their minds.

–Blood welled out (much faster than he'd expected), a small pool puddling around the sacrifice, the lines of chalk drinking it in. It spread outward, every inch of the design growing red as he carefully pulled away, sitting back on his heels.

–Mirabella patted him on the head. "Very good, dear."

–He basked in the praise, his excitement only growing. "What's next?"

What was next was the disposal of the kitten's corpse and a very repetitive Persian incantation, calling a boggart from its own dimension, through the doorway they had created with the kitten's life-blood, and into their own. It had manifested as Mirabella, telling Blaise all sorts of horrible things — that he had disappointed her, that he was boring, and she wanted nothing to do with him. He'd almost cried. (Almost. He'd had enough presence of mind to remember that if he cried while she was yelling at him, she would only yell more.) The real Mirabella had had to save him, forcing Coco into the form of a kitten for the very first time, and trapping it in a hatbox.

Harry didn't get to see any of that, though. Blaise withdrew from his mind, and pulled away from his legilimency probe, isolating Harry and "shoving" his consciousness back into his own body.

"What the fuck was that?"

Blaise blinked at his vehemence. "Apparently you have a latent talent for legilimency. If you were paying attention, by the way, that was also how you're supposed to throw someone out of a memory."

"What— No, I mean, you— you just killed it?" Shock, disgust, just the faintest hint of betrayal... Apparently Blaise had done a better job making Harry think of him as a nice, relatively normal person than he'd realized. Oops.

"I just pointed out that you have the ability to read minds, and you're more concerned about a cat that I sacrificed when I was five? You need to work on your priorities, Potter."

"I— Well, yes, but— What?"

"You were just in my memory. I didn't do that."

Harry very obviously understood the implication there, and equally obviously didn't believe it. "And you're saying I did."

"Yes." It wasn't as surprising, in hindsight, as it might have been. Harry was actually very good at manipulating his own thoughts and emotions. He was terrible at suppressing them entirely — Blaise didn't think he'd actually managed to reach a state of complete emotional tranquility or thoughtlessness in any of their meditation practices, but he was much better than Blaise might have suspected at pushing away and ignoring certain thoughts or emotions in favor of focusing on others. That was the only reason Blaise had agreed when Harry asked if they could move beyond basic meditation. Manipulating one's own thoughts to disengage from an attack was often more effective than denying the attacker access anyway.
"I think I'd know if I could just...read people's minds whenever I felt like it, Zabini." What was that subtext? Some vaguely confused thought that Harry didn't want to fully acknowledge himself, tinged with attraction.

He raised an eyebrow, putting on an expression which insinuated he knew more than he did. "And whose mind would you read, if you could read minds whenever you felt like it?"

Harry went very red. Blaise would bet anything it was Lyra. He would have to be blind not to notice the way Harry got all distracted around her. Not that Blaise could blame him: Lyra was very attractive — noble-prety and unconsciously graceful, with a sort of edgy, dangerous charisma he didn't think she was entirely aware of. If she was, she certainly never used it. But he could see how Harry (along with half the boys in their year, and at least three of the girls) would have a crush on her. And she had kissed Harry, so it was understandable that he might have come to the mistaken impression that she fancied him as well.

Blaise was quite sure she didn't, though. In fact, he'd found that revelation encouraging, rather than threatening to his own prospects — if she was willing to snog Harry to manipulate him, she would likely be open to snogging Blaise just because it was fun, when he finally found the opportune moment to introduce the idea.

He smirked. "You know, even legilimency won't help you understand Lyra, but if a girl kisses you and then doesn't follow up on it for six weeks, you don't really need legilimency to know she's not planning on snogging you again." At the expression of indignant outrage on Harry's face, he added, "And no, I'm not reading your mind." He didn't need to — the confusion associated with that brief flash of memory earlier had been more than sufficient.

"I— But— You—! She told you." Blaise nodded. Harry pouted at him. "It could happen! I mean, I don't think she was actually planning on it the first time, so." That sounded like desperate self-delusion, and Harry knew it. He flushed.

"Sorry, Harry. I'm pretty sure she's not interested in you like that." To be fair, Mirabella had given him the impression she was pretty apathetic about sex and actively disinterested in romance, but that was beside the point. "You're family to her. And all Black incest jokes aside—" Harry's face twisted into confusion, apparently he hadn't heard those yet. "—you're being a silly moo."

Harry tried to glare at him, embarrassment rolling off him in waves (along with a warm, fuzzy sense of belonging he got from being told so casually that he had family), but couldn't quite keep a straight face. Being called a silly moo, completely seriously, did tend to do that to a boy. Instead, he pouted again, which was kind of adorable (and did nothing to ameliorate his status as a silly moo). "It'd still be nice to, y'know, know. If someone liked you or not."

There was more embarrassment, there, and resentment and envy, but also...gratitude? Oh, because Blaise had given him a straight answer, and hadn't actually made him ask about it. There was something else there, too, under the rest of it — trust (thin and poorly developed) and familiarity, shot through with the slightest hint of...affection, of the sort that could easily grow into romantic interest. Hmm... He'd have to think about whether he wanted to encourage that. Yes, it could tie Harry to him far more firmly than a simple business relationship, but relationships more complex than the occasional snog were complicated. And quite frankly they looked like a lot of work. Daphne, for example, was much more difficult to keep happy than his Hufflepuffs — so insecure, honestly, it was ridiculous — and they were just engaged, not even really together. So yes, he'd have to think about that. Not now, though — he'd probably been sitting here picking apart Harry's reaction for far too long already.

Right. Legilimency. They were talking about legilimency. Using it to figure out if someone might
like you. Which obviously could be done — Blaise did it almost instinctively, he'd literally just been doing it — but according to Snape, most legilmens couldn't pick up much emotional detail or nuance without actively poking into people's minds. "That's not exactly how it works. Look, what do you think just happened, with my memory?"

The other boy shrugged, uncertain and slightly uncomfortable, but obviously willing to change the subject. "I was trying to do what you said, pushing back against you, trying to get you out of my head, and then... I don't know."

"And then I got close to something you really didn't want me to see, and you lost your sense of where the boundary between us was. You pushed straight through into my mind, started resonating with me. That's legilimency. Granted, it was probably easier than usual since I was actively trying to read you at the time, so my mind was already kind of...attuned, you could say, to yours, but still legilimency."

If Blaise had to label the predominant emotion Harry was projecting now, he thought he'd go with nonplussed. "But...how is that even possible?"

Blaise shrugged. It was probably hereditary. Talents like natural legilimency and metamorphy and omniglottalism generally were. Sometimes it showed up apparently out of nowhere, like Harry's ability to speak Parseltongue. Snape, for example, was the only notable legilimens in the Prince family in the past two centuries. More often, though, there would be occasional legilimens scattered through a family tree. The Zabinis and Contrellos tended to have one every generation or two. Mirabella's aunt Adara was probably the most notorious in recent decades, but she was far from the only one.

Judging by the quality of Harry's disbelief, however, Blaise was fairly certain he was asking how it was possible he hadn't known he was a legilimens, not how it was possible he was one.

"Natural legilimency is...kind of a complicated talent. Most of the time it manifests around puberty. Sometimes, if you're in an environment where it would help you survive, it's triggered sooner in a kind of accidental magic incident. And if you start learning the mind arts before your natural ability would have kicked in, it can develop sooner than it otherwise would have." Blaise was pretty sure that was why he had really started to come into his legilimency when he was about eight. "Sometimes, you have the latent ability, but develop a kind of psychological block against using mind magic before it can properly manifest, or you're just not a strong enough mage to consciously affect other people's minds, even if you can kind of unconsciously read or influence the people around you." He suspected that Mirabella did something like that to figure out how to best charm everyone she met, though her personality — her sense of self — was too unstable for true legilimency. "It is wandless magic, you know."

"Oh." Harry's confusion lessened slightly, though he still didn't seem to have fully accepted this revelation. "So if I start trying to learn it now...?"

"Well, you'd probably be coming into it soon anyway, but it will be much less of a shock when you start slipping into other people's minds while you're daydreaming in History, or whatever." And he'd probably have enough control to stop doing it. The first time it had happened to Blaise, he hadn't recognized it, and had consequently spent a very confusing couple of hours thinking he was Daphne (until she'd gotten annoyed with his 'mimicking' her, and demanded he go home). If he recalled correctly, Astoria had thought it was hilarious.

Alarm, curiosity. "So, um..."

Blaise sighed. "I'll ask Snape about exercises. Ready to go again?"
"Are you sure? I mean...that was weird. Not that, um, you're weird, just, uh..." Blaise couldn't help but snigger slightly. "Come on, what kind of little kid just goes around killing kittens?" There was a very specific hesitancy there, a sort of desire to willfully ignore this one unsettling memory, but one that would only hold if he was not faced with any additional evidence of Blaise being, well...the kind of guy who went around killing kittens.

Unfortunately, if they were going to do legilimency as well as occlumency, the likelihood of Harry avoiding such evidence was vanishingly small. Blaise could almost certainly keep him away from the memories which would cause the most problems if they became known, but even Harry, with his own skewed worldview, would very quickly realize that Blaise was not nearly as nice a person as he usually pretended, so the question had to be addressed.

He sighed. "It's not like I was killing it just for the fun of it. We were summoning a boggart, so I could practice occlumency," he added, addressing the question he could already see forming in Harry's troubled brow and the pursing of his lips. "And Mira doesn't enjoy suffering, it was just stunned and...never woke up."

"Yeah, okay, but..." Harry hesitated, biting his lip like Maïa. Apparently that had allayed his anxiety quite a lot — Blaise had the suspicion there was some factor there he wasn't aware of — but apparently he decided he still needed to know more. "You're dodging the question."

Blaise rolled his eyes. Because it was a stupid question. "What kind of little kid kills kittens?"

Harry nodded, wariness in every line of his body. "The kind of kid who's never been told it's wrong. Who has, in fact, been taught that sometimes death is necessary, emotional attachments are not, and everything, everyone, should be thought of as resources to exploit." He gave the other boy a wry grin and a wink. "Fortunately for everyone, I have no particular interest in exploiting most of them, most of the time."

"Er, what?" Alarm and confusion warred on Harry's face as he resisted that implication. Blaise was certain that this was the best moment to make it, though. If Harry had realized the full extent of Blaise's skills on his own (as he inevitably would, given enough access to Blaise's mind), he would be far more inclined to believe there was some nefarious ulterior motive behind Blaise's cultivation of their relationship.

Honesty, on the other hand, was disarming. And so often neglected as a potential tool of manipulation and deception.

He smirked. "My intentions in regard to you are entirely benign, I assure you... Okay, I might mess with you a bit sometimes, but really. Cross my heart." He made the appropriate muggle gesture, then shifted to a more hesitant, vulnerable tone after the (presumably) unexpected note of familiarity. "It's just... If you want me to teach you legilimency, you should know you might run into some things in my mind that are...less than pleasant."

Harry seemed to be wavering. He clearly wanted to trust Blaise — he and Maïa were almost equally desperate for friends, it was kind of hilarious — he just wasn't sure he should. Blaise decided to give him a nudge, reminding him that they'd already established some degree of trust. "In an entirely different way than your own childhood."

Harry hesitated again, but his ambivalence gradually solidified into a willingness to set his misgivings aside for the moment, giving Blaise the benefit of the doubt. "Okay. Let's go again."

Blaise grinned. Too easy, really.
"Red?" Ginny jumped at the sound of Zabini's voice, spinning on one foot to see him standing innocently at the end of aisle she was searching, holding a scrap of parchment. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm allowed to read, Zabini," she snapped, as much out of habit as anything.

He smirked at her. "Well, yeah, sure, but advanced divination? Doesn't really seem like something you'd be interested in."

It wasn't, really. She was only here because she couldn't find the book she really needed, and was hoping that there was some sort of spell she could use instead of searching every corner of the library by hand. "I'm looking for healing spells, if you really must know."

The smirk only grew broader. "Oh, yeah, Theo told me about that. Gotta say, Red, you're a hell of a lot more serious about this than any of us expected."

Ginny snorted, entirely unamused. Nott had taught her all of two spells so far, the second one just a week ago. She'd spent over a month, from the middle of November until they went home for Hols, practicing just one. Protego. Seven thousand shield charms. She could probably do it in her sleep, by now, but she'd done it, all seven fucking thousand of them, because between that and the order to start running a mile every day, she'd been almost positive Nott was trying to make her quit, and she bloody well wasn't going to. She was going to learn how to fight even if she had to do a million shield charms.

That didn't mean she hadn't been absolutely furious with him, though. After the first couple of weeks, she'd decided that she wasn't having it. Oh, she'd do the damn charms, and the running — it was half a mile to the bottom of the boathouse stairs and back up to the castle, and no one was ever there to question why she was just running up and down them like a lunatic. But she'd decided that if Nott wasn't going to teach her real fighting spells, she'd learn them herself.

So she'd borrowed the twins' defense book and started practicing a severing charm alongside her shield charm. It had taken her a bit to get it right, and it was harder to practice than the shield charm because she needed a target. She'd gone out to the edge of the woods and cast it at trees until she was sure it was working, but after it started to snow, she'd moved to an abandoned classroom instead. One shield charm, one severing charm. Protego, sabreace. Protego, sabreace. The walls were absolutely covered with marks, now — shallow gashes carved into the stone. There had to be at least three thousand of them.

When they'd come back to school, she'd tracked down Nott — not that he was ever that difficult to find, he did come to the Great Hall for meals, at least — and spat the number in his face: seven thousand. She'd done that fucking shield charm seven thousand times. He gave her a cold, condescending smile and told her to meet him that evening for a demonstration.

And oh, had he gotten a demonstration! He flicked a stunning charm at her, slow enough to dodge if she needed to. She'd snapped off the shield charm like it was nothing, holding it only barely long enough to intercept Nott's spell before following up with sabreace, faster than blinking. Of course, Nott dodged — it still took time for the spell to cover the distance between them, but the wide-eyed look of surprise plastered across his face... All those extra hours of practice were so worth it.

Afterward, well. She'd have sworn, in those first seconds after his shock wore off that he was actually pleased. He hid it quickly, of course (bloody Slytherin), giving her a stern glare. "That's against the rules," he'd said.

Ginny scowled at him. "I wasn't aware there were rules. In fact, I'm pretty sure I heard somewhere
that’s the exact difference between dueling for sport and fighting for your life."

Nott smirked. "I'm not talking about fair play and points, here, Weasley, just assuming you don't actually want to die or get caught. We don't use any spells we don't know how to heal."

"So now I have to learn healing, too?!"

"Only if you want to use any good spells."

"Ugh, fine! Any other 'rules' I should know about?"

"Nothing relevant to your level."

"Try me."

"Nothing illegal, nothing dark enough to set off the wards, and if your opponent yields, you stop, immediately."

"That could be relevant!"

"Yeah, good luck with that, kitten."

Ginny threw another sabreace at him, then yelped, because not only did he somehow reflect it back at her, but it went right through the protego she instinctively threw up to stop it. She didn't even think she'd said the incantation, it happened that fast. The severing charm cut deep into her left arm, sending her to the floor and bringing tears to her eyes. She clapped a hand over the wound in a futile effort to stop the bleeding, glaring daggers at Nott. "You fucking—!" She'd been at a loss to think of any word bad enough to apply to the bastard, and so had cut herself off with a half-frustrated shriek, half-pained whining sort of noise.

Nott sighed, knelt beside her, pried her fingers away. A few minutes later, the only evidence that she'd been hit was the blood on her robes, a thin pink scar, and a lingering pain that might have just been in her head. "Lesson two: learn what you can block, and what you need to dodge."

She'd nodded grimly and let him help her to her feet. And then, slightly to Ginny's surprise, he just went on to the next thing, as though she hadn't attacked him or been hurt at all.

"All right then, the next spell we're going to do is sesapsa. It's another shield charm, normally used to create a shield-disk, anchored at the tip of your wand, like lumos, BUT," he added, over her attempt to object to learning another shield charm, "it's more versatile than protego. It can reflect pretty much all the standard charms and curses, any spell that takes effect after it touches its target and isn't specifically designed as a shield-buster. Caveat is, it's anchored to your wand, and it's a two-dimensional spell. You can make it as large as you want, but it only covers one side of you. And it's relatively 'brittle' — the larger you make it, the more likely it is to shatter on impact. So if you make it big enough to use as a proper shield, it will fail almost right away, even against something like a basic disarming charm."

"I'm guessing it's not really as useless as you're making me think it sounds right now."

Nott smirked — the smirk she was beginning to suspect meant he was pleased, or amused, maybe. "As a proper shield, yeah, it's pretty bloody useless. If you just point-cast it, though, let it expand barely past the tip of your wand, it will stand up to pretty much anything, no matter how powerfully it's cast or what it actually does. And since it reflects incoming magic, you can use your opponent's spells against them, if you're quick enough."
He hadn't actually said that was how he'd thrown her severing charm back at her, but she was pretty sure that was what he was implying. She'd closed her mouth on another objection quickly enough that her teeth clicked, nodded again.

He'd demonstrated slowly a couple of times, then critiqued her attempts until she managed to form a shimmering, opalescent shield about the size of her hand and successfully deflect a stunning charm that he cast at it point-blank (though at an angle, so it wouldn't just hit him when it bounced off). And then he'd given her a positively evil grin. "Seven-thousand repetitions, Weasley, and we start dancing lessons this weekend."

"Dancing lessons?" she repeated suspiciously, resisting the urge to punch him in the face for assigning her another seven-thousand practice spells.

He nodded. "Every Saturday from now on," he said seriously. "Starting immediately after breakfast."

She couldn't help but be a little pleased that they were actually going to do something while she practiced endless shield charms, but, "Dancing lessons. Really?!"

Nott just smirked. "The best way to avoid being cursed is to avoid standing in one place like a fucking moron when someone's trying to curse you. So yes, dancing lessons."

It had taken exactly one 'dancing lesson' for Ginny to realize that this actually meant dodging lessons, and really actually meant repeatedly getting hit with stinging jinxes and minor slicing curses and fucking ink pellets that she tried and failed to dodge. For three bloody hours. She was pretty sure that, aside from a couple five-minute breathers, the only times she stopped moving were when she cast a protego to give herself a break. But then she'd discovered that casting the protego was the easy part of that spell. As soon as she used it to intercept anything, even killing the momentum of a banished ink pellet, the additional energy absorbed began to destabilize the spell. It only ever managed to take two or three hits before it fell and she got stung again. Or cut. Or hit in the forehead by a frozen drop of ink. She was thoroughly exhausted by the time Theo called a halt to their practice, covered in welts, inkstains, and stinging, paper-cut-like scratches.

Which was why she was now looking for healing spells. Because there was no fucking way she was going to go through another three hours of that without being able to fight back, and not with bloody tripping jinxes and disarming charms, either — if she actually managed to land a hit, she wanted it to count.

But, well, she did see the reasoning behind only using spells and curses they could heal — if they had to go to Madam Pomfrey for anything, the teachers would almost definitely make them stop.

Zabini had a sort of surprised, quizzical look on his face. "You know, I actually have no idea where the healing section is."

"Neither do I. Which is why I was looking for a divination spell to help me find it."

"And you didn't just ask Madam Pince because...?"

"Have you ever asked Madam Pince anything?" Ginny was pretty sure no one in their right mind would. She was worse than Snape. Even if she was inclined to help, and not just throw Ginny out for breathing too close to her precious books or something, she'd almost certainly want to know why Ginny wanted to study healing. Somehow, she was pretty sure that a deep, heartfelt desire to be able to curse someone's face off and put it back on again afterward would be frowned
"Ah... Good point. What about Maïa?"

Maïa? "You mean Hermione?"

He nodded. "Sure. She practically lives here, I'd be surprised if she doesn't already know the spell you're looking for, and where they keep the healing books." He turned away, gesturing for her to follow.

Hermione and Black were sitting at a table near Advanced Magical Theory, Hermione and Zabini's empty chair surrounded by what was obviously runes homework, Black... "Are you marking essays?"

Black looked up, grinned. Hermione scowled at her. "I told you you shouldn't do that in public!"

"Hello, Ginevra. And yes, I am. What are you doing?"

"Red, here, is looking for healing texts," Zabini said, before Ginny could ask why, and— Was that the essay her class had just done for Snape?

"Did you find that reference you were looking for?" Hermione asked him.

"Ah, no." Zabini looked down at the parchment he was still holding and sighed. Hermione scowled. "Oh, calm down, Granger, I'll be right back. You can help Gin while you wait."

"Oh, fine," she muttered as he stalked away.

"You could just take my word for it," Lyra smirked at her.

"I'm pretty sure Professor Babbling won't accept that Futhark is considered an ineffective language for large-scale warding projects because Lyra Black said so. What were you looking for, Ginny?"

"Healer's manuals."

Hermione scowled. "They're in the restricted section," she said, which had Ginny matching her frown.

"Well bugger. I don't suppose either of you just... happen to know any healing spells you'd be willing to teach me," she asked, rather reluctantly. She knew for a fact that Black knew some healing spells, everyone knew she'd fixed her own arm after it was almost torn off by a hippogriff at the beginning of the year, but she also knew that Black didn't want to teach her — that was the whole reason she was getting lessons from Nott in the first place. Which was completely fine by Ginny. Just being in her presence might not give her the creeps anymore, but Black still made her very uncomfortable, she didn't really want to learn from her if there was another option. Nott might be a bit of a bastard, but he'd never talked to her outside of the context of teaching her to defend herself, never even seemed to care why she wanted to learn how to fight, let alone asked about what happened with Riddle or tried to read her bloody mind like some people she could think of.

It was still incredibly annoying when Black just said, "Nope, can't say I do," and went back to scribbling in the margins of an essay.

Hermione bit her lip. "I... might be able to find some books for you. But it would depend on why you wanted them."
"Er..." Ginny's eyes flicked involuntarily over to Black. Obviously the Slytherins knew about what she and Nott were doing, but she didn't think Hermione did and, well... Hermione was nice enough, but she'd always kind of reminded Ginny of Percy.

Black didn't even look up, but after a beat of silence, she said, "I imagine Theo told her she's not allowed to try to curse him with anything she can't heal. Which is kind of stupid, since it's not like she's going to be able to hit him anyway, but hey, his student, his rules."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, flicking from Black to Ginny and back again. "I'm pretty sure I don't want to know, but why is Theo Nott teaching Ginny to duel?"

"He'd better not be teaching her to duel — sticking to dueling rules in a real fight will get you killed."

"And?"

"And? Oh! Because obviously a minion who can't defend herself is bloody useless, and — be honest — you can't really see me teaching self-defense, can you?"

"Minion?"

"I'm not a minion."

Hermione ignored her, much as Black always did when she protested against that particular label. "Why do you need minions?"

"Well, it's not so much that I needed one as she just kind of volunteered, so."

That wasn't even true, but obviously neither one of them was going to tell Hermione that Black had asked her to help kill Riddle, which made it a bit difficult to answer when Hermione turned to her, an expectant, "Ginny?" on her lips.

"It's not important," she snapped. "Black was right, anyway. I just want the books so I can learn how to heal some decent curses, so I can actually fight back and don't spend another three hours getting hit with stinging jinxes."

Black sniggered, probably thinking she was going to end up spending three hours getting hit with stinging jinxes anyway, but it was the principle of the thing, really. At least trying to fight back, even if she didn't manage to actually do anything to Nott, somehow seemed better than just sitting there and letting it happen or running away, even though that was apparently the whole point of the exercise.

Hermione bit her lip again. "I...may know of a couple of books that might have been erm...accidentally left out. I'll be back."

She slipped out of her chair and headed off into the stacks, Black staring after her with wide-eyed delight on her face, as though pleasantly surprised Hermione had just... What? It wasn't like she was going to break into the Restricted Section or something. Though Ginny wasn't really sure how she was going to get at those books. Maybe an older student had left them out, and she'd found them and hidden them away somewhere.

Zabini came back just after she disappeared from sight, now with a heavy, ancient-looking book in place of his scrap of parchment. "What happened to Maïa?"

"She went to find some books for Gin," Lyra answered absently, then grinned. "Books
that *should* be in the Restricted Section, but may *somehow, accidentally* have been...liberated. And left somewhere in the depths of the Theory section, apparently."

Zabini rolled his eyes. "Guess that explains why she wanted me to distract Pince for her."

Wait — what? But...she'd just left. She hadn't had time to ask Zabini to do anything. And she was coming back already, her own arms full of books as well, glancing around furtively, as though the librarian might jump out at her from between the stacks at any moment. She hadn't *really* broken into the Restricted Section, had she?

Black was grinning, absolutely delighted, Ginny couldn't imagine why. "You know there are spells on the Restricted books so you can't take them out of the Restricted Section without alerting Pince, right?"

"Well, since she's not here, I assume *whoever* left these out was aware of that, yes. I presume that person must have been able to remove those charms, or knew someone who did it for them."

There was obviously some sort of implication there — not only could Ginny hardly have spent her entire life around Fred and George without developing the ability to notice plots happening right in front of her, but Black smirked and nodded, practically confirming it. She just couldn't imagine what it was. And quite frankly, she didn't care. The books Hermione had brought over were *far* more important.

Black cast a glance over the pile. "I'd start with the Aurors' Fieldmagic Handbook."

"Really? I would've thought maybe Grant's, or Grey's."

"Nah, Grey's is good — really good, if you're planning on specializing in Healing — but it starts with the actual basics. Biology and stuff. Most Healing textbooks do. The Handbook is more practical first-aid oriented, and more generalized."

"Healing does rather seem like the sort of subject where a solid foundation is *slightly* important, don't you think?"

Ginny interrupted before Black could say that of course she didn't. (Because she couldn't really imagine she did.) "I'll take both of them. All of them. Whatever. Thanks, Hermione."

She grinned. Now she just needed to master something that worked on cuts and maybe puncture wounds, and she'd have *dozens* of offensive spells she could try against Nott. Of course, she didn't really expect she'd actually hit him with anything, but if she was going to spend hours dodging his jinxes, she could at *least* make him put in some effort as well.

*Let's see him just sit there and watch me dance now!*
Thestrals were kind of adorable, really. Lyra would probably never admit it aloud, but there were some things she thought were cute, and death-bound, dragon-esque flying horses were one of them. Especially when they were nosing in her pockets, looking for treats. (She'd have to bring more meat next time.)

"I wonder if they'd let me ride them."

Luna looked up from the foal she was feeding. It continued to lick at her fingers, cleaning the blood off them like an overgrown puppy. Adorable. "Oh, yes. They're very strong, and very fast. I'm told it does look rather odd, though, to people who can't see them," she said.

Then she lapsed back into silence, which was, well...odd. Odd for Luna, at least, especially since she was the one who'd suggested they go for a walk today in the first place. Lyra had sort of been expecting her to keep fishing for more information about the ritual she'd performed over Yule. For someone who seemed so distant from the world around her, Luna was incredibly observant.

Assimilating the Essence of Shadows as Lyra had kind of...well, it was weird. She could still tell where they were, because things in shadow looked more or less normal to her (albeit with various odd qualities to their edges which she hadn't quite figured out yet). But everything that wasn't in shadow didn't have shadows anymore, in the sense she was familiar with. Just...adjacent areas that looked more normal than everything else, which made looking at anything reasonably high-relief especially weird, but more to the point was really doing a number on her depth perception.

That along with the way being in sunlight seemed to weigh her down and the very distracting flashes of...half-seen things moving in the shadows had led to her being unusually uncoordinated for the past few weeks. She was finally getting a feel for the new perspective, now, and the half-seen things didn't seem to know or care that she could half-see them (which was probably good), but she suspected that Blaise wasn't going to stop mocking her about accidentally banishing a small potted plant at him (instead of the pillow she'd been aiming for) any time soon.

Luna had noticed this unexplained clumsiness only a few days after they'd returned to the school, and had since taken to intermittently interrogating Lyra about it — persistently enough that she suspected it must have had some other effects she herself hadn't noticed. She couldn't really imagine what it might be, though. As far as she could tell, she looked the same as ever, and it hadn't affected her magic.

In any case, Luna normally hardly shut up. When she wasn't fishing for information, her running commentary of random thoughts and ideas tended to be interesting, and often amusing as well. The last time she was this quiet, it was because McGonagall had made her rewrite an essay, without nattering on about imaginary animals and post-NEWT-level theory concepts. "Is McGonagall being a twat again?"

"Hmm? No more than usual. Why do you ask?"

"You're quiet. It's weird. You always have something to say."
Luna hesitated for a long moment before speaking to the ears of the thestral foal she was absently stroking. "I do have something to say. But I don't want to say it. And you don't want to hear it."

Well *that* was intriguing. "I think I'd rather be the judge of that. What is it?"

"You're not Elsbet."

_Elsbet?_

"I thought you were, at first, before I met you. I had a dream, you see — you were lost in the dark, ignorant of the danger all around you, like in the story."

Part of the appeal in talking to Luna was that her side of the conversation often took place almost entirely in riddles and metaphors. It made for an interesting challenge. "You mean the girl from Herla's Hunt?"

From what Lyra could recall, the girl, an innocent young muggleborn witch (or rather, a powerful yet undiscovered witch, because the tale was set well before the Statute), managed to get herself lost in the woods, becoming the target of a Wild Hunt. There were about thirty different versions from that point, so Lyra assumed it was the lost-and-hunted part that was important, if that was indeed the story Luna was referencing.

She nodded.

"Well, I can't imagine *that* lasted long." She had, after all, chased off a bloody _dementor_ only a few minutes later. Not exactly the sort of thing ignorant muggleborns in over their heads were wont to do.

"No. And you're not a Nymphadora, either, stolen by the Winter Court and trying to get home."

That one was much easier — while she obviously wasn't her niece or Lord Henry Black's granddaughter (well...that was obvious to *her*, at least), she *did* know the origin of the name. "You know, that's kind of funny. Maïa thought I might be a changeling, too. In the opposite direction, of course. But no," she agreed with a shrug, wondering where Luna was going with this. She couldn't imagine this was what she'd been so reluctant to say. "They don't write stories about people like me."

Well, there were a few legendary dark mages whose origins bore a passing resemblance to her own, but she wasn't about to claim fellowship with Black Alice, villainess of a hundred Frankish faeling tales. And of course there were dozens of histories about various Blacks, most of whom had something in common with Lyra, but those weren't really _stories_ in the same sense as the ones Luna had referenced.

But Luna was shaking her head. "You're Mordred, you asked for this. And..." Luna's words trailed off into mumbling. The only word Lyra could pick out was "moon."

Still, the bit about Mordred was clear enough — he'd devoted himself to the Dark in opposition to Merlin's Light, in order to keep the Balance after Morgen restored it. So... Luna knew she was a Black Mage. That...could be bad? Maybe? Somehow she couldn't really see Luna trying to publicize the fact, though.

And even if she *did*, Lyra wasn't sure anyone would take her word — the word of the twelve-year-old daughter of the owner/editor/publisher of _The Quibbler_ — very seriously. Certainly not without proof of some sort, which she was fairly certain Luna didn't have.
That didn't mean that whatever she hadn't actually managed to say clearly enough for Lyra to hear wasn't potentially important, though. "Gods and Powers," she snapped, "ee-NUN-cee-ate, Lovegood."


The moon? Who the fuck was that supposed to be? Presumably whoever had told her about Lyra being a Black Mage. But why would they wait until now to tell her and forbid Luna to talk to her? It was February already, they'd— Wait...

It was just barely February. Imbolc had been the night before last, not that Lyra had done anything for it — it was a Light holiday, one devoted to the Youthful Power, with no special significance to the Dark at all.

But the various aspects of the Youthful/Innocent/Honest Power would have been at their greatest strength. Even the weakest of them would have been able to commune clearly with their dedicates — the depth and clarity of her bond with Eris was rather unusual, Lyra knew — most Patrons just sent their dedicates dreams or some other sort of "signs" most of the time. (Eris just thought that was kind of silly.) And Luna had just reminded Lyra that she'd dreamt of her before they met — dreamt her wandering in darkness, apparently, or possibly accompanied by darkness.

She'd dreamed of Eris, too, Lyra suddenly recalled. She'd drawn a sketch of her once, and Lyra had asked about it... (If she recalled correctly, Luna hadn't known who she was.)

And her magic was lighter than anyone else Lyra had ever met, she'd thought it was just because Luna was so sheltered, and the Lovegoods did tend toward the light, anyway...

Yes, she was a bit preachy about it sometimes, starting debates about morality and trying to get Lyra to visit unicorns (as though a unicorn would let her get within a hundred yards), giving her that little healing bijou when she was in Hospital and so on, but then, most light mages were, at least to some degree. Lyra had chalked that up to genuine concern for her wellbeing, as she had the way she kept asking about Lyra's sudden clumsiness.

All that would make sense, though if... If Luna had a patron, who was trying to warn her about Lyra and Eris, or trying to — what, save her from the Dark? It was entirely possible Luna hadn't realized Lyra was a dedicated black mage until she was told — she certainly hadn't recognized Luna's affiliation... Yes, that would make perfect sense.

Eris, is Luna dedicated to the Youthful Power?

It would have to be Innocence — the timing made sense, and there was a sort of deliberate naivete about her, a willing disbelief in the darkness and cruelty of everyone around her — not just Lyra, she referred to the Ravenclaw girls who bullied her so often as Nargles, as though they were influenced by mood-altering parasites, and not just naturally bitchy teenagers and had once said Snape was just misunderstood (like thestrals). Also, Lyra was pretty sure crumple-horned snorkacks were some sort of sex metaphor.

Eris cackled. Took you long enough to notice. Care to guess her Patron?

Well it has to be one of the ones focused on innocence, and Luna did call her the moon, so that narrows it down. I doubt her name's a coincidence, especially since children are normally dedicated by their parents, one of them had to know they were going to do it — probably her
mother? Not that I've met her father, but his Quibbler articles don't really have the right tone for a dedicate of Innocence. Too canny. And her mother was a druid, right? So probably one of the Celtic deities... Oh! What's that one that's all about potential, Aine's complement?

_Gelach_, Eris reminded her, though she refrained from saying whether Lyra's deduction was correct. _Only one way to find out, then_, she added, clearly amused.

_Fine, then, be that way_. Lyra imagined sticking her tongue out at her Patron, whose only response was more cackling. _Typical._

"I told you you didn't want to hear it," Luna said.

Lyra startled slightly as she realized she was still standing there, staring blankly in Luna's general direction. "Did she happen to say _why_?"

"What?"

"Well we _know_ you're dedicated to the Youthful Power. Probably one of the ones associated with innocence. I'm betting Gelach. Did she say why you can't associate with me?"

"_We?_"

"Eris and I. I wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't said anything. I mean, I know you're _light_, but I didn't realize you were _dedicated_."

"You...and _Eris_," Luna repeated.

"Uh, yeah? You knew that, didn't you? I saw you drawing her once. Did Gelach not tell you who she was? It _is_ Gelach, right?" Luna nodded mutely. "Yeah, well, I can't say we like the way she goes about claiming dedicates—" (Aspects of Innocence had always seemed a little creepy to Lyra, duping children into their service, or forcing parents to promise them a child in exchange for release from their own vows.) "—but we have no quarrel with Youth as a whole. We don't understand a lot of its aspects, and it doesn't really like _us_, but some of the more impulsive aspects are _fun_." Artemis, for example. They'd only met once, but Sylvia reminded Lyra a bit of her.

Luna, apparently (suddenly) angry, glared at her. "I don't believe you," she snapped. "You're _dark_. You're the _enemy_."

Lyra snorted. "Someone's been lying to you." Or at least vastly oversimplifying things, in the same way that Luna disparagingly called 'lies to tell to children' when they discussed elementary transfiguration theory.

"Mummy _never_ lied to me!"

"Yeah? How old were you when she dedicated you to Gelach? I'm sure you knew _exactly_ what you were getting into."

Luna's eyes widened as Lyra offered that particular deduction, which she took as an indication that Pandora Lovegood _had_ sold her own daughter into servitude to escape her Patron. Her estimation of the woman — not high to begin with, seeing as she'd managed to blow herself up in a lab accident — slipped a few notches.

"I was seven," Luna admitted before renewing her glare. She really wasn't very good at maintaining her anger, it was kind of funny, actually. "How old were _you_?" she asked, her voice almost...petulant, and more childish than Lyra had ever heard it before.
"Same. But no one sold me for their own benefit — I made my compact for myself. And no, I didn't really know what I was doing. But I knew what I was offering, and what I wanted, and at least I'm suited to my patron!"

Luna's face grew pink with fury as Lyra insulted her mother's motives. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Really? You can't honestly think your personality, your history, inclines you toward innocence. You can see thestrals, Luna." Which in itself wasn't bad or even Dark, but it did speak to a certain degree of experience, witnessing the end of a life, and at a rather young age, too. Not as young as Bella, she'd seen her first human sacrifice the same year she'd dedicated herself to Eris, but Luna had only been a couple years older when her mother died. And experience was the absolute bane of innocence. "Not to mention, you're a bloody Ravenclaw. Seeking knowledge isn't really an aspect of Youth."

"Shut up! I'm not listening to you! You're just trying to make me doubt Her — trying to steal me from my Lady, just like she said you would!"

"If I were trying to destroy your relationship with Gelach — not steal you, you're even less suited to Chaos than Innocence — I'd point out another half-dozen reasons you're a bad match, and offer to help you leave her service, since you never had a choice to enter it." Luna flinched — that touched a nerve. "But I'm not. Because, as I said, we have no quarrel with Youth. And starting one holds no benefit to us, so."

"Oh really? Because it sounds an awful lot like you're trying to corrupt me right now, making me question...everything." Her lower lip wobbled. She bit it, clearly trying to keep her composure.

It would be so easy to keep going — they weren't suited, and it had to be hard being dedicated to a goddess you weren't truly in sync with, anyone would resent it, the idea of leaving (without incurring some terrible fate for breaking faith — Lyra was certain she could come up with some way to do that, or at least convince Luna she could) must be appealing. And she had never gotten to drive a wedge between a Patron and their Dedicate before...

I'm not saying you shouldn't, but you do realize that if Ignorance and Wisdom are both annoyed with us, that gives them common ground, right?

Yeah, yeah. Not to mention, it'd probably annoy most of the other Powers, too, if they thought we might start chipping away at their dedicates as well. Even the ones they were on reasonably good terms with wouldn't like that, and the good will Eris had earned with her little coup in Lyra's home universe wouldn't go that far in ameliorating their ire.

Eris sniggered. Well, yes, there is that.

Sigh. "Don't tempt me," she said aloud, focusing on Luna again. "Look, we're not trying to start a fight here. If you want me to leave you alone, I will. I'm not going to force my company on you, especially if it's going to make things awkward for you with Gelach. Mind you, I think it's fucking stupid that she's forbidding you to talk to me in the first place, not to mention annoying — you are one of the most interesting people in the whole bloody castle, you know. But whatever."

Luna sniffled, looking away, focusing on the thestral foal, now nibbling at her left sleeve. "I—I– It has to be this way. I– I don't want it, but— but I can't..."

Ugh. Lyra wasn't sure if she would be able to resist a direct order from Eris, either (if Eris were inclined to issue orders of any sort). She sighed. "Whatever. I'll be around. Let me know if you
change your mind. Or, you know, if you get too old and world-weary for Innocence and she lets you go."

Luna nodded, tears again threatening to fall, but it seemed she had nothing to say to that, and Lyra could think of nothing to add.

*Well, this is awkward*, she observed, running her fingers along the wing-ridge of the nearest thestral as Luna began to cry in earnest.

*She did say you could ride these things, yes? Seems as good a way as any to make an exit.*

*Sure, why not?*

She vaulted onto the back of the creature and urged it into flight. Hopefully by the time they came down, Luna would have recovered her senses enough to head back to the Castle. Or at least enough to have stopped crying. Lyra never had figured out exactly what she was supposed to do when faced with a weeping child.

*Not laugh*, Eris said, reminding her of the first time Narcissa had run to her crying over some inconsequential matter or other.

*Oh, shut up.*

Albus Dumbledore stared down at the letter before him, no longer truly seeing the words, fingers idly playing with the edge of the parchment. An unpleasant tension filled his chest, narrowing his throat, hard and tight and hot, a feeling he knew well.

The familiar pain of shame and guilt.

Despite what many of his critics liked to claim, Albus was well aware of his own limitations — he was not infallible. His mistakes were many, and as a man who had had no small amount of power and influence for decades now, his mistakes were more far-reaching and destructive than the common foibles of ordinary men.

Control of the Wizengamot had been snatched out from under his allies by the Dark, lead by Narcissa, an opponent he hadn't even seen coming until it was too late. He'd been focused on Lucius, the various pureblood nationalists who had managed to retain their power and influence, he hadn't had the insight to see Narcissa's scheming behind the scenes, hadn't prepared for the seductive draw of a more liberally-minded Dark bloc. Not only was the Light forced to negotiate to form a coalition government, but Narcissa's propaganda was gradually swaying the commons, there was even early success at turning *muggleborns* to the Dark. There was a culture war going on around him, and he was *losing*. It was all too possible that, a generation from now, the Light would vanish from positions of influence entirely.

And it was his fault. He hadn't seen the danger coming, he'd completely misjudged Narcissa. He'd expected a Black, intemperate and concerned only with her family's own power, he'd expected a Death Eater, hateful and irrational. He hadn't expected Narcissa Black Malfoy, of all people, along with her allies in the more traditionalist Dark, moderate and dignified and *devious*, to successfully chip away at the Light's moral high ground, and every time he opened his mouth he only seemed to make it worse, somehow everything he did to attempt to stem the tide was turned back around against him. He'd made a mistake, and the whole nation would ultimately suffer for it.

That was a critical mistake, but it was hardly the only one he'd ever made. The war, he'd made far too many mistakes in the war. Mistakes others had died for. He couldn't count the people who'd
paid the ultimate price due to one miscalculation of his or another. Tom and Bellatrix simply didn't think the way he did — he'd had serious difficulty anticipating their strategy and tactics, it'd been all he could do at times simply to keep up, he'd fallen for far too many of their feints. With catastrophic consequences. He still saw the faces of the lost, sometimes, both dreaming and waking, felt the accusation in dead, empty eyes, and he carried that burden with him always, that he hadn't been good enough, he'd made mistakes, and people had died. Thousands of people had died.

As much as he found her methods abhorrent, he couldn't deny to himself that, were it not for Lily, the state of their nation would be much, much worse today. As much as he hated the thought, he wasn't certain they could ever have won without her, what she'd done.

The Dark, no matter its horrors, sometimes had its uses.

But his true faults were older, dating back to long before the war had begun. He'd seen what Bellatrix Black and Mirabella Zabini had been doing. He hadn't known the threat for what it was at the time — he hadn't known of Tom's association with Bellatrix then, he hadn't seen her conquest of Slytherin House as the recruitment opportunity she'd made of it. But sometimes, he'd wondered. His past efforts managing threats in Slytherin had been failures, he'd thought a direct hand in their affairs would only create further enmity, as it had before. So he'd stood back, he'd directed Horace to handle affairs in his house. And sometimes he wondered, if he'd tried to counter Bellatrix's influence over her classmates, how much of a difference would that have made? How many young people would never have been drawn under Tom's domination? How much weaker might the Death Eaters have been, how much lesser the following violence?

He didn't know, it was impossible to know. But still he wondered.

Of course, he couldn't help but wonder if, at some level, he wasn't at least partially responsible for the existence of Lord Voldemort himself. It was quite obvious, in retrospect, that his attempts to moderate Tom's worst impulses had been less than effective. Albus had... Well, he'd been frightened, from the very beginning. There had always been something deeply unnerving about Tom, a black emptiness at the very heart of him that was horrifically wrong in a child. He'd encountered similar children, both before and since, but Tom... Tom had been different. He couldn't even say exactly how. Even when he'd only been eleven, something about him — the feel of his magic, the texture of his mind — something had set Albus's skin to crawling.

And he'd reacted badly. He could admit that now. His...direct antagonism, he'd been attempting to contain him, to enforce some degree of respect for his peers, for the law itself. As Tom had developed his own undeniable charisma, drawing people into his orbit without even seeming to try, Albus had worked all the harder to try to limit his growing influence at the school, and... It hadn't worked. His realisation that it hadn't worked was, in fact, the very reason he'd tried to use a lighter hand with Bellatrix and Mirabella (though that hadn't worked either).

Not only had it not worked, he couldn't help but wonder if it hadn't catastrophically backfired. True, Tom might have been cold and cruel to start with, at such an early age his soul already run through with darkness, but... Well, Albus hadn't helped matters by framing himself as an enemy, had he? He hadn't thought of it in those terms at the time, but trying to think of it from Tom's point of view...

The Light should be a refuge for the powerless — the commons, historically repressed groups like werewolves and nonhuman beings, muggleborns. Tom, for all anyone had known at the time, had been a muggleborn, he had every reason to identify with their mission to improve the lot of people like him. Instead, Albus had, unintentionally, made the Light seem intolerant, even toxic, certainly not people he should ever feel welcomed by.
There was great irony in a muggleborn boy growing to become a pureblood nationalist revolutionary. And Albus couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't at least partially responsible, for pushing a dangerous but lonely boy away from the very beginning.

And his greatest crime, his worst mistake, was even older than that, and it was at the core of everything that had happened since. There could be no Narcissa Malfoy without Lord Voldemort. And there could be no Lord Voldemort without Gellert Grindelwald. What was the Death Eater movement if not a response to the greater influence of commoners and muggleborns, a paranoid overreaction inspired by the violence Gellert perpetrated against their peers on the Continent? Could Tom ever have rallied such a large segment of the purebloods of Britain behind him if the widespread extermination of the noble class at Gellert's hands a generation previous hadn't already gripped them with a lingering, existential terror?

Would Gellert's revolution have happened if Albus had never met him? Somehow, he doubted it. It wasn't necessarily about the magic he'd introduced Gellert to — while Gellert was exceptionally talented, his education had been incomplete, and he'd always been less academically-minded. Albus had taught him plenty of magic he now dearly wished he hadn't, had set him down further paths of exploration that had only led to horror. And while that had been a grave mistake, it wasn't the worst part.

No, his gravest error, perhaps the single most disastrous mistake he'd ever made in his life, had been their discussions of politics.

Gellert had already hated the ruling classes of the magical world even then: few in Britain knew that Gellert had been expelled from Durmstrang for cursing a noble boy who'd raped his younger sister (Linda, Albus thought her name was), and gotten away with it. The boy's grandfather had ensured Linda and her family's accusations went nowhere — which hadn't taken much effort, since his peers weren't particularly likely to care much about crimes committed against a poor, half-blood commoner — and, when Gellert had taken his revenge, had immediately started screeching for his head. If Gellert hadn't fled the country, he likely would have been executed. Given the circumstances, his fury and hatred were perfectly understandable.

And Albus had had reason enough to be disillusioned with the aristocratic rule of their world himself. Few had been able to deny that he was a prodigy, of the kind unseen in Britain in generations. In a just society, he should have had every door open to him. But he'd seen them close, one by one, the brilliant future he'd been promised snatched away before his eyes. Because he was a poor, half-blood commoner — why give an opportunity to him, when it could be given to the son of one noble house or another? Magical society back then had cared little for people like him.

Even now, to his never-ending shame, he couldn't honestly say it was that much improved.

He and Gellert had both been perceptive and brilliant — and bitter, so bitter. Gellert had been familiar with the unification of muggle Germany, then a comparatively recent development. But Albus had been more well-read than Gellert. It was he who'd brought to the table developments in political philosophy over the last couple centuries, from Rousseau to Kant to Marx, it was he who'd studied the Revolutions of 1848, who could speak of their failures and (limited) successes.

While Gellert had been wild and hurting and spiteful, a rage that in all likelihood would have burnt out in time, Albus had helped him transform it into something else. With his help, Gellert's unfocused anger at the world became a coherent, compelling ideology, one that would inspire a dozen revolutions, one that still endured to this day.

In the sixties, a French politician (and eventual premier) had caused a fiery controversy when he'd started quoting Gellert in some of his speeches. Albus wondered how people would react if they'd
known many of those arguments had originally been his.

Albus had come to his senses, in time, realised the gravity of what they were speaking of doing, the thousands upon thousands who would likely die, the blood and chaos that would sweep across the Continent. He'd come to his senses, but Gellert had been inspired, consumed with a revolutionary fervor that had never entirely died, even to this day, after decades in prison. He couldn't help but feel, at some level, that Gellert had been the one blamed, but Albus himself was the one ultimately responsible.

Without him, Gellert might have remained as he'd been when they'd met: brilliant, troubled, and volatile, but ultimately harmless.

And Albus had to wonder — how many lives had been lost because of him? because of his naivety, in his youth, his mistakes uncounted in the centuries since? The revolutions on the Continent, the racial violence that had nearly torn his own country apart, how much of it could be traced back to him?

No, Albus was well aware he was not infallible. He'd made mistakes far greater than anyone realised.

So, at one level, Albus wasn't particularly surprised to come face to face with yet another of his failures. And, while it wasn't surprising, it was painful all the same, made all the worse by the fact that he'd already suffered this particular failure once before.

It wasn't that long ago, or so it felt, that he'd been mourning his error in trusting Sirius. How many of their people had been killed because their identities and their intentions and their tactics had been leaked ahead of time? He'd known there was at least one traitor in their ranks — it was the best explanation for Tom and Bellatrix's stunning successes at outmaneuvering them — but he hadn't been able to identify whoever it was, even Alastor hadn't had any luck. And then there were the dual tragedies of Hallowe'en and the incident in Edinburgh the next week. Hallowe'en, at least, had had a brilliant silver lining — Lily had managed to take Tom down with her, something she might never have had the opportunity to do otherwise. How many more might have died, were the Potters not betrayed in that exact manner? But in Edinburgh, there was no ambiguity about that, that was a tragedy plain and simple. Friendships that had stood unfractured for a decade torn apart in the space of a week, blood unnecessarily shed in cruel, heartless madness.

He should never have trusted a Black, he'd thought.

The family as a whole was well known for its immoderation, impulsivity, and pathological lack of concern for the opinions or wellbeing of anyone who wasn't a Black — certain extreme cases didn't even make that exception. Albus had personally observed at least a dozen young Blacks as students, and while some stood out as being more obviously wild than others — Sirius and Bellatrix came to mind, as did the Tonks girl, though even Bellatrix had not been quite so...unrestrained as Lyra — not one of them had been what he might call well-balanced. Even Andromeda, whom he would consider the most stable of the last generation, had eloped and run off to the Americas, only to return after the end of the war and begin a legal crusade against the very class in which she had been raised.

Sirius, Albus had thought he was different. He was wild and intemperate and impulsive, yes, but... Well, he was the only Black Albus had ever known to use light magic at all. While Sirius did have extensive knowledge of dark magic, as he suspected all Blacks did, Albus couldn't recall seeing Sirius actually cast any himself. That irrational devotion to the family common among Blacks had seemingly been transferred entirely to James, and later the Order as a whole, that viciousness of his applied now in their defence. He was still very much a Black, yes, but he'd been their Black.
If Albus could come to tolerate Lily twisting *necromancy*, of all things, to suit their ends, then he could tolerate Sirius simply being Sirius.

He'd thought he'd been wrong. In the immediate aftermath of that week in '81, he'd thought he'd been so horribly, tragically wrong about Sirius Black. And it had burned, for months, burned all the fiercer when he saw how it had affected Alastor, the bitterness in his eyes, the sudden worsening of his nascent paranoia. He'd been wrong — again — and it was other people, people who'd put their trust in him, who'd paid the price — again.

But the letter he'd received today had made it all, somehow, ten times worse.

The Chief Warlock was, at least nominally, the last arbiter of justice in their nation — essentially, Albus was the figurehead in charge of their entire legal and judicial system. While this was mostly ceremonial, he had very little involvement day to day, certain courtesies were still observed. The DLE regularly informed him of important developments, as a matter of protocol. So, when they started judicial proceedings concerning a Lord of the Wizengamot — which Sirius technically was, despite all that had happened — Albus was told soon afterward.

This letter, though, provided rather more detail than he was usually given. He couldn't guess why Amelia had thought it necessary this time, but her exact reasoning wasn't pertinent. This process was not just a formality, she said, they fully intended to conduct a proper trial before the Wizengamot. (Amelia wanted to do this as soon as humanly possible which, knowing the Wizengamot as Albus did, he didn't expect to be for at least half a year.) More importantly, she said, she anticipated Sirius to be *fully exonerated*.

There was a new witness, she said, a critical witness: Peter Pettigrew.

*Peter Pettigrew was alive.*

And, according to Amelia, Peter had the Dark Mark emblazoned across his arm.

Amelia hadn't said anything further, but Albus hadn't needed more information to know exactly what would happen, come the trial. He hadn't needed any more to know exactly what had happened, back in '81. *Peter* had been the traitor in their ranks. *Peter* had betrayed the Potters. *And Peter* had killed all those muggles, framing Sirius in the process.

Sirius was innocent. He'd been entirely innocent, the whole time. And yet he'd been sequestered in Azkaban, subjected to what amounted to psychological torture, unbroken, for a dozen years.

And Albus was responsible.

It'd been all he could do, after receiving the letter at dinner, to maintain his composure. It'd been all he could do to get through his conversations with those few members of his staff who would have some investment in the matter. Minerva was furious with him (again), Severus had just been smug, and Remus, poor Remus had seemed so, so broken... He couldn't help feeling, it was *Albus* he should be angry with. Peter had just been scared and foolish — and *young*, sometimes he forgot how very young they had all been. It was Albus who had put them in the positions they'd been in. Ultimately, he was responsible.
Not that it was so surprisingly he should have gotten this one wrong. Sirius was a Black, after all — their family didn't have the reputation they did for no reason. And, well, he did recall casting the Fidelius himself, Sirius had been their Secret Keeper. He'd thought Sirius had been the only person who could have betrayed the Potters, and the incident in Edinburgh hadn't given him any reason to doubt himself.

But, thinking back on it, it was quite obvious what had happened: Lily. (And it did always come back to Lily, didn't it?) It hadn't occurred to him at the time that the Secret Keeper might have been changed — why should it, he hadn't thought it was even possible. But he could acknowledge he was hardly an authority when it came to ritual magic. He knew enough to perform the Fidelius, yes, but when it came down to it that was just following directions, rather like baking a cake. Lily, though, she'd had intuitive talent with ritual he simply couldn't comprehend. He still didn't truly understand what she'd done that Hallowe'en, and he'd spent a decade, off and on, trying to figure it out. It was not at all outside the realm of possibility Lily might have conducted an improvised soul magic ritual to transfer the Secret from Sirius to Peter — it would even explain why they'd delivered fresh slips of paper to them all, which had seemed peculiar but inconsequential at the time.

It was even quite clever. Whatever one might say about him, it was undeniable that Sirius was a very hard man to miss. With Sirius being as distractingly Sirius as he was wont to be, with everyone who knew about the Fidelius certain he was the Secret Keeper, all the attention would be on him. Any efforts to capture the Secret Keeper, get the Potters' location out of him, would be focused on him — and Sirius was capable enough of a fighter, clever enough to not leave himself overexposed, any attempt to capture him was likely to fail. In fact, there had been what had appeared to be that very sort of attempt, and the attackers had always suffered serious casualties, and he'd always gotten away in the end.

In contrast with Sirius, who would ever suspect Peter? He was quiet, and meek, and just... Albus hadn't expected Peter either, he'd never even considered the possibility he might be their traitor. Relying on their opponents to dismiss him just as they themselves did was rather clever.

In retrospect, it was a brilliant plan. It was really quite unfortunate it had backfired so horrifically.

He'd told those among his staff who had some stake in the matter, but they weren't the only ones who deserved to know. They needed to know, they would want time to prepare, to rethink things in light of the revelations to come. They would probably want to attend the trial, that would have to be arranged.

Albus needed to talk to Harry and Lyra.

If he were being completely honest with himself, he was less than enthused over the prospect.

After he wasn't sure how long lost in his own thoughts, he was drawn out by the tug of the wards, announcing the two students stepping over the threshold at the base of his tower. (He knew many assumed he'd placed some charm over the entrance to inform who was coming so he could act casually omniscient, but really, that security feature had been there for centuries.) Though he had sent the invitations separately, not mentioning the other in either note, he wasn't surprised they'd come to him together. But still, a thin pall of uneasiness settled over him.

Playing at the back of his head, the wards named them Harry Potter and Bellatrix Black.

It had taken some time for Albus to even realise the wards labeled their newest Black with a name quite different than the one she used — and, of all possibilities, that particular name. It wasn't until after that farce with the young Malfoy in the Great Hall that he'd started developing serious
curiosities about where exactly she'd come from.

He hadn't truly thought it a concern of his, at first. The nobility of his country had always entertained complex entanglements, which they could be obsessively private about. He simply hadn't considered it his business, and doubted he'd get anywhere if he asked. So far as the law was concerned, Lyra was a descendant of a squib exiled from the family, raised by an unnamed foreign "curse-breaker" for most of her childhood, before finally being acknowledged by the fading remnants of the Black Family Magic. Confirmed as it was by Narcissa, the closest thing to a true Black left, there was no reason to doubt the story. Albus had considered the explanation good enough, and hadn't bothered examining it deeper.

It was, after all, not implausible. As much as they might like to deny it, squibs were born to prominent pureblood families. If they weren't simply murdered in the cradle, they were usually exiled to live in the muggle world. It wasn't at all unusual for magic to resurface in their descendants — in fact, there was a common theory that all muggleborns had squibs in their ancestry. Albus had thought it quite reasonable to expect the story was accurate, the "travelling curse-breaker" referred to likely one of the few legacies of the old French nobility Gellert hadn't quite managed to entirely exterminate. It would explain her name and her appearance, her special talent — Blacks turned out to be magical prodigies disproportionately often, it seemed to be genetic — even with theory and runes in particular, as confirmed by several members of his staff, her familiarity with pureblood etiquette, even her ease with French. It had made a sort of sense, he hadn't thought about it too hard.

But then, a few days later, he learned Severus had decided to go to Azkaban. To visit Bellatrix.

And suddenly Albus had had far too many questions.

The children shortly walked into his office, Harry glancing around with a fusion of nervousness and fascination. Albus noted that, curiously, the boy looked rather less anxious than he had in any of their previous meetings. He seemed to stand straighter, walked with the slightest shade of self-possession, one which hadn't been there before. Even his mind felt calmer, cleaner. It was...curious.

Lyra, of course, waltzed in without a care, that familiar reckless Black grin stretching her face. Looking at her now, he was almost astounded he hadn't seen it before: if not for the years that had passed, he could almost imagine this was a young Bellatrix standing before him. He'd even checked his own memories in his pensieve to confirm, they looked virtually identical.

Not that he could ever confuse the two, no matter how similar their look. Bellatrix had been... For all the black vibrancy of her magic, the sadistic intensity she always seemed to keep just barely restrained, there had been a peculiar distance about her. Though she walked the halls of this school, though she participated in her classes as she was expected, though she interacted with her classmates, she had never seemed to be entirely present. As though she didn't truly consider herself one of them, not only that, but as though the greater part of her attention were elsewhere. Like she didn't care, about anything or anyone around her, hardly even saw them, was simply...waiting.

Lyra, Albus had swiftly realised, was an altogether different sort of Black than Bellatrix had been. While her magic was just as sharp and cold, she yet seemed brighter, somehow. While Bellatrix had seemed removed, Lyra always felt, somehow, inextricably present, as though anchored in the moment in a way more than physical, something about every movement and every word feeling so very immediate, so very here. He couldn't even explain the feeling, exactly, it was quite strange. And while Bellatrix had been flat and apathetic, Lyra sometimes seemed too intense — she smiled and she glared and she laughed like any other child, but there was a peculiar presence to it, always seeming to bright, too powerful, too real, to the point that it looped back around into the surreal.
Albus also hadn't seen any sign of Bellatrix's cruelty in Lyra. It was true Lyra seemed to have little care for the consequences of her own actions, but there was an important distinction between apathy and sadism — while it clearly hadn't bothered her when she'd accidentally brought harm to Granger, displaying no sign of empathy at all, she also quite clearly hadn't taken any enjoyment from it. There had been horrible rumours floating around the school in Bellatrix's time, whispers of what she'd done to other students who'd irritated her, but with Lyra there was nothing of the kind. The few occasions he'd heard where she had targeted other students, for one reason or another, she seemed to be aiming to cause nothing more than confusion and distress. In fact, there had been no reports from his staff of her physically harming another student, at all, even with anything so simply as a stinging jinx — which was actually quite peculiar, most students acted out at some point or another. The point was, while one could hardly call the girl kind, she didn't seem to be quite actively malicious either.

So, there clearly were similarities between Lyra and Bellatrix as Albus remembered her, but there were also marked differences. Taking all that into account, along with the name the girl had been keyed into the wards with, and Albus was toying with a fascinating theory: this Lyra was, in fact, the Blackheart's daughter.

Ordinarily, Albus wouldn't even consider the idea — at that point in the War, there simply hadn't been the opportunity for Bellatrix to go through a natural pregnancy, someone would have noticed at some point. But Bellatrix wasn't an ordinary person. Albus had never gone down such roads himself, but he was studied enough in alchemy to recognise the implications of certain principles and processes. While, at that particular point in her life, Bellatrix certainly couldn't have had a child naturally, she could have created one through blood alchemy.

No matter how twisted Bellatrix might have become from Tom's influence, she'd still shown an unshakeable regard for the family of her birth. By the late seventies, it had been becoming increasingly clear that the House of Black was in trouble — as early as the mid-sixties, in fact, some had predicted they were seeing the last generation of Blacks before the ancient family collapsed entirely. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that Bellatrix, out of some deranged sense of filial piety, had created an heir to take up the Black legacy. The idea of someone actually doing such a thing was absurd, but Albus found it strangely convincing. Bellatrix was quite absurd, after all.

It made perfect sense, to him, that Bellatrix would name any child after herself — the name was strongly associated with the Blacks in British culture, had been ever since Chief Warlock Henry Black's daughter of the same name had risen to prominence. It also made perfect sense, to him, that that child might choose to use a different name — the Blackheart's exploits were still fresh in the public consciousness, after all. Taken all together, he thought this theory of his made all too much sense.

Not that he thought it mattered too much. Albus had long tried to keep himself from judging a child by the behaviour of their parents, and that principle applied to Lyra just as much as it did to Harry. It was simply a fascinating curiosity to turn over in his mind.

Besides, Lyra reminded him far more of an adult Lily Evans than she did Bellatrix. Which was...curious.

Forcing a soft smile onto his face, Albus nodded at the chairs across from him. "Mister Potter, Miss Black. Have a seat." They did, Harry with a slight air of nervousness, stiff and tense, Lyra dropping to bonelessly sprawl across hers, for every appearance without a care in the world. "I do apologise for interrupting your weekend — I'm sure the both of you have many things you would
rather be doing. But earlier today I was made aware of developments I believe you both have a right to be informed of."

A curious blankness crossed Lyra's face, before again stretching into a grin, amusement subtly dancing in her eyes. "That's quite alright, Your Excellency. I'm sure whatever this is is important."

Despite himself, Albus felt a smile pull at his own lips. Severus had told him about this — in the very first class of the year, he'd chastised her for not showing him the 'proper' respect, which she'd immediately taken as an excuse to be overly formal. The rest of the staff thought he was being a little ridiculous, getting so frustrated over it, claiming the girl was doing it just to annoy him...which was probably true. It was rather funny.

Of course, "Your Excellency" was the proper mode of address for the Chief Warlock, though nobody actually used it outside meetings of the Wizengamot.

But anyway, on to business. For what felt like the hundredth time, Albus considered how to go about this particular series of revelations. The matter was quite...complicated. But no, there was no easy way to break it, this was going to be difficult no matter how he went about it. "This news I received has personal implications for the both of you, and much of what I have to say might come as something of a shock. I will answer your questions, of course, but I ask that you—"

"Oh, is this about Sirius?"

Exasperated, Harry whispered, "Lyra!"

"Come on, that was bloody obvious. What else could he be talking about that has personal implications for the both of us? I can't think of anything." The girl turned to grin at him again, bright and somehow sly. "That's it, isn't it, Your Excellency? The D.L.E. finally get their heads out of their arses?"

"Lyra!" Harry sounded mildly scandalised that time, shooting Albus an apologetic look.

Giving Harry a patently false innocent smile, she said only, "What?"

As amusing as this was, the children could bicker on their own time. A soft clearing of his throat had their attention on him again. "Correct me if I'm mistaken, but I get the feeling you both were already aware of your cousin's...circumstances."

Harry glanced at Lyra — whose only answer seemed to be a smug smirk — before nodding. "Ah, yes, Professor. I mean, if you're asking if I knew he's innocent, Lyra told me that months ago. Way back in September, actually. I didn't know what to think about it at first, but..."

Albus tried to keep any reaction to that off his face. It was rather...galling, that two thirteen-year-old children had figured out the truth before he had. He'd never actually figured it out himself, he'd needed to be told, despite his involvement in the pertinent events. "And how did you come to know this, Miss Black?"

After the briefest of pauses, the girl said, "I was touring the Black properties over the summer, and came across one of the family elves. She's convinced Sirius was falsely imprisoned."

"The word of an elf can often be untrustworthy when it comes to their master."

"Yes, Your Excellency, but Cherri had very good reasons for believing as she did. I confirmed it later, of course."
There was that unwilling smile again, Albus could hardly stop it. "And how exactly did you manage to do that?"

For the slightest instant, Lyra went unnaturally still, staring blankly back at him. "I asked around, Your Excellency. Meda and Cissy were about his age, they knew him well." She said it smoothly enough, but Albus had a suspicion what that pause was for.

"That must be it, of course. Silly me, I had the thought you might have gotten the story directly from the source. Which is just absurd, you couldn't possibly know where to find the most wanted man in Britain."

Tellingly, Harry flushed, ever so slightly, eyes turning to stare at Albus's desk, shifting fitfully in his chair. Lyra, on the other hand, just smirked back at him. "No, Your Excellency, I couldn't possibly admit to something like that."

"Lyra!"

"I'm not likely to forget my own name, Harry — you don't have to keep yelling it at me."

Amused despite himself, as the children started bickering again, Albus looked on with nothing but a tolerant shaking of his head.

Yes, far more than the madwoman Albus suspected might well be her mother, Lyra reminded him of the madwoman who was Harry's. For Lily had been mad, in her own particular way, though it had taken Albus some time to even notice — Lily had been remarkably adept at masking her own deficiencies and eccentricities, appearing to be nothing more or less than exactly what the observer wanted to see. Truly, it wasn't until the war that Albus had begun to know her for who she'd been. It wasn't until after the fact that he'd seen her persona during her Hogwarts years as the act it'd been, and even now he wasn't certain of all she'd gotten up to. She had to have learned the skills she'd displayed somewhere, but Albus had never been able to confirm how, or when.

And he had been seriously concerned over Lily, about what she might well have been becoming. Lily had been, overall, a rather weak witch — she was brilliant, yes, she'd deserved her place at the top of her class, but the power available to her had been meagre, far more modest than some of her peers. For this reason, she wasn't suited to being a front-line fighter. But, a role more methodical, where her talents and her capacity for cold-headed reason could best serve her? Lily had shown potential to be a truly first-class Healer, had saved more lives than Albus could easily enumerate.

Even if her methods had been...less than perfectly legal. Over that first year, Albus had heard unsettling rumours of Lily and Pandora's work, whispers of illicit, morally questionable methods, everything from restricted spells, to blood magic, and even blatantly illegal high ritual. But, while unsavoury, Albus had decided he needn't intervene. He might not personally approve of that sort of magic, but it was undeniable that Lily Evans and Pandora Sage-Willow had been very good at their jobs, that many of his allies owed their lives to the pair's unconventional methods. So long as they were only saving lives, well, he could hardly call that immoral, could he?

But, then, Lily started to use her more unsettling abilities to maim and kill. And things became so much more complicated.

Albus had seen memories, of when Lily had raised the dead. A brief ritual, clearly improvised on the spot, and those who had fallen had stood again, turned to assault the Death Eaters. And it hadn't been an instantaneous effect either — each of their enemies the undead killed rose in turn, Lily's unholy army swelling second by second, until the Death Eaters had been forced to retreat.
Albus had seen memories, of what they now called the Battle of Artemis. It was said someone had invoked the Youthful Power, eldritch magics bringing a construct to life, through which it had hunted the Death Eaters attacking the village as though they were not but vermin, slaughtering dozens of them before they managed to flee. But, in truth, there had been no construct — it had been Lily, taking Artemis into herself, allowing herself to be possessed by wild magic. Albus didn't truly believe gods and powers existed, or at least not as beings independent from the caster, but it was undeniable that, that night, Lily had become something else. It was the most dangerous sort of high ritual, volatile and exceedingly illegal.

If Lily had survived the war, and the law was applied to fighters for the Light just as it was against Tom's followers, Albus had no doubt Lily would have been severely punished. She might even have been executed.

It really was a miracle he'd managed to sanitize her memory nearly as well as he had.

"—doubt he cares, he was a bloody Gryffindor. Your Excellency?"

Albus smiled. "Which part am I not caring about — the harbouring of a fugitive from the law or your immodest language?"

"See, he's joking, that means he doesn't care." Lyra, in perhaps the least dignified gesture he'd ever seen from a member of her family, stuck her tongue out at Harry, smug and mocking. "Was there anything else you wanted, Your Excellency?"

That was quite a question — what did he want, from Lyra Black?

If the circumstances had been presented to him as a hypothetical a year ago, he might have had a rather simple answer. Someone so cold and dark and unpredictable — she would present a danger to the other students, that was undeniable. In fact, Lyra had already endangered another student, if unintentionally. He might have thought, obviously, such a threat would have to be removed from the school, if only to prevent any potential disasters.

And it wasn't only a generalised threat, no, she could present concerns where Harry was concerned specifically. Lyra had wormed her way into Harry's confidence remarkably quickly, given how small his social circle was. From what Albus had been able to gather, Harry now spent a fair portion of his leisure time with her; he'd even gone home with her and Zabini over break, Albus had heard. And that...

Albus would admit, he'd been...concerned. He couldn't help the feeling that Lyra might effect an undesirable influence on Harry, should they associate too closely for too long. Whatever else Lyra might be said to be, she certainly wasn't of the Light. She wasn't truly evil, either, but in a way that was more insidious — the darkest of temptations were the easiest to recognise, and the easiest to resist. He didn't know what Harry might become, under her sway, but he'd been certain her influence would be counterproductive, that Harry would be crippled in advance of the war to come.

But now...

She did remind him so much of Lily. And, well, he had hardly approved of all Lily had done, he found much of work completely horrifying, and he could admit that, were justice universally applied, she would be a criminal on an order nearly on par with Tom Riddle himself.

But at the same time...

There were reasons he hadn't done anything about it at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, he
knew, now, that without Lily, they would have lost. He hadn't a doubt. It wasn't just a matter of the lethality of her greater workings, though her contribution there had been significant — by the end, Lily's bodycount had climbed well into the triple digits, absolutely absurd for someone who claimed to be a Healer. In fact, Lily had probably killed more people than anyone else in the war, the only likely exceptions the Blackheart and Riddle himself. The Light had been horribly outnumbered, the fight had seemed too nearly hopeless from the beginning, but with Lily...

They had been outnumbered, still. But, somehow, Lily had kept them from being overwhelmed, from losing outright.

But it wasn't just about the great number of their enemies she'd managed to kill, single-handedly, no, it wasn't just that. Lily was the only response they'd had to Tom's greatest weapon. Tom had always been powerful, of course, and he'd developed into a truly terrifying duelist, but that wasn't where the true danger of Lord Voldemort lay. The Darkest Arts were powerful and unpredictable, the potential effects too varied and horrible to anticipate. Above everything else, the greatest danger was that Tom would conduct one of his esoteric rituals, whenever a holiday on the old calendar came around, and all they'd be able to do would be to scramble to react, even just to survive.

But Lily, though, Lily was the only one among their people who had been both capable and willing to fight on his level. After she'd started practising her most illicit arts openly, Lily had made a point of interfering in Tom's greater rituals. Every time one of those archaic holidays would come around, Lily would conduct a ritual of her own to (inexplicably) counter whatever he was doing, or she would (inexplicably) find him, preventing him from finishing his work. Just this one service of hers had been absolutely invaluable — it was impossible to know what horrors Tom might have brought to bear, if he'd been allowed to exploit high ritual without opposition.

And if not for whatever she'd done that Hallowe'en — Albus highly doubted it'd been legal — he was certain they'd have lost. Things had been most dire, toward the tail end of '81. The Ministry might have held out for another two years, at the most, but that was a very optimistic estimate. Realistically, they would have been lucky to last another year.

On principle, he couldn't countenance much of what Lily had done. Practically, however...

Sometimes, people like Lily Evans had their uses. He certainly couldn't deny she'd made herself very useful indeed.

He was starting to wonder if it might not end up being much the same with Lyra Black.

The war was not over, not truly — he might be broken and friendless for the moment, but Tom was still out there, and Albus had no doubt he would return in time. And when he did...

Harry was, Albus was sad to say, not all he might have wished for. He didn't expect Harry to have the talent and skill to face Tom directly as soon as he might need to, of course not, but there were other ways to fight. But Harry was not what he'd expected. He was...withdrawn, in a way neither of his parents had been, surprisingly meek, all things considered. His heart was in the right place, but with how awkward he was, how sparingly he formed true friendships, the superficiality of his other associations, Albus couldn't help but worry Harry wasn't capable of drawing the sort of support, inspiring the sort of courage they would need to fight back the Dark one more time.

But strangely, since Lyra had waltzed into his life, he seemed to be improving. According to his staff, there'd been a noticeable uptick in the quality of his classwork, his social circle had grown significantly, and Albus could see with his own eyes that he'd become more confident, more sure of himself. Albus might not necessarily approve of all the new relationships he'd formed, but
neither did he consider them entirely unacceptable. Harry might not be turning out exactly the way he'd hoped, but...

And, well, Lily had thoroughly proven there was room for knowledge of the dark arts among the ranks of the Light. Lyra seemed to have staked a place for herself at Harry's side, which Albus would normally find alarming, but now he wasn't so sure. For all his conviction, for all his bravery, Harry was quite naive, when it came to the greatest horrors magic could wreak. If Lyra were willing, however, she could prove quite well-suited to watch his back for him. She would be in a position to see threats coming Albus was too far away to catch, who could even guess what she might be able to handle on her own. That would be one less thing to worry about, if nothing else.

In multiple versions of the story he'd read, Morgen had played just such a role for Merlin, the most terrible mistress of the Dark using her arts to shield the greatest master of the Light. Albus didn't see why it couldn't work for Harry and Lyra.

He couldn't claim he didn't have his doubts — if any scheme could be said to be playing with fire, it was this sort of insanity. But, if he were careful to not push Lyra away, if he could find some way to entice her to work with them...

"Professor?"

Forcefully, Albus dragged himself back to the moment, faced the children with a crooked smile. "Oh, I apologise. When you get to my age, you might find the mind wanders more easily than it used to. Yes, that was all I had to discuss with you. Although, Miss Black, I'm certain you also couldn't admit to any ability to get a message to Sirius? Say, in the form of a letter or two?"

As though at some unspoken joke, Lyra let out a burst of bright giggling. "No, Your Excellency, I'm quite certain I couldn't admit to that sort of thing. But, who can say what one's elf gets up to when one isn't watching?"

"I suppose one couldn't truly know what might happen to letters one unthinkingly leaves out for an enterprising elf to find."

"Yes, I certainly wouldn't want to leave anything of mine on the third windowsill east of the painting of the nymphs on the third floor corridor. Things do have a habit of wandering off, don't they?"

"Yes, quite unfortunate." Albus didn't have to fake his amused smirk, though it didn't nearly match the girl's brilliant grin for intensity. "That will be all. Have a pleasant evening, you two."

With a last couple pleasantries, the children turned and shuffled off, a whispered argument breaking out the instant they felt they were out of earshot. Albus watched them go, half-formed plans turning around in his mind, weights of probability rebalancing themselves as he considered implications, inclinations, patterns.

At some level, he couldn't believe he was honestly considering this. But, as he'd learned during the last war, people like Lyra Black had their uses.

"What are we doing here, Lyra?" Hermione hissed under her breath, her eyes darting around the dingy apothecary Lyra had dragged her into — a small detour on the way to the Bookstore.

Lyra rolled her eyes, waiting patiently for the shopkeep to return with the ingredient she had ordered. That the whole school would come down with a cold in two weeks' time was a tall order. It was February in Scotland, granted — there was every possibility that there would be a natural
bug going around soon, but she wasn't really willing to leave it up to chance. The prophecy had to be fulfilled, after all. "You'll see."

The proprietor, an old warlock, so bent and twisted and scarred he hardly seemed as though he could ever have been human, shuffled back into the room holding a crystal bottle. It was half-filled with a thick, red substance, so dark it looked black in the dim light of the shop. He handed it over without a word, allowing her to check the preserving enchantments on the bottle and the seal of the cork, hold it to the light of the window to judge the color and viscosity.

"Is that blood?"

Lyra shot Hermione (or rather, "Helen") a quelling look, but it was too late.

"Of course it is," the apothecary said, sounding moderately offended. "We're a reputable establishment, we are! When we say we can get anything, we mean it! You ask for the blood of an omniglot, you got it!"

"Yes, yes, and you get your payment, and if anyone asks, none of this ever happened," Lyra said, pulling a small coin purse from her pocket. She'd included half as much again over the price they had negotiated to ensure that last part. He hadn't said anything — that was simply how things were done in Knockturn.

The old man counted them greedily before shoving the lot into his own robes, nodding and giving her a snaggleteeth grin. "Aye, milady, never seen you before in my life."

It went unsaid that if it turned out that he'd hoodwinked her, he'd wake up one day to find nothing in his shop but ash, if he woke up at all. (She hadn't said anything — that was simply how things were done in Knockturn.) Not that she expected there would be an issue. Of all the shady apothecaries of Magical Britain's underworld, this was the most reputable, according to Anomos. "Pleasure doing business with you."

The old man made a solid attempt at a bow. Lyra nodded and grabbed a very flustered "Helen" by the elbow, marching her toward the door. "Why do you need...that?" she hissed, making a token attempt to avoid shouting Lyra's business all over the Alley.

"You'll see."

§

"Can't believe you actually got it," said whichever Weasley twin Lyra was talking to. The other one was in an elective class at the moment, but it hardly mattered. Talking to one was pretty much the same as talking to both, just without the annoying twin-speak thing.

"You underestimate me," she said with a grin. "Did you look at the arithmancy on the potion?"

"Uh, yeah. We made some adjustments, but theoretically...it shouldn't have any unwanted side effects. Or at least, none that will be permanently debilitating or lethal. There is still a point-one percent chance of temporary psychosis in consumers, rises dramatically the longer you keep them under the altered Silvertongue, but we think that should be manageable."

She nodded. She wasn't planning on that part lasting for more than a day or so, and there were less than five-hundred people in the school. Better than even odds no one would have a mental breakdown at all, which was good enough for her.

"There may be unintended side effects, if anyone is on a potions regimen we don't know about,"
"They shouldn't be. I stole Pomfrey's list. All the potions and dosages everyone's taking should be accounted for." She'd added a few of the more common self-brewed remedies into her calculations as well — pain reducers and headache potions, blood replenishers, wit-sharpening draughts, sober-up, hangover reducers, and so on. She was fairly confident that they'd taken all reasonable precautions against accidentally poisoning someone. If there wasn't a contraindication between the prank potion and anything on the list, as far as she was concerned, her arse was covered. "Well, I guess Snape might be dosing himself with something, but I think he'll be able to handle it."

The twin sniggered. "Also, there's a small chance that the cold symptoms will end up being randomly distributed, bleed-over from the effects of the alterations."

"I doubt that will be too noticeable on the scale of, well...everyone."

"Er, right. Speaking of which, did you figure out a method of distribution yet? It's going to be really hard to get it to everyone — even we've never managed to catch Snape, and Pomfrey and Dumbledore are pretty sharp, too."

Lyra gave the boy a teasing smirk. "You'll see." After all, they couldn't be allowed to avoid the effects of her little prank themselves. "You're sure you can brew it?"

The redhead made an overly exaggerated offended expression. "Of course we can. It should be ready by next Friday."

"Right then." She handed over the crystal bottle and a handful of coins. "You'll get the rest next Friday, then."

The twin's eyes went wide, as though they hadn't actually expected her to pay them. Which was kind of silly, she had made it clear at the beginning that this was her prank, they were just external contractors — she wasn't bad at potions theory (well, at least the arithmancy parts), but for something as complex as what she had in mind, she was well aware she really shouldn't do the brewing herself. The twins, on the other hand, had plenty of experience, even with developing new potions (so they could check her work), and were far more patient than she was.

Which was good, because she was pretty sure no one else in the school would be both able and willing to do it.

Weasley nodded. "Friday. We'll find you."

Lyra's eyes narrowed at that reminder of the twins' as-yet-unexplained ability to locate anyone anywhere in Hogwarts. "I am going to figure out how you do that eventually, you know."

The boy just laughed, waving over his shoulder as he headed out into the corridor.

§

The nature of a triple-timed, time-turning schedule necessitated taking two meals somewhere other than the Great Hall during the third iteration of each shift (and one during the first iteration of shift three). On occasion, Lyra made her way out to Hogsmeade or Edinburgh just for a change of pace, and every time she took Hermione to the Bookstore they went to one of the restaurants that hadn't existed in Lyra's Charing. Sometimes, if she was in the middle of something really interesting, she took baskets of food to her study or workshop. But the vast majority of the time, she and Hermione simply met up in the kitchens, to eat in an out-of-the-way spot. The elves were more than accustomed to their presence by now. One of the little towel-clad creatures still attended to them
every time they arrived, but they had long since moved past the overexcitement the appearance of students to serve had caused on their first appearance.

Lyra's plan for getting her Tower of Babble potion to every human in the castle was simplicity itself. When the twins finally delivered — on Friday, as they'd promised, though they'd brought the finished product to Lyra Two-Prime at the beginning of the second shift, rather than Lyra Null, so she'd spent two whole second-shift iterations wondering what the hell was taking them so long — she simply brought it with her to dinner.

"Can Pippin be getting anythings else for student Missies?"

"Uh, no, thank you, Pippin," Hermione said, still rather ill at ease around house elves, even after all these months. It really was inexplicable — Lyra really couldn't think of anything less threatening than a house elf. Well, unless they were ordered to act against you, she'd be willing to bet Sirius found Cherri pretty threatening. But the Hogwarts elves were under orders not to harm the students, and were more than happy to do almost anything a student asked of them, so.

Lyra, as she normally did, bit her tongue on issuing a command that the elves not speak English in her presence. Despite her obvious discomfort with the elves, Hermione would undoubtedly countermand the order immediately so that she could still understand them as well. Walburga always had (both because it was rude to make the elves unintelligible to everyone else, and also because it was incredibly improper for Bella to speak Elvish in the first place). Bella had eventually ordered every Black elf to learn proper English or not speak to her at all.

"I will need to speak to the Head Elf, at her convenience."

Pippin, a rather young elf, stiffened fearfully, but nodded. Its "Yes, Missy," was barely audible.

Lyra sighed. "It's not about you."

The elf immediately perked up. "Yes, Missy, thank you, Missy! Pippin will relay Missy's order, Miss!" it babbled, even as it scurried away, bowing rather more deeply than necessary in gratitude for her reassurance.

"What do you need to talk to the Head Elf about?"

"You'll see."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "This isn't something to do with whatever you and the twins have been plotting lately, is it?"

"You wound me with your suspicion," Lyra said drily. "And it's my plot, I just hired them to make something for me."

"You—" she started, then sighed in preemptive defeat. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

Lyra smirked. "Nope." In fact, despite how much she disliked actually speaking Elvish — it had been much easier when she was younger, her voice naturally higher and more shrill — she might just hold her entire conversation with the Head Elf in its own language, just to frustrate Hermione. That could be funny.

A few minutes later, the Head Elf appeared. "How can Rose be of service to the young Misses?" Lyra blinked, truly surprised. That was the most passable English she'd heard any elf at Hogwarts use yet.
Almost made her think better of responding in Elvish, but no, the look on Hermione's face would be too good. Rose's too, probably. She smirked. "Greetings, Elf-Mistress of Castle Hogwarts. I have a favor to request of you."

Ah, yes, that was entirely worth it. Both Hermione and the elf simply stared, Hermione's mouth hanging slightly open, while Rose rubbed at her ears, clearly uncertain whether she'd just heard what what she thought she'd heard.

It wasn't actually surprising that Hermione recovered first — the muggleborn wouldn't have any idea how odd it actually was to encounter a human who spoke Elvish and was willing to admit it. Andromeda, for example, knew a bit, but she had never been fluent, and Lyra rather doubted she'd ever used it after leaving the nursery.

Granted, she obviously still knew it was weird. "You speak house elf? Or is this like your 'few words' of Parseltongue?"

"I was once disowned by a house elf," she answered, just to further confuse the other girl.

"Are you messing with me?"

Of course she was. She wasn't lying, though. She'd been raised more or less as an extremely spoilt elfling when she was very young — she was fairly certain she'd actually thought she was an elf until she was a few years old. Lil and Zinnie hadn't really taken the personality shift that had accompanied her dedication to Eris well at all. They'd been convinced she'd caught tweelks, or else gone mad from too much punishment, which ironically wasn't far off the mark. They'd had a row which had ended with Lil telling Bella she was a bad elf — i.e., sick and in need of help — and Bella retorting that it was a good thing she wasn't an elf, then. She moved out of the nursery that same day, insisting on being treated like a proper, human Black (specifically, an adult of the House, with authority), rather than one of the elves' charges (whom they could decide to overrule under certain circumstances). The Black elves had never treated her like one of them again, making it clear that if she wanted to be seen as human, she was no longer welcome in elf-spaces like the kitchen and nursery.

"No, actually. I really do speak Elvish," she said, giving the name the elves used for their language, just for the hell of it. "Rather better than most elves speak English, actually, but ordering them not to speak English in my presence is apparently rude."

"And Lyra Black would never do anything rude," Hermione said, with a degree of sarcasm worthy of Blaise.

"No, never," she agreed, almost managing to keep a straight face. "Ros?" she said. She was fairly certain that would be the elf's actual name, anglicized to Rose by her master or by Ros herself based on the similarity of the sounds.

The elf shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, fingers nervously twisting the hem of her tea towel. Since she didn't object, Lyra assumed she'd gotten her name right. "Yes, young Mistress? What would you like the elves of the Castle to do?"

"I am trying to play a trick on the other humans in the Castle. I would like for the elves to ensure that a potion is added to the food and drink of the humans, so that they will all be included."

The elf frowned, her discomfort with a human lowering herself to the level of a house elf by speaking their language obviously not quite sufficient to convince her to agree to whatever Lyra might ask for, no questions asked. "The elves of Hogwarts will not harm the humans of Hogwarts,
and tampering with the food supply of the students is forbidden to all, human and elf alike."

"The potion is not harmful. It will simply cause confusion. Each human will speak a different
language for a day and a night. And without harm, such an action would not be tampering with the
food, but simply modifying the food. Does the Master of Potions not modify the food to prevent
reproduction following the celebration of Walpurgis?" Professor Slughorn did, in her own
universe, she could only assume Snape did so here.

"The Master of Potions is an adult of the school, not a ward. And preventing reproduction among
the wards is advancement of their interests. To cause confusion may not be to harm, but it is not an
advancement of the interests of the wards."

Hmm... "Hogwarts is a school, yes?"

"Yes..." the elf agreed warily.

"To attempt to communicate without a common language will be both a lesson and a test," Lyra
said firmly. "A lesson in what it means to be human, and a test of cleverness — a challenge for the
wards and adults both."

The elf turned over this idea for a long moment. "Like the challenges the Lord of Hogwarts devises
for his wards?"

Lyra had no idea what the elf was talking about. "Hey, Hermione? Has Dumbledore done anything
that might be considered a 'challenge' for the students to overcome since you've been here?"

Hermione, who had obviously been trying and failing to follow the conversation taking place
beside her — not surprising, Elvish had nothing in common with English, French, or the wizards’
Latin Hermione spoke — startled upon being addressed. "Um...maybe the series of traps that led to
the Philosopher's Stone? I can't think of anything else, but I don't think it could possibly really have
been intended to protect the Stone. We got through it — at least mostly — and we were first-
years!"

The elf smiled, nodded. "Yes, the Gauntlet is most recent of the Lord Headmaster's challenges."

Ah. She had heard quite a bit about that from Harry. "Nothing so elaborate. More of a trial than a
trap, a test to maintain order in the face of chaos." Not that she thought for a second they'd be able
to do it. She was fully prepared to enjoy every second of the sweet disorder which would reign
until the first part of the potion wore off.

"Explain your lesson of the humanity of your peers, young Mistress."

"The breakdown of communication divides each human from the others, forces each to examine
what it means to be an individual aside from the collective that is humanity. Also, humans, like
elves, like to think of themselves as creatures inherently of order, but take away one small thing,
their knowledge of a shared language, and they will see that order is not so deeply ingrained in
humanity as they assume. Some will attempt to cooperate and communicate without this ability
of common speech, attempt to maintain their preference for order against their equal predisposition
to chaos. Others will not. It will test the strength of the bonds of the House, to challenge them in
this way." Lyra did her best to look sincere, as though the 'reasoning' behind this 'lesson' hadn't
literally been invented as she spoke. Not that it was entirely invalid, it just wasn't at all the reason
she had decided on this plan.

"Hmm..." A canny expression entered the elf's eyes. "Young Mistress comes to this place to speak
with Ros on behalf of the elves of Hogwarts not as ward or human Mistress, but as a stranger and an equal..." she said, trailing off on a rather leading tone.

Lyra sighed. Right. This was one of the shortcomings of having learned most of what she knew about elves when she was so young. She'd largely been excluded from some types of interactions. She'd only met elves outside of Lil's kith, her extended friends-and-family network, once or twice, and consequently had completely forgotten that elves only engaged in reciprocal exchange between kith. "Is there anything the House of Black might offer to the elves of Hogwarts as a gift in exchange for your gift of assistance in this matter, Elf-Mistress Ros?"

Ros grinned. "Not at the moment, young Mistress. But the House of Black may be of assistance to Hogwarts at some point in the future."

Lyra very narrowly avoided rolling her eyes. "The House of Black would be pleased to offer the promise of a favor should the elves of Hogwarts be in need of a friend in times to come." It wasn't like it was a big deal, promising the elves a favor. Elves, as a rule, didn't want for much, aside from a House with which to join their magic, and a place to make themselves useful.

Ros nodded, giving Lyra a sly smile. "It is good. The elves of Hogwarts will administer this so-called test to the humans of Hogwarts on behalf of the young Mistress of House Black."

Well that was interesting. Lyra was well aware that elves weren't nearly as self-effacing and subservient as they normally acted around humans, and had a strong tendency to manipulate humans they didn't like, regardless of their position in their shared House, but it was relatively rare to meet one that aspired to outright slyness. To acknowledge that Lyra's excuse for her little prank was only an excuse, and agree to help her anyway... Dumbledore must have done something to seriously annoy his elves. She wondered what it was.

"This humble youngling is so happy to have come to shared understanding with Elf-Mistress Ros," Lyra said, passing over the flask the Weasleys had given her. It was hard to be sarcastic in Elvish, but being overly polite and using the vapid, slightly worshipful, overly innocent tone often used to address humans who didn't properly understand the relationship between elves and humans came close. She dropped it to add, "I presume that as a stranger and an equal, all that has passed between we two is no business of the humans of the Castle."

The elf actually laughed. "The Lord of Hogwarts will not learn of your trickery from the elves. When does the impudent child wish her test to begin?"

"The timing is less important than ensuring that all humans are included, from the youngest ward to the Lord of Hogwarts himself."

"Very well. If that is all, there is work to be done."

"There always is. Well met, Ros."

"Well met, young Mistress Black." The elf bustled away to resume her supervision of the others, the flask cradled gently in one arm.

Lyra looked around to see that Hermione was glaring at her again. "What was all that about?"

"You'll see."

§

The elves triggered the prank on Monday, at lunch. It was a good time for it, everyone except
Trelawney and Hagrid was present, but Lyra was fairly certain they just sent up the same food to North Tower, and Hagrid hardly ever came up to the Castle. She wasn't entirely certain that the elves would consider him human, anyway, but if he was the only person who could speak and understand English, it really wouldn't matter if he hadn't been affected.

At first, Lyra didn't actually notice that it was starting. Then Hermione said something in Latin — actual, proper Latin, not the stupid Latin-ish 'wizards' Latin' that was so often used for incantations. She slapped her hand over her mouth in shock.

"Something wrong, Hermione?" Lyra asked innocently, also in Latin.

"I just — that wasn't— This isn't English! Lyra, what did you do?!"

Lyra laughed. There was really only one response to that. "You'll see." And sooner rather than later. The noise level in the Great Hall increased dramatically as more and more students began to realize that they were no longer speaking their native languages (and moreover, neither was anyone else).

"Lyra," Harry said, his voice giving away his panic more clearly than the tension in his hands and face. "Did you have something to do with this?"

"If I did, I could hardly admit it," she said — then realized she had no idea what language that was. Which was... That wasn't how this was supposed to work. When she'd still been able to speak Latin to Hermione, she'd thought the potion just hadn't kicked in for her yet, but... This seemed much more like what the Silvertongue potion was supposed to do in the original form, which was weird, because the modifications she'd made had clearly worked on everyone else. "Were Harry and I just speaking the same language?" she asked Hermione.

Before she could answer, Luna Lovegood leapt up onto the Ravenclaw table, screeching — Was that Mermish? — something about the Rotfang Conspiracy poisoning her as she made a break for the doors. Professor Flitwick moved to stop her, grabbing her flailing arms. She managed to free one of them and punch him in the face (shouting that she'd known all along he was one of their agents) before Snape stunned her. Flitwick healed his nose before levitating her out of the hall.

Well shit.

Ros was going to be furious with her.

Snape, catching her eye through the crowd, didn't look too pleased, either. Dumbledore set off a canon-blast with his wand, startling the vast majority of the student body into silence. He then spent the next several minutes attempting to order them back to their dorms with verbal and written instructions (in...maybe Albanian?), before resorting to large-scale animated illusions of groups of multi-colored students traipsing through a semi-translucent castle to their respective common rooms.

"Er. I think Blaise wants to know what language you're speaking? God that's weird..." Harry said as the prefects and Professor McGonagall began trying to shuffle them toward the doors. Huh. Apparently direct mind-to-mind legilimency could circumvent the effects of the potion. There might not be quite as much chaos as she'd expected, then. A bit disappointing, but then, this had only ever been a grace-note of sorts in the larger Trelawney plot.

Hmm...indeed. And it's still a delightful diversion, ducky, even accounting for the inevitable meddling of the dour dungeon bat.

Eris underscored her words with a wave of satisfaction which caused Lyra to break out into giddy
laughter as she answered Harry. "Apparently all of them." Which honestly was just fucking weird. Do you happen to know why that might be?

*It is rather curious, isn't it. But no, it's nothing I've done. Or at least not intentionally. I suppose I don't really know all the effects my presence might have in your mind.*

*But... Oh, right, because any version of Lyra whose mind she could examine, she would necessarily already be affecting. That probably would have been more immediately obvious if she wasn't so distracted by the panicked cacophony surrounding her. If she concentrated, she could focus on a single voice in the crowd and its words, but interpreting all of them at once felt almost like talking to Eris or Hermes, just...magic with meaning behind it. Unlike talking to the Powers, however, *this* was starting to give her a headache, because it was *also* a little like trying to process the way Eris experienced the world — too much going on, all at once.*

In any case, she'd have to try to figure out the origin of her weird side effects later, because there was a more immediate problem. (Not that she'd really consider this particular weird side effect problematic, more overwhelmingly unexpected and therefore intriguing...) Approximately twenty seconds after she told Harry she apparently spoke all of the languages floating around, Blaise managed to fight his way through the crowd.

"*Snape wants you in the Hospital Wing,*" he said in another language Lyra had never heard before. Something East Asian, maybe?

"*Why?*

Blaise's eyes went slightly unfocused for a moment. "*Apparently since this is clearly your fault, you're going to play translator for him until it's over.*"

"*Gods and Powers, how does he even know that?*

"*Who else would be behind this?*

"*No, I mean, I didn't even know I would be able to understand everything.*"

After another momentary absence, Blaise reported, "*Maïa needs to work on her occlumency.*"

*Seriously?!* It couldn't have been more than five minutes or so between the chaos erupting, and Snape finding a way to circumvent it. *Powers, he's so annoying! No wonder Other Bella gave him so much shit during the war.* Eris sniggered at that.

Aloud, Lyra sighed. "*I have to go to the Hospital Wing,*" she told Harry. "*I'd tell you to tell Maïa if she asks, but...*" She shrugged. He nodded grimly, looking very unamused. "*You coming?*" she asked Blaise. Oh, that was weird, switching from speaking Blaise's language to Harry's and back again so quickly, without the boys saying something to help orient her. Not really painful, it wasn't physical, and definitely wasn't a *stop that it's bad for you* sort of feeling, but...

*Later, she reminded herself.*

"*No, I'm going to be stuck playing charades with the rest of Slytherin for the foreseeable future.*" He made a face, somewhere between annoyance and disgust. "*Never thought I wouldn't want to be a legilimens...*

She couldn't help but snigger at him as he pushed his way back through the crowd. "*It should only last about a day!*" she called after him.
When Lyra arrived in the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey was casting diagnostic charms over Luna's unconscious form and apparently attempting to explain the results to Snape and Flitwick (in Gobbledygook). Flitwick seemed to be ignoring her, silently casting the same charms for himself, while Snape simply stood there, rigid with fury, his eyes fixed on the door. From the look on his face, she might have just used up the last of the good will she'd gathered by letting him have a few days alone with Pettigrew. As soon as she entered, he said succinctly, "Welsh."

She pouted at him. "Why do you even need a translator, Your Honor? You can clearly still use legimency to talk to people."

"Telepathic communication is limited in its ability to express specificity, especially when one cannot even pull memories of the proper words to the foreground. Pomfrey is speaking Gobbledygook. Flitwick appears to have Arabic. Tell Pomfrey I need a series of blood samples to analyze. Nine will do to start. And I will need a sample of the potion you used as well to isolate the compounding factors."

"I don’t have any more," she said, before repeating his words to Madam Pomfrey. Flitwick, apparently realizing she'd just spoken two very different languages, began to speak very quickly, demanding to know everything she knew about the situation at hand, which was helpful, because she didn't know Arabic (outside whatever the potion was doing to her), but annoying because she didn't want to answer his questions.

"If you truly have no more, I hope you realize you will not be repeating any time until the dose you have given the rest of us wears off."

She scowled. It was going to be a very long twenty-four hours, especially if Snape insisted on ruining her fun the whole time.

§

"Bellatrix," Snape said. He didn't look up from the cauldron he was hovering over.

"Your Honor." When he failed to follow up on his greeting, Lyra hopped up on a lab stool, spinning his notes around to see what progress he'd made on developing an antidote for Luna. She felt a smirk stretching her lips when she realized they were written in Welsh. The Silvertongue part of the potion had worn off for her about an hour ago. She presumed Snape's had as well.

"You see my dilemma," he said coolly, English restored.

"There are plenty of other people around who could translate this for you, you know." It wasn't as though Welsh was a particularly rare language in Magical Britain. And it wasn't as though he hadn't already enlisted her to translate until about one in the morning yesterday. Classes had been cancelled for two days, misunderstanding and chaos had run rampant, and she hadn't gotten to enjoy a damn bit of it, because she'd been stuck getting dragged between the dungeons, the Headmaster's office, Ravenclaw Tower, and even the kitchens as Snape and Dumbledore tried to figure out what was going on.

(True to her prediction, Ros was furious, though she had kept her word about keeping the origin of the prank a secret, limiting her shrill lecture to Elvish...not that the others would have understood English at the time, but. It was probably a good thing that the elves couldn't harm the students, anyway.)

Snape had obviously figured out the basics almost immediately — that the school had been dosed with some sort of babbling potion, and she was to blame — but determining what exactly had gone
wrong with Luna seemed to be more complicated. Examining his face and hair more closely, she wasn't sure he'd slept, even after Dumbledore had ordered him to get some rest and forced him to dismiss her. He certainly hadn't completed his morning toilette.

"None of whom have the same insight on this problem, because none of them caused it. Start writing."

Lyra scowled, pulling a fresh sheet of parchment and Snape's inkwell across the lab table. "I didn't cause the problem. I was careful. Was there a single other serious side-effect or complication? No. There was not. I took into account every single potion regimen Pomfrey had on file, plus all the common unregulated potions. You would not believe how long it took me to balance the formula for that potion." She was going to be incredibly annoyed if Dumbledore ended up expelling her after she went to all that effort to avoid collateral damage. (She did have Sirius in custody, now, and the DMLE had Pettigrew, but she still kind of wanted to stick close to Harry, since she was fairly certain Not-Professor Riddle still wanted to kill him.)

Snape snorted. "You left out love potions," he said, waving at the list he'd had her write out for him earlier, so he wouldn't waste time on anything she'd already accounted for. Of course, if he couldn't figure out what Luna had taken, he would assume she'd done something wrong, but she was pretty sure she hadn't.

"I'm pretty sure no one fed Luna a love potion," she pointed out.

"And you were equally certain that no other student in the Castle was under such an influence?"

"Well, no, but if I were under a love potion, I would rather someone do something to trigger an adverse reaction and snap me out of it than just keep going around being a love-slave anyway, so I really don't care."

Snape's scowl deepened. "Elderberry. Write it down." She scribbled it in the margin, smirking. If he'd disagreed with her logic, he would have said so. "What haven't you told me?"

"Uh... Velociraptors are neat?"

"About the potion you altered," he ground out.

"Nothing?"

Snape scoffed, then added a few more ingredients to his cauldron. "If that is indeed the case, you will not object to handing over a copy of your notes."

Lyra groaned theatrically, but broke off her transcription to rifle through her bag. She had expected he'd ask for them, after all.

It took all of ten seconds for him to realize that she hadn't just altered the Silvertongue potion to create the Tower of Babel effect, but had also combined it with a very basic malaise-inducing potion to simulate the effects of the common cold. An eyebrow ticked upward, his scowl deepened slightly, but she told him all the ingredients she'd used, and given him an accurate representation of the terminal residuals, which were all that mattered for side-effect and interaction analyses.

After several minutes of reading interrupted by the occasional addition to the potion he was brewing, he spoke again. "You can hardly expect me to believe you brewed this."

"No, I didn't, but what does that matter?"
"If there was even the slightest error in production, your expected residuals could vary by a considerable margin, especially given that the overall process you designed is overly complex and incredibly inefficient, there are at least half a dozen redundancies which could have been simplified—"

Lyra snorted at that. "Excuse me for not being a fucking potions genius. I thought I did pretty well." Snape sneered eloquently at that. "Hey, it worked, didn't it? And if my residuals were off by that much, there would have been more adverse reactions."

"P."

"I'm not wrong about the adverse reactions, though, and you know it. Luna must have taken something weird and not told Pomfrey about it." Also, a P wasn't a terrible mark, considering that she wasn't a potioneer, and this was something she'd come up with for a prank over the course of a few weeks, not a bloody Master's thesis with years of research and experimentation behind it.

He sneered again, but had nothing to say in response to that, apparently, as he threw her notes back across the table at her. "I presume you prepared an unaltered draught of the Silvertongue Potion for yourself?"

Lyra made a point of frowning at that. "Uh, no, actually. I got the same thing as everyone else. I have no idea what was going on there." Snape just stared at her for a long moment. Added something else to the cauldron, stirred automatically, still staring. "What?!"

"I suppose that would explain more than it doesn't." He sounded almost amused.

"What?" she repeated.

He hesitated, but apparently decided it wouldn't do any harm to tell her. "Tell me, Bellatrix, how many humans do you know of who speak House Elf, Mermish, Parseltongue, and Gobbledygook?"

"Uh, one, kind of — Meda, she's not very good at it — none, and...three. Four if you count Riddle twice. Loads of people speak Gobbledygook, though. Do you have a point?"

"Very few humans speak Gobbledygook without resorting to sign language, and I can only think of two who speak all of those languages. One is your counterpart. The other is Bartemius Crouch."

Lyra had to think about that one for a second. "You mean that dweeb in International Cooperation?" The only reason she knew his name at all was— "Wait, are you implying I'm an omniglot? I can't be an omniglot, I only speak like, seven languages."

"I speak four—"

Lyra couldn't help herself. "Three, your French is terrible."

Snape glared at her, but continued as though she hadn't interrupted. "—and I used legilimency to learn the last two."

"Yeah, okay, but you're muggle-raised. Most purebloods speak at least three or four. Meda and Cissy speak five: French, English, Welsh, Latin, and Gobbledygook. " Though admittedly, they probably both used the hand signs instead of doing the click sounds. Cissy did for sure, her accent was painful. Worse than Snape's French. "Those are considered necessary elements of a proper Black education. The only languages I speak that they don't are Greek and Elvish." Well, the only ones she spoke fluently, anyway. "I'm pretty sure if I was an omniglot, I'd have gotten a lot further with Old High Elvish than tourist phrases by now."
Snape added a tiny pinch of powder to the cauldron and announced, "Moonstone," pointing to the parchment. She added it to the margin. Then he apparently registered her last sentence, as he pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering something that sounded very much like, "demon tourism."

Lyra grinned at him. "Hey, you never know when you might need to tell a dementor to fuck off or you'll set it on fire."

That actually got a snort of laughter out of him. "I'm curious, Bellatrix. How do you think the omniglot talent works?"

She shrugged. All she knew about it was that it let an omniglot learn any language they came across with unnatural speed, achieving a level of fluency comparable to native speakers in a matter of weeks or months, rather than years. "Magic?"

"Mind magic. Even an omniglot wouldn't be able to learn Old High Elvish without speaking to someone who already speaks it. Tansy."

She paused in her transcription to make another note. "Well in that case, I'd expect to be much better at Italian." She'd barely been able to keep up a conversation with Zee's (stunningly normal) parents when she'd met them for the first time, and Zee had been half-heartedly teaching her Italian for the better part of a year at that point. "And Parseltongue, for that matter. I mean, I can mimic about half a dozen different Hisses of Annoyance, but I have no idea what they actually mean." She should try to remember to ask Harry about that, actually... "I'm pants at mind magic, anyway."

Snape nearly made an actual expression there, though Lyra had no idea what it might have been. "You cannot possibly believe that."

"Uh, yeah. I can't even compel Cissy to stay in the Nursery, and she's four." Well, that might have been a slight exaggeration, but mind magic was by far her worst area when it came to actually performing magic.

"Yes, well, constantly maintaining impenetrable, all-encompassing occlumency barriers around your own mind would hinder your ability to interact with the minds of others, but far be it from me to convince you." That last bit was said rather absently, as he peered down into the smoking cauldron from directly above it. "I think...yes. Raw cotton, lemon oil, and white quartz. It's not an active potion, it's an antidote. Notes."

"An antidote?" she repeated, sliding the English copy back to him. "Aren't antidotes supposed to kind of...just neutralize whatever they're the antidote to?" Seriously, she hadn't even considered antidotes when she was balancing the prank potion because she was almost positive they weren't supposed to have residuals to worry about.

"They do. Provided one has previously imbibed a substance that requires neutralization." Snape flipped through the pages of speculation and analyses, glowering and muttering under his breath. "Lovegood, you paranoid fucking bastard!"

"What is it?"

Snape didn't answer, instead selecting a handful of vials from a cabinet on the wall and throwing a stasis charm over his workbench. "Out," he ordered, leading her to the door, which slammed behind them, wards clicking into place automatically.

He headed toward the nearest staircase immediately, leaving her to call after him, "Hey! Your
Honor! Are you going to answer me?"

"You'll see!" he called back, his tone entirely mocking.

Yeah, she was pretty sure that was a no. And that fucking bastard stole my line!

Luna Lovegood was lying on a bridge. The smell of mud and dry grass and the sound of cicadas and babbling water filled the air. The sun was hot on the back of her neck, the wood rough under her hands, sharp against the tops of her feet — she'd hooked her toes over one side. She was just barely tall enough to peer down over the other. There was a pair of plimpies there, in the shallow water, where the creek emptied into the lake, arguing over a teacup that she'd accidentally dropped last week. She was vaguely surprised it hadn't already been snatched up. Everyone knew male plimpies competed for the attention of their females with hats — normally bits of shell or particularly flat rocks, but a teacup would be a spectacular hat for a plimpy.

"Luuuu-na," a voice called from up the hill. It didn't sound like her father, but she couldn't think who else would be here. She'd have to go up to the house to find out, which meant she'd miss the outcome of the Great Teacup Debate. Bother.

"Luna!"

So impatient. She sighed, rolled over to stare up at...not the cloudless blue of a summer sky, but the white-painted ceiling of a Hogwarts Hospital Wing, surrounded by white curtain-walls and Weasleys and...Lyra (Bellatrix)? She didn't look like she expected to find herself visiting Luna in hospital any more than Luna did, and yet there she was.

"Good morning," she said, her voice still scratchy from screaming in Mermish — not that she remembered that, but Madam Pomfrey said she had been, and she had no reason to doubt the veracity of her story. "Or is it afternoon?"

"Morning break," the Weasley on the left said. The other sneezed, looked around to see if the Matron had noticed (no), then asked, "How are you, Luna?" The guilt and apologies absent from their words leaked into the space between the two of them and herself like alcohol in water. When the light hit it a certain way, she could see it swirling and dissipating into the air.

Luna was, she thought, as well as could be expected. She vaguely recalled the Rotfang Conspiracy, and running, fighting to escape them, but as though it was a distant dream. Much of the past few months felt a little like that, really. They'd been getting clearer, though, since she'd woken up to an unusually annoyed Professor Snape (that was, more annoyed than he normally was) discussing her treatment with Madam Pomfrey. He'd sneered a sneer that promised unnamed horrors to come before sweeping away, and hadn't returned until Professor Flitwick had brought her father to see her.

That conversation she wished she could forget, or pretend it had been just a bad dream. Daddy had cried. And then he'd apologized to her, over and over. He'd never meant to hurt her, he insisted, even after the Professors were gone. He made her promise never to take any potions again unless they were prescribed by a mediwizard, which seemed like a silly promise to make — what if she had a headache? But she'd made it anyway, because his guilt was smothering and she just wanted to make it go away. (It hadn't worked.)

"Tired," she said, in response to the Weasleys' question. It wasn't untrue, she was tired, but it was...an understatement. She wasn't just sleepy, she was...exhausted. Ever since Imbolc — before that, even — it seemed like things were just getting heavier, all the time, and she just... She felt old,
or like she imagined old people felt, weighed down by worries and cares and too much life. Like her father had felt after her mother died, even though nothing that bad had happened this time.

It was more like a lot of little bad things all piling up over the whole year, becoming a gestalt of badness, greater and more overwhelming than the sum of its parts.

Longer than that, even. Going home for the summer had been a relief, getting away from the Nargles and all the people and surrounding herself with the safe familiarity of the home she'd known all her life. She'd spent weeks reacquainting herself with the streams and the fields and the little stands of forest around the Rookery, and of course the creatures who lived there. It was quiet. (Hogwarts, with its hundreds of students and dozens of ghosts and house elves lurking just out of sight was so loud, their hopes and fears and loves and hates all pressing down on her all the time.)

But it wasn't very long at all before she'd run into Ginevra. She had spent the first few weeks out of school wandering around the fields as well, aimlessly oblivious to her surroundings, but intent on avoiding her family, who were (as Ginevra herself put it) compensating for not having realized that she was possessed for almost nine months by smothering her in meaningless, superficial attention. That was admittedly paraphrased, but it was still Ginevra's perspective on the whole issue, not Luna's. Luna could see their guilt and concern and love for her, just as she felt the abandonment and betrayal and hatred and fear that were consuming Ginevra, the stain her ordeal had left on her soul.

Luna could not stand to watch her suffer, and so, without much thought at all, had resolved to do anything she could to help Ginevra, which had proved impossible in the short time before the Weasleys disappeared off to Egypt and the week between their return and the great departure to Hogwarts. And in the meanwhile, she'd started to have very strange, unsettling dreams of a dark-haired girl, lost in a maze with Darkness stalking her (slowly overtaking her), apparently oblivious to her dire predicament. When she met that girl on the Hogwarts express, it had seemed only natural to introduce the two of them — she couldn't really say why. It was something about the way their threads in the Tapestry of Fate resonated with each other, or the way they would resonate, sometime in the future, reinforcing each other in a way Ginevra, struggling weakly against the corruption that had been forced upon her, sorely needed.

It wasn't until the dementors invaded the train that she realized she might have made a terrible mistake. Lyra (who Hogwarts insisted was really a Bellatrix) normally kept her magic close and controlled, and the periphery of it was less intensely dark than the core — but when she'd been threatening the dementor, she'd pushed raw power into the air around herself, as cold and terrible as the dementor's aura. When Luna had recovered enough to realize what she'd felt, what she'd heard, she realized that the Dark wasn't just stalking Lyra (Bellatrix), but had already caught her, already sunk its claws into her, eating away at her soul and magic, corrupting her.

Still, Luna had been too distracted by the memory of her mother's death and the fear and sorrow and loss wafting off the other students to consider what it might mean, then — how she ought to interpret her dreams in light of this new information. All the way up at the Castle, away from the dementors themselves, their aura still spread an emotional malaise among the students. Luna had spent the better part of a month suffocating under the negativity before the only other empath she knew had taken pity on her, showing her how to keep the thoughts and feelings that weren't hers at a distance. (She wished she had known occlumency could be used like that before she had started school, she'd spent half of first year sick from the constant tension between what people felt and what they said and how they acted.) But even at arm's length instead of shouting in her face, the overwhelming sense of defeat the dementors brought with them dragged at her, like sinking and slipping in icy mud when she could be skipping down the garden path.
And the dreams hadn't stopped. She'd been spending as much time as she could with Lyra (Bellatrix), trying to figure out what she was supposed to do to help her, but they'd only become more urgent. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten a good night's sleep. And then Lyra (Bellatrix) had taken an interest in Ginevra over Samhain — neither one of them had said exactly why — and well...

Ginevra did seem to be doing better, in a way. She had purpose, now, and the stain on her soul seemed to be fading, but... She was full of rage, all the time. It wasn't necessarily a dark sort of rage, more a righteous fury, a sort of obsessive determination to see her enemies destroyed, but it was still a far more... Volatile, was a good word. It was a far more volatile mood than Luna was comfortable around, and it scared her. (It reminded her a little bit of the one time she'd met Daddy's sister, Castalia, but that didn't mean much — Aunt Cassie was scary.)

And Lyra (Bellatrix) herself had resisted all Luna's efforts to help her, from refusing her invitation to participate in Luna's Mabon observance to turning down the idea of visiting the unicorns when they went to feed the thestrals in the Forest to stubbornly arguing for the Dark in their debates about morality and the nature of Magic. She'd even given away the healing charm Luna had made for her when she and Hermione had been in Hospital in November. Blaise Ricardo had taken it upon himself after that to tell her to stop pressing light magic and ideals on Lyra (Bellatrix) before she started getting annoyed with it.

She hadn't, of course. (She couldn't.) She'd come closer after Yule.

Lyra (Bellatrix) had somehow come back to school even darker than she had been before. Luna hadn't realized that was possible. Lyra (Bellatrix) had already been the most thoroughly dark-tainted person Luna had ever met — but... It was almost as though she was somehow less of this world than she had been before. Less present, and more a part of the dark magic that had taken (was taking?) her over. And...brighter, kind of, if darkness could be called bright. (The Blacks call themselves the Darkest House, but in truth, they are more a dark flame at its heart, casting greater shadows in their wake, and destroying all they touch... Where had she read that?) It was deeply, deeply disturbing. Not surprising, she supposed (in hindsight) — Yule was the Darkest Night — but that didn't mean it didn't make her want to stay far away from Lyra (Bellatrix).

Luna hadn't been able to bring herself to do it, though. For one thing, the urgency of the dreams continued to increase — it had to be important that she try to help Lyra (Bellatrix) reclaim some degree of the innocence she had obviously long-since lost. (Not that she had any idea how to actually do that, she'd already tried everything she could think of.) But if she was being honest with herself (and Luna always tried to be honest with everyone), it was just nice, having a sort-of friend. (Even one who was disturbingly comfortable with the Dark.)

Because Lyra (Bellatrix) hadn't seemed to mind the way Luna had insisted on keeping her company as she tried to figure out what she was meant to be doing with her. (Most people found Luna very strange, and thus attempted to avoid spending any time around her at all.) One of the Lyras (Bellatrices) — there had only been one for a bit, but there were several again, now — even occasionally sought Luna out, mostly to talk about magical theory, lately, but also to practice speaking Parseltongue and High Elvish (not that Luna knew much more of those languages than Lyra (Bellatrix)), and sometimes just because she was bored and she thought Luna was interesting — she'd even said so. She'd looked at Luna's drawings and asked questions about her creatures — not mocking questions, like the other Ravenclaws, but actual questions — and made suggestions for Quibbler articles, and explained what McGonagall wanted her to say in class instead of the truth about how transfiguration worked.

Luna didn't actually like Lyra (Bellatrix). She didn't care enough about the little boats caught in her
waves. But on the whole, she found Lyra's (Bellatrix's) thoughtlessness more understandable and even preferable to the deliberate cruelty she'd suffered at the hands of her housemates in first year, and she had never met anyone else (other than Daddy, of course) who actually seemed to enjoy talking to her.

She had not been happy to hear that the dreams she'd thought were encouraging her to help Lyra (Bellatrix) had really been meant to warn her away from her. Lyra (Bellatrix) wasn't in danger, she was a danger, bringing trouble and strife and change in her wake, a threat to Luna's innocence as well as that of everyone else around her.

Gelach, her Lady, had made it very clear that not only was Lyra (Bellatrix) dangerous, she was the enemy — a black mage, bound to Chaos. And Lyra (Bellatrix) hadn't even tried to deny it when Luna had brought it up, just gone and deduced everything about Luna's relationship with her Patron, from her name to the circumstances of Luna's dedication, just from the fact that she had brought it up. Luna wouldn't have put it in the same terms she had — Mummy hadn't sold her, any more than her great-grandmother had sold her grandmother, or her grandmother had sold Mummy. The fact remained, however, that Luna could not continue to associate with Lyra (Bellatrix), lest she be drawn so far from the goddess's sphere of influence that she was no longer a suitable Dedicate.

The whole situation was just overwhelmingly unfair, from the fact that Luna was even dedicated to Gelach in the first place, to her complete failure to communicate her instructions — hadn't Luna's actions clearly implied that she was misinterpreting the dreams? So clearly the obvious thing to do was keep doing the exact same thing, but more. She wasn't sure, but this might be the most frustrated she had ever been in her life. In fact, she was outright annoyed at her Patron.

Not annoyed enough that she would dare disobey — she was declared for the Light, it was her duty and responsibility to oppose the Dark and its agents, Mummy had told her that, when she was telling her about the War — but certainly annoyed enough that it had seemed like a good idea to tell Lyra (Bellatrix) that the Moon had said she couldn't talk to her anymore, instead of just beginning to ignore her with no explanation at all.

Lyra (Bellatrix) had taken it surprisingly well. She'd been annoyed, certainly — enough that she'd hinted she might be willing to help Luna leave Gelach, despite not wanting to cause trouble between her Patron and the other Powers — but Luna was the one who'd ended up crying. Lyra had just pointed out that she'd still be around if Luna changed her mind and flown off on a thestral as though she didn't care even a little bit about the gods meddling in their lives. (But then, perhaps she was more accustomed to it, she seemed to be much closer to her Patron than Luna was with Gelach.)

None of the Lyras (Bellatrices) had spoken to Luna for over a week, now, even passing in the corridors or the Ravenclaw commons. She had been trying very hard not to feel lonely and disappointed at how easily the almost-friendship between them had disappeared, because she didn't know how disillusioned she could become before she fell into trouble with Lady Gelach, but now it hardly seemed worth it — she was sure the betrayal she couldn't help but feeling over this whole poisoning incident and her disappointment in her father, her sudden realization that he wasn't as infallible as she'd always thought... Those, she was almost certain would count against her almost as surely as witnessing her mother's death.

So now she was just trying not to be scared, because she felt old, and for a child dedicated to a goddess of innocence and potential, that was bad.

"Why are you here?" she asked, trying not to think about it (though she never had gotten the hang
of pink elephants).

Lyra (Bellatrix) shot an exasperated look at the boys. "It was their idea."

Whichever one was nearer to her elbowed her in the ribs, covering a cough with his other arm. She smacked him in retaliation as the other said, "We just wanted to see how you were doing."

"We were worried about you."

That was probably true. The Weasleys were the Lovegoods' closest neighbors, she'd known the twins longer than she could remember. She wouldn't call them friends — they'd never cared much for anyone other than each other — but they were friendly. She could believe they had been concerned for her safety and wellbeing, and not just because they might get in trouble for hurting her, even if it wasn't really their idea. Luna wasn't entirely sure who was responsible for the potion she (and everyone else — even Dumbledore and Snape, apparently) had been slipped, but Snape had hinted that it was Lyra (Bellatrix), and Madam Pomfrey had mentioned she'd been translating for them while everyone was speaking different languages. If Lyra (Bellatrix) had been able to get around the effects of the prank, that was probably a good indication that she'd been behind it.

"I wasn't. I told them you'd be fine. Snape is annoyingly good at cleaning up my messes." (As was that.) "This is all your fault, anyway, you know. What the fuck were you doing, taking some antidote you didn't need?" She sniffled, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket. She glared over it, clearly implying that she was the wounded party, here.

Luna's eyes narrowed, but before she could think of a response, one of the boys snapped, "Lyra!" shocked and offended by her behavior.

If she hadn't been so very annoyed (and scared and preoccupied) by everything, Luna might not have said anything, but she was, and she was quite certain this wasn't all her fault (or even all her father's). "It was a preventative measure. And I'm sure you poisoning the entire school had nothing to do with my predicament."

"It wasn't poison, it was a bloody prank. If you hadn't been having a psychotic break, you might have noticed watching Dumbledore try to order everyone around in Albanian was hilarious. And I went to a lot of trouble to ensure there wouldn't be any bad reactions with anything anyone else was taking, you were the one hiding that you were taking something from everyone! What was it, anyway?" she asked, smothering a cough.

"Is that why you're here?"

"No, of course not!" "We got you these," the boys said, offering her a small Honeyduke's bag. "And before you ask," "no, we didn't do anything to them." "You're already in Hospital" "that would be tasteless." "And Pomfrey would kill us."

Luna set it aside. "Apology accepted. Though if you're really sorry, you won't prank me at all for the rest of the year."

"You drive a hard bargain," "blondie," "but okay." "Prank immunity is yours." "We really are sorry, you know," they added redundantly.

Luna nodded. "I know." Even if she couldn't see the lingering traces of their guilt, she'd know it — they wouldn't be here if they weren't.

"Do you have anything to say, Lyra?" one of them asked, clearly attempting to prompt her into an apology of her own.
Luna could have told them that wasn't going to work.

Sure enough, Lyra (Bellatrix) rolled her eyes. "Snape and Ros agreed that since my prank revealed another, potentially more harmful situation before it could do permanent damage, it didn't actually count as harm." Luna blinked at that. What did the Head Elf have to do with anything? "So, no. I do still want to know what antidote you were taking, though. And yes, that is why I came."

The boys glared at her. "You have to take responsibility when you fuck up, Lyra" "it's part of the Pranking Code."

Lyra (Bellatrix) snorted at that. "You...have a code."

"Inherited it." "From the Greatest Pranksters Hogwarts has ever seen," "Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," "the Marauders of Mischief."

Lyra (Bellatrix) gaped at them for a second, then sniggered. "That's — seriously? I'm going to give him so much shit about that next time I see him..."

Both twins blinked at her. "What?"

"I'll tell you when you're older."

"Tease." "Bitch."

"Yeah, yeah, love you too. So, Luna. What were you expecting to be dosed with, that you thought you needed a preventative antidote?"

Luna felt her face grow warm, because in hindsight, it seemed rather silly and unlikely, but Daddy had been worried that when she left home, his enemies — he did have them, people didn't like him telling The Truth in the Quibbler — might try to subvert her, turn her against him. "Suggestibility Solution."

The boys winced. "Antidotes to mind-altering potions" "are also mind-altering potions," they noted. Which Luna knew, now. (Professor Snape had berated Daddy about that for over five minutes.)

Lyra (Bellatrix) just raised an eyebrow at her. "Maybe it's just me, but that kind of seems like trying too hard."

Perhaps that would make more sense from a different angle. Some things did. Luna tipped her head to one side, but...no. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I can see how it might be tempting between the Moon and, well, your life, to just potion yourself into fuzzy-headedness. But the long-term effects are, what? Not good, I imagine, Snape really wasn't happy when he figured it out."

"Chronic confusion," "paranoia," "delusions," "obsession," "and hallucinations."

"Yeah, doesn't really seem worth it to me. If you're that poorly suited, you really should just break it off."

"That's not why I did it," Luna snapped. "And I thought you weren't talking to me anymore!"

"Woah!" "Are you two" "actually fighting?" "I don't think we've ever seen little Luna angry, have we, George?"
"I don't believe we have, Fred."

"We're not fighting," Luna told them, as firmly as she could.

Lyra (Bellatrix) smirked. "Yeah, we're just not speaking. Philosophical differences, you could say. So, are we done here, then?"

"We still think," "you should apologize."

"Yes, well, that sounds like your problem," Lyra (Bellatrix) informed them, adding a two-fingered salute for emphasis, then sneezed again. "Luna, see you around. And remember, if you change your mind..."

"Goodbye, Lyra," Luna said, trying to keep her voice even. She really didn't want to start crying again.

"What was that about?" one of the Weasleys asked, the other coughing into his elbow.

Madam Pomfrey appeared behind them with vials of Pepper-Up before Luna had to come up with a response. Which was good, because even if she could explain — which, she really couldn't, the Weasleys were light like the Chief Mugwump, not light like Mummy, they wouldn't understand — she had no idea where to even begin.

Chapter End Notes

First co-written chapter in a while. Funsies.

For the record, Albus name-dropping Marx isn't meant to imply he's a socialist. You don't have to be a socialist to acknowledge Marx's ideas of dialectical materialism, alienation, and primitive accumulation have been massively influential in socio-political philosophy in the last century and a half. That's just a fact. Especially given his age — this would have been in the 1890s, well before the Russian Revolution made any mention of Marx extremely controversial — it's not at all surprising that he might have read Marx. Just because he has doesn't mean he 100% agrees, or that the dynamics described in Capital are even necessarily applicable to magical Britain. (The magical British economy is largely pre-capitalist, in fact, but that's hardly the point.) Just thought I'd get out in head of the inevitable overreactions to that.

About Lyra being keyed into the wards as Bella, it is based on the person's own conception of themselves (as determined by the Hat). At the time Lyra was Sorted, she still thought of herself as Bella, so that was the name that was used. She has since transitioned to thinking of herself as Lyra, but it's too late as far as the wards are concerned. —Lysandra

Magical British society has been scaled up in this story (compared to Mary Potter) to make certain elements of the shared worldbuilding work better, which is why Lily's body count is significantly higher here than it is in MP.

What's this? Snape actually softening toward Lyra? Giving someone their worst enemy to torture for a couple weeks really does work wonders for the state of your relationship xD (Also, he's more likely to chatter when he's sleep-deprived.)
The other empath Luna knows is Blaise. She was hanging out with Lyra (and therefore him) often enough that her constantly reflecting and magnifying the suffering of the other students was irritating to him enough to do something about it. —Leigha
Snogging Companions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So I only have about fifteen-hundred more sesapsas to go. I can probably knock out a couple hundred this afternoon, and I know I'm this close to getting protego down silently. That piercing hex, too, if I could get that off silently...but I still need a bit more practice with that charm to heal puncture wounds... Poking holes in yourself is just so much harder than cutting yourself, though... Maybe if I do a numbing charm first? I'm going to have to come up with some other way to practice, though, especially when I get to bone-breakers...

"Oi! Weasley! Gin! Wait up!"

Ginny was on her way to the classroom she had appropriated for spellcasting practice after lunch when someone shouted her name from the bottom of a staircase, interrupting her train of thought — a tall blond boy with a Hufflepuff tie. She vaguely recognized him as a muggleborn from Ron's year (the one she — Riddle — had petrified last year, along with Nearly Headless Nick). Finch-Fletchley, she thought his name was. She paused at the fourth-floor landing, rather surprised — not only did hardly anyone ever try to speak to her anymore, but he'd actually called her Gin, not Red (like the Slytherins) or Ginevra (like Luna and Black) or Ginny (like everyone who'd known her before this year).

"Hi," he said when he finally caught up, slightly out of breath. "Wow, you're fast. Justin Finch-Fletchley, you can call me Justin."

"Gin. How long have you been following me?"

The boy shrugged. "I saw you on the second floor, thought I'd try to catch you before class — Transfiguration," he added, making a face.

"Oh. Um... Well, you've caught me. Did you...want something?"

He grinned. "Theo says he's been teaching you to fight. I'm starting a, well, it's not really a dueling club, more like a dueling...study group? Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to get together and practice." Ginny felt her eyes grow wide. How long had it been since anyone other than Luna or Ron had actually invited her to do anything with them? She couldn't even remember. "Potter's already agreed, and I think if I can tell Blaise he'll make four, he might actually come."

She couldn't help but laugh at that, just a bit. She wasn't surprised that Zabini didn't like fighting — probably too direct for him, bloody mindreading creep. She'd probably be even worse than he was, though, they were all a year ahead of her, and she had really only been training since November. Still, it would be good to practice against someone who wasn't Nott-level good — more like an actual fight and less like, well...dancing lessons. (She still hadn't managed to tag the bastard with anything, but she was going to get him, one of these days.) Not to mention, she'd get to spend time with Harry without Ron. He might actually notice her if this became a regular thing. All in all, she couldn't really say no.

"Yeah, alright," she said, trying to sound cool, and not like this was the most exciting thing anyone had invited her to do in months. "When and where?"

"Well, Gryffindor has quidditch practice tonight, so I was thinking tomorrow, around seven, if
that's good for you? Lyra said she could get us into the old dueling arena."

"There's a dueling arena here?"

"Apparently no one's used it for decades, but yeah, there used to be a dueling class. It's on the ground floor, off that north-south corridor with all the bird statues." Ginny had no idea which corridor he was talking about. Apparently this showed on her face, because he added, "Or I can just meet you and Potter in the Entrance Hall?"

"Yeah, that'd probably be better."

"Cool," Justin said, then made a very amusing squawking sort of sound as the carillon bells began ringing the hour. "Gotta go," he called, racing back down the stairs. "McGonagall's going to kill me!"

"Well...okay, then," Ginny muttered to herself, trying not to grin.

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As it turned out, Justin didn't need to meet Harry and Ginny, because Lyra had waited until the last possible minute to break into the arena. They just followed her. And then waited for twenty minutes while she constructed something she called a "ward gate" and Justin and Zabini (who were apparently taking Runes) interrogated her about the process.

"And you're using Futhark because...? I thought you said it's a terrible system for large scale enchantments."

"This isn't a large-scale enchantment, I'm just poking a hole in the wards that are already here, and making it wide enough for you to open the door. And whoever locked this up used Futhark — don't ask me why, I've used hieroglyphs. It's easier to use the same language to alter wards...most of the time. Unless they're really complex. This isn't."

She'd already explained that at length. If Ginny had understood her lecture correctly it was basically just a permanent sticking charm binding the door to the frame, with a trigger built in to alert someone if it was broken. Which really wasn't any sort of decent ward. It would stop unlocking charms, sure, but she'd seen Bill do something like that, once, locking the twins in their room. It only took about five minutes to set up.

"And you couldn't just, uh...take them down?" Harry asked, clearly bored. He'd mentioned earlier (quietly, just to Ginny) that he wasn't taking Runes, so this was all complete gibberish to him. "Would that be faster?"

Lyra rolled her eyes at him before returning her attention to the four small pieces of stone (initially one large stone that she'd carved some enchantment into, then broken apart) that she'd spent the past fifteen minutes sticking to the center of the door. "Yes, I could. And yes, it would be faster. But you may recall I mentioned that breaking the ward would alert the office of the Deputy Head that someone was tampering with a door that's supposed to be sealed. No idea if McGonagall even uses that one, but in any case, this," she said, painting a series of runes on the fourth piece, "won't. There," she declared, plucking each piece off the door in turn and moving them to a corner of the frame. They stuck to the stone as easily as the wood, as though magnetized.

"You're done?" Justin sounded surprised. "I thought there was more to ward gates than that."

"Ah, well, only if the ward you're putting a gate in is, you know, actually decent... Or if you want to key the gate to a specific person... And if you want it to last more than a few days, you really
"need to carve the runes, not just paint them."

"Oh. So...we can go in, now?"

"Sure. Just, don't step directly on the threshold or your shoe will get stuck. And then you really do have to break the ward to get it back, and you get made fun of for making a rookie mistake for months. And in this case, probably also detention."

Zabini sniggered at that. "Is there a story there?"

She glared up at him, still kneeling beside one of the lower gate-stones. "That's pretty much all of it. Though in my defense, I was a rookie. Go ahead, I'm just going to make these invisible, then I'll come check the platform enchantments for you."

The other four left her there, stepping (very carefully) into a large, dark, circular room. There was a round platform in the center of it, about thirty meters across, with tiered seating all around — easily enough space to hold every student in the castle, and then some.

Zabini hopped up onto the platform, striding confidently into the shadows. "Lucernae!" he declaimed, making an equally dramatic gesture with his arms (it was Zabini).

Dozens of light-globes, like the ones in the library, burst into life, nearly blinding Ginny, who had been peering up into the stands.

"This is great!" Harry said, joining Zabini on the platform — the dueling stage, she supposed it was called. She'd never actually seen a proper tournament duel, or even an arena, but Bill and Charlie used to tell her and Ron about them over hols. One of their friends used to compete, though Ginny was pretty sure she had given it up to become an auror when she left school. "Wonder why they closed it up."

It was Justin who answered. "I asked Abbott, you know, our prefect. He said he heard Dumbledore shut down the dueling class when he became headmaster. Too many kids getting hurt, I guess? There used to be a dueling club, a real one, not like that stupid thing Lockhart tried to start, but they met in the Great Hall."

"Yeah, well, this is old," Lyra said, wincing at the brightness as she entered the room. "The New International Dueling Commission uses those long, narrow platforms, now. Less room to move, makes the bouts go faster." From her tone, Ginny guessed Lyra preferred the older style of dueling, with stages like this one. "Lucernae minue?" She let out a sigh of relief as the lights dimmed to a less blinding level.

Harry looked irritably from her to Zabini and back again. "Is there just a list, somewhere, about how to work the lights and stuff?"

"Honestly, Harry, you still haven't read Hogwarts, a History?" Zabini said, sounding, for a moment, uncannily like Hermione. Everyone laughed, even Harry, though he looked like he was trying not to.

"There is, actually," Justin informed him. "And not in Hogwarts, a History. The lights aren't always on downstairs, so the prefects teach us the keywords to activate the enchantments, in case we get up early or whatever. I can get you a copy, if you want."

"Or you could just learn Latin," Black suggested absently, walking around the platform, her fingers trailing along the edge of it. "That's been the standard for enchantment keys for about three-hundred years or so..." She trailed off and began poking at the platform and the air around it with
her wand. "Ha! Got it!"

A second later, a small console-table *thing* shimmered into sight. Ginny drifted over to get a better look at the carved top of the thing — it was positively *covered* in runes, about half of them glowing various shades of purple and blue.

"What the hell is *that*?"

Black spared a second to give her a 'god, you're an idiot' look. "It's the controls, obviously." She tapped at a few of the dark runes with finger and wand. Nothing happened.

"It doesn't seem to be working," Ginny pointed out, just to annoy her.

"I hadn't noticed." She quickly dropped the sarcasm as she continued to muse aloud. "But why would... These shouldn't be lit if the main control for the array is completely cracked."

That *was* weird. Ginny didn't know much about enchanting — only what she'd seen Bill do at home (which, to be fair, was a *lot*, the house probably wouldn't still be standing without all the work he'd done on it) — but even she knew that the subsystems of an enchantment tended to fail before the main part tying them all together. "Maybe you're not authorized to turn it on."

Black seemed to miss her needling tone, there. And even more surprisingly, she responded as though Ginny *hadn't* just said something stupid, which, well, it kind of had been an intentionally useless suggestion. "No, I checked that, there's no referent for authorization."

"Well, aside from being able to access the control panel in the first place," Zabini said. Ginny jumped — she hadn't noticed him sit down on the edge of the stage beside them. "I could have *sworn* I saw you walk *through* that spot."

"I did. It wasn't invisible, it folds up into a pocket dimension, kind of like a really complicated space expansion— *Hey*, Blaise, you're sitting on the ward line!"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Just move," she demanded, then jabbed at the main control rune again. This time it turned green. She reached out to tap the now-solid space in the air where Zabini had been sitting. "Yes, I'd say it was a bad thing."

A bit more fiddling had the physical barrier down, and the other aspects of the wards tinged blue. Ginny was somewhat surprised to realize that it wasn't just a dome, with the widest part at the level of the stage, but more of a cut-off sphere, bulging out around the stage so the widest part would be about at head-height for a grown man.

"Okay, this is *neat*!"

"What's neat?" Justin asked, peering over Ginny's shoulder at the display. He wasn't actually *touching* her, but she could feel the heat of his body against her back, through her robes. She couldn't help focusing a little too much on how close he was (and wishing he and Harry, now standing between Black and Zabini, would switch places).

"Okay. The wards are really about fifty different shielding enchantments woven through each other — this controls which ones are in use at a given moment. All these runes here?" Black pointed at twenty or so rows of runes, each beginning with a different symbol, but followed by the same three. "These are different spell classes, the Ptolemy classification. And *these*—" she pointed at another set of shapes, "—are for blanket interference with any spells exceeding a certain degree of
power and, I think anything too light or too dark, which is just really neat. I'll have to come back later and try to figure out how they made it work. But anyway, this lets you control whether the dome and platform wards — they're controlled separately — absorb or reflect all these different spell classes, or randomly alternate between those two, which is just... I've seen the absorb or reflect options before, but random automated alternating between ward settings is like, noble seat-level advanced warding."

Zabini cleared his throat, apparently drawing her attention to her rambling. Which was a shame, that was probably the longest Black had ever gone without saying something insulting or unnerving. Well, it was a bit unnerving that she knew so much about wardcrafting, but she did claim to have been raised by a cursebreaker, so that wasn't really unexpected. And it wasn't like she was babbling on about murdering Riddle or something.

Black sighed. "Fine, I'll get on with it. I have to go meet Hermione soon, anyway. Let's see... One through three are pretty harmless, and five...and seven," she muttered, lighting some runes and dimming others. "Not that I think any of you will be throwing around anything else, but... Probably should kill anything over Class Four dark and light, just to be on the safe side. There is a Holston variation, here, but just in case... And let's say anything with an amplitude greater than seven. Right. That should do it. Go sit behind the spectator wards for a minute while I make sure I got that right."

Justin led the way out of the little depression between the seats and the stage to sit in the front row as Black hopped up onto the stage and walked to the center of it. She looked surprisingly small, standing there in the middle of the open floor. Ginny kept forgetting she was actually taller than Black, even when they were standing right next to each other. Probably because of well, things like that, she thought, as the tiny witch began casting spells — not silently, Ginny could see her lips moving, she must be at least muttering the incantations (she'd noticed after about the two-thousandth protego that you didn't need to say a spell very clearly for it to still work), but ridiculously quickly, and with no ceremony whatsoever.

A stunning spell, a piercing hex, a binding jinx, a cutting curse, and a stinging jinx — all reflected, ricocheting off the wards until they ran out of energy. (Black had to dodge them a few times first, the cutting curse almost got her.) Then a wall of flame and a jet of water that disappeared when they reached the ward line, a pair of conjured birds that did the same, and a giant transfigured wasp that turned back into a hairpin as soon as it touched the blue bubble. The only effects that got through were a burst of light (which Black cast only after covering her eyes with her free hand) and a sound like a canon-blast, and even those, Justin said, were much fainter than they would be inside the dome. Then she did a quick series of spells Ginny didn't recognize — Zabini said at least two were specifically designed to break shields — all of which were absorbed by the wards without any effect at all, and stood there trying to cast at least a dozen more spells, all of which were somehow snuffed out before they ever really left her wand, their spell-glows winking out as soon as they were cast.

"Fuck, I hate smothering wards. But they seem to work alright. Anything else you think I should try?"

"Maybe banishing something?" Zabini suggested. "I don't have any potted plants on me, but—"

"Oh, shut up," Black snapped. She waved her wand and alerted them that, "Summoning won't work outside the circle," before pulling another pin from her hair and sending it shooting off toward the stands on her left. Most of its momentum disappeared as it crossed the wards on the platform, but it was still going fast enough to hit the spectator wards, whereupon it dropped like a stone.
"What about lightning?" Justin suggested.

Harry looked a little surprised. "Wouldn't that basically be the same as light and sound? The same class of spell, I mean, it's just electric energy..."

"Well...yes, but I just want to see it."

"Yeah, do it!" Ginny agreed enthusiastically.

"I'd have to adjust the settings. All the decent lightning curses are well beyond the power threshold I have set."

"C'mon," Justin whined. "Just a little one?"

"Hmm..." Black tapped her wand against her lips for a second, obviously considering the problem, before casting a series of curved disks — seven pink and one blue, each larger than the last — between herself and the other edge of the platform. They hovered ominously in mid-air.

"What are those?" Harry asked, saving Ginny the trouble.

"I'm...not sure," Zabini admitted, just as Black cast what seemed to be a simple shocking hex at — through — the first pink disk.

It collapsed, pulled into the shocking hex, which doubled, splitting into two tiny bolts of energy. Which became four, and eight. Sixteen. The spell kept doubling each time it hit — absorbed? — one of the pink disks. And then, so quickly Ginny hardly had time to register what had happened, all of the tiny, doubled sparks of energy hit the blue disk, which exploded with a thunder-crack as they were all re-combined into a single, massive (well, decent-sized) lightning bolt to strike the wards.

Black cackled like a madwoman. When the afterimage cleared from Ginny's eyes, she saw that the other girl's normally perfect curls were standing on end, but the wards appeared unharmed. And unlike with the light and sound effects, she didn't even think any of the lightning had gotten through them.

"Yes, Justin, I think it's safe to say the wards can handle lightning. Though apparently they can't handle the effects of spell-duplication and concentration lenses. Not exactly the sort of thing you could cast in a fight, granted, but still an oversight in my opinion. So, don't do that, if you don't want to kill each other."

No danger of that, since none of them had any idea what she'd actually done. She hopped off the platform, grabbed the small bag of enchanting tools and materials she'd brought with her, obviously preparing to leave.

"Sure you don't want to stick around?" Zabini asked, his tone somewhere between teasing and hopeful — did he think that if she stayed, he wouldn't have to be their fourth?

"If you somehow managed to con Theo into coming, maybe. We could see how good the Holston ward is. But I'm really not in the mood for kiddie dueling. Besides, Hermione's already going to be annoyed with me, I was supposed to meet her—" She cast a tempus charm. "—in three minutes. Huh. Thought it was later than that. Should still go, though." She headed for the door. "Have fun, and if you get caught, I had nothing to do with this," she called back over her shoulder.

"So...do you think we should have told her about her hair?" Justin asked.
Zabini burst into very girlish giggles. "Oh, no, let Maïa have that, it'll be good for her."

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"Ready?" Justin called from the sidelines.

Ginny raised her wand in a salute, as did Zabini, who looked rather like he just wanted to get this whole thing over with. Justin had decided — and the rest of them had agreed — that since Ginny had just started training a few months ago, and was a year younger besides, she should get to start easy, and Zabini was the most defensive of the three older boys when it came to his general strategy.

Justin gleefully shot green sparks into the air above them, and Zabini immediately shouted, "Lumax!"

Ginny, blinded and cursing herself for not anticipating that, or even doing it herself, cast a *protego* without thinking — just in time, too, since a spell — a stunner, from Zabini's incantation — hit it not half a second after it went up. She was getting better at holding her shield, even under constant, irregular spellfire, but she was well aware (thanks to Nott's *repeated* demonstrations of the point) that *protego* didn't stop every class of spells. She dove to the side before her vision fully cleared, snapping a *sabreace* off in the direction of her opponent's voice.

He dodged it, and the rebound when it hit the wards behind him, distracting him long enough for the spots to fade from Ginny's sight. He sent a stinging hex at her, followed quickly by a silencing jinx, a stutter-step spell and another stunner, effortlessly avoiding her retaliatory strikes.

Black had apparently set the floor to reflect certain spells as well as the dome, so the air quickly grew thick with rebounding jinxes. Granted, Ginny was pretty sure each one was only getting three or four bounces, and they probably wouldn't do much damage if they hit after the second one, but they were still distracting, and it was impossible to tell which ones were sufficiently weakened to just take the hit, so the combatants had to avoid (or block) them all. After a few minutes, Ginny took to interspersing her attacks with defensive re-directions of ricochets. *Sesapsa* really was incredibly useful.

Zabini was infuriatingly good at avoiding everything she threw at him, though. Made it look easy, even. He probably wouldn't *mind* spending three hours avoiding Nott's stinging jinxes. She swatted just such a jinx back in his direction, even as she ducked under a stunner, then followed up with another *sabreace* and a tripping jinx before she had to spin out of the way of a silencing jinx and deflect another stunner. Zabini was, in fact, not shielding *anything*, apparently *preferring* to just stand there dancing out of her way and waiting for her to wear herself out.

Unfortunately for him, Ginny had the *best* older brothers — she'd spent most of winter break convincing the twins to teach her some of their more slapstick pranking spells. She especially liked the one that produced dozens of tiny marbles under the feet of its victim. She had to wait for an opening — *protego* to catch those two incoming trigger-drop jinxes, dodge one of her own rebounding slicing curses, bat a stunner back at Zabini, and duck under a silencing jinx — but when she finally had it, "*Marmerkundes*!"

The marbles popped into existence all around Zabini with a series of cracks like those little muggle firecrackers Fred and George were so fond of. He startled, but still managed to duck an incoming tripping jinx, and obviously only realized what she'd done when he tried to take a step, cursing as his left foot went out from under him anyway. He cast a vanishing spell at the ground, but missed — and in any case, he'd've had to vanish each marble individually. (There was a reason she liked this spell.)
That was all Ginny needed to press the offensive: "Silencio, tacitus, pica, cadarma, marmerkundes!"

Zabini, pinned under her barrage and trapped by the marbles (she conjured more as he kicked them away, trying to give himself room to move) put up a protego. It shattered after four hits, but he cast it again before she could finish him. At this rate, they'd be here all night. On the other hand, she did know one spell that would definitely go straight through a protego shield, and she didn't think Zabini knew sesapsa — he hadn't been using it at all, and she thought he would have, if he did. It would fit his style, using his opponent's spells against them.

"Sabreace!" she muttered, determined not to give him any warning — he might just dive out of the way if he realized what was coming. She certainly would have. The bruises from landing on the marbles would hurt, but not as much as getting cut.

Zabini's eyes went very wide in the split-second between the slicing spell flying through his protego and its impact with his chest. He fell on his arse, clutching at the wound, even as Ginny cast a disarming charm at him. She snagged his wand from the air and Justin sent up red sparks, indicating that the match was over.

"Blaise!" Harry's voice rang out in the sudden silence. He was on the stage, kneeling at Zabini's side even before the last of the ricochets were exhausted. "Blaise! Are you okay?"

"Ugh, yeah, I'm fine. But fuck, Red. Ow."

"What was— You're not fine, you're bleeding!"

He was. He was wearing a dark shirt, so it wasn't immediately obvious, but Harry quickly unbuttoned it and pulled it out of the way, revealing a six-inch gash in Zabini's left pectoral.

"Ooh, right over the heart," Justin observed. "Assuming Zabini has a heart, I mean."

"Your mockery, it wounds me," Zabini retorted, obviously not hurt too badly.

"This is not the time for joking around!" Harry snapped. "We've got to take him to Madam Pomfrey, or—"

Zabini sighed. "Relax, Harry, it's fine."

"It is not, you need a doctor — a healer, I mean—"

"It looks worse than it is," Zabini said, poking at his chest. "You got muscle, but not bone," he informed Ginny.

"I assume you know how to fix this?" Justin asked her.

She nodded. "I'm not stupid enough to go around casting curses I can't cure," she said defensively, as though she hadn't been doing exactly that the first time she'd cast this spell at Nott.

She knelt opposite Harry, directing her wand at the slash. Before she could cast anything, though, he slapped her hand away. "No, Ginny, you've done enough damage. I'm taking him to Madam Pomfrey! Come on, Blaise, stand up," he said, doing his best to lever Zabini into a sitting position.

Zabini didn't seem inclined to move, though, so this mostly resulted in the much taller boy half-lying, half-sitting with his back propped up against Harry. "It's really not that bad, Harry. I'm sure Gin can heal it just fine."
"No! You're in shock, you're not thinking clearly. I've been hurt enough to know what it looks like, okay? I'm telling you, you need to go to Madam Pomfrey. Now get up, we're going," he said. He tried and failed again to lift the larger boy to his feet, which seemed to rather amuse Zabini. Maybe he was in shock. After a few seconds Harry added, "If you want to help, Ginny, you can help me get him to hospital!"

Ginny exchanged a conflicted glance with Justin. Maybe they should — she didn't have a lot of practice healing cuts this deep, and she'd never tried to heal someone else. Yes, she'd probably be in loads of trouble, and they wouldn't be allowed to keep their 'dueling study group', but it might be worth it...

Zabini, however, sighed, rolling his eyes. "Harry," he said calmly. "Look at me."

"What? Come on, Blaise. Look, you're bleeding on the floor." He was, a slow but steady trickle of blood seeping from the wound — or rather, he had been. Now he was bleeding on Harry. "Now is not—"

"Look at me," he said again. There was something more behind his words, this time. Something compelling. Ginny glared at him, even as Harry gave a Hermione-like huff of annoyance and looked down into Zabini's eyes. Zabini reached up with his good hand to lay it on Harry's cheek.

It struck her, rather suddenly that this was all a very... Well, the only phrase that came to mind was tender moment, or rather scene, Zabini lying across Harry's lap, wounded and half undressed, Harry bent over him, concerned and caring. The intensity of emotion on his face — so unlike him, or at least what Ginny had seen of him — contrasted with the absolute serenity of Zabini's. The gentle touch of hand to face seemed entirely natural. They stayed like that for several seconds — long enough for Ginny to become distinctly uncomfortable, because, well...

It was obvious, wasn't it? That Harry cared far, far more for Zabini than he ever had for her. Even in the Chamber — he'd been terrified, furious, but not worried. Not about her.

It was even more distinctly uncomfortable because, well... As much as she wanted to hate Zabini for usurping her place at Harry's side (a place which, a traitorous little voice at the back of her mind reminded her, was never really hers to begin with), she couldn't help but appreciate the picture they made together. Like a statue, something Greek, maybe. A wounded warrior saying his final farewell to his lover, his brother in arms, ready to face death, even as his friend mourned his passing. Tragic, but oh so poignant. She wasn't entirely certain that was her analogy, Riddle was the one who appreciated fancy old statues and myths about Achilles and Patroclus (Ginny wasn't even entirely sure what story they were from), but she was pretty sure she was the one who thought the moment, that long, lingering gaze into each other's eyes, was just a little bit beautiful.

(And maybe if Harry had never noticed her because he liked boys, well...there was nothing Ginny could do about that. It wasn't as though he'd gone for some airheaded bit of fluff like Lavender Brown, or worse, Black.)

And then Zabini had to ruin it by whispering, "Relax," with another compulsion behind it, this time — she would be willing to bet a hundred galleons she didn't have — using legilimency to force Harry to comply, reminding her that, pretty as he might be, Zabini was still a creep.

Harry, though, didn't seem to mind. He closed his eyes, breaking Zabini's hold over him, but still sounded remarkably calm when he said, "Fine. Yes. You're right, I was overreacting. I just... I don't like seeing my friends hurt, Blaise."
Uh-huh, friends.

"Yes, well, I don't particularly enjoy being hurt, either, so I'd greatly appreciate it if you'd let the violent heathen child heal me, now."

"Violent heathen child?" Ginny repeated, well and truly breaking the moment.

"Don't take it personally," Justin advised her. If he'd even noticed the moment in the first place, Ginny couldn't tell. "He calls everyone who beats him a violent heathen. Which is pretty much everyone, at least when he doesn't cheat...and sometimes even then. So you're in good company."

Harry glared at Justin, but laid Zabini back down, nodding at Ginny. She quickly sterilized the cut and began to whisper the healing spell. It was supposed to be a charm, but it wasn't quite, or not entirely. It almost felt more like un-transfiguration, calling on the object to revert to the form it should have. It wasn't transfiguration, though, because it didn't expire. It just urged the body to fix itself, far more quickly than it naturally would or could. It was a little tiring to have it cast on you, but far better than waiting for your body to heal naturally.

It was weird casting it on someone else, though. She could feel the energy tingling outward from the deepest part of the wound, sealing blood vessels back together and spinning muscle fibres around them, evening out the thin layer of subcutaneous fat and sealing the skin back together as though it had never been broken. Unlike the spell Nott had used on her, this one didn't even leave a scar (at least as long as the wound was fresh) — which was good, since she'd been practicing it on herself, her arms would be nothing but scar tissue at this point if it did. But since she had been casting it on herself, she hadn't realized quite how much energy it cost to cast it on someone else. Or maybe it was just that Zabini's injury was far worse than the little cuts she'd been giving herself. In any case she felt rather light-headed by the time she was done.

"Woah," she said, sitting back. "I think I'm done for the day."

"Me too," Zabini said quickly. So quickly she was fairly certain he was perfectly fine, and just using this as an excuse not to have another duel. "You two should have a go, though," he added, before Harry could ask him if he was okay again.

"Are you sure? I mean, we could just call it a night."

"Yeah. I'm fine, and Justin didn't even get to have a single bloody fight. That was the whole point of this practicing thing, wasn't it?"

"It was, yes," Justin confirmed, giving Harry a hopeful look. "Please?"

Harry sighed. "Alright. Just, you should know, I'm not really very good. Lyra just taught me a few spells over Christmas, and of course I know expelliarmus, but..."

Justin snorted. "Yeah, well, if you're not very good like Red's not very good, you'll be handing me my arse. Won't be the first time, though. Come on." He led the way back to the center of the platform, taking his place for the start of the duel.

Harry, with a final reluctant glance back at Zabini, followed. Zabini himself cleaned the streaks of red off the white tiles of the stage before motioning for Ginny to follow him back to the spectators' seats.

"Ready?" he called. When the boys saluted, he added, "Fight!"

Justin, like Zabini, opened with lumax, but Harry seemed to have been expecting it, since he just
dodged the follow-up hex and shouted "Dharma!" which Justin shielded against. The whole process, from over here, seemed much less exciting than it was up on stage.

"Were we that...slow?" she asked Zabini.

He snorted. "No. Harry has potential, he really hasn't been taught or practiced much at all, and he's keeping up rather well. But Justin's nearly as hopeless as I am. And I realize you've only really fought against Theo, but you're much better than you think you are." She flushed at the praise before he added, "Want me to get the memory from Harry?"

"What? No! You shouldn't just go around using mind magic on people, anyway." She glowered at him.

He very obviously found this amusing. "I'm teaching him occlumency, you know. And he does have some natural talent for the subject. At least as much as he does for dueling. If he wanted to shrug off my compulsions he could have, easily — it's not like I was being subtle about it."

"Oh." Ginny wasn't really sure what to say to that. Plus, thinking about it made her think about that moment, again, watching them stare into each other's eyes...

"And some people just think way too bloody loudly," Zabini said pointedly. Ginny flushed again, this time slightly embarrassed.

She made an effort to reel in her wayward thoughts, like Bill had started to teach her over the summer. "Better?"

Zabini nodded, raising an eyebrow in a way that seemed almost impressed. He didn't say anything about her obvious forays into mind magic, though, even though Black had probably told him that she was working on occlumency herself, picking apart the mess Riddle had left in her mind. Instead, when he spoke, it was about the thing she'd been thinking about. The thing between him and Harry.

"Don't say anything about it."

"What?"

"What was your analogy? Patroclus and Achilles? It's the Iliad, by the way." He smirked. "Don't say anything. Harry doesn't know, yet."

"Harry doesn't— How can he not know?!"

Her outraged tone managed to draw a snort of laughter from the mindreader. "Well he's starting to catch on. But he is a thirteen-year-old boy, pretty sure they're expected to be a bit obtuse about their feelings."

Which was kind of a funny statement. Especially since, "You're a thirteen-year-old boy, you know."

"There's no way a child raised by Mirabella Zabini doesn't know everything there is to know about human emotion by the age of thirteen, boy or not. And I'm fourteen, now, anyway."

Which was just... Everyone knew Zabini's mother was a notorious seductress — rumor had it she'd been married seven times, and killed each of her husbands in increasingly gruesome ways. Though if that was true and everyone knew it, Ginny didn't see how she could still be a Department Head
at the Ministry. Still, she was definitely good at manipulating people, you had to be, in politics. That just...didn't seem like the sort of thing you'd go around teaching your son. Or something you'd admit you knew, if you did. Especially not in a way that implied you were less human than the average thirteen (or fourteen) year old boy.

"You know, you're kind of weird, Zabini."

He didn't even look at her, apparently absorbed by the match. His tone was exceedingly dry when he said, "That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Yeah? Well, don't get used to it. You're still a creep."

He shrugged. "You're entitled to your opinion."

Before Ginny could think of a response to that, Justin fell to the ground, petrified by a ricochet. They'd been mostly dodging them for a few good minutes, now, only casting the occasional new hex or jinx. Harry, with his years of experience dodging bludgers, obviously had the advantage. Justin's collapse distracted him, however, and a moment later (as he looked for Justin's wand, Ginny thought), he joined him on the ground, stunned.

"Unbelievable."

Zabini snorted. "At least we're better than that."

Ginny tried not to laugh, though if pressed, she might admit to feeling rather smug about that, too. "Come on, let's wake them up."

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_Project an illusion of me, it'll be easier than constantly repeating everything I say._

_You...do realise that when I do an illusion of you, I have to repeat everything you say, and also focus on maintaining the spell, and control the visuals, right?_

Eris cackled. _Are you saying you can't do it?_

_You know I can, we did it that one time with Ciardha a couple years ago, I'm just saying, it might be faster than repeating shit, but it's definitely not easier. Not that it was really difficult creating an image of her Lady. It was mostly distracting, having to devote a constant degree of attention to it, but light and sound effects were child's play. The illusion formed with a few flicks of her wand. Today Eris looked a bit like Dora, though with her usual blue hair and constantly-shifting eyes. It's annoying doing your eyes, you know._

_Builds character._

_How, exactly?_

Eris didn't answer, which probably meant she was just being silly. Instead she started playing out the scene she wanted Lyra to replicate in the real world with the illusion-Eris, skipping over to Blaise and kissing him on both cheeks before hopping up onto the teacher's desk in the abandoned classroom they were currently occupying. She obliged, along with the overly-peppy, sing-song, "Hel-lo! I'm Eris. Nice to finally meet you!"

Blaise, being Blaise, just raised an eyebrow at the illusion before turning to Lyra. "Did you drag me in here to give me a puppet show? Because I have to say, that's not what people generally drag me into neglected corners to do."
"Eris thinks this is easier than just letting me tell you what she says."

"But...it's an illusion...isn't it?" Lyra nodded. "So, aren't you really just—"

She cut him off with an exasperated, "Yes. We just had this conversation."

See, that's why you should use the illusion! Eris instructed her to make the image 'say'.

She did. Then added, "You just made that up."

"Yes, I did. What are you going to do about it?"

"Yeah, definitely just in a silly mood today."

"Do you always talk to each other like this?" Blaise asked. The look of complete incomprehension and confusion he gave first Lyra, then the puppet, almost made the little charade worthwhile. "Or yourself? I'm afraid I'm not certain of the terminology here..."

"Each other," Lyra informed him.

"For now."

"And yes, this is— Wait. What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see...eventually. Each other is fine, Blaise, darling. And look at me when you're speaking, not Lyra. Otherwise, what's the point?"

I'm currently asking myself the same thing, she thought. Then repeated it aloud. If Eris could force her to repeat things, she could listen to Lyra narrating her own superfluous comments aloud as well.

"As though I care, ducky." Lyra was pretty sure she managed to catch the exact degree of dismissiveness in that sentence. She definitely got the eye-roll right.

Blaise, being Blaise, recovered annoyingly quickly from being thrown off-balance by Eris's manifestation — such as it was. "Very well, then," he said, turning to the illusion. "Lady Eris, it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance." He even gave it a brief bow, which sent Eris into hysterics.

"He's so polite, it's adorable!" she said, clapping delightedly. That one was tricky to do realistically, especially over speech, but Lyra managed it.

"I do try," Blaise said, winking at the illusion. "But you — both of you? — wanted to talk to me about something? Something other than puppetry."

(Eris sighed, slumped slightly from her overly-attentive, delighted pose, pulling her feet up onto the desk so she could lay her head on her knees, a far-away look in her green — no, golden — cat-like eyes.)

"No," Lyra let her face crumple into a frown. "It's about Other Bella. Now that I've got the Sirius situation more or less in hand—"

"Now that you've done your part and Mrs. Tonks has the Sirius situation in hand," Blaise interjected.

"Yes, that. Other Bella is the next thing on my list. Any progress on her front, Eris?"
The goddess (and accordingly Lyra's representation of her) pouted. "You know there hasn't been."

"Yes, well, you're the one who wanted to pretend to take an active role in the conversation, so."

"What exactly are you trying to do with her?" Blaise asked, doing an admirable job of staying on topic, Lyra thought, given that the other two people in the conversation were herself and Eris.

"Well, ideally remove the compulsions Riddle rooted in her mind and return her to something resembling my bellatrice, obviously."

"Yeah, it's just, well, goddesses of chaos don't generally fix things." (Eris stuck out her tongue at Lyra.) "So. Yeah. That's basically the problem."

"And you can't just, I don't know, ask another Power to do it?"

"No," Lyra said, projecting Eris's identical illusory response at the same time. "Don't ask why," she added. "She gets all annoyed and disappears in a huff."

"I do not huff," the goddess said in her haughtiest tone, sitting up straight again, because haughty and anything other than straight-backed dignity didn't really go together. Of course, she dropped both a moment later, relaxing as she added, "Still, the problem remains — we cannot allow another Power direct contact with our mind, and given the degree to which Riddle's compulsions have spread and corrupted the Bellatrix of this universe, well..."

"She can't even speak to Other Bella, anymore, is what she's trying to avoid saying."

Eris glared at Lyra, but didn't object.

"I...see. And I'm here because...?"

"Because I wanted to see if you, as a mind mage, have any ideas that might be remotely helpful."

Blaise sighed. "You really should ask Snape. I can use mind magic — if you wanted someone to set compulsions, I could do it — but I haven't studied it, not like he has."

Eris sighed back, mimicking his exasperated expression. "Can't."

Blaise raised an eyebrow, so Lyra elaborated. "He'd know — or figure out — why we're asking, because he's annoyingly good at that spying thing, and he kind of hates Other Bella. Which is understandable, because I'm pretty sure she spent most of the war fucking with him and torturing him for fun." Eris shrugged and nodded. "Which is also understandable, because seriously, he's so annoying — he completely ruined my Tower of Babel prank!"

"Yeah, but he didn't reverse the everyone has a cold part. I hear Trelawney's been muttering to herself about things coming true that she never expected. And he didn't reverse the prank either."

"No, but he kept dragging me around to translate shit for him, I didn't get to actually enjoy any of it!"

"Yes, so it's completely understandable that Other Bella would spend years on end torturing him physically and psychologically while he labored as a double agent for the Death Eaters."

Was that sarcasm? Lyra didn't care. "Yes." She nodded. "It is."

"She doubted his loyalty to Riddle's little movement," Eris volunteered, kicking her feet against the front of the desk like a bored child, probably just to make Lyra make the thunk sounds when she
did so. "And not without good reason. He was loyal to them, at least for a time, but he was also very close to young Lily Evans, and she was fun."

Blaise raised an eyebrow for an explanation again.

"She kept fucking up Riddle's rituals, apparently it was hilarious. I really need to see if I can find someone who'll share the memories. Not the point. Snape wouldn't help us, even if we asked."

"Fine. But I don't have anything to tell you since the last time you asked me about this. As far as I know, early childhood compulsions can't be reversed without completely destroying the person — their identity, I mean. Sometimes they can learn to circumvent them, but if they're really as extensive as you imply..."

"Show him the model, Lyra."

She did. It was a vast collection of points and lines of light, which Eris said represented memories and the connections between them. "This is what a healthy mind looks like. To Eris. Or, as close as I can get in three dimensions."

Her goddess gave her a superior smirk. "Humans are so very limited like that."

"Shut up, no one asked you." It wasn't like she couldn't actually conceive of what Eris had shown her, she just couldn't represent it properly in the physical world. "This is what Other Bella's mind is like." She twisted the image into a tangled mess, erasing some of the most fundamental points in the network and all their associations, connecting others that never should have met, dragging the whole thing out of shape, and staining almost all of the nodes with a creeping, sickly green color.

"Okay, I get the point."

"Good, because keeping up two complex and unrelated illusions at the same time is really hard," Lyra admitted, letting the model go. It fell apart into sparks of white light before it faded away completely.

Blaise twisted his face into a grimace. "I'm sorry, but I really doubt there's any chance for even someone as smart as you to work around something like that. She wouldn't want to, for one thing."

"If she was in her right mind, she would," Lyra grumbled. "I'd rather die than have my mind so thoroughly subverted and enslaved to someone else. I guess there's nothing else for it, then."

"Ah...what?"

"Are you forgetting I can't even speak to her at the moment?"

Lyra made a resigned sigh in the direction of the illusory Eris. They'd already had this conversation, of course — not so explicitly, perhaps, but the idea had been floating around in the back of Lyra's head for a while now, and they'd considered the drawbacks at some length. Repeating it aloud was purely for Blaise's benefit.

"Not now, no, but on Walpurgis, you'll have more than enough power to punch through to her, and if we're not worrying about collateral damage..."

"Are you planning what I think you're planning?" he asked, sounding somewhat alarmed.

"If you think we're planning to rip out the compulsions and let Other Bella worry about the consequences, the answer is yes."
Lyra had never seen Blaise look quite so shocked. "But you— How could— I thought you hated the idea of people messing with your head!"

Eris giggled in anticipation of her explanation. Lyra ignored her as well as she could while she still had to pay enough attention to make the illusion giggle as well.

"Well, yes, but I'm me, and Other Bella dedicated herself to Eris as much as I did, and she has every right to use us as she sees fit. That's what dedicates are for. If she decides that a dedicate with a mind full of compulsions sitting in Azkaban out of some false loyalty to a false Lord is worse than dead, and I think any sane Bellatrix would rather be dead than live like that, we see no problem with potentially completely destroying her mind, even on so slim a chance as she might have that she'll be able to rebuild herself."

Blaise blinked, letting silence stretch between them for a beat before saying, "Well, that's very ruthless of you."

Lyra snorted. He actually sounded surprised by that. Weird. She'd thought he'd understood that about her. And besides, "Luck does tend to be on our side."

Eris grinned, her teeth sharpened ever so slightly to make it a more predatory expression than usual. "So, Blaise, darling. Given that salvaging Bellatrix's mind without destroying it is impossible, we would request any advice you might have on how to successfully re-build it after we destroy it. We do want her to have the best chance possible of doing so, after all."

Blaise nodded slowly. "Well...the thing is, the compulsions are probably mostly affecting her perception of what it means to be, well Bellatrix Lestrange — Bellatrix Black, even, since they go back so far. Yes, he affected a lot of her life, and the events she participated in and the memories she has of them, but she should be capable of being objective about those and kind of...distancing herself from the motivations she had at the time. People do do that, re-evaluate past decisions and decide they were made for stupid reasons—" Without the Powers drastically fucking with their heads? Weird. "—it's not even uncommon. Provided, you know, she's still capable of rational thought after whatever you're planning to do."

Eris shrugged, leaning back on her hands, her face tilted somewhat absently toward the ceiling. "It would take a lot to completely undermine Bellatrix's capacity for rational thought. Most irrationality stems from human concerns, of which she no longer has any. Or won't, once I'm done with Riddle's compulsions."

From the way Blaise went, "Erm...right," Lyra didn't think that was quite what he had meant. "Well, there's a theory that our personalities, our perceptions of ourselves, are based on our experiences and the way we interpret them. If you could somehow manage to copy or preserve her memories, separating them or copying them out of her mind-structure before you tear it apart, you could erase everything, then give them back in the order she experienced them, and let her build a new personality around them," he suggested, pacing, his enthusiasm growing as he fleshed out the idea. "The main problem with that is, you'd have to have a way to induce a sort of distancing or...some basis for her re-evaluation of the memories from the moment the compulsions would have been introduced, since her actions in the memories will reflect the effects of the compulsions, and there's the chance — a rather strong one, in fact — that she would, consciously or unconsciously mold the new personality so that its priorities match the ones she sees reflected in the memories."

"What if Eris stays with her, telling her how she should feel, rather than letting her make bad assumptions?"
"Kind of like possession? With her reactions influencing Other Bella's? That...might work. Though she wouldn't necessarily be very...Bellatrix, after, since she'd be modeled on Eris."

"You might be underestimating how much I'm already like Eris," Lyra pointed out, but Eris shook her head.

"No, he's right. It would be far better to facilitate your possession of her, and use you as a sort of...guide, for her to work around. A frame. Your mind should be similar enough to her own that she might not even be able to tell the difference between your reactions, and the ones she might expect to have in a given situation. Yes, they'll be the reactions she would have had to her memories after devoting herself to me, rather than the ones she would have had before, but I burned most of her former associations, anyway, so. Yes. That might just work." The goddess (and the illusory representation of her) grinned, delighted to finally have some idea with which they could move forward.

As always, it was rather infectious. Lyra couldn't help her own smile, even as she asked, "Can you do that? Let me possess her? Or help me, or...something?"

"Well, I can possess her and draw your mind through mine, allow you to control the shape of that little extension of my will and being that resides in her..." Blaise looked like he was about to say something, but thought better of it. "Yes. Short answer, yes."

Lyra nodded firmly. "Right then. It's a plan. We can start on Walpurgis, as soon as you break through to her and copy her memories, and then...I suppose it takes however long it takes."

"People don't remember every moment of their lives," Blaise pointed out. "And thoughts and memories can move much faster than actions in real time." Lyra knew that, it was why it was faster to transmit Eris's words through the illusion than to say them aloud — the spell reacted to new input pretty much as she thought of it, which was essentially as soon as Eris did anything, as long as she was paying attention. "I think I read somewhere that the average time to relive a year's worth of memories is between half an hour and an hour."

"So, twenty-two to forty-four hours?"

Eris shook her head. "That's assuming a human degree of attachment to experiences. Most people have far more clear, distinct memories that they consider important than you do. Factual memories, things she knows like spells and etiquette and such, those can simply be copied wholesale, I believe?" Lyra wondered where she'd heard that. She hadn't mentioned it in any of their previous conversations on the topic. "The process of learning them doesn't seem terribly important to relive."

Blaise shrugged. "Honestly? I don't know. There could be other, less obvious things that were learned alongside a particular skill or spell, important things that happened during the process, but if you're worried about her forgetting how to speak English, or something, she won't remember the whole period while she was learning it, anyway."

Eris nodded. "Plus she's spent the last twelve years in Azkaban. How many distinct memories could she possibly have formed there? I would estimate perhaps eight to ten hours. Possibly less — if I understand correctly, after the foundation and the direction of her new personality are established, Lyra's input may not be necessary to maintain that course."

"Well, that would be good, if no one even realised I was gone."

"You do realise this means you'll essentially be living through all of the significant events in Other
Bella's life to date," Blaise pointed out. "Or at least until you think she's sufficiently on-track to let her continue on her own."

"Well, yeah. Obviously. That's...kind of the point?"

The boy sighed. "Yes, but my point is, there's a non-negligible chance that living through her experiences will have a significant impact on you."

"It'll be fine," Lyra said, her excitement and willingness to do it only increasing as she considered the implications. "She had an interesting life, from all accounts. From what Eris has already showed me, her worst memories are probably not much different than mine — our childhoods were very similar — and I'd get to see so much more of what happened in the last war, more of Not-Professor Riddle, which should be helpful eventually— Ooh, I'd get to see Lily Evans in action, and I'd get to kill Cygnus, and I bet Not-Professor Riddle let her actually try some of the more impressive spells in the House Library — Ciardha never let me, stupid responsible adult morals. So yeah, sounds like fun. I'm in."

"Well, if that's settled, then, I suppose you can drop the illusion," Eris said, then hopped off the desk again to say goodbye to Blaise.

Lyra acted it out for her before killing the spell. Fucking finally.

You like it when we make an impression on people, don't lie.

Yeah, but repeating shit is so very tedious.

Yes, but it keeps you from getting distracted so nicely, she said, grinning in a way that suggested she'd gotten one over on Lyra. Which, admittedly, if she'd been trying to keep Lyra fully focused on their discussion with Blaise, she had, because Lyra hadn't noticed.

She gave the goddess the mental equivalent of a shrug. It wasn't like she really cared, and Eris probably had had a point, she tended to be easily distracted when she was excited, and the idea of finally seeing some movement on Project Bellatrix was very exciting, to say nothing of the how of it — she was going to get to see all of Other Bella's memories! So neat!

Now that she wasn't concentrating on maintaining the stupid illusion, she could practically feel her blood fizzing in her veins, she was so excited — not literally, literally would probably mean she was dying— She wondered if there was actually a curse to do that — not a blood-boiling curse, but a blood...carbonating curse? If there wasn't one, she should invent it, because it sounded like it had the potential for very interesting (though probably very messy) results. Oh, well, that's what House Elves were for. She should look into it at some point. Should be easy, now Cherri had all the books in one place. They weren't really organized, though. Had she ever asked Hermione if she'd be interested in doing that? She didn't think she had.

"Lyra?" Blaise said calmly, leaning on a desk as though he had no intention of leaving, even though the conversation was clearly over and there were so many other things they could be doing.

"Hmm?"

"You're just kind of bouncing in place and giggling to yourself."

Oh. Yes. Yes, she was. Oops. She made a point of stopping, now he'd pointed it out. "In my defense, a blood-carbonating curse would be neat!" She cast a tempus charm. "I still have twenty minutes before I need to go find Hermione. I'm taking her to meet Sylvia. I would've taken her ages ago, but it's taken her this long to get used to my inhuman weirdness, so I doubt she'll
really enjoy meeting wilderfolk. But Sylvie's been asking about normal human mores again, and I figured Hermione would be good at explaining. Or, well, better than me. Probably also better than you, since you're also weird people." He raised an eyebrow at that, as though he wasn't sure what she meant by it. "It's a good thing," she assured him. "What are you doing this afternoon? You could come with. Hermione doesn't know we're going, yet, so it should be pretty funny."

Blaise shrugged, obnoxiously slowly. "I could come."

"Great!" she interjected, before he managed to say, "Why do you need a blood-carbonating curse?"

"Well obviously I don't need one, there's already about sixty other curses to exsanguinate people, or inject various foreign substances into their blood, there might already be one for carbonation, even, I'm not sure, I'd have to look it up. The thought just occurred to me, and it would be neat. Mostly I'm wondering if the increase in pressure would break all the capillaries and cause massive hemorrhaging in the lungs or something, or if the subject would have a heart attack first — I know a big air-bubble in the heart is bad, but what if I somehow limited it to bubbles of a certain size, came up with an element to stop them combining to anything larger than, say, a few microns in diameter. Maybe I could write someone at Miskatonic and they'd try it for me. Assuming there isn't a spell like that already, I mean—"

Lyra, pacing as she spoke, reached the far side of the room again and spun on her toes, trailing one hand across the stones of the exterior wall, slightly warm from all the magic channelled through them and around them. The wards of Hogwarts were really pretty, but there were so many of them and they were so intricate that she made a point of not looking at them very often. Like trying to be Eris or speaking too many languages at once, they tended to give her a headache. Which reminded her, "Hey, what do you know about mmph—"

Well, she was going to ask him about omniglots, but kissing was fine, too. She'd been wondering when he'd get around to it. For someone so much like Zee, he'd been awfully slow about it.

Though, to be fair, he seemed to have been practicing a lot more than Zee had before she started randomly kissing Bella. (Understandable, she supposed, he was two years older than she had been...) There was this thing he was doing with his tongue, for example, and the nibbling at her lower lip... He was also quite a lot taller than Zee was at this age (and of course, Zee was already taller than Bella). Given the way he lounged around all the time, she tended not to notice, but in this position, it was very obvious. She was leaning against the wall, now, and one of his hands was tangled in her hair, holding her head in place when he stopped to stare at her from about two inches away, close enough that she couldn't focus on both of his eyes at once, but also close enough that she could see little flecks of orange in their brown — from further away, they looked golden.

"In case you were wondering, this is what people generally drag me into neglected corners to do."

His voice was also deeper than Zee's, though not adult-man deep, and he smelled different. She couldn't exactly say how, there was just a very distinctly Blaise scent about him. Really, in this context, it might just be easier to list the similarities between them — she'd never really noticed before, but there were actually a lot of differences.

Such as the fact that Zee flirted with everything that moved (including ghosts, and once an animated suit of armor, though that had been a joke), but she didn't tend to go around kissing people other than Bella. Or at least if she did, Bella had never noticed. She smirked up at him. "Surprisingly enough, I knew that. Did you not know I knew that? I've interrupted you with enough of your Hufflepuffs, I thought it should be pretty obvious."

"Hmm, yes. Are you going to give me a score this time?"
Lyra scoffed at him. Obviously she wasn't. For one thing, she couldn't really critique his technique according to the same criteria from this perspective. And for another, "I'm not one of your Hufflepuffs," she pointed out.

Then, before he could react, she dug the ball of her thumb into the tendons of his wrist (forcing him to release her hair) hooked a leg around the back of his knees, and shoved. Of course, she fell to the ground along with him, her leg was still wrapped up in his robes, but she was expecting it, and so managed to land on him gracefully enough that she didn't crush anything important. He did hit his head slightly — maybe she should have cast a cushioning charm? But that would have given him warning...

Besides, he couldn't be that hurt, he just did the same sarcastic "Ow?" thing that he did all the time. She shrugged unrepentantly. "You were taller than me. It was annoying."

"I'm still taller than you, we're just on the floor."

"Yes, but this way your tallness is less annoying. Are you complaining?"

"Well, I already knew you were a violent heathen child. Is tackling me some sort of weird critique of my snogging skills?"

"Well, obviously. I didn't hex you across the room. Though I am somewhat curious as to why you just suddenly decided to start snogging me. I mean, you're allowed, honestly I kind of expected you to do it a while ago, but..." What had they been talking about, anyway? (Blood-carbonating curse, Eris whispered, highly amused.) Right. "Are speculations about gruesome curses like your successfully manipulating people into giving you something? Or, well, I guess the first time Zee kissed me like that, we were also talking about murder, though, so—"

Blaise, his face blank with confusion for a moment, there, suddenly burst into laughter. "You mean is murder a turn-on?" Well, if that was what it was called... "Not particularly. It just seemed like you could use some distracting. This is the approved method of distraction, yes?" he said, rolling them onto their sides — Bella always was too small to be very good at wrestling — and leaning in to kiss her again. This time, however, he deviated from his previous target at the last second to zero in on her neck instead, propping himself up on one elbow his other hand holding her hair out of the way, licking and sucking and even biting, just a little and well...

That was very distracting.

Distracting enough that she didn't mind at all that he was doing that looming over her thing again.

Distracting enough that she wasn't inclined to think about the kind of arithmancy necessary to limit the size of carbon dioxide bubbles in the bloodstream at all.

Distracting enough that she wasn't inclined to think, full stop. For a moment, she couldn't have said how long, she lost herself in her senses — in the hard stone beneath her right shoulder and hip, cool even through her robes; the humid warmth of his breath on her neck and the heat of his hand at the back of her head; the texture of his hair under her fingers, so very different from his mother's (Zee had also never used her teeth like that...); the pressure as he sucked at the spot right over her carotid, her pulse beating against his lips, so present she could feel it all through her body; the softest, barely-there touch as he skimmed his nose up to her ear, kissing down her jawline, gently, until he reached her mouth again; hot, white, unexpected pain as he bit her lip hard enough that she tasted blood.
She gasped slightly and opened her eyes at the sudden, striking contrast.

Blaise's face was still about two inches from her own, his own eyes narrowed stubbornly. "Next time, cast a cushioning charm before you decide I'm too tall."

She smirked at him. Well, that was fair. The thing he'd done to her neck, though, that wasn't. That was so very unfair and distracting that she rather thought she should let him know what it felt like.

She rolled them back over, shoving at his shoulder with her left hand and sitting up to straddle him, her hair falling around them like a curtain, casting shadows across his dark face, enough for her to notice how pretty he really was without the light interfering, all high, sharp cheekbones and soft, pouty mouth, lips parted slightly, wide eyes staring at her intently with something almost (but not quite) like fear in their depths. She could feel him holding his breath as she leaned down and pressed her lips to his, his tongue flitting into her mouth as it seemed to have a tendency to do. When she pulled back, he said, sounding rather surprised, "You taste like blood."

"Well whose fault is that?"

She leaned down again before he could answer, licking and nibbling and then clamping her own teeth down on his neck hard enough that he would probably bruise. He made a very unexpected whining, moaning sort of sound, wriggling beneath her, his breathing fast and ragged, hands skimming over her sides, seizing her shoulders but not pushing her away. She backed off anyway, smirking down at him, moving her hands to his shoulders as though she could pin him in place. His hands fell down her arms to cover hers, hot and dry, the rest of him going limp.

He grinned. "This is going to be fun."

Well, she didn't disagree. But speaking of fun...

She shook her wand hand free to cast a tempus charm. "We should go find Hermione," she told him, sitting back and smirking as she realised not all of him was limp.

He groaned. "Tease. Aren't you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," she said, letting her smirk broaden into a grin. "But I enjoy watching you suffer, too."

His response was an exasperated sigh and a roll of his orange-flecked eyes. "Mother would be so proud." She would be — she'd always said the goal of any flirtation should be to leave the target wanting more. "Yes, fine, let's go see Sylvie and laugh at Maïa being all weird about clothes and personal space and justifying the way humans live their lives. You will have to get off me, though," he added, when she didn't immediately move aside.

She tipped her head slightly to one side, to better see the mark she'd left on his neck. "But it's such a nice view," she said, giving him the best impression of wide-eyed innocence she could muster before ruining it with a wicked grin she'd shamelessly stolen from Zee and pushing herself back up to her feet, spinning away and giggling giddily, still excited, despite his momentarily successful effort to ground her. Ooh! Maybe Sylvia would want to go hunting, that would be even more fun than watching Hermione be awkward!

"You're going to drive me insane, aren't you?"

"Hmm, yep," she said, popping the 'p' at him and tearing down the palings she'd put up to prevent anyone spying on their earlier conversation. "Probably. But madness is more fun than sanity, anyway. Come on, get up, we're going to be late!"
Blaise just smirked at her, still lying flat on the floor. "So much more."

Hermione had thought it impossible for Lyra to be any more irritating, imposing, frustrating, and generally maddening than she already was on a regular basis, but she'd thought that before, and she'd been wrong then, too.

This was, however, a whole new level — she had to be doing this on purpose, but Hermione could not for the life of her imagine what that purpose was.

After lunch, Lyra had appeared out of nowhere to drag her (and Blaise) off on some completely impulsive adventure, with no regard whatsoever for any plans Hermione might already have for her afternoon. This was not entirely unusual, it tended to happen about once a week. Then, however, she'd then disappeared on her!

After introducing her to Sylvia, which, well... Hermione was fairly certain she hadn't made a good impression, but in her defense, she hadn't even known what they were doing until they were well into the Forest. And even then, she'd had no idea what to expect. The book she'd found had said wilderfolk weren't human, really, but... Someone more like Lyra, maybe? Lyra hadn't really told her much about the wolf-girl, even when Hermione had asked, so she supposed she had just assumed that she didn't see many differences worth noting between the two of them.

But the wolf-girl wasn't really much like Lyra at all. Hermione had thought, at times, that Lyra didn't seem human, but when contrasted with Sylvie... She really didn't understand people. Humans. At all. (Understandable, perhaps, since all she knew of them was what she'd seen skulking around the outskirts of Hogsmeade and learned from talking to Lyra, Harry, and Blaise, but still.) Lyra often seemed to miss the finer points of human emotion, it was true, and Hermione often got the impression she thought social conventions were silly, that she was just playing along, humoring everyone else, but she actually knew what they were and could play along. Sylvia, with her lack of clothes (in Scotland, in March) and no understanding of personal space or human customs (greeting both Lyra and Blaise by smelling them before licking at their faces) and the strange, overly-intense way she just stared, completely expressionless, obviously didn't. Couldn't. Hermione wouldn't call her feral, but she was definitely a wild thing — friendly, yes, especially with Lyra, but alert and wary, even after she'd adjusted to Hermione's presence, and...

She was just very unnerving, that was all.

And she asked questions that Hermione didn't really know how to answer, about humans and why they lived the way they did. How can so many packs live so close together without fighting over food? Why do humans agree to let outsiders tell their packs how to live? Why do they spend so much of their time trying to get more resources than they need? Why do humans cheat each other? Why do they say things they don't mean? What is 'property'? What are 'laws'? Why do the strongest humans not lead the pack, and the...groups of packs? Why not the cleverest? Why do they not like wilderfolk and centaurs and werewolves and vampires and giants and goblins and veela and elves? How do they decide who is enough like them to be human, and who is not? If they don't fight each other for resources, but only outsiders, how do they decide who is an outsider, and who is not? Why are magic humans and not-magic humans kept apart, even though they look the same, and live in the same places? Even though they are born into the same packs?

Thankfully Blaise had volunteered to explain how humans choose mates because Hermione hadn't even been able to form a coherent sentence on the topic, not with Sylvia practically lying in Lyra's lap and Lyra absently playing with the wolf-girl's hair, watching Hermione getting all flustered and not even trying to hide her laughter. (Though he hadn't had an answer to the follow-up — Why do
humans get jealous? — any more than she had.)

Actually, if it hadn't been for the fact that she and Blaise were now abandoned in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, she might have been relieved when Lyra got bored and decided to interrupt the wolf-girl's stream of endless questions. (Well, if it weren't for that and the particular alternative activity she'd suggested.)

"So," Hermione said, looking around at nothing in particular. Not that there was much to look at, just trees and mud and Blaise, lounging on a fallen tree, apparently as comfortable as though he was at home in his sitting room. "That...happened."

He sniggered, rolling his eyes at her, which she felt was unwarranted. Even if he didn't think everything about this — about Sylvia — was weird — which he obviously didn't, he'd licked her back when she was greeting him and hardly seemed to notice that she wasn't wearing clothes — which was in itself weird, since she knew how much time he spent snogging people in secluded corners — he'd still been abandoned here, the same as she had. "Quite frankly, I'm surprised she managed to sit still and stay that quiet for that long. Or hadn't you noticed she's a bit more manic today than usual?"

...Honestly, she hadn't. In hindsight, she supposed it was true, but Hermione had hardly seen her all morning, and then she'd been far too distracted by Sylvia and her questions to notice Lyra being even more absurd and talkative than usual.

Well, at least until she'd run off with the wolf-girl to go hunt acromantulae, with bloody spears — oh, and did she mention they were naked? Because that seemed like a very important point! 'I wouldn't want to ruin my robes,' indeed!

That's what magic is for! she'd wanted to scream at her infuriating, irrationally nude roommate. She'd managed to restrain herself to a mildly exasperated, lecturing tone. To which Lyra had calmly and 'reasonably' explained that acromantula blood — that was what those blue speckles were! — was unusually resistant to normal cleaning charms, and the House Elves were still annoyed with her about accidentally making them accomplices in poisoning Luna Lovegood.

She'd definitely noticed that.

She didn't even know where to begin. No, that was a lie, she definitely did.

Acromantulae were, from all she'd heard from Harry and Ron, incredibly dangerous, terrifying, man-eating monsters and probably shouldn't be living in the Forest in the first place. The boys had nearly died trying to get information from them about the Chamber of Secrets last year (because everyone had been too stupid to realise she'd had the answer literally in the palm of her hand the entire time she was petrified).

But, they were also intelligent creatures! They spoke English, or at least some of them did! Hagrid was friends with them! And Lyra (and Sylvia, though Hermione wasn't sure she knew better — she was basically a wild animal, after all) was just going to creep into their home, pick one at random, and stab it to death with a sharp stick! Hermione didn't like spiders — she rather loathed them, in fact — but even she thought the entire prospect was absolutely barbaric! She wasn't entirely certain it shouldn't count as murder!

And even if it didn't, if Lyra could somehow justify her spider-hunting, and she had tried — "They're not supposed to be here." "They have no natural predators here." "They're ruining the ecosystem — their territory is almost completely dead, Hermione." "We're doing every other living creature in this Forest a favor." — that didn't change the fact that she wasn't doing it for any
justifiable reason. Granted, Hermione wasn't sure exactly why she was doing it, but her overall impression (before and after Lyra started making excuses) was that she just thought it was fun. Giant, man-eating spiders were generally considered acceptable targets, and she thought killing them — murdering them — was entertaining. And she could get away with it, so she just went ahead and did it.

The whole reason she was using a sharp fucking stick instead of magic was "well, it's more sporting this way." As though it was all some sort of insane game to her. A game she'd been playing for months, now — Hermione had first noticed those blue speckles back in, what? November? How many sentient beings had she already killed?!

And the worst part was, Hermione knew this wasn't going to stop her from spending time with Lyra, or even stop her from wanting to spend more time with her. It definitely wasn't going to make her stop thinking about Lyra standing there, naked, with leaves in her hair and mud up to her knees as though she was a wild animal herself, leaning on her spear and making her arguments and grinning at her as though she already knew she wouldn't be changing her mind no matter what Hermione said, silently daring her to give in, join her in her ridiculous fucking madness!

Zabini obviously already had, as he burst into laughter, then, apparently at nothing. What the hell was so funny?

"It is a game to her," he said, still lounging on his log, staring up at the canopy above them, then turned to her and smirked. "The most dangerous game."

"Was that— Did you just reference Richard Connell? Wait — I didn't say all of that aloud, did I?" That had been known to happen, but generally only when she'd gone far too long without sleep.

"Yes, I did, and no, but you really might as well have," he said, before apparently deciding to address every question (and inaccuracy) she'd thought over the past several minutes. "Acromantulae are sapient, not just sentient — the killing curse can kill them and they have being-level intelligence — but they'll never be granted Being status because they literally eat other sapient beings, along with anything else small enough for them to take down or trap in a web. I think they've killed a couple dozen of them by now. They don't do it very often, but really are doing the Forest a favor. It's all the centaurs can do to keep them confined to their current territory. Besides, would you rather Lyra didn't have an outlet for her more destructive tendencies? Also, I'd like to point out the hypocrisy of thinking that the acromantulae have a moral right to life, but the wilderfolk don't have a moral obligation not to kill them — you know Sylvie's half human, right?"

Hermione could feel her face burning. "Could you not do that?!"

The infuriating boy's smirk didn't even twitch. "What, be right?"

"No, stop reading my mind! This is why people think you're a creep, you know."

"No, most people don't know I'm a legilimens. They think I'm a creep because people watching them makes them uncomfortable, and I'm not pretty enough to pull off the whole ice princess thing like Daph. And I wasn't reading your mind, you were projecting your mental ranting so loudly I couldn't help but overhear. Completely without trying."

Hermione glowered at him for a moment, but closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing and attempting to calm her emotions, pulling her thoughts back to herself and envisioning a wall between herself and Blaise.
"Not bad," he noted. "Now you just need to learn to do that all the time, and then you can start learning to keep people who are actually reading your mind out. Which you really should do — there aren't that many natural legilimens around, but quite a lot of older, more powerful mages and pretty much any serious duelist can do the legilimency charm silently and wandlessly, including Professor Flitwick and our illustrious Headmaster. Pretty sure you don't want Dumbles knowing exactly how many illegal things you've done this year." He tisked, grinning. "You've already given in to the madness, you just don't want to admit it to yourself."

She hadn't thought her face could go any redder, but it felt like she'd managed it. She had no good response to that — she was trying to learn occlumency already, after all, but she had to at least defend herself against the last point. "I have not. I'm a good person, I don't— don't go around killing people for fun, or abandoning them in the middle of the Forest with no way to get home!"

Blaise laughed again, this time derisively. "You don't believe that. You might want to, but you don't. And regardless of their personhood, they're giant, man-eating spiders that will slowly take over and kill the entire Forest if someone doesn't keep them in check."

Hermione decided that the best tactic available to her was to ignore those points. "You didn't mention being left here — does that mean you know how to get back?"

"Well, we could use a locator charm for some landmark outside the Castle — the Castle itself is protected from that sort of thing, but not the Whomping Willow or the boats on the lakeshore or Hagrid's hut. But there's no guarantee we wouldn't walk straight into something nasty trying to get there, since we don't know the safe trails."

"But—"

"Don't worry, Granger. Sylvie's aware that we're children, and most humans aren't, well...Lyra. She wouldn't have left us anywhere dangerous. We'll be fine here until they get back. Just relax for a bit, it's good for you."

Hermione huffed at him. Relax, when Lyra had, had dragged her out here, apparently just to make her as uncomfortable as possible before running off with the wolf-girl? Leaving her in the middle of the Forbidden Forest with Blaise of all people?"

"You're doing it again. And what do you have against me, anyway?" Damn. She'd already read the book Lyra had pointed out on the subject (three times), but she really needed to find some way to actually practice occlumency. "Get a boggart. Or ask Harry, he could use the practice."

"Seriously, knock it off, Blaise! And as for what I have against you, it's just... You always take her side, even when she's being completely horrible! And you told me you think like her, but by choice — how much of an utter arse do you have to be to go around knowing what everyone's thinking and feeling and acting as though you don't care about any of it?!"

The boy sat up, staring at her with unnervingly Lyra-like directness. "Think about that, for a second — just try to imagine what it would be like, knowing what everyone around you is thinking and feeling all the time. You can't do anything about it, because then they'd know you can read their minds. You can't tell them exactly what their problems are and how to fix them. You can't make them stop hurting or hating, can't stop the unrelenting flood of teen angst and obsession and dementor-induced depression, the sickening roller-coaster of teenage mood-swings — no two of which are ever in sync — the fear and rejection and absolute misery of being surrounded by hundreds of people, only a handful of whom have the common courtesy to keep their fucking thoughts and feelings to themselves, and even they're stupid and oblivious to everything going on around them, the effects they have on others. Not caringis, I assure you, the best possible response
in such a situation," he said, his voice unnaturally even. He didn't seem ruffled, even, aside from the fact that he was still staring at her.

Then his eyes narrowed. "I could go around telling people things like, you're lying to yourself when you think that the horrible things Lyra does bother you. You admire her. You wish you could do things like that, and not care about the consequences. You know you could do the things, but after — people would judge you! And oh, their opinions, the opinions of perfect strangers, the opinions of people you hate, and wish you didn't care about, they matter to you so much, even though you lie to yourself again, trying to convince yourself that they don't. You envy her — that's at least half of your attraction to her right there, envy of her lack of restraint, but also her knowledge, the way she seems so effortlessly belong here, despite being a complete outsider in so many ways. You want to possess her, as though if you have her, some degree of the traits you admire will rub off on you, or at the very least others, those so-judgmental, faceless others will attribute them to you by association, even if it's not true. The other half, of course, is animal lust, teenage hormones running amok — and of course you don't want to acknowledge them because Hermione Granger is a rational creature. Not the sort of superficial teenager who loses her mind over a pretty girl, unable to find her wanting in any way. Though even that would be better than admitting to yourself that those morals you hold in such high esteem, your precious ideas of right and wrong, your image of yourself as a good person, they're nothing but lies you tell yourself, and they're becoming more and more obvious every day. Which is the reason you don't want to be attracted to Lyra. Because every day you spend with her, the more you realise that you don't care about your pretty fiction as much as you thought you did. Because she makes you question your identity, your perception of yourself. And you hate that. You hate that far more than you hate the idea of her killing innocent man-eating spiders, or terrifying Malfoy in front of the entire school, or systematically driving Trelawney insane.

"I could go around telling people things like, you'd be a lot happier if you just accept that you aren't what you consider a good person to be, and you haven't been for a long time, and there's no inherent value in your concept of 'good' anyway. What you consider good is nothing more than socially-mandated bullshit, regulated by that same mass of faceless other people whose opinions you insist you really don't care about. I could tell you that you should just give it up, or revise your definition of good to something you're actually capable of conforming to, and then call you an idiot for hating me for forcing you to face the truth about yourself.

"Or, I could act like I don't care. Whichever you prefer — I'm very accommodating like that."

Hermione blinked at him, trying to stop her eyes from stinging — I can't cry in front of Zabini! I won't! — completely at a loss for what to say. She'd almost felt sorry for him, at one point, when he was telling her how horrible it was to be aware of the unfiltered thoughts and feelings of everyone around him, but then he went and said such mean things. Didn't he know how terrible and uncertain he was making her feel? She didn't even know if he was telling the truth, not about most of what he'd said — yes, she knew there was a part of her that really didn't believe she was a good person anymore, but she didn't think that idea of being good was the same as, as wanting other people to like her, or at least not hate her, and she didn't want to possess Lyra, and she was a rational person, damn it! And she just stood there, listening to his hateful words, like she had when Amanda and Chelsea used to bully her in primary school, like she did when Lavender and Parvati talked about her behind her back and they knew she could hear them, too afraid of, of what? Making a scene? Not being polite? Too weak and miserable and pathetic to fight back, to defend herself—

"You're doing it again," Zabini said, lazily, disinterestedly. As though this was all nothing more than a mild diversion for him.
"God — you're... You are *such* an arse!"

He smirked. "More or less of an arse than when I *don't* analyze your motivations and dissect your morality and self-perception? Because, as I said, I'm perfectly willing to do so if you're so offended by apparent disinterest."

**Aargh!** He was so infuriating, he made her want to...to just...throw a rock at him, or something.

And she was probably still thinking too loudly — he raised an eyebrow just as she thought about how good it would feel to knock him off his stupid log, at least then he wouldn't seem so-so *ridiculously nonchalant* about this...whatever this was. The systematic dismantling of her psyche. The deliberate, vicious, hurtful dissection of her very *identity*.

"More," she admitted, grudgingly.

His smirk morphed into a genuine-looking smile. "I'm glad we understand each other, then. And yes, you were still thinking too loudly. Believe me, Maïa, if I were *trying* to hurt you, you'd be in a *far* worse state than *this*. *I can* read your mind, you know. Simply forcing you to confront the same issues you were *already thinking about* slightly more directly is hardly the same as deliberately undermining and shredding your self-confidence."

She really *should* ask Harry to help her practice occlumency, she thought, making a concerted effort to think it *quietly*. Either she had done so well enough, or Zabini was willing to let her think she had, because he didn't respond, instead lying back on his stupid log and staring up at bare branches and grey skies. Suddenly exhausted, Hermione took a seat on a fallen tree of her own, one where she didn't have to look at him.

This, being trapped here, alone, in this clearing with Zabini, might, she thought, be even more awkward than earlier, with Sylvia hanging all over Lyra. She'd thought it before, that if Lyra was snogging anyone, it was probably the wolf-girl, so it shouldn't seem so unexpected to see such a degree of casual physical contact between them, she just... She was jealous, okay? She could admit it, at least in the privacy of her own mind. (Which had *better* be private, Zabini! — *God, he's making me so paranoid*!) She didn't even know if they *were*, she just... She wished she could be that comfortable with Lyra. With *anyone*, really, but... Who just comes out and says you're allowed to kiss them?!

Zabini, on the other side of the clearing, giggled. "Um...Lyra, I'm guessing. Permission to snog is permission to snog, Granger. If you want to get with her, go for it. She's not going to tell you *no*. And if you *don't*, she's not going to make the first move."

"*God damn* it, weren't you listening when I said you'd better not be listening?!

"Ah...no? You actually were speaking aloud that time, at least that last bit."

She suspected her face might actually be *glowing*. "Uh. Yes. Of course. I knew that." She hadn't. She really hadn't.

And he knew she was lying (not that she'd thought he *wouldn't*), because he laughed, as though she was deliberately making a joke. Then he let heavy, awkward silence develop between them for a moment before speaking again. "You know, I don't care if you like me."

"Honestly, Zabini?" she said, still deliberately not looking at him. "I have a hard time believing you care if *anyone* likes you."

"It's easier if they don't," he admitted agreeably. Though she had *no* idea how that could possibly
make any sense. Why would it be easier if people didn't like you? No one liked Hermione, and she was fairly certain her life would be much easier if they did. "That's not my point. I'm not trying to make you like me." She snorted slightly at that because if that wasn't the most obvious thing... "I'm also not trying to make you hate me, and I'm not trying to hurt you. However, surprising as you may find this, I don't really enjoy spending time around angsty, miserable people, and I don't make a habit of giving advice."

"O...kay?" While she was fairly annoyed at the implication that he considered her an angsty, miserable person, she was far more confused. "Where exactly are you going with this?"

"Will you be patient, I'm trying to be nice here!"

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at his aggrieved tone. Just a little. Very reluctantly. "Oh, is that what this is?" Because tearing into her as he had only minutes ago didn't seem very nice. "Didn't you just say you don't care if I like you?"

"I really don't. But I don't want you to be angsty and miserable, especially if we're going to be spending as much time together as we have been lately." Well that did tend to happen when you shared a best friend — it was the whole reason she'd spent so much time around Ron in first and second year, really. "So if you want help, advice, someone to talk to, whatever..."

"What?" She hadn't known where this conversation was going, but she certainly hadn't expected that. She couldn't decide whether to be more offended that he thought she needed his help or advice or whatever, or shocked that he'd made the offer in the first place. It just seemed... really out of character, honestly. It was probably the least arseholish thing she'd ever seen him do. "I'll think about it," she eventually managed to say, though she had absolutely no intention whatsoever of taking him up on it.

She'd ask her mother for advice before she asked Blaise — even if he did have a half-decent reason to want her to be less miserable, given his own apparent lack of friends and inability to keep a snogging companion (she was quite certain he didn't think of them as girlfriends) for more than a week, she rather doubted his advice would be of any use whatsoever. And even if he did seem to understand Lyra rather better than she did most of the time, he certainly didn't understand her.

How could he, when she didn't understand herself?

"Fair enough," he said, the faintest hint of laughter in his voice. "Offer's open."

Silence fell between them, again. After a few minutes, Hermione decided it wasn't worth breaking it and inviting more awkward conversation to ask how long spider-hunting usually lasted. It wasn't like it would make a bloody bit of difference, anyway. They'd still be stuck here (alone, in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, and she hadn't even brought a book) until Lyra decided to come back.

God, she needed a vacation. Not just from school, from her bloody life.

Two more days, she reminded herself. Just two more days, and then it would be Easter hols, and she could go home and see her parents and have a brief, glorious respite from Lyra and everything to do with her. Maybe that would give her enough time (and space) to think through the moral dilemma of her attraction.

Maybe she really would ask Mum for advice. She'd have to figure out exactly what she was willing to tell her, to give the situation context, but she knew Hermione, or at least, she had done, until a couple of years ago — Hermione didn't like to think about how little they'd spoken in the past
two years. She'd probably be *thrilled* that Hermione wanted to talk to her about Girl Troubles. Though, then she would have to explain that it *was* Girl Troubles and not *Boy* Troubles, which...

She *really* needed a vacation.

Chapter End Notes

*Lysandra is making me write the A/N. I'm terrible at A/Ns.*

*We have an outline for the rest of the year, now. We're looking at six more chapters. We might actually finish a thing... 0.0*

*Of course, then there's the summer, and next year, which will probably be even more insane than this one, so. Yay story?*

*Alternate title for this chapter: Blaise, you slut xD*
Damn it, Lyra!

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a few days into Easter break when Hermione finally worked up the nerve to talk to her mother.

Not that Easter actually happened during "Easter" break this year — it turned out, what mages called Easter and what muggles called Easter were completely different holidays. Which should have been obvious, since Christianity was practically nonexistent in magical Britain. Far as she could tell, the magical holiday of Easter was a holdover from pagan times, a festival around the equinox presumably somehow related to a fertility goddess of some sort, judging by the traditions associated with the Easter she was more familiar with that clearly had no relation to Christianity at all. (Hermione would like to hear someone try to come up with a reasonable explanation for what rabbits and eggs have to do with the Resurrection, because that made absolutely no sense.) Of course, the vast majority of mages weren't actually pagans any more — she'd heard there were some people who still held to ancient Celtic traditions, but they were a very small minority — but that wasn't really the point. The point was that "Easter" break extended from the nineteenth through the twenty-seventh of March, but the Christian Easter this year was on April third.

Hermione still wasn't sure why the name was the same in both Britains, considering it was quite obvious they weren't even close to the same holiday, but that wasn't particularly important.

She found her mother sitting with a novel in the library, which came as absolutely no surprise. She was in there rather a lot, after all. Hermione's parents had had a library for, well, longer than they'd had Hermione, certainly. (Some of her earliest memories involved picking through books pulled off one shelf or another that were honestly far above her reading level at the time, but books for children were boring.) They were both literature snobs of slightly varying brands — Dad could talk about French Romantic and Modernist authors for hours, and Mum's tastes were (unsurprisingly) more American, mostly focused on naturalist authors from the first half of the century, with a bit of dark romanticism on the side. Of course, they also both read a fair bit of horrible genre fiction, which they claimed they only enjoyed ironically, but Hermione didn't buy it, they were just nerds. There were also plenty of nonfiction texts filling the shelves hiding every inch of wall, covering everything from medicine to history to psychology to philosophy, but she honestly caught them reading fiction more than anything else.

Many people had commented on just how peculiar her bibliophilia from such a young age was, but it was just to be expected, really, given that her parents were intense bibliophiles themselves. It would have been 'peculiar' for her to have not turned out the way she did. She was more geared toward nonfiction, true, but still.

Mum didn't even look up as Hermione entered the room, absorbed in... Was that Louis Aragon? Mum hated Surrealism. Okay, then. "Mum? Can I talk to you about something?"

"Hmm?" Mum glanced up, blinked at her a couple times. "Oh, sure." Mum set her book aside next to a cup of tea — which, knowing Mum, was probably still half-full and long cold. (She had a tendency to get absorbed in whatever she was reading and forget she'd made a drink.) One corner of her lips lifting in a light smirk, she said, "I could use the break, honestly — Aragon's surrealist works are a slog to get through. I have no idea how your father can read that drivel."
Hermione shrugged — she was just as hopeless to explain Dad's...less conventional tastes. (Honestly, there was quite a bit about both her parents she'd have trouble explaining, they could be sort of weird.) Once she was settled in the overly-comfortable armchair across from Mum's, Hermione turned her thoughts back to the topic at hand.

And abruptly realised she had absolutely no idea how to ask what she wanted to. She meant, the entire subject was bloody confusing, it was hard to get her thoughts straight on it to begin with, and she wasn't sure how much she wanted Mum to know...

Smiling to herself a little, Mum took the opportunity to retie her ponytail. It did tend to get away from her sometimes, but it wasn't nearly as bad as Hermione's. (Which she tried to take as a good sign, she was pretty sure she'd inherited it.) After a few more moments of Hermione thinking and fidgeting, but somehow still not managing to figure out the hell she was supposed to go about this conversation, Mum let out a short huff, trying and failing to hide her amusement. "Do I have to guess?"

Hermione sighed. "It's just... It's just really awkward."

"I had picked up that much." Mum reached for her cup, took a sip — then she made a face, lip curling with disgust, glaring down into the cup. Shaking her head to herself, she put it back, perhaps more firmly than necessary. "If it helps, I think I can guess what this is about, at least in broad strokes. You are getting to that age."

"Yes, well..." Hermione fought a flash of embarrassment, mostly succeeded. Honestly, she was being so ridiculous, why couldn't she just talk like a normal person and not be so neurotic all the time? (She really did wish she could just not care the way Lyra did sometimes, Zabini hadn't been wrong about that.)

"It's just, what if you, er..." For some reason, Hermione had trouble even saying it in the general, even though Mum likely had no idea who she was talking about, she was so ridiculous. "Okay, there's this...person." Oh God, trying to avoid using gender-specific terms was just going to make this conversation even more awkward. "I think I might...you know. Kind of."

"Yes, Hermione, I know. You're old enough to start thinking about dating now. This doesn't exactly come as a shock. So, how about we skip over the awkward part and straight to whatever it was you wanted my advice on, shall we?"

Yes, well. Hermione realised she was being ridiculous, she couldn't help it. This was just...really uncomfortable. "I just... Can you still, you know, fancy someone, but think they're a horrible person at the same time, or am I just going mad?"

That actually seemed to surprise Mum, for a few seconds she just stared blankly at her. "Well... Sure, I suppose. That sort of thing happens all the time — attraction is a complicated business, and sometimes it just works out that way. Especially, well, depending on what you mean by horrible person, it might not actually be unusual at all."

Her eyes narrowing in a frown, Hermione said, "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean to be overly patronising, Hermione, but you do have a tendency toward hyperbole. I mean, just because a boy annoys you sometimes, doesn't make—"
"They're not just annoying. They really are a horrible person." Not as horrible as she'd thought for a little bit there, but Hermione wasn't convinced her own moral standards weren't just loosening, which was a kind of scary thought.

"If you say so." Mum was managing to keep it off her face, but that was definitely laughter in her eyes. "I can't say I can judge, honestly. I remember some of the things I said about certain people back in high school. If my grandmother had heard me using language like that, well..."

And Mum still wasn't taking this seriously. This conversation was bloody pointless if Mum wasn't taking this seriously. Trying to keep her irritation off her voice, and probably failing, Hermione blurted out, "She's literally a psychopath, Mum."

"Really, Hermione, that might be going a little..." She trailed off, eyes going slightly out of focus for just a second. A rather odd, thoughtful look overtaking her face, Mum turned back to Hermione, her head tilting slightly. "Are we talking about Lyra?"

Oh...shit. Had Hermione slipped on the pronouns? She hadn't even noticed... Trying to shoot for an offended tone, she said, "No, Mum, we're not talking about Lyra, honestly." She wasn't sure she was pulling it off very well. It probably didn't help that her face felt unusually warm, stupid traitorous capillaries...

Mum reached for her cup again, seemingly trying to use it to hide her smile, though Hermione still saw the laughter dancing in her eyes. Also seemingly, she'd forgotten her tea was cold and gross — she gave the cup another exasperated glare before again setting it aside. "You never did develop a talent for lying, you know."

Hermione glared at her.

The tiniest shade of frustration (or offense, maybe?) slipping into her voice, Mum said, "You don't have to try to hide that you have a crush on a girl from me, Hermione — I don't care about that. Did you really think I would?" Mum's accent had slipped, more noticeably American than she usually allowed, which was weird, that hardly ever happened anymore.

"Er..." When Hermione thought about it, no, not really. Honestly, she wasn't certain...the subject had ever come up. Mum had never really struck her as the sort of person who got worked up about who other people wanted to date, it should have been obvious she wouldn't care, but, well...Hermione still thought it was a bit weird. Not bad, just, before Lyra, she hadn't even considered the possibility. (And she'd spent most of the past three years in Magical Britain, where homosexuality was considered normal, if not particularly common). "No, sorry, I just—I didn't want to talk about that."

Mum sighed, head tipping to the side a bit, one hand rising to rub at her temple. "You really don't have to apologise, Hermione, it's a perfectly understandable concern. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"It's fine." Hermione muttered. She was being a bit ridiculous today, getting impatient with her wasn't unreasonable — she was getting impatient with herself, even. And anyway, half of her conversations with Lyra at some point involved her getting irritated with Hermione for not knowing something. She was rather accustomed to being the target of impatience lately.

(She wondered what that said about her, that Lyra was annoyed with her so often, and Hermione was pretty sure she still liked her anyway. Probably nothing good.)

"But your father and I will always love you, no matter what. And no matter who you fancy." There was a peculiar note of irony in Mum's voice as she said that, as though there were some joke in
there left unsaid.

Hermione couldn't help the thought that, if Mum had any idea what Lyra was actually like, she wouldn't be so quick to say it didn't matter. But that was a silly, useless thought. Taking in a long breath through her nose, she tried to force down the anxiety tightening her chest — it was just Mum, she didn't have to be so nervous over this, she was being ridiculous, honestly... "Well, um, yes. It, it is Lyra, that we're talking about." Christ, that shouldn't have been so hard to say...

And, of course, Mum just looked amused with her. It was obvious she was trying not to, the expression limited to just the slightest quirk of her lips, but she could still tell. "I can't say I saw this coming, but I can't say I'm that surprised, either. You do talk about her quite a lot. Your letters these days are a good eighty per cent whatever the two of you have gotten up to in the last week. You hardly ever wrote nearly that much about Harry and Ron."

Hermione was far too aware of the warmth on her own face, which, of course, was itself embarrassing, which just made the blushing worse, and she hated this conversation already, and they hadn't even really gotten to the important stuff yet! But anyway, "Yeah, I guess." In her defence, she did spend more time with Lyra on a regular basis than she had the boys, but she didn't have much choice in the matter — with the time-turning, she didn't have a whole lot else to do, and she had to be careful the wrong people didn't see her, realise she was in two places at once. Sticking close to Lyra was just the rational thing to do.

Yes. Entirely rational. Mum really didn't have to smirk at her like that.

"But, okay, I've been..." Hermione broke again to take another long, centering breath. "I've been...leaving things out, of my letters."

One eyebrow slowly tracked up Mum's forehead. "What sort of things?"

A whole bloody lot of things, actually. She had told Mum her roommates were awful, though she'd downplayed just how awful. And, well, she'd also downplayed the whole...ridiculous magical racism thing, just how horrible Malfoy and his idiot Death Eater wannabe sycophants could be at times. (She wasn't even certain the boys knew the worst of it, Malfoy's cronies were usually smart enough to not hex her in front of them.) Of course, her parents had looked into the history of magical Britain a bit, since they'd first learned it existed — a fair number of the books in here were from Flourish and Blotts now — so they knew this particular prejudice existed, they knew the general idea about Voldemort and the Death Eaters and all that.

But, most texts that tackled the subject tended to take a...sort of establishment narrative, would be the way to say it. She meant, they went out of their way to use as neutral of language as possible, to not risk offending anyone with too much money or power. Even ignoring how much they tended to skirt around the whole genocide topic, the ones she'd read hardly even mentioned the Death Eaters who'd lied or bribed their way out of Azkaban. Many of those Death Eaters were even in very influential positions in magical society. From what she knew her parents had read, they probably didn't provide a perspective that could give them a comprehensive view of what it was like to be a muggleborn in Britain — even at this point, Hermione doubted she knew the full picture of it, but her parents certainly knew far less.

Honestly, she preferred it that way. It made things...simpler.

In the interest of making things simpler, Hermione had just...not told them about the more absurd — and absurdly dangerous — things that went on at Hogwarts. The troll, she hadn't told them about that. Or the very real possibility that a professor was trying to kill Harry. Or really anything about that whole debacle with Quirrell and the Stone. She'd simply said their Defence professor
had died at the end of the year of some degenerative disease, she hadn't seen any reason they needed to know more than that.

She hadn't mentioned their detention in the Forest which, really, she thought might be the worst debacle of the whole year. The other awful things that had happened her first year, those could be written off as a fluke, a madman causing far more trouble than would usually be expected, something external to the institution of Hogwarts itself. But that? They'd been sent somewhere they otherwise weren't allowed to set foot in, the detention extending long after curfew...as a punishment for being out in the corridors after curfew, which was ridiculous on its own, but what they'd actually been doing?

The number of things in the world which would both be willing and able to kill or even slightly injure a unicorn are very, very few. None of them are the sort of thing anyone with an ounce of sense should be exposing children to. Honestly, they were lucky it turned out to be a critically weakened Voldemort — most of the other possibilities would have just killed them and moved on.

And things had somehow just gotten worse in second year. There were her suspicions about Harry's home life. (She did feel a little guilty over not telling someone about that, but she just knew Harry would be furious if he found out she'd gone talking about it behind his back, she couldn't bring herself to.) The whole thing with the Chamber was, just, awful. There were a few months that year that Hermione had been in constant fear for her life — and she'd, just, stayed there, and not said anything. She had no idea how her parents would react to that if they knew.

Hell, her parents had no idea she'd been petrified for a couple months. She'd never told them — perhaps more concerning, nobody at the school had informed them either, Hermione still wasn't sure how to feel about that. (Had they not told any of the petrified students' parents? She knew they'd contacted the Weasleys practically the moment they'd figured out Ginny was missing. If they hadn't all been muggleborns, would something, something actually effective, have been done? She didn't like to think about it.) Far as she could tell, Mum and Dad assumed she'd been having some...she didn't know, ridiculous teenage silliness moment, had just been ignoring them for one reason or another. When Hermione had started writing them again, they hadn't even really asked, just...pretended it hadn't happened, that everything was fine.

She had been asked, multiple times, why she'd decided to stay at Hogwarts over Christmas, which she'd obviously had to lie about. She wasn't certain they even believed her excuses about experiencing magical holidays and keeping Harry company and so forth — they hadn't made a point about it, but she had the feeling they thought she had...other reasons, for not wanting to come home. And she let them think it, which she did feel rather guilty about, but what could she do about that?

And this year, there was a lot she'd been leaving out about this year. Though, in a way, it wasn't even as bad as the previous two years — by the standards Hogwarts had previously established, it was rather calm this year. There was that time Sirius Black had broken into the school, which had been sort of scary, but even at the time Lyra (and Harry) had been insisting he was innocent anyway, so it'd ended up more confusing than anything. (Of course, the Prophet had since heavily implied without outright claiming that he was legitimately innocent, but that wasn't really the point.) From a certain perspective, this was actually the tamest year yet, so far as the potentially concerning things going on she felt she had to hide from her parents.

But, in other ways, it was the worst. Just being at Hogwarts seemed less dangerous than it had in previous years (the dementors floating around notwithstanding), but Hermione herself was getting into far more...questionable activities. Okay, she had done unethical and sometimes even illegal things before — setting Snape's robes on fire and impersonating unconsenting people with
polyjuice stood out — but she'd had what had seemed at the time to be perfectly reasonable justifications for the extreme measures she'd been taking. She could at least make an argument that she'd had no choice in the matter, she'd had to do it to protect herself or Harry. Her parents might not necessarily agree, if she ever explained it to them, but she was certain they'd be more understanding than they might be otherwise. This year, though...

If the 'authorities' ever found out exactly what she'd been studying lately, Hermione could, quite literally, spend the rest of her natural life in prison. Estimating from Lyra's description of the censorship laws in this country, Hermione had been idly tallying what her sentence would be if they were ever caught — she'd stopped counting back in February, when she'd passed a hundred and fifty years and decided counting any further was just absurd.

Of course, it was even more absurd that just reading books was enough to theoretically get someone a life sentence, but that wasn't really the point.

Her parents might be on board with that if she explained just how stupid it was — they didn't have any more favourable an opinion on censorship in general than she did. But, well, it was more complicated than just the law-breaking.

If her parents understood Lyra as she did, she rather doubted they'd be comfortable with it. With her, and Hermione spending so much time with her.

But, if Mum didn't understand Hermione's doubts about this at all, then there was no bloody point to this conversation. So Hermione had to explain the problem somehow, but she had absolutely no idea how to get the point across without making Lyra sound completely terrifying. (Because, objectively, she sort of was.) She struggled over it for what felt like several minutes — though, it probably wasn't nearly that long, given that Mum never said anything. "Lyra is kind of... Well, she's certainly not normal. She can be sort of scary at times, honestly."

An odd look came over Mum's face, one Hermione couldn't quite identify. "You did say she's a psychopath a moment ago. I take it you don't feel you're exaggerating."

"I'm really not."

"She doesn't..." Suddenly, Mum was the one looking uncomfortable, hesitating for a brief moment with a wince. "If you're concerned she might hurt you..."

"Oh, no, I'm not worried about that, really. Actually, she's said outright that, basically, she's going out of her way to be nice to me — or, as close as she can possibly get, Lyra Black doesn't really do nice. I mean—" Hermione let out a thick, frustrated sigh, eyes tipping up to the ceiling. "It's not like she normally goes around hurting people for fun or anything, it's nothing like that. At least, assuming acromantulae didn't count as people. "Or, not physically, anyway. I told you about Trelawney, right, the Divination professor?"

Mum nodded. "I recall the words 'fraud' and 'alcoholic' came up."

"Well, yes, that. Anyway, Lyra has apparently taken it upon herself to make all of Trelawney's predictions come true, just to mess with her. Usually this involves playing some kind of prank on whoever the prediction involves, which can range anywhere from completely inane, to...

"Okay, back in our first class, Trelawney said something about how in February the whole school would get a cold. Which is absurd to begin with, because, colds just happen in February, it doesn't take any special talent to realise that. But, Lyra decided to make sure it happened, and not just with some people, but the entire student body. So she invented a potion, had it slipped into the food
somehow, so it got to everyone. For twenty-four hours, every single person in the school could speak and understand only one random language — and none of those languages were the same. I was stuck with Latin. I couldn't talk to anyone, I couldn't even read, because all of my books are in English, or French, which were suddenly foreign languages. It was very confusing.

"Anyway, that lasted for about a day, but when it wore off it gave the whole bloody school a cold. Well, not really a cold, but the symptoms of a cold, which is close enough. Which, I have absolutely no idea how she did that — there is such a thing as a multi-stage potion, where the metabolites themselves have their own effect, but that is seriously advanced stuff, and she apparently invented the potion herself. It's, just, that was an insane amount of effort to go through, just to mess with everyone's heads."

Annoyingly, Mum had a faint, hesitant sort of smile on her face, as though she were amused, albeit reluctantly. "That sort of dedication is rather impressive, when you think about it."

Hermione huffed — it was, yes, she couldn't even begin to guess how long it might have taken for Lyra to design that potion. But that really wasn't the point. "She just, she does things like that all the time, messes with people just for fun. That's what her being 'nice' to me means, she doesn't go out of her way to annoy me as much as she does other people — she still does, sometimes, just not as much. And, she doesn't care, at all, about what other people think of her, of the consequences of her own actions most of the time, even the law, if she has a good enough reason for breaking it, and doesn't think she'll get caught. There are a lot of, just, absurd things she's done over the year, if I were to try to explain them all we'd be here for hours.

"And I just... She just doesn't care, and sometimes I think she's rather a horrible person, but at the same time... It's not like she's ever actually hurt anyone, not really, and she's perfectly decent to me, for the most part... I do understand why she is the way she is, for the most part, but she still does scare me sometimes."

One eyebrow ticking up, Mum said, "She has a reason why, other than just to entertain herself?"

Hermione hesitated for a brief moment. Ordinarily, she wouldn't consider sharing something...private, about another person, at least without their permission. But, well, unlike Harry, she highly doubted Lyra would actually care. "Er... Lyra was, um, abused, by her father, before she moved here."

She didn't know how to read that expression either. "How badly are we talking here?"

"Very. She has these scars all over her back, from curses, I think, she's covered with them. Some of the curses he used on her are illegal, so illegal he would have gotten a life sentence if anyone knew about it. And there was, um, sexual assault too, she said. And then there's also her, um, religious inclinations, I'm pretty sure that has an influence too."

That expression was far easier to interpret: a distant sort of horror, concern with slight traces of pity. (Hermione somehow knew Lyra would hate the pity more than anything.) Thankfully, Mum didn't ask after the abuse part, seemingly deciding to move on. "Religious inclinations?"

"Er, she worships chaos, basically. It's from a traditional polytheistic religion, long story." That wasn't entirely accurate — if Lyra, or that Nott kid, overheard her referring to the whole Powers thing like that, she'd probably get a rambling lecture about it — but the details weren't particularly important at the moment, she could pass that off for now. "Although, it isn't, just, chaos for the sake of chaos, it's more...morally ambivalent than that. Far as I can tell, when Lyra says 'chaos', she's actually referring to the absolute freedom to make choices without external coercion. Which, well, laws and social conventions by definition limit a person's freedoms — it's not a, say, negative
interpretation of what 'chaos' means, if that makes sense. It's really more amoral than anything."

"I see how that could make things interesting." Mum, damn her, was looking amused again, a pert little smile that Hermione was finding disproportionately irritating. "And it does make perfect sense, when you think about it. It's not unusual that a person who was abused as a child might be attracted to a religion that emphasises personal freedoms."

"Yes, Lyra herself made that point, explicitly. That conversation was so uncomfortable, honestly, she's just unnervingly nonchalant about the whole thing."

Mum shrugged. "That's not entirely unexpected either. When it comes to serious trauma, a person is sometimes faced with the choice to either break under the strain or remake themselves into something that simply can't be broken. The latter sort of person can come off a bit... Well, I'm sure you're far more familiar with it than I am by now."

"Perhaps a little too familiar," Hermione muttered under her breath. Obviously loud enough that Mum heard it, a smile was twitching at her lips again. "And, okay, I get that, you know, she can't really help it. The way she is, she isn't like that on purpose. It's not, like, a choice to not care the way she does, to be so...so very Lyra all the time."

With a light, not quite fully-suppressed snort of laughter, Mum's face broke into a smirk.

"Oh, don't laugh at—I don't know what else to call it, okay? Lyra's, just, Lyra, if you ever meet her, you'll know exactly what I mean." Hermione would, of course, endeavor to ensure the day her parents ever did meet Lyra was delayed for as long as humanly possible. She really couldn't imagine that going well — and if it did...

Hermione would have absolutely no idea what to do with that.

"But, okay, the real problem is..." When it came time to put words to the actual dilemma — the one she'd been struggling with, off and on, for what felt like ages now — Hermione found she couldn't do it at all. "I mean, the... The I guess normal stuff, that isn't that much of a problem. I mean, it's still kind of weird. The, er, gay thing. I just... It's still kind of weird, you know?"

That hadn't been intended as an actual question that needed an answer, but apparently Hermione was stalling enough, trying to decide how to move on, that Mum decided to fill the silence. "I don't think it's weird at all, honestly."

"Yes, well..." Hermione did not want to have a conversation about sexuality with her mother, no thanks. "Anyway, that's not what I really wanted to talk about, and actually...going about it, I mean —" A nervous laugh cut her off in mid-syllable. "Lyra actually said I could just go ahead and kiss her whenever I want, which was just bloody weird, I don't..."

And there Mum went smirking at her again. That wasn't getting any less annoying the more she did it.

"Anyway, I just... I've been worried that..." Hermione let out a long, thin sigh. "Blaise referred to it as giving in to the madness."

One of Mum's eyebrows went up a tick. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It's hard to explain. She's just so... A lot of the insane things she does or thinks, if you can get her to sit still long enough to explain herself, it makes sense. Mostly. Even when it's something that's kind of awful, she's never doing it for, I don't know, bad reasons. Absurd reasons, sometimes, but there's at least a logic to it. And... Sometimes I just..." Hermione trailed off, running a hand
through her hair — which she immediately regretted, it took far too long to get her fingers disentangled from the stupid mess on her head.

Thankfully, Mum was gracious enough to fill the awkward silence. "I don't see how that's a bad thing, really. I mean, it would be a lot worse if she didn't have rational reasons for doing things, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yes, but I..." She paused for a moment, biting at her lip. "It's really... I just... The way she can just, not care, about what people think of her, you know, or... Sometimes, I wish I could... I'm jealous of her sometimes, I think, for that, that she can just do and say what she wants and, just, not care what anyone thinks about it. And, and I worry that...well, that I'm giving in to the madness, I guess, that... I'm afraid that she's making me not care as much, about important things, and if I spend too much time with her, if I get too..."

"Important things?"

She let out a huff — she guessed it was only appropriate Mum didn't get what she was trying to say, Hermione hardly knew herself. Unfortunately, she couldn't use concrete examples of the ways Lyra has had her...wavering, that would lead to arguments about other things, which Hermione really didn't want to deal with. Things were just simpler if her parents were left ignorant of certain things.

Although...maybe there was a safe topic she could use, when she thought about it. She knew full well her parents hadn't any better of an opinion on the concept of censorship than she did. Maybe she could...

"There's... The magical government has laws about what sort of magic people are allowed to use, right? People have come up with some really nasty things over the millennia, some of the worse things I've heard about are just plain sickening. But it's not just using the magic that they've made laws about — it's illegal to study a lot of these magics too. And not just the really bad ones. Which magics are restricted and which aren't is completely arbitrary. European magical society is very much focused on wizardry — that is, wand magic — and there are entire branches of witchcraft that have gone out of use, some of them even banned. There are a few other forms of magic that are banned or restricted, like runic casting or blood magic and the like, for no real good reason that I can see. Some bureaucrat just decided they didn't like them, and added them to the list. Not just the use of these magics, just owning books that describe them, in specific enough of terms, just that can get you a prison sentence. Sometimes a very long one, depending which kind of magic we're talking about."

The expression was very mild, but Hermione was pretty sure that was a disapproving look on Mum's face, nose scrunched slightly with disdain. "I suppose Lyra doesn't think much of these censorship laws." The lack of judgement on her voice was rather clearer — it looked like this was a safe topic, then.

Hermione shook her head. "No, she really doesn't, repeatedly calls the whole idea idiotic and short-sighted. And, well, she... There's this bookstore, which acts as sort of a black market in restricted texts. Lyra's gotten dozens of books from there, and she's, well, bought some for me. Rather a lot, actually. We're careful — we have them hidden in an unused classroom far away from our dorm, and we use a few charms to prevent leaving forensic evidence they can use to identify us if anyone does stumble across it all — but, technically, it's very illegal. It's a dumb law, but it's still the law.

"And, see, that's the problem, really. Because Lyra's just dragged me along into her insanity, but it makes perfect sense much of the time, and I just— I wish I could do it all as easily as she can, just not care about it, just do what I like, and... And I'm worried, that, that I'm letting her...corrupt me, I
guess? That doesn't sound right. I mean, I've always *tried* to do the right thing, you know, to follow the rules, but Lyra makes a bloody good point, sometimes the rules are *stupid*, and I don't *have* to all the time, and it's so damn *tempting* to just... And I don't know what's happening to me, and she's so *bloody insane*, and I'm afraid that she'll pull too far, and I won't even notice crossing a line that shouldn't be crossed, and I'll look back, and it'll be too late, and—"

Normally, Hermione might have been grateful that *something* came along to interrupt her directionless rambling. She was pretty sure she'd stopped making sense a little bit ago, she didn't even know what she was saying anymore, anything that got her to shut the hell up before she made her mother *too* worried would be welcome. But, well, some distractions were worse than others.

Hermione started, breaking off in mid-syllable, when the doorbell rang. There'd been absolutely no sign up to this point that she was any kind of Seer — in fact, Hermione still wasn't certain whether Seers actually existed — but all the same, she somehow knew. Dread lurching through her, like that instant just after missing a stair, she knew *exactly* what was about to happen.

A moment later, before Mum could ask what was wrong, Dad called from the front of the house, "Hermione, your friend is here!"

*Crap.*

Mum raised an eyebrow at her. "I wasn't aware you'd invited someone over today." Hermione was pretty sure she meant, *I wasn't aware you had anyone to invite over.* Which, she *didn't*, but that was still a nicer way to put it.

"I didn't," she said, feeling her face grow warm again, because there was only one person it could be, one friend who would decide to drop by uninvited, and *how can her timing be this bad? Good? Argh!*

(Who was she kidding, of course it just *was*, this was *Lyra.*)

Mum, apparently reading her mind, grinned and rose from her chair, leading the way out of the room. "Well, it would be rude to hide away in here while she's standing on the doorstep. Shall we go say hello?"

Hermione followed quickly. She *really* hadn't wanted to introduce Lyra to her parents yet! Leaving aside for the moment the fact that she'd wanted this holiday to be a Lyra-free vacation, *and* the particular conversation they'd just been in the midst of — *If* she'd *ever* decided to introduce them, she would have spent at *least* a few hours drilling Lyra on what she was and wasn't allowed to say about what they'd got up to at school, and what was absolutely inappropriate to say to muggles in general and Hermione's parents in particular, and generally made sure she *knew* how important it was to Hermione that she make a *good impression* on them.

*And also how to dress,* she thought, as she caught sight of Lyra, standing in the foyer, looking impossibly out of place, not only because she'd brought the magical part of Hermione's life crashing into her muggle life even more thoroughly than when she and Blaise and Harry had showed up in a *car* over Christmas, but *also* because she looked like she'd just stepped off of MTV or something.

*It...could* have been worse. Maybe. Last time, she and Harry had *clearly* been wearing suits (presumably Blaise's) that they had transfigured to fit. Made being overdressed into a bloody *uniform*. But she and Hermione had been to muggle London *several times* now — spent a whole *day* wandering around Oxbridge! She *had* to know that normal people didn't go around
wearing dayglo-violet, skin-tight crop-tops, Doc Martens, and rhinestone-encrusted jeans cut so low Hermione was frankly surprised they were still in place. Without even a jacket. In March.

(Hermione tried not to look too close or too long, but it was annoyingly difficult.)

"What the hell are you wearing?" she asked, before she could stop herself. "Wait, no — why are you here? How are you here?"

"Madam Granger," Lyra said, bowing slightly to Hermione's mother (which was weirdly formal of her, but so much better than the alternative Hermione couldn't help but be somewhat relieved) before addressing her questions with a bright grin. "Dora left them at Zee's house — she got called in to work, and obviously she couldn't go dressed like a muggle or a teenager, and I needed to go to Charing today anyway, so I thought I'd see if you wanted to get lunch. And I apparated, obviously — I'm never getting in another one of those horrid automobiles if I can help it." She shuddered dramatically — she'd been horribly carsick the entire time they'd been driving around looking for bookstores, Hermione recalled. "Also, hi."

"Er. Hi."

When it became apparent that Hermione was too stunned by Lyra's sudden and inexplicable presence to make introductions, her mother stepped in to fill the void. "You must be Lyra, Hermione's told us so much about you!"

God damn that ridiculous, overconfident smirk. "Oh?"

"All good things, of course." Hermione went very red at that, all the more so when Lyra gave her an exceedingly peculiar look. "I'm Emma, this is my husband, Dan. Care for a cup of tea?"

"Well met, Emma, Dan." Lyra nodded to them, in what Hermione recognized as that little not-quite-formal-enough-to-bow-but-still-being-polite thing the purebloods at school did all the time in passing, but Mum and Dad probably took as accepting the offer of tea. If so, it must have been confusing when she added, "If you've only heard good things, you probably haven't heard as much about me as you think. And I wouldn't want to impose, if you don't want to go, Maïa, I'll just—"

"Nonsense," Dad said, heading toward the kitchen and gesturing for the rest of them to follow. "Come in, come in."

"Ah... So is that a no on lunch, then?" Lyra asked as Hermione's parents pulled away from them, whispering amongst themselves. Hermione could only imagine what Mum was telling Dad.

"You...know it's almost half past two, don't you?" she said, trying not to sound too distracted. (Mum and Dad whispering to each other, and that...all of it that Lyra was wearing, were really not helping.)

"Is it?" Apparently not. Lyra went to pull out her wand, as though she didn't quite believe Hermione and needed to check. Hermione, moving faster than she'd known she could, seized her wrist. Lyra's eyes narrowed as she jerked her hand free. "Maïa. What are you doing?"

"You can't do magic here," Hermione said quickly, before she could cast that tempus charm she used all the time.

Lyra's face cleared. "Oh, right. Harry said something about a house elf and a pudding... It's fucking stupid, though, that you can't do magic in your own home. I can't even imagine. Honestly, how do you find things you've misplaced? What do you do when you want to know the time? How do you keep your tea warm?" she asked, as Dad turned on the kettle and the rest of them settled
themselves around the table. "I mean, I guess you could enchant the cups, that's not the sort of active spell the monitoring field would notice, but you'd still have to activate the enchantment in the first place, and who's going to ask an enchanter to put warming charms on individual teacups? And you don't have any wards at all — how do you stop people just apparating in? I mean, it's not polite, but now that I've been here, I could just pop into your kitchen whenever I wanted. You don't even have scrying wards — everyone has scrying wards!"

Mum and Dad, unaccustomed to Lyra's rambling — admittedly even more rapid-fire today than usual — simply stared.

"Dare I ask what a scrying ward is?" Mum finally asked, breaking into the one-sided conversation.

"And what's apparating?" Dad added.

Lyra gaped at them for a moment, looking from one to the other, and then to Hermione. "Haven't you told them anything about...anything?"

Thankfully, she didn't seem inclined to wait for a response, because Hermione didn't want to admit exactly how little she'd told her parents about magic. They'd flipped through her textbooks, of course, and they'd picked up a couple of introductory theory texts at Flourish and Blotts, but they'd seemed more interested in the history and society of the magical world than the specifics of spells they would never be able to cast.

"Apparition is, well, technically it's throwing yourself out of this plane of existence, into Apparition Space, which is— Well, what exactly it is isn't really important, major theoretical debate. Anyway, you then pull yourself back into this plane at a different place. It's not quite instantaneous, there's a non-linear correlation between the distance travelled in this plane, and the time that it takes — and the amount of magic, as well — but it's fast enough most people consider it instantaneous. And scrying is well, the whole discipline of divination, basically, but in this context, it's using far-seeing spells to spy on someone, usually through a mirror or something. Scrying wards stop an area from being scryed. Again, the technicalities of how they work don't really matter, though unlike the apparition thing, it's not really a subject of debate, I'd just have to talk about theory for about five hours before it would make any sense at all, seriously, divination spells are really neat. Oh, hey! Speaking of school, have you finished your Potions essay, yet?"

"What?" Hermione said, thrown by the sudden change of topic. "Well, no, I haven't. I thought I'd leave Snape's for last, since he's just going to give me an 'E' on it, no matter what I do. I suppose you already did yours?"

"Mmm, nuh-uh. I was going to ask if I could copy yours."

Dad, fiddling with the kettle and cups, didn't seem to have noticed, but Mum, who had been rummaging in the pantry for something, straightened around to glare at the back of Lyra's head at that. Oh, no, she probably thought Lyra was trying to take advantage of her, like so many so-called friends had done in primary school. Even though Hermione had written them already about Lyra beating her in every single bloody one of their classes.

This is not a good impression! she thought futility. Then, in an effort to avoid whatever sharp comment mum was about to make, quickly said, "What? Of course not! Why would you want to, anyway? I know you know the material, and you still have five days before we go back to class!"

Lyra giggled. "But, see, it will annoy dearest Sev far more if I turn in a blatantly copied essay than if I don't turn one in at all. Kind of like it's better to show up to Transfiguration with ten minutes
left in the period than to just skip it."

"You're actually trying to annoy Snape? Why?"

The infuriating girl put on an overly-exaggerated tone of exasperation. "I heard Big Head Weasley telling the twins that Snape's been assigning them far more essays than he did when Big Head was in his fifth year, which I can only surmise is because he doesn't have to mark them. I've decided to offset the extra marking time by refusing to do the essays he sets for our class. Annoying him is just a bonus. Well, that and if I deliberately draw his attention to it, he's more likely to realise I'm doing it on purpose, and not just being lazy and not doing my homework."

"Wait," Mum said, setting a plate on the table. Hermione hadn't even realised they had biscuits in the house. Since when did Mum keep sweets around? "Are you saying you're marking the fifth-year Potions essays, Lyra? Why?"

"Yes," Lyra said, pouting over a biscuit. "All of the first through fifth-years, actually, except for our own class — not sure why, he has to know I don't care enough to play favorites, but I'm not complaining, that is one-tenth of the work, so. And as for why, I think his reasons are obvious, the only fun part of marking is coming up with snide comments to write in the margins, and even that gets old quickly. I'm doing it because if I don't, he'll confiscate Hermione's time turner again. Joke's on him, though," she added brightly. "See, this really only gives me incentive to try to figure out how they work and make my own."

"I...see." Hermione winced at her mother's ominous tone.

"No, you can't copy my essay," she said, attempting to drag the conversation back into safer waters, but to no avail.

"And why would confiscating Hermione's time turner have any leverage over you?" Dad asked, finally claiming a seat for himself, passing around the cups and setting the sugar and lemon in the middle of the table. "No cream, I'm afraid, love," he said to Mum. "It's gone off."

Lyra ignored their byplay, addressing Dad's question. Unfortunately. "She didn't tell you? We've been doing every day three times through. In pieces, the thing's stupidly limited. But yeah, I stole it back in September—" (Another point for the great impression tally.) "—and refused to give it back unless she agreed to use it to its full potential, and take me with her. You'd think school would be more boring when you're there three times as long, but it drastically improves the free-time to class-time ratio, so it's really much better overall. Plus if one of you is already in class, another can leave the grounds entirely, and no one will notice."

(Was that four points, or five? There might have been a couple, earlier, with Snape, and the marking.)

"You don't say," Dad said, giving Hermione a very stern look. The Department of Mysteries had made it very clear to him and Mum as well as Hermione that she was only to use the time turner for classes, and she had to avoid being identified as a time-traveller, or she might be kicked out of the mentee program at the end of the year. Which, well, given the situation, that might have been inevitable from the moment Lyra had appeared in this universe.

Hermione had almost managed to come to terms with it, now. Almost. Okay, she was mostly just hoping she'd be able to claim extenuating circumstances based on Lyra's very existence— surely the Department of Mysteries would be familiar with the Black reputation for messing up everything in their general vicinity. (Okay, she was mostly just in denial. But she'd almost come to terms with it. If it came down to it, she was pretty sure she valued Lyra's existence more than some
potential future career opportunity, even if it was the Department of Mysteries.)

But she really didn't want to have to explain the whole mess to her parents. Especially with Lyra right there, insisting on being so...very Lyra.

"What have you been doing with your break, Lyra?" she asked, in a desperate bid to change the subject, though she was certain she would be thoroughly interrogated about their exploitation of the time turner as soon as Lyra left, anyway.

"Oh, I've been updating Zee's wards — Ms. Zabini, that is. Seriously, they're terrible. She did them herself, and, well, she's pants at arithmancy. And, I can understand why she might not want people asking questions about why half her house has to be kept magic-free, but really, that's no excuse. It only took me a month or so to come up with three better solutions than the one she's been using. Ridiculous. But yeah, she's in the States for some business...thing, I guess? Also the future late Mr. Zabini lives there, so I guess she's staying with him for a while, too."

"Oh?" Mum managed to interject, as Lyra snagged another biscuit. "Hermione mentioned that you and Harry stayed with Ms. Zabini and her son over Christmas. But if she's on a business trip, who's staying with you and her son?" Hermione successfully held back a relieved sigh when Mum apparently failed to react to the future late Mr. Zabini line — one of her new friends' mothers supposedly being a serial killer was one of those things she didn't want to have to try to explain.

"Er...no one? Well, Harry's there again, too, was that a plural you? Theo stopped by on his way to Ancient House, I should probably make sure he didn't get cursed and die in the library, because it's been a while since I've seen him... And of course the staff come around, but they don't actually stay there. So, yeah, just me, Blaise, and Harry. Why?"

Hermione was willing to bet, based on the worried little crease between her mother's eyes alone, that she disapproved of the idea of three teenagers staying in a house for a week without adult supervision. She was equally willing to bet that Lyra, who considered herself an adult in every way that mattered, wouldn't understand why. Six. She groaned preemptively, which gained her a confused glance from her father, but was otherwise ignored.

"Oh, well, it's none of my business how Ms. Zabini raises her son, of course, I'm just surprised that your parents and Harry's aunt and uncle don't mind you staying the week alone there."

Lyra broke into giggles at that. "You sound like Cissy — I wouldn't presume to judge Mirabella's life choices, but... Give her a little credit, she did make me promise not to blow up her house, and if I wreck her wards and get bored with the project before I finish it, she said she'll convince Severus to kick my arse for her, which, I'm kind of tempted, I'd like to see how good the Death Eaters really were. But it's not like I'm going to get to the point of stripping out her wards this week, anyway — the new stones won't be done, yet. Anyway, I don't imagine Harry told his aunt and uncle. My understanding is that they would prefer to pretend he doesn't exist. And my parents...aren't in the picture."

Mum did an admirable job of staying on point, refusing to be distracted by the mention of Death Eaters, or their Potions Professor potentially kicking Lyra's arse at the behest of the CEO of LES. "You have a guardian, then, like Harry?"

"Oh, well, no, not really. Technically, Sirius is the legal Head of House Black, so he'd be my guardian, but since I'm a more competent adult than he is in practically every way, I'm not sure he really counts. And what little remains of the House Magic thinks I'm the Head, anyway, so there's that."
"Is this the Sirius Black we saw on the news?" Mum asked.

"Highly dangerous madman, convicted murderer, escaped from prison over the summer, been on the run ever since?" Dad specified, presumably in case it wasn't.

"They actually alerted the muggle press? Morgen, Circe, and Lilith, overkill much? Unless they had to, I guess, but— Hey, Hermione, was there a revision of our treaty with the UK and Ireland in Thirty-Three?"

"Which Thirty-Three?" There had been several important treaties between the Wizengamot and the Crown — and various pre-modern states, only some of which had been reaffirmed by successor governments — though Hermione couldn't think of any that had been signed in '33, of any century. If she’d been more specific, maybe...

Lyra stared at her incredulously for a long moment before she apparently remembered, "Oh, right, History of Magic is useless. Nevermind, I'll look it up later, should know the exact text we're using anyway. But speaking of, I'm certain the Treaty of Nineteen-Thirteen includes a clause concerning international... Wonder how the D.I.C. missed that."

"Lyra. What are you talking about?"

"Oh, well, it's not important, really. Just something that's happening next year, I happened to see the guest lists and it's possible the Ministry left a couple very important people off." She grinned.

"In any case, yes, that Sirius. He didn't actually murder anyone, though, he never got a trial, and well... I guess some people might consider him dangerous, he is a Black, after all, but I don't think any of them have actually met him." She shrugged. "He's not really on the run, anymore either. Remember, Maïa, I told you I caught him back in December?"

"What?! Bugger the tally of things Lyra should not have said in front of her parents, there was absolutely no point keeping track anymore. "You most certainly did not."

"Are you sure?" Hermione nodded. "Oh." For a brief moment, Lyra stared back at her, blinking. Then, shrugging, she said, "Well, I caught Sirius back in December, had a House Elf keep him locked up in the nursery over winter hols, which was bloody hilarious, and— Are you sure I didn't tell you this?"

"Oh, my God! Yes, I'm sure! How could you— Ugh! You're infuriating, you know." Mostly because Hermione couldn't help feeling more put out about the fact that Lyra hadn't mentioned any of this to her than that she was harboring a fugitive.

"It's part of my charm. But anyway, after we got Pettigrew into custody, Meda let me ship Siri off to France. He's staying in Molitg-les-Bains while she gets his trial in absentia off the ground. I should ask her about getting a retraction in the muggle papers, too, I guess. He should be able to reveal himself once the news that the trial has been confirmed reaches him on its own, you know, to avoid looking too suspicious. I mean, everyone will suspect we knew where he was all along, but there's no real proof. But that should take care of the rumors about his trying to kill Harry, and the Aquitaines would never extradite anyone to Britain, so he should be fine and I expect the dementors will be pulled back before the end of the year."

"Dementors?" Dad repeated. He and mum had been exchanging a series of concerned looks for the past several minutes.

"Soul-sucking demons? Popularly considered evil? Make people exceedingly boring when they come 'round? Maïa didn't mention them? They normally guard the prison Sirius escaped from, but
they're currently stationed at Hogwarts, because— Well, mostly because everyone in the Ministry is a moron, really— Oh! Speaking of morons, I guess Druella's still alive, so she might technically have some claim over me, but, well, that would depend on her recognising my existence, and probably also coming back from wherever she ran off to when Cygnus died. I still haven't found their marriage contract, though. She might have reverted to the Rosiers, in which case, yeah, it'd be Sirius."

"Druella and Cygnus? Your mother and father I presume?" Mum's face was completely unreadable, but Hermione rather thought her tone was disapproving. Whether that was because she disapproved of Lyra or what little Hermione had told her of her parents, she really couldn't tell.

"Well, bearer and sire, at least."

From how the disapproving look grew stronger, if only barely, Hermione would guess it was the latter. "Any other family?"

"I have two sisters, but one married out of the family, and one of them disowned us. They both have kids. Draco's a prat, Maïa may have mentioned him at some point, he is in our year—" Mum raised an eyebrow at that — probably both because Hermione had mentioned Malfoy, and also because that implied that Lyra's siblings were far older than she was. Not impossibly so in the magical world, but still unusual. "—but Dora's great. Pity Meda won't let me bring her back into the House. But anyway, it's really just me, Sirius, and Harry. Kind of. He's Siri's godson, so he's our responsibility. Well, mine, really, since Sirius is an incompetent, wanted idiot. And there's Other Bella, of course, but she's...unwell. And also in prison."

"Other Bella?"

"Er." Lyra hesitated, her eyes going momentarily unfocused and distant as they did every so often. Then she blinked, and shrugged. "My counterpart from this dimension."

"What?!
Lyra looked at Hermione as though she was the one who'd gone mad, here. "Why are you freaking out, you already knew that. I know you did. Blaise will back me on this!"

"Because, you lunatic, how long did it take for you to tell me that? And now you're just telling my parents? You've hardly met them!" And, she just— Letting people know she was a time traveler from the past — which was supposed to be impossible — couldn't be a good idea. There was a reason Lyra had come up with a (patently fake) cover identity in the first place. What the hell was she thinking?!

"Well, yes, but they're muggles. Who are they going to tell? And who would believe them?
Hermione considered objecting to that, but, well, Lyra wasn't wrong — no one in the magical world had much respect for muggles at all, even the ones who supported muggleborn rights and muggle protections. (Sometimes even especially them.) "Besides, it's not like it's not going to come out eventually. Honestly, I'm surprised no one's figured it out, yet, even though it is impossible as fuck."

"Could you not swear in front of my parents?" Hermione snapped, though she wasn't entirely certain they were even paying attention at the moment, instead whispering animatedly to each other at the other side of the table. She was fairly certain she heard the words flux capacitor and the bloody Doctor and Tricia McMillan's Earth mentioned in passing.

"Er... Well, no, probably not," she said, very seriously. Too seriously for her response to be
anything other than sarcastic. Sure enough, she followed up with, "I mean, I probably can't not swear. I'm a bit of a twat like that, in case you haven't noticed."

"It's magic, Dan, we don't have to understand it." Mum, at least, appeared to finally have processed the counterpart from this dimension comment. "So you're..."

"A time traveller from the past is probably the easiest way to think of it," Hermione explained, rather reluctantly.

"Except, not the exact past of this universe. As far as I can tell, we diverged from each other somewhere in the Nineteen Thirties, so it was already a bit different when I left in Sixty-Three. You know, technically, I'm probably older than you," she said with a grin, nodding at Mum. "Yes, some people would argue that the thirty years I 'skipped' don't really count—" Hermione being one of those people. "—but the way query spells work, magic still considers me to have been born in Nineteen Fifty. That's one of the reasons it's bound to come out eventually. Like I said, divination is really neat. Anyway, my point was, I definitely don't require adult supervision. And Blaise and Harry have been taking care of themselves almost as long as I have. Honestly, I'm not really sure why you think we shouldn't be left alone. We're not going to starve or wander off and get lost or accidentally blow ourselves up or curse ourselves, and — er, actually, like I said, I should probably check on Theo — but I can almost certainly reverse anything he's managed to do to himself, and Blaise and Harry have been spending all their time playing mind games and being boring, so."

"What's she in prison for?" Dad asked, apparently out of nowhere. He'd been rather quiet for some time, now, simply watching Lyra ramble with a flat, disapproving stare.

"Huh?"

"Your alter ego. What's she in prison for?"

"Well...technically? Torturing a couple of people into insanity using an Unforgivable, but really, she was one of the leaders of the Death Eaters — Hermione has at least told you about the war, right?"

She had. Though not in much more detail than the history books. Her parents nodded.

"Yeah, well, the Longbottoms were only the last of her Azkaban-worthy offences. They didn't bother prosecuting her for any of the others, since that's already two lifetime sentences. I'm kind of surprised they didn't chuck her through the Veil, honestly. Azkaban sounds boring, yeah, but if Sirius got out, she definitely could, and you'd think anyone who considers Sirius dangerous would consider her too dangerous to live. Not that I'm complaining, but, well, I think I already said, everyone in government are idiots."

Okay, that was it. "What the hell is wrong with you today, Lyra?"

Lyra just raised a questioning eyebrow at Hermione, took a sip of tea and another biscuit. Mum and Dad looked rather more surprised at her sudden outburst than she did.

"You...do realise that you just told my parents that a version of you was one of the head Death Eaters and is in prison for torturing people into insanity? And that you're a time traveller, and you're just... You're being weirder than usual," she finished lamely. Though really, she wasn't being that much weirder than usual, at least in the type of weirdness. Just in the degree, as though her behavior — already infuriatingly impulsive, distractible, and overly energetic — had somehow been turned up to eleven. "Did someone give you a truth potion or, I don't know, speed, or something?"
"Uh...no? Is that some kind of muggle drug? I've never heard of it. And truth potions don't work on me. Well, most of them. But I'd recognize any of the ones that do. Anyway, nothing's wrong, I just came up with a way to—" She spaced out again, just for a moment. "Well, I can't tell you exactly what, it's a surprise." Because that wasn't ominous at all. "But I made a breakthrough on one of my long-term projects a few days ago. The excitement hasn't quite worn off yet. Though honestly, if you think this is bad, you should have seen me yesterday. Blaise actually tried to lock me out of a room because I was annoying him. Blaise. He never gets annoyed."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She couldn't help it, Lyra just sounded so delighted with herself. "God, sound more impressed with yourself, why don't you."

"Whatever. Point is, nothing's wrong, this just...happens, sometimes. I'll probably crash in a week or so. And then there's usually all sorts of consequences for things I did without thinking them through to make life interesting for the next few weeks."

Right, so when Zabini used the term manic, he meant in the clinical sense. And of course he couldn't have been more explicit about that. Lovely. Just lovely. Mum exchanged another significant look with Dad, and then with Hermione. This time, she was pretty sure she knew what they were thinking — it had been in their textbooks that she'd read about psychology, after all.

"Though there probably won't be many this time, I mean, since we left school, I've mostly just been playing with Zee's wards. She agreed to let me fix them, as long as I ran the plans past a 'real' wardcrafter first — as though I don't know what I'm talking about, honestly!"

Hermione did her best to seem skeptical, because really, Lyra wasn't an actual wardcrafter, but she had chosen to say she'd been raised by a cursebreaker for a reason. She had cracked the box she'd been given to keep her time turner in in the time it took Hermione to take a bloody shower, so. "Well...you are fourteen. And apparently in the middle of a manic episode."

"Well, yeah, if that's what you want to call it, I guess."

Somehow, knowing that Lyra didn't realise this wasn't normal, didn't make Hermione feel better about not having been warned about the possibility. She hadn't been this manic the last couple of days at school, had she? Or had three days away from her reset Hermione's perception of normal behavior?

"But Zee knows me. Here, look." She pulled a full-sized notebook apparently out of nowhere and passed it to Hermione. It was filled with page after page of runes and diagrams, none of which meant much of anything to her, though she obviously recognised them as the blueprints for runic inscriptions and ward-stone specifications. "The first six pages are the implementation for the most elegant of the five solutions I found for segregating the magical and non-magical areas of the house, then there's the standard wards, and a defensive suite you might see on a noble seat — not like one of the Black or Monroe or Bones properties, because as far as I know, no one's ever tried to assassinate Zee, but like the McKinnons or Abbotts — and a couple of avoidance wards, with amulets keyed to let her muggles in, which, yes, is a security flaw, but Blaise said she wouldn't go for tattooing the key onto the staff. Plus, what if they had to let one go? And I told him they could just—"

"You did all this since the beginning of break?" Hermione asked, because she was fairly certain Lyra was about to say that they could just kill any servant Ms. Zabini decided to fire, and her parents were already clearly uncomfortable with the revelations of the past few minutes, sitting in silent judgment on the other side of the table, giving her looks that suggested they'd be having a long talk about Lyra's suitability as a friend the moment she left.
"Uh, no, that would be absurd, even for me. I've been working out the magic-isolation wards and the arithmantic interactions for the past few weeks to keep myself awake in Defense. Night Mares? Really? How much time do we really need to spend on just don't get on the fucking horse? And I spent most of Sunday measuring the house and grounds — *twice*, actually. See, the inside of the house is the same size as the outside, which is just... She didn't even expand her closet or compress the corridor between her bedroom and the morning room, it's bloody weird. Thought I'd done something wrong the first time, but no. Just...purely euclidean architecture. Whatever, made the arithmancy easier, I guess. Tailoring the outline to the actual spaces that needed to be covered only took like, six hours. I made a clean copy and sent the plans to the goblin who manages my accounts yesterday morning, asked him to have the cursebreaking department have a look at it. They're perfectly fine, of course. It's not like I haven't been doing this since I was *seven*, or anything."

"Seven?" Dad repeated, rather incredulously, his curiosity about the world they'd managed to learn so little about apparently overcoming whatever else he was thinking. "Like an apprenticeship or something? Is that common, in your world?"

"Ah...no, not really. I mean we do *have* apprenticeships, and yes, they would traditionally start around that age, traditionally being, ah...two- to three-hundred years ago, or so — but you don't do your whole apprenticeship and then go to Hogwarts, they're considered post-secondary educational tracks these days, the official international guild-standard programs won't look at an application until you've got your NEWTs. You can go the independent route, just find some master willing to train you, or go at it on your own, but the guilds make it positively hellish getting recognized as a member if you do. Well, enchanting and wardcrafting are worse than most, but. Ciardha, my tutor, he just specialised in the runic arts, so we spent about half our time on wardcrafting and cursebreaking. I think I passed the ten-thousand-hour mark a couple years ago, that's usually considered the point to start considering your mastery project, but like I said, the guilds are terrible to get into, and the only reason to bother with official certification is if you want to teach or do this for a living, and I really don't."

"Seriously? Are you having me on?"

Lyra reaching for yet another biscuit, gave her a blank look that suggested she actually *wasn't*. "About what?"

"Ten-thousand hours is more time than we spend in class the entire time we're at Hogwarts! And that's *including* the useless classes!"

Lyra snorted, apparently amused by her characterization of some of their classes as useless, but honestly, what *was* the point of Astronomy? And there was *no* way to better describe Divination...

"I've been studying or using magic at *least* six hours a day, *every* day, since I was *three*, Hermione. Closer to twelve, on average, since I turned seven. And that's *not* counting history, languages, and etiquette."

Dad looked almost as horrified at that as Hermione felt — surely it couldn't be good for *three-year-olds* to be taught magic, especially if they were forced to study it *six hours a day*. (Mum, rather disconcertingly, *didn't* look horrified. Slightly surprised, maybe, but almost more...calculating, than horrified. Which was, in itself, slightly horrifying. Hermione could only *imagine* what she was thinking...)

"Hogwarts isn't really about learning magic. Yes, it does teach kids the bare minimum of what they need to know to control themselves and get a job at the Ministry, or something, but anything we learn in class, you could learn on your own — probably ten times faster, if you really worked at it.
At best, the magic they teach is a starting point. Anyone who wants to excel beyond their standard of mediocrity almost has to have the initiative to engage in extensive self-study."

Hermione sputtered at that for a moment before managing to ask, "Well then, what is the point, if we're not really there to learn things?!"

"Well, we are there to learn things, just...not magic. According to Walburga and Zee, it's more about, well, developing social relationships among our peers, mostly. And forcing people like me, who spent the first ten years of their lives being indoctrinated with the values of their own House, to develop a degree of autonomy and class consciousness, break up the insularity of our society, basically." Then she shrugged.

That sounded patently absurd to Hermione, but she couldn't help but notice her mother nodding slightly to herself, nibbling at her lip in contemplation.

"I'm inclined to believe them, especially since, well, the curriculum was better back in the Sixties, but it still wasn't good. Though this latest generation has really dropped the quaffle when it comes to early childhood education — Blaise and Daphne and Theo, yeah, okay, they're alright. Susan Bones and Zach Smith, and a few of the Ravenclaws, too. But most of the other kids in our year don't seem to know, well, anything really, even in Slytherin. Even Draco, I can't even really explain how badly Cissy spoiled that brat. Meda did better, and Dora didn't even need to prepare to take on the responsibilities of a Noble House. Seriously, House Malfoy is completely screwed."

"Yes, well, I'm pretty sure forcing a three-year-old to study for six hours a day counts as child abuse," Hermione informed her.

"I'm pretty sure it only counts as abuse if it's not the social norm," Lyra shot back. "Which it is. Was, I guess. Generally speaking, my upbringing was very in keeping with the times. Or, well, it wasn't that far outside the norm, in most ways, at least. And you have to admit, it got results. Anyway, while I was waiting for the goblins to get back to me— " What? Oh, she'd gone back a couple of topics, as though the conversation hadn't deviated since Hermione had asked what she'd been doing with her break. "—I started on the dueling wards — Zee doesn't care about those at all, so, not necessary to pre-check them, and I did promise her I wouldn't blow up her house, so if I want to practice runic casting at all, it had to be done. I also integrated a bunch of the features from the Hogwarts Dueling Arena, have you seen that thing? It's amazing, seriously. You should come next time we break in. Those I finished at school, they didn't need to be tweaked to the actual space, so I spent most of Monday on that, just painting them, not carving, I wanted to test them first. Which I got Dora to help me with this morning. She's an auror," she added, for Mum and Dad's benefit, as though they actually knew what an auror was.

"Aurors are kind of like DIs...if DIs had SWAT training," she explained, in response to Dad's er...

"...Ah."

"Not sure what that means, but she's a complete badass. We spent a couple hours warming up, and then I made the mistake of telling her to stop going easy on me. Ten rounds, and I think the longest I lasted was two minutes? And that was using every dirty trick I know." As though lasting two minutes in a duel with a bloody auror wasn't impressive itself, especially after spending a couple of hours warming up — honestly, Hermione couldn't tell if Lyra had any idea how ridiculous she really was. "But she was ordered in, and then I realized the goblins had owled my plans back, so I spent a couple hours breaking up the specs so no one will be able to figure out exactly what I'm doing, which is why I'm headed to Charing."

"Er, what?" Hermione was fairly certain she'd missed something there, or else Lyra had assumed
"There's no fucking way I'm going to carve an entire house's worth of wardstones on my own. I'm having it hired out — that's what journeymen are for. In pieces, because Zee said I could only do this if I could do it without making anyone too suspicious. I'm using an Incan technique to construct what would traditionally be single stones piecemeal from a bunch of smaller stones carved to lock together. Uh...the last four pages in that," she explained, pointing to the notebook still sitting in front of Hermione. "It's actually really neat, see the Inca didn't actually have a writing system, they recorded information in knots. But they did have defensive wards — actually something we would recognise as wards, I mean, not like most of the Americas. The channeling elements, what would be the runes in Western wardcrafting, were defined by the shapes of blocks and the three-dimensional intersections between them when they were fitted together. Which, when you combine it with Western wardcrafting, means you can spread your wards across eight or ten stones and then fit them together, instead of putting the whole thing on one stone for your carver to read as they're doing their work. Really cut down on the mortality rate among journeymen, or so Ciardha said. So I have a bunch of different pieces I need made. Preferably by competing shops, so they won't get together and work out what I'm doing. But there's at least a dozen between Diagon and Knockturn, so it should work out alright. Still won't be done in time for me to set it up before we go back to school, especially since they won't have non-standard blocks pre-shaped, but stripping the wards she's already put up is going to take at least a week, anyway, so."

Hermione gave her a very pointed look as she took the last biscuit — it had to be her sixth, at least. "I did come to see if you wanted to get lunch because I was hungry," Lyra pointed out, entirely unapologetically. "Still up for that, by the way, I haven't had real food since...yesterday?"

Mum gave Lyra a rather concerned look. Hermione didn't think she noticed it. Dad snorted, probably thinking of her earlier claim that she didn't require adult supervision, though she wasn't sure how much difference it would make if she did. She was pretty sure Lyra would just do whatever she wanted to, regardless of whether she had anyone telling her when to eat or sleep. Speaking of which... "Are you saying you forgot to eat all day? How long has it been since you slept?"

"Sunday? Yep, Sunday. Got a couple hours between measuring and fitting the ward-scheme. Why?"

"Because it's Tuesday."

"Yes, and? It'll probably be another eight hours or so before I pass out again. And I'd like to get to the wardsmiths' shops and get real food before then, so — what time is it, now?" she said, probably rhetorically, since she immediately reached for her wand to find out for herself.

"No magic!" Hermione reminded her.

"Dark Powers, that's annoying. Do you want me to fix that for you? I totally can, I'm already going to get a bunch of stones carved anyway, and this house isn't that big, you'd only need, what, five? seven? Either way, they'd probably be done in a day or two, could get everything set up before we go back to school."

"Wait — what?" Mum said, startled.

"Sure. Pass me that back," she said, gesturing toward the notebook. "And a quill, if you have one."
Dad grabbed the biro from the pad by the telephone, which she took as though she suspected it might explode. "You write with the pointy end," Hermione informed her.

Lyra rolled her eyes, scribbling a few lines of runes on a blank sheet of paper. "This is all the text you need for a ward that would slow the dispersal of magic within the warded space sufficiently that the monitoring spells wouldn't register most magic being used. And this," she added a few more lines, "is a basic anti-apparition jinx. We can also include anti-disapparition, portkey wards, uh...gate spells — though those haven't been popular since the floo was invented — not shadow-walking, that's stupidly hard to ward against. It's also really difficult to master, though, so it doesn't really matter. I've only gotten as far as sticking things in shadow-pockets, still, and I've been working on it for months, bloody annoying. This is a variation on a Somebody Else's Problem field that will lead anyone who notices anything amiss here to disregard it, including the authorities, unless they're specifically prepared to counter it — I wouldn't worry, really, it's fairly rare. Let's see...common post wards—"

"Is this legal?" Dad asked suddenly, probably clued in by the Somebody Else's Problem ward that something was amiss.

Crooking an eyebrow, Lyra asked, "How much would it matter, on a scale of one to forget I ever said anything?"

"One," Mum said, without missing a beat. Huh. Hermione had guessed she'd be okay with breaking the censorship laws, but she hadn't expected this.

Lyra giggled, nodded. "I like you. Good priorities."

Dad glared at the both of them. "Well, it is kind of important, isn't it?"

Lyra hesitated for a moment, then tore a page out of her notebook and scribbled something on it before passing it to Mum and grinning at Dad. "It's fine, you have nothing to worry about. It's not actually illegal for there to be wards on your house, it's just really illegal for me to put them up. It's also not illegal for Hermione to do magic outside of school. She is supposed to be supervised by a qualified mage, except in a whole list of exceptional cases, but that law has literally never been enforced. If I understand it correctly, the point of the monitoring thing is to protect muggle parents from their kids using magic to control or manipulate them, and, well, they don't really consider it a high priority, prosecuting witches on behalf of muggles. Even muggleborns." Hermione winced at the appalled looks which appeared on both her parents' faces. That was exactly the sort of prejudice she'd not told them about over the past two years. "Anyway, the monitoring charm just tells them if magic is used in this house, not by whom. There's a separate Trace on the wands of underage mages, but that's easy to get around. I already took it off Hermione's."

Which Hermione had not known. "You did what?"

"The Trace? It's easy enough to break with ritual magic. Not even high ritual. It took like, ten minutes. And now your wand isn't registered as belonging to an underage witch, so no one will care if you use magic away from here. Or, well, other muggleborns' homes, I suppose."

Hermione knew she probably should be quite offended — mages took other people fiddling with their wands very seriously — but, honestly, she'd prefer the Ministry not to be able to monitor the spells she was casting. Not because she planned on doing anything illegal, exactly, she just didn't trust them. But that wasn't really the point. "When did you do that? And why didn't you ask me?"

"Before we went to London the first time, and because you probably would have said no." Well, if she'd asked all the way back then, she might have, but now—
"London?" Dad repeated, in a tone which promised that Hermione was going to have to explain that tonight as well as...everything else. "The first time?"

Damn it, Lyra!

She ignored him, of course, pointing at the noted she'd passed to Mum. "If anyone gives you any trouble, that's my solicitor, just tell her it's all my fault, she'll take care of it. Probably won't even be surprised, really."

"You...have a solicitor on retainer?"

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me," Dad muttered.

"Sure, why not? Well, the House of Black does, technically, but I'm kind of the closest thing we have to a functioning Head of the House right now, so essentially yes."

"How much would this sort of thing cost?" Mum asked, reaching across the table to pull the ward-scheme toward herself.

"Emma, you can't possibly be serious."

"Well, why not? Hermione would never hurt us, and I'd much rather get in trouble for having protections against other mages than abide by the laws of a country we aren't even recognized by, and then end up needing them. Especially if the law puts most of the culpability on Lyra. No offence, dear."

"Oh, none taken. None at all." She grinned, then whispered, very audibly, "Your mum is great, why didn't you ever tell me your mum is great?"

Because Hermione loved her mother, she really did, but Mum had a terrible, terrible habit of taking over everything she touched, from PTA fundraisers to book clubs to Hermione's entire life. One of the reasons she'd been so excited to go to Hogwarts (a distant second to magic, obviously) had been that her mother wouldn't be able to hover behind her, there, waiting to intervene in teacher conferences and meetings with parents of children who were mean to Hermione, demanding to know every little detail of everything she was learning, trying to protect her and make all her decisions for her and generally being far too interested in everything, even when it was really none of her business.

She loved her mother, she really did, but she needed at least some degree of independence from her. Not to mention, Mum had an uncanny ability to win people over, even people who had no business liking her. She could probably form a working relationship with Narcissa Malfoy, given half a chance. Much as Hermione hated to admit it, she was just a little bit afraid (and not without reason) that anyone who met her mother would like Mum more than they liked her. So no, she had not mentioned that her mum was, in Lyra's terms, great.

Mum smirked in a very self-satisfied way — obviously that little comment had been calculated to win points (why Mum wanted to win Lyra over, Hermione wasn't really sure, since it had been her impression until just now that Lyra was failing miserably at winning her over, or Dad) — but continued as though she hadn't heard. "Plus it's patently unfair that Hermione can't practice magic over the summer when all of the — what did that book call them? the purebloods — can. It wouldn't interfere with the electricity, would it?"

"Well, they would, but I came up with this neat little work-around, see, you just have to use an insulating metal like iron or lead to make a ring to seal to the outside of the wires bringing the
electricity in, and then enchant *that* so it sits in the ward like a little tiny gate. Can't do any blanket wards, like to throw someone out, if they're already in, but that just means you have to be careful about who you bring in in the first place. Since you're muggles, you won't be able to adjust them on the fly. I can still key you specifically to the wards if you're willing to use blood, but you'd probably need amulet-keys to bring visitors in. Or, I guess I could just adjust them to keep out anyone sufficiently magical, and key in Hermione. That'd probably be better." She crossed out a few lines — she'd been writing the whole time they'd been talking — and replaced them with a new set of runes. "How large is the house?"

"Just over a hundred square meters."

"And it's three levels including the attic, and basically a square layout, right?" Mum nodded. "So six meters to a side should cover the footprint, no problem. Though squares are really a poor shape for wards. Quadrilaterals in general suck, actually. A septagon would be a better fit than a pentagon — really, the more points, the better, but the more stones you use, the longer it takes to carve them. And to ensure that the dome covers the upper stories entirely, you'd want to pull it out a bit further, so you'd actually end up with most of your gardens covered, too. Though, I wouldn't do any flashy magic out there, anyway, there's only so much an attention deflecting ward can cover, and anything stronger would disrupt the magical currents around here and completely defeat the purpose of the slow-release ward. We're far enough from any ley lines that there aren't any complex currents to account for, and close enough to tap the River Cherwell for power... Yeah, that should work," she declared, her eyes skimming over the page. "Assuming the wardsmiths aren't complete *trolls*, I can come back and set it up on Saturday."

"Hold on a second, we haven't actually agreed—" Dad began, but mum cut him off.

"And *how* much did you say this would cost, precisely?"

"What, like, if you got a professional wardcrafter to do it? Maybe...two hundred galleons, or so? I'm not really sure what the rates are in this time. Why?"

"Because my parents don't have fifty thousand pounds to spend on a magical security system, Lyra," Hermione hissed through gritted teeth. She'd better not be about to—

"Don't be stupid, I wouldn't have offered if I expected you to *pay* me." Of *course* she was. Yet another absurdly overexpensive gift, for which she wouldn't desire any apparent compensation at all, given simply *because she could* (or because she thought censorship laws were stupid, or because she thought this would be an entertaining way to spend her Saturday, or *whyever*).

Hermione let her head fall to the table, hiding behind her hair as her mother's voice took on a tone of offence. "Of course we'll pay you," she said, (ignoring Dad's very annoyed, "*Emma!*") "You have to at least let us compensate you for the materials!"

With a low giggle turning her voice to bouncing, Lyra said, "I think I had this exact same conversation with Harry. I really don't need your money. *Really*. A few hundred galleons one way or the other isn't exactly going to break the bank."

Mum had another faint frown going, looking rather reluctant. "Maybe we should wait, sleep on it, and discuss it sometime you're feeling a bit less...impulsive."

Hermione sighed. "That won't make a difference, Mum. She's always like that with money."

"Yeah, well, there's currently more money sitting in the Black vault than I could possibly spend in one lifetime. Seriously, that's not an exaggeration — the goblins limit the market to keep the
economy more or less stable, if I tried to spend the entire Black fortune, even over the next century, it would be destabilising enough that they'd never allow it."

"Wha— Now I know you're messing with me. Is that even possible?" Hermione demanded. It shouldn't be. It really shouldn't be. But with all she'd seen of Magical Britain... Mum and Dad looked like they thought she was exaggerating, but Hermione wasn't sure.

Lyra grinned. "No, it totally is. I was talking to Justin about it the other day, he says Magical Britain is basically a mercantilist society, with the Noble Houses — the ones that still have money, anyway — kind of functioning as the corporations controlling pretty much everything. And of course, the goblins control the actual money. I'm pretty sure the Ministry only agreed to that treaty to limit our power and influence - well, the nobility as a whole, not just the Blacks. Point is, money's not an object. Money is never an object, and likely will never be an object. Many transactions don't even involve gold at any point in the process, houses agreeing to trade this service for these goods, or whatever. Money is only actually used for small, instantaneous transactions between individuals — that's a large part of why the Black fortune is so bloody enormous, we just keep accumulating it, mostly through rents and loans and such, without having to spend it on anything, at least not in any significant volume. Actually, I should probably ask Justin if he wants me to do his house, too, though that might have to wait, I know their property is more on par with the Zabinis'. I would just go ahead and do Harry's, but he won't be going back to the Dursleys, and all of the Potter and Black properties are already warded."

Hermione, still trying to wrap her head around the idea that Lyra considered the House of Black comparable to a mercantilist company — who did she think they were colonizing for resources? — was momentarily distracted. "What do you mean — Harry's not living with the Dursleys anymore?"

"Well, you don't think he wants to, do you? I mean, most humans really don't like being treated like House Elves."

"So...you haven't discussed this with him, yet."

She shouldn't really be surprised that Lyra had the nerve to look confused. "...No? I didn't think it was really necessary, I mean, he knows he has options now — fuck, he can probably stay with Blaise, if he doesn't want to renovate a place for himself — so why would he go back to people who hate magic, and were disappointed that the undead dark lord didn't manage to kill him in your first year, or the bloody basilisk last year? If he makes it through term without getting his soul sucked out by demons, they'll probably be disappointed again."

"Basilisk?" Mum repeated, followed by Dad's equally disapproving, "Undead dark lord?"

"It— It wasn't really a big deal, the Headmaster had everything under control, I'll tell you later."

Lyra snorted. "Are we talking about the same years, here? There's no way in any of the seven bloody hells Dumbles had any of that under control. He wasn't even in the school the whole three months you were petrified!"

"Petrified?" they said together. Hermione winced. This was going to be bad. This was going to be very, very bad.

As shockingly oblivious as she could sometimes be, Lyra didn't even seem to notice there was anything wrong. "Uh, yeah. Apparently if you see the eyes of a basilisk in a mirror or something, the magic is refracted enough that it just petrifies you instead of killing you. Kind of neat, actually, I'll have to remember to look and see if anyone's written an article about the arithmancy on that.
It'll probably be in Hindi, though, if they have. Hmm..." she trailed off, obviously to consider this ridiculous potential 'problem' — which just gave Hermione's parents enough time not filled with Lyra's insatiable ranting to start in on her.

"You were petrified?"

"For three months?"

"Is that why you weren't answering our letters?"

"How close did you come to actually dying?"

"Why didn't anyone from that bloody school tell us?"

"Why didn't you tell us?"

Lyra looked from Mum, to Dad, to Hermione and back again. "You didn't know?" she said, her tone one of absolute delight. "Oops? Anyway, I really should go if I'm going to get to all the shops before they close, and it sounds like you lot have a lot to talk about. Thanks for the biscuits, Emma. Dan. Lovely to meet you and all that."

And with that, she rose from the table, leant over, and kissed Hermione full on the mouth. Her lips were warm and dry and she smelled like sugar biscuits, and Hermione was far too concerned about the conversation that was about to ensue to enjoy it at all. (Though not too concerned to feel her face growing so hot she probably looked like a bloody lobster.)

"Blaise said I was right. Now you can stop being all weird and awkward, yes? You're welcome."

Hermione, frozen in shock — completely unable to process what had just happened — could only watch her skip back toward the front door (humming a Van Halen song?) before apparently remembering that the whole reason they'd been discussing the economy and Harry and Hermione's close brush with a basilisk was the Grangers' lack of wards, and disapparating from the middle of the living room.

When she finally did recover her ability to speak (well before her mother, she noted, only slightly smugly — she did have far more experience with Lyra, even if Mum was generally harder to shock), all she could think to say was, "You see why I couldn't possibly explain what she's like?!

Mum just fixed her with a pointed stare. "Oh, no, love, you'll not be changing the subject that easily. We want to know exactly what's been going on at that school of yours. From the beginning. Start talking."

...Crap!

Chapter End Notes

Hermione, muggle/magical Easter are both called Easter because they were the same holiday, once upon a time. It's theorised by some that Easter was originally a Germanic pagan holiday marking the beginning of spring, centered on a goddess named Ēastre in Old English, hence the name.

Literary terminology wheeeee. For anyone who cares, capital-R Romanticism is an
artistic/literary/intellectual movement dominant in the first half of the 19th century. Big English language Romantic writers are people like Lord Byron, Keats, Walter Scott, so forth; the Brontës are also quasi-Romantic. The big-name French ones are Dumas and Hugo. So-called "dark romanticism" is probably most famous in Edgar Allen Poe, but Irving and Melville and Hawthorne were also a thing. Modernism is another movement, in France including people like Proust, Gide, du Gard, and the hilarious but extremely racist Céline. The American naturalists referred to include people like Crane, Faulkner, arguably Hemmingway, Steinbeck, that sort of thing.

I realise neither of these points was entirely necessary, but I'm a nerd like that. — Lysandra

Whereas my random trivia is totally necessary:

Easter break is a point where mine and Lysandra's headcanons differ. I had the Traditionalists (who are mostly Dark) throw the Progressives a bone and let them have Muggle Easter off (because Ostara is a Light holiday and they don't much care about it). Obviously we're using Lysandra's headcanon in this story.

[half of her conversations with Lyra at some point involved her getting irritated with Hermione for not knowing something]
The other half involve Hermione getting irritated at Lyra for being generally insane.

Yes, Emma did put out cookies just to make Lyra stop talking and let her get a word in occasionally. Because she's sneaky like that.

The DIC – The Department of International Cooperation. In Lyra's timeline, one department handles both muggle and magical international affairs.

Druella's actually not a moron (the Black sisters get their intelligence from her) she's just really self-absorbed, and really hates children. And in Lyra's opinion, she completely wasted her potential spending all her time and energy on being a Society Lady.

Yes, that was Eris telling Lyra to just tell the Grangers about the time travel, because she can tell that the Grangers knowing more about magic leads to more chaotic futures than their not being involved with Magical Britain, and this is the fastest way for Lyra to establish herself as a trustworthy authority on the magical world. Also, not to tell them about Other Bella, because they're not sure if their plan to save her will work.

(Wait, does this mean Lyra Black and Emma Granger are teaming up? Magical Britain is doomed. —Lysandra)

[flux capacitor and the bloody Doctor and Tricia McMillan's Earth]
References to Back to the Future, Doctor Who, and Mostly Harmless (the fifth book in Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide trilogy)

[my upbring was very in keeping with the times. Or, well, it wasn't that far outside the norm, in most ways, at least]
Yes, Lyra actually believes this.

[She could probably form a working relationship with Narcissa Malfoy, given half a chance]
Yes, this is a reference to Mary Potter. Because I think I'm funny.

Also, I'm slightly jealous that Manic!Lyra is sooo much more productive than hypomanic!Leigha... —Leigha
"Hey, Ginny!"

"Ah!" Ginny, half-lost in a memory of Riddle's — picking them apart and figuring out their context was an ongoing battle, but she was pretty sure she'd just been snogging a Malfoy, which had been...interesting — startled rather badly. "Um, I mean, hi, Harry."

"Red?"

"And Zabini," she added.

Zabini's voice called back, "And Black."

Great. "Are you all going to come in, or just shout at me from the corridor?" she asked, even as Harry and Zabini piled into her (as yet otherwise unoccupied) compartment.

Black, however, stopped in the doorway. "Nah, I'm looking for Hermione. I've been informed I owe her an apology."

"Why?" Ginny asked, morbidly curious.

"Well, she's been all awkward for weeks now because she's very clearly attracted to me and I offered to let her kiss me, but she didn't. She's just been increasingly...awkward. So I kissed her on Tuesday, so things could go back to normal, but then I saw her yesterday and it was even worse."

"Don't forget spilling all the secrets she's been keeping from her parents," Harry reminded her, then explained, "Apparently she thought they'd pull her out of school if she told them about getting petrified last year."

Ginny winced, trying not to think about the role she'd played in that whole fiasco. "And you just told them?"

"It came up in conversation." Ginny could only hope Black sounded more convincingly sorry about that when she finally found Hermione.

Zabini rolled his eyes. "I still can't believe you thought it was a good idea to meet Hermione's parents like that. For future reference, if you're annoying me, you really shouldn't be around people, full stop."

"The Black Madness strikes again? But in my defense, it was a Tuesday — don't muggles work on Tuesdays? And I wanted to go out for lunch, it was their idea to stay and have tea. And Maïa never told me they didn't know! Besides, it's not like they actually decided she couldn't come back."

"You still owe her an apology for kissing her and then skipping away like a lunatic. Go find her," Zabini said, pointing toward the back of the train.

"Yes, yes. Still don't know why, but—"

"Just take my word for it. Go."
"Yes, that. I was going to say that," she said, flipping him off before closing the compartment door rather harder than necessary, and allowing an awkward silence to settle over the three of them.

"So, um..." Ginny said, just to break the silence, "Are Hermione and Black, then...?"

"I...don't think so?" Harry seemed almost as confused about the whole situation as Ginny felt. Just...what? Yes, they did spend an awful lot of time together, but— what? She just...couldn't see it. Yeah, they were both crazy smart, but Hermione was just so very...Percy-like, and she was pretty sure Black thought rules were meant to be broken. All of them. Really, Harry and Zabini made more sense, and she honestly couldn't think what Harry saw in the creepy bastard.

"No, they're not," said creepy bastard said. "Hermione hasn't admitted that she actually wants to date Lyra, yet, and Lyra's completely apathetic about it. How was your break?"

"Bloody terrible," she said flatly. It really had been.

Only she and Ron had gone home. Percy was studying for his NEWTs. He'd planned to camp out in the library all week. Ginny suspected he was actually regretting taking the Head Boy position, since it was cutting into his study time so much. And the twins were, she thought, working on some prank potion and didn't want to leave it, though of course they'd told Mum they were studying for OWLs. She probably hadn't believed them, but she also hadn't questioned them too closely — she had been rather distracted, because, well...

Only Ginny was coming back.

"What happened? It wasn't anything really bad was it? I owled Ron to see if he wanted to get together and hang out, but he never wrote back."

"Er...I'm not sure he got the letter. Mum—" Ginny cut herself off. She could already tell he wasn't going to take this well, but sometimes it was best to tear the bandage off quickly. "Ron's not coming back to school."

Wide-eyed panic flooded Harry's face. "WHAT? Why? Ginny, what happened? Is he hurt, or sick, or—"

"He's fine, Harry, he's just— Well, he's not fine, but he's not hurt, he's just...failing everything, basically."

"So he's not coming back to school?! How— Why— What— Why wouldn't he tell me?!"

"He didn't know! We found out when we got home — Mum was furious. I don't think I've ever seen her that angry— She said she was going to homeschool him for the next two years, drag him through his OWLs kicking and screaming if she had to." Ron would be kicking, Ginny expected, and Mum screaming.

Harry seemed to collapse in on himself. "I— I had no idea! I mean— I knew about Potions, but Snape hates us, I thought... Everything?"

"He... He's been having a bad year. Apparently."

Not as bad as Ginny had had, last year — she was slightly furious about the fact that Mum and Dad hadn't seemed to care nearly as much about her being bloody possessed, but then, she hadn't actually been failing classes (Riddle had made a point of keeping her marks up to avoid suspicion). But apparently his best friend daring to make other friends and finding out that a Death Eater had been sleeping in his bed was bad enough for Ron to fucking give up on anything important
whatsoever. Which, okay, it was kind of disgusting that Scabbers had been Pettigrew all along — Percy wasn't very happy to find that out, either — but Ginny didn't think it was that much more disgusting than Ron letting Scabbers sleep in his bed when he thought he was just a rat. (Ew.) And it was definitely no reason to spend all his time reading comics and listening to quidditch matches on the wireless, or helping the twins with their pranks and trying to convince the boys in Ginny's year that he was a cool, older guy who could bring them back things from Hogsmeade (rather than a lazy, friendless arse), and who knew what else, up in his dorm all alone, instead of doing his homework.

Harry ran a hand through his hair anxiously, his face falling from shock into guilt. "I— I was his best mate, and I didn't even realise— I— We haven't been spending as much time hanging out this year, but— I should have— should have noticed, should have done something, God. Just. He's just gone? He's never coming back?"

"It's not like he died," Ginny snapped.

"Well, yeah, but..."

Zabini, already leaning against Harry's side, his feet pulled up on the bench beside him, snaked an arm around his shoulders, his other hand reaching across to grab Harry's forearm, looking all concerned. "Hey."

"What?"

"It's not your fault."

"What are you— I know that," Harry said defensively, avoiding meeting Ginny's eyes as well as Zabini's. "It's just—"

"No," Zabini said firmly. "Other people's choices are not your responsibility. You don't have to go feeling all guilty just because—"

Harry glared up at him, pulling his wrist away to cross his arms. "He was my first friend, Blaise! The very first person who ever wanted to be friends with me. You know how much we've been through together. The Weasleys have always made me feel welcome, treated me like a brother. He — and the twins — they saved me from the Dursleys, the summer before last. And I haven't had time for him— We've hardly hung out at all lately. And I didn't notice he was having such a hard time he was failing all his classes! I should have. I should have noticed, and I should have said something — it never should have come to this, and now... Now it's too late. Even if Mrs. Weasley changes her mind, even if Dumbledore lets him come back next year, it'll still be months, and Ron's shite at writing letters, and—"

"And you're not his keeper, Harry. It's not your job to make sure he does his homework and keep him happy. It's not your job to take care of him."

Much as she hated to agree with Zabini, Ginny did. Ron was fourteen, he could bloody well take care of himself — all the rest of them had to.

Harry glared at the floor. "You're wrong. Friends should take care of each other. I—"

"I really don't think I am," Zabini said, then hesitated. "It's not— No. You're right." Ginny had never seen Zabini hesitate before, or give up his position in an argument like that. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. It had to be a trick.

Harry obviously hadn't been expecting it, either. "Er...what?"
"Sure, yes, you're right. Friends should support each other, help each other out when they need it. But not at their own expense. Yes, Weasley resented the time you've been spending on other things, and yes, that's probably part of the reason he's been doing so poorly, but—"

"See, it is my fault! I'm a shite best mate, I—"

"Hey, I said but, didn't you hear the but? I wasn't finished. The things you've been spending your time on — learning to duel and occlumency and the Patronus charm — doing your own homework and actually learning something in class — are important. They're things you're doing to better yourself, so you'll have a better life when you leave school. And Weasley would have preferred that you sit around wasting time with him in your common room, doing nothing, just to keep him company? You have every right to have other priorities that are more important than killing time with your best mate."

"I still should have made more time for him— There were times he wanted to hang out and I said no because I was doing something stupid and unimportant with you, or Lyra—"

"Oh, so Weasley's happiness is more important than yours?"

"Stop making excuses for— Wait what?"

"What I'm hearing is you think you should have spent all your spare time with Weasley instead of doing things you wanted to do, just to make him happy."

"Don't be stupid, of course I don't think that, it's just— Going to visit Sylvie or staying at yours over break instead of here, that's not as important as Ron being so miserable he was failing everything and dropped out of school!"

"It wouldn't have made a difference. He didn't want you to be friends with Lyra or me or Justin. He didn't even like sharing you with Hermione, especially when she wasn't helping him with his homework — he never did. He wanted to be the only person who mattered in your life. Made him feel special that the Harry Potter was his friend."

"Stop it!" Harry demanded, shaking off Zabini's arm and scooting away. "That's not why he's friends with me! Why would you— Is that why you're friends with me?"

Zabini rolled his eyes. "No, I'm friends with you because it's pretty bloody impossible to teach someone occlumency and not come to care about their general wellbeing, and because Lyra has adopted you, and because under that hotheaded facade, you're actually a fairly cunning, witty person who I actually enjoy spending time with — I know, I find it as surprising as you do. I'm saying it because it's true, Weasley's a—"

"Are you trying to make it sound like I never should have been friends with him in the first place? Because that's so—"

"No, I'm just trying to make the point that this was inevitable."

"Inevitable," Harry repeated in a tone of flat disbelief, glaring at Zabini over crossed arms.

"Yes. It would just have been quicker and more dramatic. You would have eventually disappointed him in some way, made him realise that he wasn't the center of your world or that you wanted more in your life than sitting around being a lazy bum with Weasley Number Six, made him feel slighted or betrayed in some way, and your friendship would have imploded — that's just what happens when one person's sense of self-worth is completely invested in their relationship with someone else. And it's not—"
"Do you have a point, Blaise?" Harry asked coldly.

"Yes. I was just getting there. It's not your fault that your friendship with Weasley is completely unhealthy. And you're not obligated to conform to his idea of what it should be. Even though you making other friends was a contributing factor in his downward spiral, it's not your fault. It's really, really not."

Harry had apparently decided this conversation was over. "I'm going to the loo." Zabini moved his legs — stretched out across the entire compartment — so he could get out, which was, quite frankly, more accommodating than Ginny would have expected, especially in the middle of an argument.

As soon as the door closed again, Zabini sighed. "He doesn't believe me, yet, but he will. Eventually. What's up with you? I kept expecting you to interrupt. I mean, Weasley is your brother."

"I know—"

"Well, I would hope so."

"Shut up, I mean, I kept thinking I should, but, well... The very first letter Ron sent home when he got here, he was bragging about being friends with Harry. You know how bad a crush I had on him? Before I even met him, I mean."

Zabini nodded. "Though you're getting much better at keeping your thoughts to yourself."

Ginny ignored that, though she supposed it was good to have some confirmation that her occlumency practice was having some effect. "Yeah, well, if Ron ever says he didn't want just as much for Harry to be his friend as I wanted to marry him, he's lying. Besides, he's been a complete prat this year. If I don't want to hang out with him, I don't see why Harry should. How much of that was an act?"

Zabini raised an eyebrow at her abrupt change of subject. "How much of what was an act?"

"Oh, you know what I mean — pretending you're all concerned and actually care about him."

He gave her the smirk that always made her want to throw a Bat-Bogey Hex at him. "What makes you think I was pretending?"

She gave him the most Slytherin look of disbelief she could muster, as though she couldn't believe he'd even tried to just lie about that, of all things. "Well, you see, Zabini, your mouth was moving and words were coming out."

That actually startled a snort of laughter out of him. "That's very cynical of you, Red." Then he shrugged. "Twenty-five per cent? What? She really hadn't expected an answer. Which must have shown on her face, because Zabini laughed at her again before he continued. "Okay, maybe thirty-five. The sentiment is genuine. I really do like him, and I don't think he should be making himself miserable over your prat of a brother. And not just because I think it's more of an interesting challenge to try to fix people instead of breaking them. The expression and performance of it..." He shrugged again. "Well, almost all of that is always calculated, but most people at least put some thought into how others are going to perceive the things they say and do."

Which...was a point. About half the time Ginny had to talk to anyone, she felt like she was pretending to be someone she wasn't, really. (Someone who hadn't been possessed, and almost died in the Chamber of Secrets, someone who didn't have the memories of a teenage Dark Lord floating
around in her head...) But she didn't particularly want to think about that. "Well, I didn't say anything about you trying to fix him..."

The boy interrupted, rolling his eyes. "No, Daphne did. Apparently I'm not allowed to just like people. Which, you'd think she at least would know better, I like her — we've been friends since we were five! But whatever." He pouted, probably not really put out at all.

"Shut up, I was still talking— You might not be trying to fix him, but you'd better not break him." Zabini put on an expression of surprise, but didn't say anything. "I'm serious — if you hurt Harry with your manipulative dragonshit, I will make you regret it."

"I'm not going to hurt him." She couldn't tell if that offended tone was genuine or not. That was always the problem with Zabini, she could never tell if he meant anything he said or did. "Not on purpose, at least. I assume you are aware that teenage romance almost always ends in tears. But yes, I will do my best to avoid that." Then he smirked and made an 'X' with his finger, right over the spot where she'd cut him when they were dueling. She was sure that was intentional, which meant he understood that he'd be getting cut again (at the very least) if he fucked up. "Cross my heart."

"Good," she said lightly. She pulled a book from her bag with every intention of ignoring Zabini as much as possible for however long he stayed — she couldn't quite bring herself to keep working on Riddle's memories with him sitting right there, even if she had gotten good enough at occlumency that he wouldn't just overhear — but before she could open it, Black stormed into the compartment, slamming the door behind her.

"I take it the apologizing didn't go well?" Zabini said, clearly trying not to laugh.

"No. I'm not even sure if it was the 'I thought this would make things less awkward, but it didn't, so I'm open to pretending that it never happened' part or the part about this really being for the best with her parents that made her all snappish. And I know I was going off-script, but what the hell was I supposed to offer as restitution? You told me not to be formal, and I'm still pretty sure I didn't do anything wrong in the first place! If you still think someone owes her an apology, Blaise, you can do it. I give up." Zabini opened his mouth, but Black just talked over him. "Change of subject! What happened to Harry?"

Zabini sighed. "Red told him that the Penultimate Weasley isn't coming back to school. He said he was going to the loo, but I presume he's gone to find Longbottom, Finnegan, and Thomas to break it to them."

"Oh." Black blinked at the two of them for a couple of seconds. "I didn't realise the twins were taking care of that one — I already talked to Babbling about taking NE Runes next year. Do you think it will still count if two of our number leave Divs forever? Because I was really looking forward to not breathing in her terrible incense anymore. Shit gives me a headache, and she gave me detention that time I used a Bubble Head charm in class. I already spend enough time with Sev, thanks."

What? Seriously, none of that made any sense, at least to Ginny. Zabini seemed to understand at least part of it, since he suggested, "Just give it a couple weeks, then stop going."

Whatever. "If you two are going to talk, can you put up a silencing? I'm trying to find a healing proxy to practice bone-breakers on," she said, hefting the book at them.

Black grinned. "If there's nothing in there, I'll pick up a couple things on Bioalchemy for you next time I go to Town," she said, before she began casting a palling around Ginny's corner of the
The last thing she heard before it went up was Zabini, making a slightly disturbed face at her, saying, "You know, I think you may have created a monster with that one."

Ginny snorted softly to herself as she opened the book. She really couldn't care less what Zabini thought of her. If he wanted to call her a monster for learning how to protect herself, that was fucking fine. He'd just better remember that if he hurt Harry with his stupid mind games, the "monster" would be coming after him.

"We've been at it for some time now, if you wanted to call it a day."

Some part of Harry bristled at that, but it was easy enough for him to turn it aside, keep his annoyance from showing itself. Keeping Blaise out of his head was still bloody impossible, but at least occlumency was good for something. Though, being too aware of his own thoughts, which was just a natural consequence of playing around with mind magic, had its own downsides as well — before, he probably wouldn't have been able to hide his annoyance, but he also might not have been entirely aware of why he was getting so annoyed in the first place. But now he did, and he wasn't entirely sure how to feel about it.

He hated being patronised. He really, really did. With the traipsing around in his memories he and Blaise had been going about recently, he even understood why. See, the Dursleys were terrible, terrible people, and had always been terrible to him, in pretty much every imaginable way. (Before this year, Harry had never really... Well, he'd had some uncomfortable conversations with Blaise since they'd started their mind magic lessons, leave it at that.) What it came down to, really, was that Harry had never been taken care of — at least, not like a child in a normal, healthy family might be expected to have been. Even...Mirabella, as...odd, and distant as she could be (case in point: Blaise thought of his mum as Mirabella), even she'd been a far better parent to Blaise than Harry had ever gotten from anyone. He'd always had to take care of himself.

He could take care of himself, he didn't need anyone else, and at some point, without even realising it was happening, he'd become proud of that fact. He would watch Dudley, spoilt in every way imaginable, pretending to cry to get whatever he wanted over and over and over, he would see the other kids at school, snivelling and helpless and...just sort of pathetic, honestly. At a level somewhat less than fully conscious, Harry had thought he was stronger than them, he was better than them.

When he had become aware of it, he couldn't help feeling a little, well, bad over it. He knew he shouldn't think that sort of thing, but... Well, it was sort of true, wasn't it? He was stronger than most kids he'd ever met — honestly, he couldn't think of a single thing or person he needed. He wasn't even entirely used to having friends or, well, things, money and such. He might not like it, if certain people or things were taken away from him, but he didn't need them, he would survive.

(If Ron didn't want to answer his letters, that was fine — Harry didn't need him, he would survive.)

That was the very thing that had almost gotten him put in Slytherin, he understood now. As absurdly Gryffindorish as he could be sometimes, even now, if he was being perfectly honest with himself, if he were to put that damn Hat on again it'd probably still tell him he should be in Slytherin. Because he took care of himself, and he didn't need anything else — when it came down to it, more than anything, that was who he was.

So, when this sort of thing happened, Harry just couldn't help it, he got a little offended. He meant, it wasn't like they'd been working for that long — less than an hour, certainly. And it wasn't like
this was that difficult. He meant, some of the duelling practice he'd done this term was bloody intense, it was more of a workout than Wood ever put them through, sometimes Justin would try to keep them going for hours. (Not that he always succeeded, Blaise rather hated duelling.) Relatively speaking, trying to cast the patronus while Lupin hit him with confounding charms was nothing.

If anything, it was far less draining this time than their last couple sessions. While he hadn't managed to pull off the full corporeal patronus yet — which Lupin honestly didn't expect him to, that was advanced stuff — Harry had been making some progress. Sometimes he'd gotten this...odd, shimmery, silvery stuff, just leaking out of his wand. Never very much of it, and it always fell apart almost right away, but something, anyway. And that could be bloody exhausting. Get that useless cloud of whatever out a couple times, and it felt like he'd been casting full shield charms (probably the most demanding thing he could cast at the moment) for hours, leaving him all shaky and tired. At that point, when Lupin said they should quit he really couldn't complain, that was just reasonable.

But today? Harry hadn't even managed that damn, stupid mist. He was really more frustrated at this point than tired. Honestly, he'd at least been able to accept the progress he'd been making, no matter how slow it'd been, but going backward? That was just making him annoyed.

Lupin talking to him like a child didn't make it any better.

Once he was sure the flare of irritation was squirreled away, that it wouldn't be on his voice, Harry answered. "No, I'm fine, I just... I think I need to try a different memory."

For a moment, it almost looked like Lupin would insist, looking at him with a crooked, hesitant sort of expression twisting his scarred face. But then the tension went out of him with a thin sigh, shaking his head. "Alright, if that's what you want. If you don't mind my asking, Harry, what memory have you been using?"

He still wasn't sure what to think about that either — Lupin switched to using Harry's first name whenever they were in private, which was sort of odd in magical culture (as he understood now), but even more odd given the generational gap between them. Most people were more familiar with him than he knew they should be, because of the whole Boy Who Lived thing. Harry hadn't even noticed Magical Britain had a whole complicated formality...thing, not at first, because everyone knew Harry Potter the Boy Who Lived, so even perfect strangers called him by his first name to his face, despite how incredibly rude that would be with anyone else. Lupin didn't seem to care about that nonsense, which was what made it so weird...but he'd also been friends with Harry's parents — or, at least, that was what the Prophet said, Lupin himself had never mentioned it — so maybe that was it.

It was just sort of uncomfortable, was the thing, Harry wasn't entirely certain of how he should be dealing with Lupin.

Of course, it didn't help that Harry doubted he could actually answer this particular question. He'd gone through a few memories, trying to figure out this damn thing — his first time flying, winning quidditch matches, Hermione being un-petrified, being told he was a wizard, whatever he could think of. Today, he'd had less success with some of his old ones than usual. (Because of Ron being gone now, he thought, that made a lot of his Hogwarts-related happy memories...complicated.) The one he'd been using just now was from winter break, meeting Sirius and hearing all those stories about his parents which, honestly, he hadn't expected that to actually work. That whole conversation had been a little...awkward, what with Sirius still being a bit off from his time in Azkaban. Not to mention, Sirius rather clearly hadn't liked his mother much, he hadn't even really
tried to hide it. So, too complicated to really be called happy.

But, well, he wasn't sure he could admit that — back then, Sirius had still been a wanted man. (The legal situation now was slightly more complicated, as he understood it, not the point.) Lyra hiding him in her house was technically harbouring a fugitive, she could get in trouble for that. "Uh... Nothing big, really. Just, something with Lyra, back toward the beginning of the year, it's not important."

He wasn't even entirely lying, he had used things to do with Lyra multiple times. But, well, that was rather complicated now too. While he did like Lyra, she was also... Well, there was just something off about her, was all. He'd sort of known that from the beginning, of course, it was just getting harder and harder to ignore. The fancy he'd only been half-comfortable admitting he'd had for her for a while had already died a fiery death when he'd realised how much she clearly thought of him as a little brother or cousin she had to take care of, and he hated being patronised, so there was also that. And now there was whatever the hell was going on between her and Hermione, Harry had no idea what to think about that.

He was almost positive...something was going to end up happening there. Something like dating. Which was just sort of... Well, he could almost see them working, honestly. He meant, other people who'd noticed didn't, but they hadn't seen the same side of Hermione he had — just that Ginny had actually thought it was appropriate to compare Hermione to Percy Weasley proved she didn't know her at all. And, just, they were together all the time, it seemed like, so they obviously did get along. But, he just...

Honestly, Harry couldn't help but think that, if Hermione and Lyra became a thing, it was either going to blow the fuck up — possibly literally — or they'd end up taking over the world or something. He meant, as brilliant and scary as the two of them were, whatever happened it was going to be messy, he just knew it. The thought was vaguely intimidating, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to be anywhere near it.

So, yeah, anything involving Lyra or Hermione or Ron had suddenly gotten far too complicated in the last couple weeks. Which meant he'd actually been doing worse this practice session than before.

It was frustrating.

As usually happened whenever he mentioned Lyra, an odd, uncomfortable sort of expression crossed Lupin's face — like he wanted to say something, but it wasn't something nice, and he didn't think it wise to insult Harry's friends to his face. It was honestly sort of funny. "Yes, well... It doesn't appear to be working."

"No, it doesn't." Of course, that didn't mean he was on the wrong track, necessarily. Not about Lyra, about break — as pathetic as he knew it might sound to almost anyone else, Christmas (Yule) with the Zabinis and Lyra had probably been the best he'd ever had. He couldn't even explain why, exactly, it just...

It had been nice, that was all.

"I've got another one. Hit me again."

Lupin gave him a very doubtful look — he clearly didn't think continuing was a very good idea. For...some reason, he guessed, it wasn't like today was really that bad, he didn't get it. But eventually, his lips quirking with a reluctant grimace, Lupin raised his wand and cast his confunding charm again.
That familiar fuzzy, disorienting blanket fell over him again, turning Harry sluggish and clumsy. He didn't try to fight the magic directly, but instead just narrowed his focus, trying to force his own thoughts as sharp and solid as possible — rather like trying to push Blaise out of his head, actually, those mind magic lessons had been quite helpful at the trying to concentrate part of this whole thing. It still took a moment of mental flailing to bring to mind the particular memory he was looking for, and it wasn't as clear as he knew it should be, oddly indistinct.

He'd picked when they'd sat down to brunch, on Christmas. Just, hanging out with Blaise and Mirabella and Lyra. Mary had even showed up, which was a little odd — did she not have her own family she'd rather spend the holiday with? He didn't know really, it'd just... It'd been nice, that was all.

Trying to hold on to the feeling of the blurry memory, Harry flicked his wand, the by now far too familiar incantation falling past his lips. The magic spilled through him, cool and smooth and bright, almost too much of it, making him feel all too full. It poured through his head on its way out, and...tugged. He wasn't sure what else to call it, it felt very weird, the magic pulling at his mind as it went, seeming to catch on something. It was so odd it broke his concentration, the silvery mist breaking apart almost the second it'd formed.

The confundus charm faded a moment later, those parts of the memory his own magic had tugged at lingering, Blaise smirking at him in his head.

*Patronus*. Harry wasn't great with languages, not like Lyra or Hermione, but even he could see what that word obviously had to mean. He meant, there was a word in English that was practically the same thing.

He remembered thinking to himself, when Lupin had first described the charm, that it didn't entirely make sense. See, as far as he could tell, it wasn't about happiness, really. That wasn't the thing dementors deprived people of, no, it was something far more fundamental, something ultimately far more important than that.

The patronus wasn't about happiness. Hell, it was *in the bloody name*.

Lupin was saying something, but Harry ignored it, hardly even heard him. Without even really thinking about what he was doing, he cast the charm again. This time, he didn't dwell on a happy memory — or, as close as Harry could get to a properly happy memory, anyway. Instead, he remembered that one time, shortly after they'd come back from Easter break, Ginny had hit Blaise rather badly, he'd been bleeding all over the place, and Harry had been... He wasn't sure what to call that feeling, really. Almost like anger, but not quite, almost like fear, but not quite, something... He didn't know, but something powerful, certainly.

The magic burst through him, more smoothly than it ever had before, and much less uncomfortably than it ever had before, cool and gentle and soothing, almost. The tip of his wand erupted with white-silver light, and that damn mist clenched, twisted and condensed—

Standing on the tile before him, glowing so brilliantly it *should* be hurting his eyes — but, presumably for some baffling magic reason, didn't — was a cat. It was a little thing, probably less than a foot long, just a house cat, nothing particularly impressive. But as it started pacing, sloping back and forth with a casual, languid sort of grace, Harry was enveloped in tingling magic, soft and smooth and...comfortable. It was nice. He was probably grinning like an idiot right now, he couldn't help it.

The patronus wasn't powered by happiness. It was the *drive to protect*, to *keep something safe*. Which was really bloody obvious, when he thought about it.
"Well, I'll be damned."

Lupin's voice, slow and oddly thin, broke Harry's concentration. The patronus vanished, the soothing cloud of light magic going with it, leaving the room feeling unaccountably cold, hard. Harry had to take a moment to collect himself from the whiplash he'd just gotten. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"It's nothing, I..." Shaking his head to himself, Lupin let out a low laugh, a loose smile pulling at his lips. "That is very impressive work, Harry. To manage a corporeal patronus, especially one that powerful, at your age... Well, that's not something you see every day."

Harry couldn't help but think people would see it a lot more often if they bloody taught the thing properly. True, someone couldn't feel happy if they didn't feel safe first — that was probably why he had such trouble coming up with happy memories, now that he thought about it — and happy memories would probably involve people they'd want to protect, so it might work for most people.

But still, it would have been way easier if the thing had actually been explained properly. Harry had far more experience protecting people (mostly himself) than he had being happy. (There was that 'saving people thing' of his, after all.) If he'd known that was what he was going for, he might have gotten it right away.

"I guess not," Harry said, mostly out of a lack of anything else to say. "So... Why a cat? That just seems sort of...odd, for patroni to be cats." Not that he didn't like cats, he was just saying...

"It's not always a cat — the charm will take a different form when cast by different people. The theory is that some quality of the memory is somehow associated with a particular animal, subconsciously. You might even notice that, should you decide to use a different memory next time, it won't be a cat at all, but something else. Theoretically, anyway — for the most part, people grow accustomed to casting the charm the same way every time, so it won't change for most people. The only person I can think of off the top of my head whose patronus took multiple—"

Lupin broke off, so abruptly it was rather obvious he'd been about to say something he hadn't meant to. Suddenly looking quite uncomfortable, his eyes dropped to the side, a peculiar grimace crossing his face.

Harry waited a few seconds through the awkward silence before prompting him. "Um, sir?"

Slowly, cautiously, he said, "I knew your father, you know. We were in Gryffindor the same year." He sounded oddly guilty — probably over the fact that he'd gone this long without saying anything.

"I know. You were mentioned in the Prophet." There'd been a lot of speculation, before he'd suddenly appeared as the new Defence Professor, over where exactly Lupin had been all these years. Apparently, he'd vanished from magical society after the war — nobody they could find had any idea what he'd been up to since. Of course, Harry was pretty sure that was just because magical society made it virtually impossible for a werewolf to keep a proper job, not that the Prophet had any idea about that little tidbit.

Lupin winced at that — probably realising that Harry had known this whole time, wondering what he'd been thinking about Lupin not saying anything about it. (Not that Harry even knew what to think.) "Yes, well... Your mother, was what I was about to say, hers would change depending on what memory she was using at the time. Or so she claimed. There were a few different ones that popped up now and again, but it was usually a doe, more often than anything else. Which, well, James got a kick out of that."

At this point, Harry had no bloody clue what to do with himself. He could follow the natural thread...
of the conversation (rant) at this point, ask what the hell that was supposed to mean, but he...wasn't really sure he wanted to? He meant, he didn't think he got as much out of these stories as people assumed he would. The random-stories-about-your-parents thing. Some of it was...interesting, he guessed, but very little of what he'd heard so far... He meant, none of it was really very...important? Like, ninety-five percent of everything Sirius had said ended up boiling down to you had to be there, and most of the rest was, just, random shite — fine, okay, that was a thing, why should I care about this now?

Honestly, the only thing any of these stories had ever gotten him to actually feel, was anger that these people got to know them, and he didn't. Which, well, he'd rather not spend his time being irrationally angry with random people for no reason, there was just no point going through this nonsense.

But, unfortunately, he couldn't see any way out of this particular corner without being horribly rude. He'd been trying to get into the habit of not being an arse, so... "Why should it matter to him what her patronus was?"

And then Lupin was going off on a ramble about this patronus stuff, about James's being a stag, and Lily's being a doe, and wasn't that a crazy happenstance. Harry was only really half-listening, as Lupin went on an overlong dissertation on animal symbolism in British culture — he'd gotten a lot of practice not really paying attention to nerdy rambles going on around him just being friends with Hermione and Lyra — instead focused more on why his was a bloody cat. He did like cats, sure, but he didn't especially like cats. And, what the hell were cats supposed to symbolise? Lying around in the sun? Being a smug little shite, just, ignoring everything else, because fuck it, you don't care? Really, he had no idea.

Eventually, somewhere in his presumably informative ramble, Lupin mentioned something about Lily claiming her patronus represented someone she wanted to protect (though she never did say who it was). Which, well, Harry had been thinking about Blaise when he'd cast the thing. And Blaise was sort of...cat-like, when he thought about it. Just the way he would lazily throw himself over whatever furniture he happened to be occupying, bonelessly laid across the thing like a human-shaped quilt. Regardless of whether anyone else was already sitting there — he had a terrible habit of laying all over people, just found them complaining about it amusing. Which, yeah, cat-like, that did sort of make sense.

It didn't really make sense that it was Blaise, though. He meant, if the magic was going to... Well, honestly Harry had no bloody clue what had happened there, that was just weird. Could magic even do shite like that? Okay, it had, so obviously it could, but... Whatever, not important. The point was, he hadn't actually known Blaise that long. That thing with duelling and Ginny and Blaise, just, bleeding everywhere, that had been rather recently, but if the magic was going to pull at something, he'd think it would be someone he knew longer, better, someone like Hermione, or...

No, he didn't know Hermione better than Blaise, now that he thought about it. Hermione was a bit... He liked her, of course, he wouldn't have hung around her so much if he didn't, but he'd never really understood Hermione, was the thing. Even less these days — spending so much time with Lyra had somehow made Hermione, like, extra Hermione-ish, it was a bit overwhelming sometimes, honestly. But...

Well, you couldn't really practice mind magic with someone and not come out knowing them rather bloody well. He wouldn't claim there weren't still things he didn't know, of course he hadn't seen everything, but he'd spent hours in the bloke's head. That didn't really compare to being friends for two and a half years, it was its own kind of thing.
Around then, Harry checked back into Lupin's monologue long enough to catch what he was talking about now: why exactly James had gotten such "a kick" out of Lily's patronus. See, the theory about why exactly patroni took the shape they did was rather innocuous, but it was a more modern explanation based on a more modern understanding of mind magic and human psychology. The charm was much older than that. All kinds of superstitions had sprung up about the things over the years.

James had insisted their matching patroni meant they were fated to be together. (Lupin was half-certain he'd been being ridiculous on purpose, apparently it'd been hard to tell with him.) Which, while obviously just baseless superstition, patroni didn't actually work like that, it hadn't been so far out of nowhere that people hadn't followed what he meant immediately.

And Harry was quite suddenly very much distracted.

Did he...like Blaise? He meant... Well, he obviously knew what he meant, he didn't have to clarify that to himself in his own head, he was so absurd.

Honestly, the possibility had, just, never even occurred to him. There'd never really been a time to sit back and think about that sort of thing, the whole thing had just been sort of...odd. He'd hardly even spoken to him before Lyra was dragging him off to the Zabinis' for winter break — without telling Harry that was where they were going, or the Zabinis that she was bringing him along. (Lyra really was quite ridiculous some– most of the time.) And then, there was all that stuff with the mind magic lessons, which could really be quite humiliating at times, and then meeting Lyra's other friends in Slytherin, or bloody Hufflepuff, apparently.

Harry still thought it was just strange that pureblood Slytherins, like Blaise and Daphne and Theo, had known Justin, a bloody muggleborn, since they were, what, seven or eight, something like that. It was just... That must have been awkward, explaining that shite to the Finch-Fletchleys...

But anyway, he'd never had the time to think about that sort of thing. Yes, there'd been a bit of ridiculousness over Lyra there in fall term, but since winter break there'd just been too much going on, he hadn't... Well, it'd just never occurred to him to think about.

Not to mention, even if he had had occasion to wonder about it, he still didn't think it would have occurred to him. He didn't realise he could like blokes.

Not that he was entirely sure that's what was going on here. All right, sure, Blaise was...well, Blaise — like Hermione and Lyra, Harry honestly couldn't think of a better way to describe Blaise than to just use his name as an adjective, they were all bloody weird, when he thought about it. He just...

How could you tell? What did...

"Right, I have to go."

Lupin had obviously been in mid-sentence, blabbing off about something. Harry couldn't even guess. He'd stopped paying attention a couple minutes ago. "Yes, well..." That was probably going to be an apology about how he had just gone on for a bit long there, or maybe asking if Harry wanted to practice until he had casting the thing through the confundus down.

But Harry really didn't care about that right now. He mumbled something not too far removed from the appropriate gratitude for taking the time to help him, then turned and walked out of the classroom. Which was a bit rude, yes, but he couldn't really expend the effort to worry over that at the moment.
He had something rather more important he had to think about.

Minerva McGonagall's least favorite part of her job was not, as the other Hogwarts professors might have guessed, the endless marking, or repeating the same lessons and the same answers to the same questions year after year. Nor was it the paperwork associated with the position of Deputy Headmistress or taking up the slack when the Headmaster was called away by other commitments, as he might have guessed. It wasn't even chaperoning Hogsmeade weekends or detentions, as some of her more perceptive prefects had suggested, over the years. It wasn't dealing with outraged letters from parents or integrating new curriculum requirements — she suspected Zabini kept adding new minutiae every year just to annoy her — or supervising Defense Professors or sitting through budget meetings with the Board, either.

No, Minerva's least favorite part of her job was addressing disciplinary problems within her House.

For some reason, she couldn't really say why, having to deal with children's petty arguments spiraling out of control and into the realm of violence annoyed her more deeply than anything else Hogwarts had yet to throw at her. It was bad enough when her children took it into their heads to pick fights with the other Houses, but she particularly hated it when her young Lions fought amongst themselves. Even more-so when their spats landed one or more of them in Hospital.

The fact that she hadn't even realised a problem had been festering in the second-year girls' dormitory simply added insult to injury.

She had known, of course, that Miss Weasley had had a bit of trouble fitting in her first year — but she had assumed, since there had been no complaints this year, that that had all been because of the trouble with He Who Must Not Be Named and the Chamber of Secrets.

Apparently she had been wrong, because two of her girls were currently sitting before her, on a bed in the corner of the hospital wing, while Ginevra Weasley awaited Minerva's attention in her office under the watchful eye of a very annoyed Irma Pince. (It was possible the librarian hated students fighting even more than Minerva did, at least when those fights occurred in her library.)

"Alright, Miss Abbott, Miss Morisette, I've already talked to Madam Pomfrey. Would you two care to tell me what happened before I speak to Miss Weasley?"

"She just went mad!" Janine Abbott claimed, a protective hand curled around the arm which had, only half an hour before, been cut to the bone.

"Started throwing curses at us — we were just trying to talk to her!" her best friend, Caitlin Morisette, insisted. She still had two black eyes from what Poppy had said was a Striking Hex reflected at close range. According to their story, she'd been trying to protect Janine from Ginevra's unprovoked assault. Minerva suspected, based on precisely the way she'd phrased her report of the girls' injuries (and the fact that she'd left the more superficial damage to heal naturally), that Poppy doubted their account, but she'd stopped short of offering her own possible explanation for the injuries they'd incurred.

"She should be chucked out, like that idiot brother of hers!"

"Whatever happened in the Chamber of Secrets...she's just not right, Professor."

"Yeah, she never did fit in, but now..."

"And the way she looked at us, it was terrifying."
"She tried to *kill* us, Professor," Janine said earnestly. "You have to do something!"

"She's not going to get away with this, is she?" Caitlin demanded.

Minerva sighed. "I will continue to investigate the situation, Miss Morisette. I assure you both, however, that all appropriate actions will be taken. In the meanwhile, Madam Pomfrey tells me you are both well enough to be released. You may go."

They went, Abbott muttering something to Morisette about writing their parents. Joy.

(Even if it wasn't her *least* favorite part of her job, Minerva truly didn't appreciate dealing with irate parents, either.)

§

Ginevra Weasley sat on the other side of Minerva's desk, meeting her every question with a cold, uncompromising glare and stubborn, resentful silence.

"Miss Weasley! If you refuse to defend your actions, I'm afraid—"

"You don't care what I have to say, anyway," the girl snapped — the first thing she'd said since Minerva had begun to recount the evidence Poppy attested to and the accusations Abbott and Morisette had leveled against her.

She pressed her lips tightly together, biting back the first response that came to her tongue — something along the lines that unless she said *something*, Minerva was entirely willing to pass the matter of her suspension to Dumbledore and wash her hands of the whole affair. It was, however, her responsibility to advocate for Weasley as well as for the girls she had apparently attacked. "Well, as you've yet to say anything of substance, I believe that remains to be seen! Now—"

"You never cared when I told you I wanted to move rooms, last year," Weasley interrupted again. "I *told* you those stupid *bitches*—"

"Language, Miss Weasley!"

The girl's mouth snapped shut. She fumed silently for another moment before standing so abruptly that she very nearly knocked over her chair. "Justin Finch-Fletchley was there. He saw the whole thing. And Theo Nott, though I doubt you'll take his word for anything," she said, then turned on her heel and stalked out of Minerva's office, not even pausing to acknowledge the detention issued in her wake.

Fine. Witnesses were good. Better than simply pitting Miss Abbott and Miss Morisette's words against Miss Weasley's. All Irma had been able to tell her was that Weasley and Morisette had still been fighting like hellcats when she arrived, and Abbott had had the temerity to *bleed* on one of the books!

Minerva sighed, then summoned an elf. "Mimi! Please deliver a message to Professor Sprout. I require Justin Finch-Fletchley in my office at his earliest convenience."

§

"Er, no. They said *what?* No, that's not what happened at all. They came up trying to get a rise out of Gin, I don't know *why*. She's a nice girl, really. I mean, I think so, at least. But anyway, they were getting on her about hanging out with Theo this year, and well, being possessed last year. They may have implied that she must still *be* possessed, since she wanted to hang out with
Slytherins like him."

"What happened then, Mr. Finch-Fletchley?" Minerva asked, checking the dictaquill she'd decided to use to record his statement on the matter.

The boy flushed slightly. "Ah, well, I may have said something like what did that make me, because I've been chumming around with Nott and Zabini since before Hogwarts, you know."

"Since before Hogwarts?" Minerva repeated, confused. "But, aren't you muggleborn, Mr. Finch-Fletchley?" She was quite certain he was, he was one of the students who had been petrified last year.

"I am, yes. Zabini and I attended the same prep school. He introduced me to Nott. And yeah, they can be a bit weird, but they're not bad blokes. Nott especially is kind of quiet, but he's not, like, Malfoy. And they didn't like that, told the stupid Hufflepuff to butt out. And then Gin said that, speaking of butts—" He smirked, obviously trying to keep a straight face long enough to finish his sentence. "—we should find another table, since this one was starting to get a bit whiffy, smelling like arsehole, and all—" He paused as Minerva opened her mouth to interrupt, but continued when she decided that there was no point in rebuking him for quoting the girl's foul language. She had asked, after all. "That was when, what's her name? Hannah's cousin?"

"Janine."

"Yeah, her, the dumpy blonde. She threw a punching hex at Gin's back — seriously, she wasn't even looking, I don't know how she managed to catch it, she's just insanely quick. But anyway, she batted it back at the other one, Katie, I think?"

"Caitlin."

"Yeah, well, it hit her right in the face, and I'm not really sure what she retaliated with because Theo dragged me out of the way, but I did see Gin get hit with a tooth-growing curse, that should have ended it, but those other girls, they didn't stop. It was just lucky she still had that little tennis-racquet shield thing up so she could knock their follow-up curses back at them until Madam Pince came over to break it up. Though really one of them chucked a cutting curse at her and ended up taking it in her own arm, so she was pretty much out of it by that point, and the other one didn't stand a chance one-on-one, even if Gin couldn't cast anything."

The third-year Hufflepuff sounded rather admiring of that, though Minerva couldn't help feeling that it was a bit disturbing, Miss Weasley's apparent dueling abilities, even if her actions had been taken in self-defense, as it now appeared. She sighed. Well, at least this would be the end of it — she would keep a closer eye on the three of them from now on, of course, but now that their little feud was out in the open, she predicted the girls would quickly be forced to resolve the tensions between themselves, if only because they still had to sleep in the same room.

§

"I'm not staying in that room, with them," Ginevra Weasley said, glaring furiously at a spot on the floor in front of Minerva's desk.

She refrained from rolling her eyes at the child's stubbornness. "You cannot simply decide to sleep in the Common Room, Miss Weasley."

"Hermione said there's nothing in the rules against it."

"Well, no, but—"
"So, it's not a problem, then."

"Now see here, Miss Weasley! Regardless of the animosity between yourself and your roommates, that is your dormitory! You will simply have to work out whatever issues lie between you. Consider it practice for the real world, when you can't simply run away from your problems!"

"The issues that lie between us are that those twats—"

"Five points for language, Miss Weasley!"

"—have had it out for me since my very first week here. I don't want to stay with them, and they don't want me there. You let Hermione and Black have their own room, why can't I?"

Minerva ground her teeth at that. She hadn't let Black have her own room, the infuriating child (quite possibly Minerva's least favorite student, she could go on for hours, she suspected, enumerating the reasons why) had simply gone ahead and done it — and somehow gotten the Castle to play along. But she could hardly tell the Weasley girl that.

Apparently having decided that no answer was forthcoming, Ginevra added, "And is this the same real world where you can just tell people to bug off and work out their problems for themselves instead of doing your job?"

"Detention, Miss Weasley! This Saturday!" Minerva snapped. While she appreciated that the girl was currently in a difficult position with her peers — circumstances not entirely outside of her own making, but nevertheless — she would not stand for that sort of impertinence. "With Professor Snape!" she added — Severus always had work for students to do down in the dungeons, and almost certainly already had one or two detentions to supervise on Saturday anyway, Weasley could simply join the cauldron scrubbing crew.

"Fine! Maybe he'll let me stay in Slytherin, because I'm not going to sleep in a room with people who try to hex me in the back, no matter how many detentions you give me!"

§

"A word, Minerva."

Minerva completely failed to suppress a groan. She'd so very nearly gotten out of the Great Hall without any last minute requests or unpleasant notifications from the staff — it would have been the first time all week. She paused, allowing the young Potions Master to sweep up beside her. "Yes, Severus?"

He cast that anti-eavesdropping spell of his before addressing the issue at hand — paranoid man. Honestly, they were bloody schoolteachers, the war had been over for twelve years. And yet he insisted on acting the spy even now. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but it is my understanding that it is the responsibility of the professor who assigns a detention to supervise it."

Even for something as banal as this. "Yes, well, it is my understanding that certain children could benefit from an hour or two scrubbing cauldrons, far more than they would from copying lines." Not that the three detentions she'd given the Weasley girl thus far seemed to be having any impact on her behavior whatsoever.

"Is there a reason you insist upon forcing the girl to sleep among enemies? At least Slytherin has the decency to provide sanctuary in one's own quarters."

Had the child actually had the gall to ask Severus if she could sleep in his Common Room?
Minerva couldn't think how else he would have come to be informed of the particulars of the situation. She almost wished she could have seen that. "She doesn’t need sanctuary — learning to compromise and cooperate with your roommates is a valuable life skill! She simply needs to—"

"Minerva, do you hear yourself when you speak? A student is telling you that she's in a position where she fears to sleep in her own bed, and yet you continue to force her to do so — or attempt to do so, at any rate. If you persist in this idiotic, idealistic inanity, you will have only yourself to blame when your precious Gryffindors—"

Minerva cut him off with an emphatic *Hrumph*. She would not be lectured on the management of her House by Severus Snape, of all people. She'd been doing this since before he had even started school, and Gryffindor hadn't had half the troubles Slytherin had, in all her years as its head. "If anyone has reason to be afraid, it's Abbott and Morisette — they were the ones in Hospital, not Weasley."

"Yes, well, silent shield charms notwithstanding, even Weasley can't defend herself *in her sleep,*" Severus quipped, though there was something about his tone that suggested a bit more investment than she would have expected.

Could it be he held some personal interest in the matter? He had, she suddenly recalled, had a rather similar relationship with some of his own classmates many years ago. She had to ask, she decided. "Why are you defending her, Severus?"

"Because, Minerva, I sincerely doubt you have any intention of supervising her detentions yourself, thus resolving the underlying situation to your mutual satisfaction is the most efficient, most likely method by which to retain some scrap of free time for myself this weekend."

Of course, if he did have some personal reason to defend the girl, he'd never admit it. Which really meant he was just meddling in the running of her House. "Oh, are you telling me it would cost you a single second to supervise a fourth detention alongside the three you've already assigned for yourself? Bugger off."

She wasn't wrong, and he knew it, too. His eyes narrowed in a vicious glare, but all he could say was, "*Language, Minerva,*" before sweeping away like the overgrown bat he was.

§

There was a soft knock at Minerva's door, just before the end of her official office hours. "Come in."

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," Hermione Granger said, closing the door behind herself, which suggested that her question was of a rather more delicate nature than a simple inquiry about the parameters of her most recent Transfiguration assignment.

Minerva was intrigued. "Yes, Miss Granger, what is it?"

"It's, ah..."

"Yes?"

"Well, actually, it's— Well, it's about Ginny."

"Ah."

Minerva threw her quill back into the inkpot slightly more vehemently than necessary, then took a
deep breath, attempting to maintain her composure. She couldn't really blame Hermione for being concerned about the Weasley girl, especially since she'd been such good friends with Ronald Weasley before his unfortunate...withdrawal over this past year. Surely she knew young Ginevra personally as well. Minerva was just thoroughly sick of hearing about the problems of the second-year girls. It had been nearly two weeks, and there had been no more violence among them, it was only a matter of time until they managed to work out their differences for themselves, and they'd be the better for it!

"Can she move to our room? Please? It's just— Her roommates hate her, you know. Worse than Lavender and Parvati, and— She's been sleeping in the Library, and the Common Room — I know you told her she couldn't, but—"

Minerva barely managed to contain a snort of frustration. "Miss Weasley's troubles with her roommates are none of your concern, Miss Granger! Now, unless you have a question about Transfiguration, I believe my office hours are over."

§

"So, Minnie, is there a reason you're being such a bitch to Ginevra? Or are you just being stubborn at this point?"

Minerva was just turning in for the night when an unexpected voice spoke from an armchair by the fire, the speaker concealed by its high back, but entirely unmistakable, even before she hopped to her feet and moved to lean on the arm of it instead, the flickering light casting ominous shadows over her face. Minerva let out a rather undignified yelp of surprise before her anger overcame her shock.

"Miss Black?! How the— How did you get in here?!"

"I walked," the girl said sarcastically, as though this should be obvious, despite being a blatant lie. "Nice nightdress, by the way. Very House McGonagall," she drawled.

Minerva fought the urge to pull the duvet closer to her chin, hiding her tartan-patterned sleepwear. There was something slightly disturbing about Lyra Black even at the best of times — she reminded Minerva altogether too much of a young Bellatrix, both in her looks and what passed for a sense of humor in that woman's sick, twisted mind. She was quite certain that the girl was being intentionally unsettling, commenting on her sleepwear on top of violating her privacy by breaking into her bloody bedroom (itself so subtly threatening Minerva couldn't tell whether it was intended to be such), but that didn't stop it being effective.

"You most certainly did not just walk in here! There is no way you got past my wards!" Filius and Ashe had both helped her update them after the Weasley twins had somehow managed to get one of the school carriages complete with thestral into her office overnight. "And five points for cheek!" she added belatedly, caught rather badly off balance.

Black smirked at her and shrugged, tapping her wand idly against one cheekbone, just as Bellatrix used to, back when Minerva had had the misfortune to have her in class — surely she couldn't be doing that intentionally. It was bloody impossible. But that didn't stop it being unnerving as hell. "And yet, here I am. Are you going to answer my question?"

"Get out, Black, before I give you a month's detentions for being out of bounds and breaking into my private chambers!"

"You can't actually prove I broke in," the girl said calmly, then grinned. "And if you could, would
you want to admit your personal wards were so shite that a third-year could break them? I'm just saying, I'm not even in Runes..."

"Get. Out."

"Oh, you're not comfortable going to sleep with me here? But I haven't even tried to curse you in the back." Her tone of false innocence grated — Minerva was certain the little bint knew exactly how violated she felt, lying here, vulnerable, her wand just out of reach on the night table, watching the girl play with her own weapon, grinning down at her...

No, Minerva, you're being ridiculous! She was a grown witch, damn it, she'd fought in the war! No matter how much she might look like the Blackheart, Lyra was fourteen, a child — in Minerva's own House, no less — and no threat to her, regardless of how intrusive and annoying and downright disturbing she might be. "That's it! Detention! For a month!"

Black's mad grin didn't falter. "So, Red can sleep in my room from now on? I'm not leaving until you say yes, by the way."

Filch had been begging to be allowed to use thumbscrews on students for years — Minerva was sorely tempted to let him do so with this one — maybe that would impress upon the impossible brat that her behavior was unacceptable. (She wouldn't, of course, but she was fairly certain she'd never wanted to curse a student so badly in her life, and that was including the time James Potter and Sirius Black had switched her teaching robes for a dressing gown at the bloody welcoming feast.) "Fine! Yes! Just— Fine!"

Black checked the time. "Ha, I win! I told Hermione I could get you to agree in under ten minutes," she explained with a final smirk, skipping toward the door.

Correction: This was the most Minerva had ever wanted to curse a student in her life. Her fingers were actually twitching toward her wand of their own volition as the door clicked shut behind the insufferable...Black.

§

"It's fine, McGonagall says you can stay," Lyra said, skipping back into the room she now shared with Ginevra as well as Hermione. Really, she didn't understand why the Ultimate Weasley (her new nickname bestowed by Justin in the wake of her fight with her roommates) was so opposed to sticking it out in her own dorm — Lyra had offered to ward her bed for her, and she could certainly hold her own against those twats when she was conscious — but she also didn't much care.

"Do I even want to know what you did?" Hermione asked. "She wouldn't listen to me, and she loves me!"

Lyra shrugged. On a scale of things she could have done, making the point about bedroom security as she had hadn't been that bad, but Hermione probably still didn't want to know. "I just went to her rooms and had a chat with her. I can be very persuasive."

"You just showed up at her door in the middle of the night, and she let you in to have a chat? Pull the other one, Lyra."

"Well, she didn't actually let me in."

"You broke Professor McGonagall's wards?"

"No, even I couldn't do that in ten minutes. Well, I might have been able to if she'd done them—"
Amateur ward-writers tended to leave all sorts of holes to be exploited by a cunning cursebreaker, and runes weren't McGonagall's speciality. At all. "—but they looked like Flitwick's work, and he's really very good."

"But then— How...?"

"Shadow walking." She'd finally managed it, not two days ago, the trick of stepping through her own shadow. Granted, she'd gotten terribly lost for several hours, until Eris had decided she was being too boring and showed her how to orient herself, but she'd done it! It had been the easiest thing in the world to just...step around McGonagall's wards, from a patch of shadow on one side of the door, to a dark corner on the other side.

"You used illegal, dark magic to break into our professor's bedroom and— and what? Threaten her into letting Ginny stay with us?!

"Mmmm, 'threaten' is a strong word. I just pointed out exactly how troubling it could be, trying to sleep in a room with someone you don't trust hovering over you."

"You— Ugh, I can't believe you! You can't just go around threatening professors!"

"Powers, Maïa, I didn't threaten her!"

"You used shadow walking to just show up, in her bedroom, in the middle of the bloody night! What else would you call that?!"

"Okay, well, when you put it like that... Look, you were the one who wanted me to do something about the whole situation."

Hermione's obvious annoyance suddenly faded into anxious hand-wringing. "Well, yes, but I thought you'd — oh, I don't know, threaten Ginny's roommates or something!"

Wait, so threatening students was okay, but threatening professors wasn't? Honestly, Hermione made no sense sometimes. Besides, the Ultimate Weasley could obviously do that herself, if she wanted to. Whatever, she'd still solved the problem, either way. Lyra shrugged. "Well, I thought you wanted me to make Minnie stop being a twat. Next time, be more specific."

"Next ti—"

"I don't care how you did it," Ginevra said, interrupting Hermione's habitual bickering before covering a yawn with one hand. "Thank you. Just— Thanks."

"Yes, well, you can thank me by not mentioning to anyone that Hermione and I have been abusing the shite out of her time turner. Ready to go? I need to tell the elves to give us another bed."

Hermione slapped a hand to her forehead, giving her a furious glare. "Seriously, Lyra? Are you incapable of keeping secrets?"

"Did you...not realise Red would inevitably notice that there's always one set of us sleeping in here?"

"Ugh..."

"Don't worry, I won't say anything," Ginevra said, crawling under the covers of the bed the elves would conveniently be relocating from Storage about three hours ago, and pulling the curtains. "You guys could be doing necromancy in here and I wouldn't care, as long as I don't have to worry
about Janine cursing me in my sleep. Night."

She really was coming along quite nicely as a minion, Lyra thought as Hermione looped the chain of the time turner around her head, awkwardly pretending she wasn't staring at Lyra's lips as she did so — really, it was obvious now she knew what to look for. Not that she knew what she was supposed to do about it, they seemed to be going with the 'pretend it never happened' option for the moment. Well, kind of. Hermione wasn't very good at it. Lyra poked her in the arm. "What are you waiting for, Maïa? Aren't you ready to go to bed?"

Hermione went very red, but she did start turning the hourglass back. Lyra bit her lip to keep from giggling. She was starting to see why Zee enjoyed this whole flirting thing — it could be positively hilarious when done right. Though she was quite certain her reactions had never been quite so amusing as Hermione's.

Chapter End Notes

_The Malfoy Tom was snogging was Candidus, Lucius's grandfather from my headcanon. He and Tom were sort of a thing for a few years back in Hogwarts. And yes, that was an enormous scandal, Tom found the whole thing hilarious._ —Lysandra

_This characterization of Ron isn't really intended to be bashing, though I know it will probably be interpreted that way. It's largely based on his freak-out over Harry being entered in the tri-wizard tournament. But yeah, basically, Ron Weasley is one of those guys who says he's going to kill himself if you break up with him._ —Leigha

_In case anyone was wondering about Mary being at the Zabinis' on Christmas, it was briefly mentioned that her parents are Pakistani immigrants. They're Muslim. Not exactly big on celebrating Christmas._ —Lysandra

_Presumably Blaise will think it's hilarious that Harry basically has a kitten patronus, while he carries around a kitten-boggart in his pocket xD_ —Leigha

_McGonagall is shit at her job. I mean, look at the madhouse Gryffindor is in the books, lord of the fucking flies in there, honestly..._ —Lysandra

_The hardest part of writing that scene was coming up with pranks to mention in passing._ —Leigha
**Best Day of the Year**

*Hey, wait!*

*Yes?*

**Did the Judgment of Paris actually happen?**

*Mythos is an interesting thing, ducky. The story has become so well known that in a way it did happen — it shapes the way people think of us, and so too the way we are shaped by them, so in a sense, yes.*

*Yeah, that sounded like a 'no, there was no actual wedding or Apple of Discord, and the Trojan War wasn't actually inspired by a bunch of aspects being petty bitches.' Which I guess makes sense, it would have been way too easy for Paris to just give the damn thing to Persephone. Of course, I guess that might have annoyed them all — Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. But I'm pretty sure none of them would have actually fucked with someone who had the favor of Kore.*

*Hmm...yes, I suppose, if he'd been smarter he might have.*

*Wait. That sounded like there really was a Paris.*

*There was a man who was given a choice, certainly. Though it bore little resemblance to the myth that grew up around it. And Troy was involved in several wars — even some with the Achaeans — though the ten-year siege never happened. There have actually been several metaphorical Apples of Discord, too, but they were made after the fact, inspired by the tale, not the other way around.*

*Oh. Neat. Can I make one?*

*Probably. You certainly have the skill. The trick to a good Apple of Discord, though, is choosing the right confluence of events to target, and crafting the Apple to fit the situation. You can't just enchant a literal apple to inspire stupidity in all who see it. Though I admit, that would be amusing.*

*Tell me about not-Paris! Lyra demanded.*

*Eris chuckled. Well, this was long before the division of magic as you envision it. In that time and place, the world was smaller, and magic was the domain of the gods and the children of gods, as those born to magic styled themselves. Mortals appealed to us with prayer and offerings, and marveled when we deigned to grant their pleas. Paris, or the man who would later be remembered as Paris, was indeed a prince of Troy, or the city that would later be remembered as Troy, a boy born to fulfill a prophecy, a red thread in the Tapestry, woven through the fall of his city. Not the end of it, of course, but an undeniable turning point in its history. The soft-heartedness of his parents was foreseen, and his ignominious childhood. In truth, as in all the stories from that time and place, he would never have fulfilled his part without them. But they always would have been, and thus were, as the Fates decreed.*

*In the sixteenth summer of his life, Oenone, in service to Apollo, came down from the slopes of Mount Ida. Gifted with prophecy, she knew him and his fate when first she saw him. Without her, too, the story could not have happened, because it was she who brought him to question the circumstances of his birth. The herdsman who raised him admitted to his deception, and when Paris demanded it of him, brought him before the king, begging his pardon for the heinous crime of not killing the infant prince, as he had been ordered to do. Priam, seeing in the fine young man before him the strength of his own long-fled youth, could not bring himself to turn the prince away,*
any more than he had been able to bring himself to kill the boy on the day of his birth. And so Paris returned to the city he would destroy in youthful folly.

He had not, of course, been raised as a prince, and knew nothing of the world in which he suddenly found himself. It was not long until he began to pray for guidance from the gods—

"Okay, Lyra," Hermione said, emerging from the loo with a very serious look on her face. "I'm starting to get seriously worried about you."

"Er... Why?" Really, we haven't even done anything lately.

Lyra, of course, had been growing more excited by the day as Walpurgis and the reforming of Other Bella's mind approached, but Eris had been rather preoccupied with the magic necessary to pull it off. As far as Lyra was concerned, the plan for her to ride along with Other Bella as she pulled her mind back together didn't seem too different from any of the other times Eris had let her see the universe from her perspective, but it apparently was.

I don't normally allow you to manipulate my being to project yourself through me, Eris explained, for approximately the millionth time in the past two (or six) days.

I still think it sounds an awful lot like me projecting your bloody illusion, doesn't seem that hard, Lyra snarked back, just to annoy her.

It really wasn't the same — Eris's mind was foreign enough to a human's that it was essentially impossible for her to simply replicate Lyra's reactions for Bella in real-time, at least realistically. It was just really, really hard for Eris to give up control of even the smallest part of her being, and Lyra couldn't just take it from her, that would require an absurd degree of power. Like, tap directly into a triple confluence of ley lines and immolate yourself before you managed whatever you were attempting to do absurd. So as the peak of Eris's strength approached, they'd spent most of their time practicing that, rather than anything more immediately entertaining.

Hey, do you think if I destroyed my body trying to possess you, my mind would be preserved, since I wouldn't actually be occupying said body at the time?

No, when you die, your sense of self will unravel like any mortal. Your magic will still be mine, but you as an independent entity, your mind, will be gone.

Ah. Right. Good to know. But...what about Death? Because Lyra had been under the impression that when people died, their magic and memories were integrated into the Deathly Power, that was just how it worked.

Death can suck it, you're my dedicate.

Lyra giggled.

"That!" Hermione said, glaring down at her. "I'm fairly certain you haven't slept for the last three sleep-shifts, you just lie there playing with your stupid levitation charms and listening to your terrible music and staring off into space and giggling to yourself like a bloody crazy person."

"But Maïa, I am a bloody crazy person. Everyone knows this. And Gin likes my music, clearly your opinion of it is just wrong. And it's more like seven. Magic's been too loud since Friday." She shrugged. It wasn't like she was tired, anyway. No, humans weren't meant to stay awake this long, but it was Walpurgis. And besides, she wasn't entirely certain the hours she spent with Eris counted as being properly conscious, anyway. She should probably ask Blaise.
"Magic's been too loud," Hermione repeated, giving Lyra a look she couldn't really interpret.

"Well, loud isn't really right. Sound isn't really right, either. But yes. It's singing. I can probably find a way for you to hear it, if you want." Maybe tweak a supersensory charm to affect her ability to sense magic?

It would just be noise to her. You'd have to find some way to make her own magic resonate with ours.

Huh. Well, I'll think about it, see what I can come up with. Maybe something to sort of filter the noise...bring it into focus? Though that would probably require quite a lot of analysis of Hermione's own magic, and her own, and finding a way to temporarily modify the interface between one's own magic and the world, like the equivalent of wearing spectacles, but for magic...

"You're doing it again. Staring off into space and grinning."

She dropped the wandless levitation charms she'd been using to juggle a handful of knuts for the past...however long she'd been talking to Eris about Carthage (which had made her think of the Aeneid, which had made her think of the Iliad, which had made her wonder whether that had actually happened like in the story). The most annoying thing about the run-up to Walpurgis was the way she had to do things pretty much constantly. If she didn't, weird accidental magic shit started happening. Very obviously weird accidental magic shit. Like the rules of magic suddenly and inexplicably shifting, affecting any spells cast anywhere near her. She hadn't really realised that before her first year here, but that last Transfiguration lesson before Walpurgis had been very interesting. She had a really hard time focusing on too many things at once, though.

"Just thinking. Actually, it would probably be easier for me to just translate my perceptions into actual sound. Or light, I guess, but I think better in sound. Or you could just come to the Revel tonight. It should be clear enough there that everyone will hear it, not just me. That's kind of the point, actually."

"No, that's not the point." What? "The point is, you need to sleep." Oh, the point of this conversation. (Eris sniggered.)

"I'm not tired."

"You're not— You just told me you've been awake for a week, Lyra."

Lyra giggled. "Since Friday is only two days, Hermione."

"One-hundred and sixty-eight hours is not two days, Lyra! God, this is worse than Easter! You—Do I need to take you to...to Madam Pomfrey? Or Snape? Do wizards even have a way to treat mood disorders?"

Mood disorders? "Is that what muggles call the Black Madness? The way I was over Easter, I mean? Because no, there's no cure for that. And even if there was, mind healing doesn't work on me." Ciardha had taken her to one a few months after becoming her tutor, which had been how he discovered her general immunity to mind magic. "And even if it did, this isn't the same thing."

It really wasn't. The Madness was like electricity running through her veins, making it feel like she could do anything and nothing could possibly go wrong, like she could step off a balcony and fly, if she wanted to. (She couldn't, of course, that was the whole reason Ciardha had taken her to see a mind-healer in the first place.) It was like having all the energy in the world, like being unstoppable, but also needing to do everything at once, as soon as she thought of it, because
the idea of waiting, or even slowing down, was unthinkable.

Walpurgis, on the other hand, was much more...stable. Which was an odd way to think about chaotic magic, but it was part of the natural ebb and flow of magic in the world, and she, by dint of her connection with Eris, was a part of it. Both more and less than mortal, as she'd told Harry over Yule. Granted, they were close enough to making their attempt to fix Other Bella that if it hadn't been Walpurgis, the excitement might have been enough to push her back into the Madness, but the magic flowing through her, so much greater than usual, seemed to be drawing the giddy, excess energy into its circuit, rather than allowing it to overwhelm her and carry her away.

Hermione didn't look convinced. "And even if it was, I don't need a mind-healer. I'm fine."

"A week, Lyra! That's not fine!"

"Sure it is. It's just Walpurgis. I'll be back to normal after tonight." Or rather, she would be back to normal after the crash that inevitably followed the holiday. But she would definitely be able to sleep after tonight — she anticipated that what they were going to attempt with Other Bella would be magically exhausting, and it really was just the magic sustaining her at this point.

Hermione parked her hands on her hips, her mouth set in an expression far too serious for the best day of the year. "After tonight."

"Well, yeah. It's pretty normal for me to be a little..." She wasn't sure there was a word to accurately describe her current state of mind, she realised, trailing off mid-thought and kind of waving a hand vaguely to indicate there ought to be one. "Fae," she decided, was close enough. "...around the holiday."

"Fine, then." That was rather odd. Hermione tended to be more contrary than that. So it wasn't entirely a surprise when, half a second later, she added, "In that case, we won't be turning back again until after tonight."

Lyra shrugged. It wasn't like she'd had anything planned, other than more practicing with Eris, and she was pretty sure they'd be fine. "I couldn't tonight, anyway."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, sounding rather annoyed. "And when were you planning on telling me?"

"Oh, sometime before tonight, probably. And because I'll be busy around eleven." Mostly because Eris claimed it wouldn't be any more difficult for her to puppet multiple Lyras at the same time, but Lyra doubted her ability to make even one Lyra seem properly human while she was the only consciousness occupying Lyra's body.

Yes, yes, meat puppets are bloody stupid, I know. I didn't choose to be a physical being, she thought, in response to Eris's unarticulated annoyance at the recurrence of this topic. (She really didn't enjoy not being good at things any more than Lyra did, and she was really bad at having a body.)

But in any case, they had agreed it was probably for the best if there was just one Lyra to deal with. She could just stay at the Revel, and anyone who remembered her acting more oddly than usual would just chalk it up to the magic.

"You'll be busy? In the middle of the night? Doing what?"

"The Revel. The Walpurgis ritual. Starts at sundown, ends at sunrise. Lots of music and dancing and fighting and fucking. Technically it's a Slytherin House thing, and they only invite you if
you're fifteen or older, but it's not like they'll turn you away if you know and just show up, especially if you're with me. Zee and I went, it was great. Are you coming?"

"Hang on, are you saying you and...Ms. Zabini...went to a sex ritual, at school, when you were thirteen? You didn't participate, did you?"

"What, in the orgy? Zee did. Lost her virginity with a sixth-year Ravenclaw, actually. I just watched. Also, we were twelve the first time. And it's not actually a sex ritual, it just lowers all your inhibitions. You still get to choose what you do, you just choose freely, which hardly anyone ever does, and there are no real consequences. Most people won't even really remember it very clearly in the morning. So sex tends to happen."

"But she was twelve — and he had to have been at least sixteen! Is statutory rape not a thing in Magical Britain?!"

"Wait — are you saying muggles consider sex rape if the age difference is too great? Wait, no that can't be right, Number Four was, like, sixty years older than Zee. So they have laws about what age you can have sex at? Like, actual laws? How the hell would they enforce that sort of thing? Fucking weird. Especially the calling it rape part. Pretty sure twelve is plenty old enough to know if you want people touching you or not."

"But..." Hermione said, but she trailed off all hesitantly rather than advancing an argument for such a silly law. Or correcting Lyra's understanding of it, possibly, but she couldn't think why Hermione would hesitate to do that.

Therefore, she thought she probably did understand what they were talking about, which meant she could say definitively, "No, that's not a thing here. If you're not married and the Head of your House is okay with the relationship, it's fine. If your Head of House doesn't approve, they can press various charges regardless of your age, but not for rape, as long as it's consensual. If you're already married, no one cares, even if you're like, thirteen. Though it's been a while since even we've had anyone get married quite that young. There's a bit of debate about whether you can consent before the age of thirteen, since you aren't recognized as a political entity until then, like, you can't speak in Wizengamot meetings or bring a case to be heard on your own behalf or sign a contract. But at Walpurgis? When you can't be forced? Yeah, definitely not rape."

"But she was twelve," Hermione repeated. "Did she even know what she was doing?"

Lyra giggled at that. "You know Lolita? It's a muggle novel."

Hermione nodded, rolling her eyes. "I haven't actually read it, but yes..."

"Yeah, Zee read it when she was nine, and apparently thought she could do better at the whole femme fatale thing. So I'm gonna go with yes, she knew exactly what she was doing. Actually, in hindsight — I mean, knowing that we probably would have been having sex today, in my universe, if I'd stayed—"

Hermione made a little choking noise, distracting Lyra from the rest of her thought, which had been something along the lines of, eleven-year-old Bella had been a complete idiot not realising that Zee was trying to seduce her, she'd practically come right out and told her. Well, it might have been obvious by now, even without hindsight, Bella just hadn't known her and the way she talked well enough, then, to catch the implications behind her words.

"What was that?"
"You– and Ms. Zabini— What?"

"Apparently — I didn't know this until I got here — Zee was trying to seduce me. She thought she was being obvious about it, but she totally wasn't. But my general understanding of the sequence of events was, she got tired of waiting for me to notice — Other Bella, I mean, back when they were fourteen — and started snogging me at Walpurgis and figured that I'd stop her if I wanted her to stop, but I didn't, so she just kept going. And after that, it was just a thing. I can only assume my Zee would have done pretty much the same thing, if I'd stayed."

"And you– the other you, you just let her...?"

Lyra shrugged. "If I had a problem with her touching me, I would've put a stop to the random kissing and sleeping in my bed back when she first started doing it."

"Kissing and having sex are very different things, Lyra!"

"Yeah, I don't get that."

"Wha— How can you not get that?"

That really didn't seem like a fair question. How the hell was she supposed to explain not understanding something? If she understood it well enough to explain it, obviously she would get it! "Well, I mean, obviously sex is far more involved, but I don't get the lines people draw between which parts of themselves can touch which parts of other people. It just seems really...arbitrary. If you're okay with smushing your face against someone else's, why wouldn't you be okay with smushing your genitals together? Or you know, what's really the difference between touching someone's hair and touching their boobs? Besides the texture, obviously." She shrugged. "If I'm willing to let someone hang all over me or sleep with me or snog me, I don't see why I should be unwilling to let them fuck me."

For a brief moment, it looked as though Hermione had some sort of explanation to offer, but then she apparently realised something, her eyes going very wide. The first time she tried to talk, the words wouldn't come out, but on her second try she managed to ask, "So...when you said I was...that I'm allowed to kiss you— You meant..."

Really? That was it? "I meant you're allowed to touch me, full stop. I don't mind. Granted, I don't really get it, but I won't stop you. Though if it's going to make you all awkward, I'd prefer you didn't, because I really don't get that, either."

Lyra hadn't thought it possible for Hermione's eyes to go any wider, but she managed it. That looked almost painful, actually. "I— you— I have to go," she finally managed to choke out, the last word little more than a strangled squeak. Lyra almost didn't catch it, she was already halfway out the door. Left so quickly she forgot her bookbag, even.

Well, if she needed it, she would come back for it. Probably not for a couple of hours, she tended to try to avoid Lyra when she got too flustered and awkward, but her essays wouldn't write themselves. Snape's marking, on the other hand...

Do you think I could come up with a spell to mark essays? Maybe adapt a translation spell to check their statements against a set of texts, work in something to count the factual and grammatical errors, assign a score and... I wonder what spell he uses to copy the instructions onto the slate in class... I'd probably have to come up with a list of snarky insults that were vague enough they could apply to anything, and have a number of them be randomly selected and applied, based on the number of errors.
Really, that sounded like a much better use of her time than actually marking the essays.

Yes, but I doubt you could do it before you leave school.

I think I could. Well, assuming I remember I was going to. Which, given the number of essays that arse assigns, I'm sure I will. Not now, though. And we still have hours to kill before it's time to head down to the woods. Let's go back to spying on Carthage! That alchemist was up to something with the head of the palace kitchens, I know it! I bet they're going to poison Lady Khawlah for Alqayid.

Eris cackled. Oh, they don't just poison her. Really, this plan was inspired.

"Hey, Nott!" Theo looked up from a collection of essays on magical theory to see Melinda Lestrange, a second-year he'd never spoken to before, making a beeline for him across the commons.

"Lestrange?"

She waited until she was close enough to not have to shout to explain herself, which was probably for the best. "That muggleborn who always hangs out with Black wants to talk to you. I told her to wait outside."

"Did she say why?" he asked, thoroughly confused. He was fairly certain he'd also never really talked to Granger, at least not without a mutual acquaintance — generally Lyra or Gin — present.

"Something about a Runes project. Don't know, don't care," the second-year said, waving casually over her shoulder as she headed back to her own clique by the door.

Huh. Apparently Granger was attempting to be covert about something, because their partners for the end of term Runes project had yet to be assigned. Which of course meant that if he'd been sitting with any of the other third-years, it would have immediately fallen flat — almost all of them were in Runes — but since the only people within earshot were a handful of sixth-years, he supposed the attempt rated an acceptable. He closed the folio and carefully tucked it into his bag, taking it with him when he headed toward the door — while this particular subject wasn't even restricted, the collection itself was unique, half of it written by members of the House of Black and never published outside of it. (He still wasn't entirely sure whether Lyra understood exactly how big a deal it was that she had let him have free rein in her library, but he wasn't about to complain.)

"Oh, good, you're here!" Granger exclaimed as soon as he stepped into the corridor. She seemed rather anxious, pacing in circles (though she stopped when he appeared), her expression wavering between trepidation and suspicion. "Ginny said you might be, since you weren't in the Library."

"Yes, well, I do live here. Can I help you with something, Granger?"

"Is there, ah...somewhere we could talk privately?"

Well that was intriguing. He motioned for her to follow, leading her deeper into the tunnels. There weren't very many abandoned classrooms this far down in the Castle, but there were plenty of store-rooms that were never used for anything. He cast a few anti-eavesdropping charms around one and closed the door behind them, raised an eyebrow at Granger to indicate that she ought to start explaining herself, now.

Apparently she got the message, though she wasn't particularly concise in her response. "It's well—It's kind of awkward, but I figured you'd be the best person to ask, you'd probably know the most, I
mean. It's just, I can't ask Lyra, she's just impossible, as always, I mean honestly — and well—you're a Traditionalist, right?

"You dragged me into a storeroom to talk about politics? I realise Gryffindors abhor the subject, but there's no reason we couldn't have talked about that in the Slytherin Common Room. Where there are chairs," Theo pointed out, leaning against a wall. Honestly? Even the most vehement pureblood supremacists in his House wouldn't actively object to him inviting Granger in to talk if he was explaining why it was in the interests of muggleborns to support a more Traditionalist agenda. Though if his father heard he'd been using Narcissa Malfoy's arguments to do so (and he would have to, because she was just so very reasonable), there would probably be hell to pay next time he went home, so perhaps chairs were a small sacrifice to make.

Granger didn't seem to mind the lack of seating in the empty room — she'd resumed pacing, avoiding looking at him, he thought. "Well, no, not exactly. I mean, you celebrate the traditional holidays, Samhain and Yule and so on?"

"Oh. Yes." He didn't really think it was worth the trouble of explaining that following the Powers wasn't exactly synonymous with Traditionalism. There were plenty of Traditional families that made little more than a passing nod toward the Old Ways and developing a more personal relationship with Magic. "So this is about Walpurgis, then?"

"Er. Yes. Partly. Mostly, really. Um. I heard there's a...a ritual, of some sort, tonight?" Granger went rather red at that. "Er...yes. Lyra mentioned that. Do you— Do you know what actually happens? What you do, or what the ritual does to you?"

"Uh...not really. I mean, I haven't been, obviously. Everything I know about it — the specifics, I mean — I got second-hand from Blaise, who got it from his mum. There's a party down in the Senior Woods. At some point the magic chooses a Host for the evening, who does...something, there's some degree of variation from year to year, I guess, and... It's called the Unbinding. Walpurgis is all about freedom and choice—" He was explaining this badly. "You probably haven't attended any holiday rituals, have you?"

"Uh... Just the thing Lyra did for Yule, which was really weird, I'm not really sure I understood it." Oh, right. Theo had forgotten Granger had been there when Lyra had summoned the Infernal Power to just...hang out for a few hours. He'd been far too distracted by the fact that Lyra was (he was about 95% certain) a black mage to pay much attention to anything else to do with that part of the ritual, and Lyra had hardly mentioned it when he asked her about it the next day — she was more interested in whether she'd be able to master shadow walking before Midsummer than chatting about music and time travel with Hermes.

"Er...yeah, it's not going to be like that. Well, in the sense that holiday rituals are mostly about raising power just for the sake of appreciating it and its role in the world, yeah, it's similar, but it's a much bigger, more general sort of thing than inviting a god over for tea." And then forgetting to provide tea.

"She told you about that?"
"Blaise mentioned it." Specifically the part where he thought he was going to get smited for not having refreshments on hand.

"Oh. And it— You think it — Hermes — was really a god? Like, an actual manifestation of an Ancient Greek deity, not just...I don't know, some delusion of Lyra's, made to seem real for the evening?"

"More like a manifestation of a particular aspect of magic, in a form defined by human myth and belief." Or so Henry Black had argued, in the essay Theo had just been reading. "But it definitely wasn't a delusion, or some trick she was pulling on you. The Powers and their Aspects are autonomous entities, or, well...facets of one, anyway. They do have agency outside of that of the mage who summons them, not like a conjured construct or something."

"I...see."

"Yeah, I know, the idea that Magic is kind of sentient is weird if you didn't grow up with it." Even most of the Slytherins, he thought, didn't really understand it. "But that's not really terribly important for the purposes of Walpurgis — the Revel doesn't invoke a particular Aspect, just the Chaotic and Deliberative Powers in general. I don't even think they interact directly with anyone other than the Host. Okay, I was going to try to be more organized than this. Holiday rituals in general — the ones that fall on the solstices take place at sunrise and sunset. The ones that fall on the equinoxes take place at noon. Samhain, Imbolc, Walpurgis, and Lammas are two-day celebrations, and the rituals take place on the night between them. Most holiday rituals — normal ones, not, you know..."

"Lyra being Lyra?"

Well, that was certainly one way to put it. Theo shrugged and nodded. "And the Universe being weirdly tolerant of that."

Presumably that was because she was a black mage, though he'd never read anything suggesting that Powers and Aspects other than a particular black mage's Patron had any inclination to favor them. If anything, they tended to have more complicated relationships with other Powers than the average ritualist. Though he supposed some Aspects of Chaos and Mystery (which also governed madness) might have rather a lot in common. That might explain it.

There was really no question in Theo's mind that Lyra was dedicated to some Aspect of Chaos — even if her general approach to life, constantly making trouble for everyone around her, hadn't given it away... Most people probably hadn't noticed, but magic had been moving...differently around her, for the past couple of days. The closest thing he could think to compare it to was the way wild, unaligned magic had played around him during the introductory ritual conducted on his thirteenth birthday. As though her very presence was causing ripples and eddies in the natural flow of magic in the world. And today she'd completely given up on controlling her own magic — normally she kept it close to her body, oddly disciplined for someone so otherwise lacking in self-control, but today she was just letting it do whatever it wanted — or perhaps there was simply too much of it to properly control. He was pretty sure she'd been keeping up a constant stream of wandless charms to keep it mostly occupied (which was in and of itself rather absurd), but it had still been so distracting he hadn't been able to read in the Library. It kept flaring out and pulling at him, making him all antsy. Seriously, he had no idea how Blaise and Gin hadn't noticed.

A tiny crease appeared between Hermione's eyebrows as she nibbled at her lower lip, clearly trying to decide whether or not she ought to say whatever she was thinking. Apparently she decided not, because after a moment she just said, "Go on, you were saying something about normal holiday
rituals?"

"Uh, yeah. Normal holiday rituals tend to be designed to highlight the role the particular Power being celebrated plays in our lives and the world at large. Most of the ones we do here at Hogwarts also tend to reveal something about yourself that you may not have been aware of, before. Most families who actually celebrate the holidays use the same ritual every year, like we do here for Samhain and Walpurgis, but for Mabon, Yule, Imbolc, Ostara, and Litha, one of the senior students adapts their family's ritual for our celebration, so they're different every year.

"Walpurgis is all about freedom, choice. It's conceptually opposed to the Binding and Orderly Powers, which are celebrated on Lammas, but it's counterbalanced in the wheel of the year by Samhain — Death is the Ultimate Inevitability, there's no choice in the end. The Samhain Revel is very structured. It's more or less the same every year. Occasionally someone will introduce a new element that is incorporated from that point on, but there's a strong continuity and tradition there. The Walpurgis Ritual is entirely improvised, guided by the magic itself, so it can vary from year to year, but not even the Host knows how it's going to go ahead of time. They don't even know who they are, though Lady Zabini says it will often choose the same person several years in a row, someone it likes, for lack of a better term. Or, well, that's how it's supposed to go. I'd put money on Lyra being the Host, and it would be entirely like her to actually plan something ahead of time, just because she's not supposed to."

"Er..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing, just thinking, that must be why she said they wouldn't turn me away especially if I was with her. And I knew she sort of...worships Chaos. But why wouldn't the magic choose someone older, or more experienced, or whatever?"

Theo completely failed to hide his surprise at the fact that Lyra had apparently just told Hermione she was dedicated to Chaos. (Though that pretty much solidified his theory about her.) Maybe she hadn't expected Hermione to understand what that meant, but still. "Ah...well. Have you ever met anyone with a greater affinity for chaos? And if Lyra told you she's aligned with Chaos specifically... It's really very rare for someone to be dedicated to a single Power above the others. There are a lot of us who follow the Dark Powers in general, but that would suggest something above and beyond her general alignment with the Dark."

The tiny, indecisive frown was back. "Like a black mage? Hypothetically speaking, of course. I've only seen them mentioned in passing, I don't even really know what being one entails."

"That is the implication, yes. Hypothetically speaking, you really, really shouldn't tell anyone that Lyra worships Chaos. I understand that 'worship' might have other implications to muggleborns, but most wizards will only take it one way. And being a black mage is incredibly illegal. Becoming one is actually considered an Unforgivable Act — basically an automatic death sentence, if you're caught. You wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about Lyra's...philosophical leanings."

The girl gave him a rather odd look, as though she wasn't entirely certain whether they were on the same page or not. (Theo was pretty sure they were.) "No, of course not. But, um. Hypothetically, if she were... What would that entail?"

"Generally black mages lead their lives in such a way as to increase their Patron Power's influence in the world. Beyond that, it would depend on the specific Aspect she's taken as a Patron. Hypothetically speaking, you could ask her. She might even tell her, given that she'd apparently
come out and admitted to being a black mage in the first place. He'd ask himself whether she was completely mad, but he already knew the answer.

Hermione looked slightly horrified at the idea of asking, though, and quickly changed the subject. "Erm...right. So, about the Revel?"

Theo raised an eyebrow at her. "Smooth, Granger." She glared at him. "The Revel starts at sundown and ends at sunrise, though the actual ritual part of it will probably start well after dark. According to Lady Zabini, the first hour or two tends to just be a big party, like the sort of thing the Hufflepuffs do around exams."

"What? Hufflepuffs?"

"Never mind. When the ritual goes into effect, it strips your inhibitions. Everyone's inhibitions. You can't force anyone to do anything they don't want to — literally can't, the magic won't let you — but aside from that, anything goes. Usually people aren't invited unless they're already fifteen, because there tends to be a lot of sex, alcohol, recreational potions, and sometimes even muggle drugs, and... People who have a lot of inhibitions tend not to really know how to handle not having inhibitions. They tend to do things they'd normally never even consider, and then regret it in the morning — assuming they even remember it. There's a side-effect of the magic that makes it difficult to remember things if the ritual changes your personality too much. But the point is, it's better if only people who are mature enough to handle the situation and anything they might do end up at the ritual."

"But you can go, even if you're not fifteen."

"Well, yeah, you can. But as far as I know, the only people from our year who will be there are Lyra and Blaise. You're not actually considering going, are you?"

"Well, Lyra did invite me. But the conversation got...side-tracked, before I could ask anything about it, really. Do you think I should?"

Theo didn't even have to think about that one. "No."

"But you said it's not just Lyra thinking the rules don't apply to her — Blaise is going, too. And if nothing really bad can happen..."

"You can still make choices you think you're ready for, but then, in hindsight, weren't. Blaise is perfectly okay with the idea of potentially being drawn into an orgy that he may or may not remember very well the next day. Somehow, I don't think you are."

"Well, no, but... Lyra said you still get to choose, if you do...that, or not."

Really. She couldn't even say the word sex, and she thought she should go to a ritual where people were likely to be fucking all over the place? Theo sighed. "Have you ever been drunk?"

"Of course not!"

"No, of course not, that would make this too easy to explain. Okay, just. No inhibitions means your priorities will be completely different from normal. It means not worrying about being judged or consequences or anything, just doing whatever you want to do in the moment. So you can still choose, but your choices probably won't be the same as they normally would be. And you'll probably regret at least some of those choices in the morning. If I were you, I wouldn't go."

Granger hesitated for a long moment before she spoke again, her body language screaming
embarrassment and indecision. "What if... What if I just... want to know what it's like? Not worrying about consequences and judgment and everything, I mean. What if I want to know what it's like to be like Lyra, just for one night?"

“Well then, you have issues,” Theo thought, but what he said was, "It's up to you. Choice is the whole point, after all."

The girl gave him a rather wan smile. "Lyra said the point was so that everyone could hear magic singing, not just her. Apparently it's been too 'loud' for her to sleep since Friday."

Singing? Theo had a rather unnerving suspicion that what she meant by that was being so involved with the magic around her that she was aware of even its most minor fluctuations — which would make sense, given the way she'd been affecting it, lately. It was unnerving because even people with mage sight didn't really pick up on ambient background magic. Not well enough to actually perceive any sort of patterns in it, and certainly not without trying. The only time he'd ever heard of anything like that happening was when people had been possessed by the Powers and on the verge of losing their sense of self entirely.

"Yeah, well, Lyra's a crazy person. But, uh— Aside from not sleeping, has she, um... seemed like herself, over the last few days?" Granted, Theo hadn't noticed her acting much more oddly than usual, but Granger spent much more time with her than he did.

"More or less. Mostly more."

Theo had no idea what that was supposed to mean. "But, she hasn't seemed like she might be... possessed by some inhuman entity of some sort, for example."

This question was met with a flat stare. "No more than usual." Theo raised a questioning eyebrow at that, so Granger elaborated, pinking slightly as she did. "She did just tell me that she thinks the difference between kissing someone and having sex with them is completely arbitrary, but..."

Well, Theo honestly didn't really get that difference himself, and he certainly wasn't possessed, so if that was the weirdest thing she'd said or done lately, Lyra probably wasn't possessed either. Which was... reassuring? The magic singing thing was still rather disturbing, but... maybe that was normal, for a black mage, on the day of her Patron Power's greatest strength? He had no idea, really. It might be for the best if he just pretended Granger had never mentioned it, because he had no idea what to do about it, or even if it was technically a problem. Lyra had to know as well as he did what that sort of thing would normally mean, if it had been going on for days and she hadn't already completely lost it or gotten help for herself, maybe it wasn't.

He sighed, resigning himself to doing nothing — what would he do, anyway? — and changed the subject back to the Revel. "Are you sure you want to be like her, even for just one night?"

It wasn't the most graceful of segues, but he suspected Granger's thoughts were wandering as well, because she didn't seem to notice. "Blaise does keep telling me I should embrace the madness,” she said, her tone suggesting it was meant to be a joke, but Theo thought it fell rather flat.

Quite certain that the conversation was reaching its natural end, he began to tear down his privacy charms. "Yes, well, going to the Revel would certainly be that. If you do decide to go, you'll have to tell me about it after."

"Assuming I remember it, right?"

He nodded. "And now if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to my reading."
"Er — yes, of course, don't let me keep you, but..." She looked around, obviously uncertain as to how to get back upstairs.

He pointed toward the appropriate tunnel. "Go that way and make a left at the top of the stairs."

She nodded. "Thanks. I'll...see you around, I guess?" she said, obviously uncertain how to wrap up the conversation they'd just had. He understood, he really did. It felt like there were still things left unsaid, though he couldn't have said exactly what they were, and he wasn't sure their talk had actually accomplished anything. Well, he was even more certain, now, that Lyra was a black mage, but aside from that.

"Just go, before you make this even more awkward," he advised her (though he did nod in acknowledgment of her farewell) then turned on his heel and took his own advice, trying to ignore the nagging sense that he ought to tell Professor Snape, or someone, that Lyra Black might be going more insane than usual.

It was probably nothing.

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God damn it, Mad-Eye! I didn't tell you Lestrange is a black mage just to have you turn around and make me guard her! "She's less likely to kill you if she decides to break out tonight" my arse!

Sure, all the Blacks were fucking crazy about preserving their family — case in point: Lyra showing up from a different universe and immediately deciding that she needed to rebuild the House of Black — but if all went well, Lestrange wouldn't have any idea who Dora actually was, and even if she did, as far as the auror was concerned, that would just give the psychotic bitch more reason to kill her.

But when she'd told Moody that, she was pretty sure he'd decided that now she had to do it, because she was so obviously scared to do so. Which was a perfectly reasonable fear, Lestrange was fucking terrifying!

Even Lyra was pretty damn scary, and she was only fourteen. Dora could definitely take her in a fight, she'd spent an entire morning over Easter break demonstrating that fact in the cause of testing Lady Zabini's new dueling wards. But Lyra was clever and quick, and her stamina was downright inhuman. Seriously, the damn kid would not stay down — every time Dora thought they were done, she just reversed the curses and healed herself and popped back to her feet demanding another rematch. For hours. Dora was fairly certain that shouldn't be possible — yeah, she hadn't been using her most lethal spells, but she hadn't been pulling her punches, either. Lyrashould have been completely exhausted, physically and magically, by the time Dora had gotten called in to work. Fuck, she should have been passed out on the floor after half an hour — the girl had hardly gotten any decent strikes in, she'd basically just been taking a beating the whole time.

She'd mentioned it to Mum, who had simply shrugged and pointed out that there was a reason she'd always been rather relieved that Dora seemed to have missed out on the Black Madness.

But the point was, she was pretty sure Lyra was going to be terrifying when she grew up. Which meant that, even if her reputation had been fantastically exaggerated (which Mum said it hadn't), Lestrange was even more terrifying — Lyra hadn't been trained by a Dark Lord or lived through a goddamn war. Dora wasn't even certain she could take the madwoman unarmed — she'd heard Lestrange had once taken Fenrir Greyback apart in hand-to-hand combat, and at a certain range, it became rather impossible to curse an assailant.
Of course, Moody knew that, he was the one who'd told her the Greyback story. So he'd assigned her a partner for the evening, Penderghast. Which just— What was he supposed to do if Lestrange made a break for it? She honestly didn't know what she'd done to annoy her Senior Auror so badly. Really, she hadn't done anything since they'd come back to this gods-forsaken rock.

She'd thought Azkaban Detail couldn't possibly be any worse than their first rotation, the whole damn place gave her the creeps. It didn't seem possible for a fucking island to have an aura of dark magic about itself, but she would have sworn it did, malevolence seeping out of every crack in the stones. She was sure it wasn't just her imagination — the place even disrupted their communication mirrors, somehow.

But it had gotten worse, because after the dementors had attacked a Hogwarts quidditch match back in November, it had been decided — by whom, Dora had no idea — that it would be best to rotate them back to Azkaban every few weeks so they could continue to feed off the prisoners and would therefore (theoretically) not be tempted to attack innocent citizens. Even with only a quarter of the usual demonic population in residence, she could see how being stuck here, with them, for months or years on end could drive a person mad. In fact, she was quickly coming to understand exactly why everyone had been talking about how strange it was that Sirius had managed to maintain his sanity long enough to escape in the first place.

Of course, it had just come out in the papers that the Sirius Black had applied for political asylum in Aquitania while his trial here was conducted in absentia — that had been announced weeks ago, but Dora supposed it had taken some time for him to hear, wherever Lyra had (hypothetically) hidden him away. So all of the dementors might be returned soon, and the aurors, Dora included, could vacate the Island of the Damned.

That thought was cheering enough that her patronus — a fox, today — brightened slightly, though it dimmed immediately as she realised they were coming up on Lestrange's cell.

"Right," Penderghast said, sounding very nervous. "So, I thought I'd, um, take the first shot and, uh, then you can follow up, maybe?"

Dora groaned. "You know Moody doesn't actually expect us to get her to answer the questions, right?"

Apparently under the impression that simply standing guard wasn't enough of a challenge for a third-year trainee, Dora had also been assigned to demonstrate interrogation techniques for Penderghast. The list of questions they'd been given was half absurd — What's your favorite color? What's the Parseltongue word for 'snake'? — and half incriminating, either for Lestrange or others — If you're really a black mage, who's your Patron? Why did you join the Death Eaters? How old were you when you witnessed your first murder? (Dora actually knew the answer to that one already — mum had told her ages ago that the Black family Yule ritual called for human sacrifice, and the kids had been included from the age of seven.) Who were your allies in the Ministry? What about St. Mungo's? Why did the survivors of Bloody Sunday live? — and so on.

She rather doubted Lestrange would be inclined to answer any of them.

"We still have to try, don't we?"

"We could not, and say we did. I mean, what's he going to do? Check up on us with Lestrange? She'd probably tell him to piss off before she took his other leg as well or some shite."

Apparently they were in earshot, now, because Lestrange, sitting cross-legged in the middle of her cell at the end of the corridor, her back perfectly straight, but her eyes closed, grinned. "I didn't
"Shacklebolt," Dora said shortly. She had chosen to impersonate Kingsley tonight specifically because he was a challenge. Might as well enjoy some part of the evening. "This is Penderghast."

"Do you think I'm an idiot? Shacklebolt's patronus is some kind of big cat, and you've got his accent all wrong." Damn it. She knew that had sounded off... "Besides, he's not on this rotation. You're that girl who came here with Severus — your face may be different, but your magic's the same..." She hesitated for a moment, her grin falling into an all-too-familiar smirk. "What does Andromeda call you?"

"None of your business," Dora snapped. "And how the fuck do you even know that?!"

"I'll answer your questions if you answer mine. But drop the patronus. You won't need it. The dementors are sleeping tonight."

"Dementors sleep?" Penderghast asked, saving Dora the trouble. The idea of a dementor just...lying down for a bit of shut-eye (nevermind the fact that they didn't have eyes) was just...no. Just, no.

Lestrange shrugged. "Not the same as humans — dormancy is probably more accurate than sleep, but it serves a similar function. At least, I think so, France and Etruria were being a bit vague. I don't think they talk about abstract concepts very much among themselves. And I'm half-guessing at most of the terminology, but yes. Probably. In any case, they're in their own quarters tonight."

"You...talk to the dementors?" Had Penderghast not heard that rumor? "And...they actually talk back?" Oh, maybe he just thought she was delusional. He hadn't met her before, Dora didn't think. Personally, she was more curious about how she could possibly tell them apart to name them, and why after countries? "You're insane."

The madwoman cocked her head to one side, her rat's nest of curls falling over one thin shoulder, emphasising how much the woman had shrunk since she'd been given her current uniform — it was practically hanging off her. "Yes, hi, I'm Bellatrix, you may have heard of me," she said sarcastically. "And I'm not answering any more questions until you put out that damn light."

As terrifying as the idea of wandering around here without a patronus was, Dora had to admit that she hadn't actually seen or felt a single dementor since she'd been on this floor. She'd thought she was just doing a really good job of avoiding them, but... "Fine." She let the spell fall, the fox fading away, leaving the world feeling cold and empty, but not unnaturally so. She could always cast it again, she reminded herself, if the dementors showed up, or Lestrange got too creepy.

She almost cast it again right away, simply because of the way the creepy bitch in question sighed, a tension Dora hadn't noticed easing from her shoulders. "Much better." She closed her eyes, conjuring light globes with a few flicks of her fingers, then opened them again with a grin. "Yes, of course they talk back. Not in English, they can't pronounce it, but they have their own language. How did you think they communicate with each other? How did you think they established their treaty with the Ministry? Or with us?" Dora hadn't really thought about it at all, really. She didn't think much about the dementors in general, beyond avoiding them. "My turn! You, nameless metamorph. Why are you pretending to be Shacklebolt? You are an auror yourself, aren't you? I did think it was odd that Severus didn't have an escort, but if it was you, that makes sense. So were you wearing my face to fuck with him, or me?"

"Er...bit of both, I suppose. And Kingsley's good to practice with." And also, she felt better not wearing her usual face(s) when she was anywhere near Lestrange. They bore a strong resemblance
to her mother — the face she'd seen most often growing up — and she really, really didn't want to deal with psychobitch flipping out if she was reminded of her ex-sister. Especially since she could apparently do wandless light charms as well as fire — who knew what other tricks she had up her overly-large sleeves? Though apparently that hadn't been entirely necessary — she'd just referred to Mum by name a minute ago, and was still conversing relatively calmly.

"Hmm, well. In answer to your question, once I knew you were a metamorph, it was simple enough to deduce that you are most likely Andromeda's child. I thought metamorphy an unlikely explanation for your appearance, you know, when you were with Severus, but yet, here you are. And the first time we met, you showed up looking like me — a young me — which, unless it was completely random, which it couldn't be, you had to have put some effort into reconstructing my image at that age, photographs only show one angle, and there aren't any proper portraits of me at thirteen — suggested an especial interest in me, and there are only so many reasons for that."

Well, that wasn't entirely correct — it hadn't taken any special effort to 'reconstruct' her appearance, what with having met Lyra — but it did make sense, given what she knew of the situation, and well, it wasn't like she was actually wrong about Dora's identity.

"If you were...a fan of my work, let's say, I imagine your aura would be significantly darker. By that same token, you're not any of the Black metamorphs — some of them may have thought it was funny to infiltrate the aurors, but none of them could cast a patronus. And you're far too young, Severus said something about you not believing I was as crazy as you'd heard, as you were leaving, which means you weren't around during the War, and probably also that I didn't do anything to anyone too close to you, so it's not a weird vendetta obsession thing. Also, I daresay if you considered me an enemy, you wouldn't appropriate my image so lightly. Not to mention, you mostly just seem confused right now, and wary. You don't hate me, I know what that looks like. So if you're not an enemy, and you're not a potential ally, yet you still have a great enough interest in me to go to the trouble of reconstructing my face as I looked when I was a schoolgirl, I am forced to consider that you might have been told of me by someone sympathetic to me, someone who portrayed me as interesting, but not evil. And since neither Narcissa's son nor Mirabella's is a metamorph, and they're not old enough to be aurors, anyway, even in training, and there is no one else left who had any significant relationship with me — enough to have told a child about me, anyway — I suspected you of being Andromeda's. And you confirmed it not ten minutes ago by your reaction to the suggestion. So, if you would be so kind as to answer my question, what's your name?"

That was a 'simple deduction' was it? It was somehow easy to forget that, in many ways, the woman quietly (or voluntarily, at least) sitting here in a cell was exactly the same person as Lyra, who was currently off at Hogwarts, probably celebrating Walpurgis and coming up with more ways to make life interesting for everyone around her. Lyra was almost disturbingly clever, apparently they had that in common.

"Dora," she said shortly. "Tonks, preferably."

"Uh, what's your favorite color?" Penderghast asked. Both witches turned to stare at him, holding the parchment Moody had scribbled his questions on — the one Dora had accidentally-on-purpose left back at the barracks — all wide-eyed and innocent.

"Seriously, Penderghast?!"

"We have to at least ask, don't we?"

"No! No, we do not have to at least ask — he's having us on, I guarantee it! No one cares what her favorite color is, or how she likes her fucking eggs, and she won't answer the rest of them!"
Penderghast pouted at her. "Well, I'm asking anyway. What's your favorite color, Lestrange?"

Lestrange, who seemed to be highly amused by their byplay, raised an eyebrow at that. "I don't understand the question," she told him, before going right back to her conversation with Dora. "So you are that mudblood's daughter. And she named you after Henry's Nymphadora? Good job casting aside the family, Meda," she scoffed. "How's that going for you?"

Then again, sometimes she and Lyra sounded exactly alike, it was bloody unnerving.

"So you're...not mad?" Honestly, from everything she'd heard about Bellatrix over the course of her childhood, Dora had expected her aunt to be furious, to be faced with the evidence of her mother's traitorous abandonment of the House of Black. Not...whatever this was.

"Wha— How can you not understand the bloody question?"

*God* damn it, Penderghast!

"How the hell are you supposed to pick a favorite color? They're just *colors*. None of them is inherently better than any other."

"Well...fine, then. How old were you the first time you saw someone murdered?"

"Ah... Eleven? I mean, I said it was self-defense, but I *could* have used something non-lethal on him, so I think it probably counts."

"But Mum said your Yule ritual—" Dora's voice cut out abruptly, a wave of magic spilling over her. Had that bitch just...?!

Lestrange rolled her eyes. "Sacrifice is not the same thing as *murder* — if Meda told you about Yule, she should have told you that as well."

Dora broke the wandless silencing hex with a silent *finite*. "What the *fuck*?!" How did she even *do* that? Weren't there supposed to be magic-suppressing wards on her cell?

Lestrange smirked. *Language*, Nymphadora. And mind your tongue around outsiders. I'll make an exception for you knowing, but Family Traditions are meant to be kept in the Family."

Even if there wasn't much of a Family left to speak of? "Wait — you'll make an exception for me? I thought you'd want to kill me, because of, you know, *Mum*.

"If Magic decided to bless Andromeda's ill-conceived marriage with a fae-touched child — and a chaotic one at that — I suppose I must admit that her choice wasn't so very unsuitable after all." The witch scowled dramatically, apparently displeased to have to admit she'd been wrong. "I have my doubts that he was truly *muggleborn*, I'm sure you'd find a squib or two in his pedigree if you looked. And he was certainly not a politically appropriate match for a daughter of the House of Black. But it's the magic that matters, and the children. I'm not going to kill you for her betrayal, or her, or even her bloody mudblood. You can tell her so next time you see her. She's still a complete *idiot* to have left the House, though — and she was supposed to be the clever one."

"Well, you're in Azkaban," Dora snapped. "So by comparison..."

"How do you take your eggs?"

"Damn it, Penderghast, shut *up*!"
"But—"

"Cooked," Lestrange said, giving the idiot a bewildered glare. "Seriously, what the fuck is this moron doing here?"

"Practicing interrogation skills," Dora said, almost managing to keep a straight face. Lestrange's was much better. "Really."

Penderghast nodded. "Senior Auror Moody gave me a list."

The prisoner extended a hand through the bars of her cell. Dora tensed, but all she did was flick her fingers in a give it here gesture. Penderghast, after giving Dora a rather panicked look and receiving an eye-roll in return, did.

Lestrange's eyes flicked over the page, a smile tugging at her lips. "I speak twelve languages — fluently, at least. Not answering that one. Or that one. Or that. You weren't meant to go telling people that, you know. Poor form, niece. But it's Eris, in any case. Keeping kill counts is for little boys who like to play at war and pretend they're warlocks, but I imagine it's somewhere in the triple digits — only counting the ones I killed personally, of course, not my influence or training or contributions to larger plans. I joined the Death Eaters because I wished to serve my Lord in every way, which, yes, means we were fucking, and you can tell that old lech he doesn't have the constitution for details. The Parseltongue word for 'snake' is—" She made a hissing sound that was presumably the word in question. "—and a certain percentage of people are naturally resistant to the plague we used as the basis for the Bloody Sunday attack. Their survival was, so far as I know, random." She glared at Penderghast, the parchment bursting into flame as she did.

"How did you...?" he asked, staring at the ashes slowly falling to the floor — which was a much better question than which sex positions You Know Who had preferred, she'd just been too distracted by Lestrange basically forgiving her mother to ask after breaking that damn silencing hex.

The witch grinned. "Magic."

"But— What about the wards? There are wards against the prisoners using magic, aren't there?" he added, hissing the last question at Dora, though not quietly enough that Lestrange couldn't hear.

"No, the wards remove the ambient magic from the cell and stop it from flowing back into the area. They don't actually disrupt casting."

"But if there's no ambient magic..."

It was Dora's understanding that magical effects were created by the interaction of one's personal magical field and ambient magic. She didn't really understand the details of it, they weren't really important. If there was no ambient magic in there, that left only freeform effects, generated exclusively from...wherever one's personal magic came from. She'd thought it was slowly assimilated from the environment, but...apparently not?

"You have no idea what the term black mage means, do you? It would take far more than these paltry wards to sever my connection to Magic."

They'd probably have to kill her — that was one of the reasons becoming a black mage was an Unforgivable Act. But if the DLE had, for some gods-unknown reason, declined to press for Lestrange's execution back in 1981, given her list of offences at that time, there was hardly any way they would do so now. Moody had said even knowing that she was dedicated to Chaos
probably wouldn't be enough to get her another trial, not after she'd been a model prisoner for over twelve years. Especially since, if she thought they were going to press the issue, she'd probably find a way to escape their custody entirely, and no one wanted to see what she'd do then.

"Wait — are you saying you're...?"

"Me? Saying? I'm not saying anything," the black mage smirked, the image of her younger self, making it very difficult for Dora to avoid thinking about whether Lyra was also a black mage (which she had been avoiding, successfully, for months, because she didn't want to have to deal with the ethical dilemma of whether to bring her in). "Now go away, I was in the middle of a conversation."

"Er... I think... I'm supposed to stay with you, aren't I?" The boy looked frantically from Dora to Lestrange and back again.

Dora sighed. "No, you're supposed to take orders from the fucking prisoners." Moron.

"Er. Right. I'll stay."

Lestrange grinned. "Are you sure? There should be a riot going on downstairs in about, oh, two minutes? If you hurry, you can warn your S.A. before the doors inexplicably unlock themselves and the inmates realise they're free."

"Er—"

"Go," Dora ordered him. She had no idea whether Lestrange was bluffing, but better to give a false alarm than ignore a real tip.

The stupid boy fled.

"How did he make it through the entry exam?" Lestrange asked, sniggering slightly.

No fucking clue, Dora thought, but ignored the question. "He's not going to get eaten by a dementor, is he?"

"No, I told you, they're not patrolling tonight."

"Why not?"

"Professional courtesy?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, they know I'm not food, so they presume I'm something more like themselves. There was a bit of confusion when I got here, actually, about why I was supposed to stay in a cell. They still don't actually believe I'm human, but whatever." She shrugged, smirking. "I convinced the leader of the cohort that's here now that a hint of hope, a brief glimpse of freedom, will bring out the misery more strongly in the prisoners once they're recaptured." Her grin was almost painfully bright. "Like salt."

"And you're actually going to...somehow organise a mass prison break?"

"Hmm, 'organise' is a strong word, but yes, it's not difficult... Wanna watch?" she asked, rhetorically. Dora was certain, she didn't imagine for a second she had a choice in the matter. Lestrange stood, winked at her, and stepped backward into a patch of shadow, only to step out of a
dark corner on this side of the bars.

Dora's grip on her wand tightened, her heart suddenly racing. "What are you doing? Get back in there!"

"In a minute," the black witch said, apparently completely unconcerned about the wand pointed at her back. She sliced an index finger with a wandless cutting curse and painted a short series of runes on the doorframe of her cell.

"I'm warning you, Lestrange..." Dora said, hoping desperately that she wouldn't have to finish that sentence, because she wasn't sure how.

The so-called prisoner ignored her, focused entirely on the door. She laid a hand over the runes she had painted and, with a strange twisting sensation in the magic all around them, shoved power into them, far more than they could possibly require or hold, by orders of magnitude. The wards the aurors had laid when the dementors had gone cracked, the lock disengaging with a very audible click.

The door swung inward, allowing Lestrange to step back into her cell and resume her seat on the floor. "Sympathetic magic is so underrated," she said lightly.

"Wait, so, you just—"

"Unlocked every door on the island, yes. A night of freedom for Walpurgis."

Fuck! Dora's first instinct was to run, find Penderghast and regroup with the aurors, help them recapture the rest of the prisoners. She quashed it. She was under orders to guard Lestrange. Moody could handle whatever the gibbering madmen on the lower levels might get up to without her. Not that she thought she could actually stop the crazy bitch if she decided she wanted to leave. She re-cast her patronus, just in case she tried shadow walking away again. The fox advanced on the black witch, snarling silently. She grimaced slightly, but stayed in her spot.

"And you're just...going to sit there."

The prisoner cackled. "I'm here because this is where my Lord would want me to be, loyally awaiting his return. I could leave if I wanted to. You may be a decent duelist, but you're scared of me, and that makes you weak. I could take your wand and be halfway to Suthuroy by the time you woke up."

Dora...didn't really doubt that. She found it rather surprising that Lestrange would consider leaving her alive, but...

"But...you don't want to," she said, just to confirm, clutching her wand a little more tightly.

The older witch shook her head. "Everything I tried to do for him, everything I tried to do to save him, it all fell apart, in the end. This is all that's left now. And I am still his. So I wait."

"Save him?" Dora repeated. She had never heard anything like that before. Granted, she'd never really talked to a Death Eater before, but there wasn't anything in the history books about You Know Who needing saving from something. If anything, everyone else had needed saving from him.

"We were Knights, once, in the beginning." Lestrange sounded uncharacteristically nostalgic, her light globes twisting and reforming into the shape of the Knights' Crest — the triple-spiral alchemists used to represent change, surrounded by a circle broken into seven offset segments. It
was one of the first symbols associated with the movement that would become the Death Eaters, back in the early sixties, though it had fallen out of use by the seventies in favor of the Dark Mark. "My Lord... He was brilliant. He wanted to change the world, bring about a Dark Revolution. We would be free to act as we pleased in his new world, without fear of censorship or restriction. Nothing would be Anathema. The Statute would fall and we would walk like gods among men, blessed by magic, unleashing potential back into the world."

There was a stumbling, shuffling sound in the corridor behind Dora. She spun on her heel, releasing a *stupefy* before she'd even identified the target. There were two of them, ragged, emaciated men, leaning on each other for support. They both collapsed when the one on the left fell to her spell. Lestrange giggled.

"Bella? Bella! Help us!" the other man cried.

"You could kill them," the witch murmured, far too close to Dora's left ear — she'd stood up, come to the doorway of her cell, leaning against it nonchalantly. "I wouldn't mind. Dolph's purpose was served as soon as the ink dried on our marriage contract, and Bastian's a bigger idiot than that partner of yours."

Dora ignored her as best she could, sending another stunner at the man who was still moving.

Lestrange sighed. "Pity. Where was I? Oh, yes. Those lofty ideals were goals for the long term. More immediately, we would carve out for ourselves a kingdom of sorts, demand autonomy and recognition by the government of Magical Britain. The war, in the beginning, was not about mudbloods and traitors and hate. It was about exercising our freedom, and having it be known that we *could not be stopped* from doing so. About forcing Magical Britain to deal with us as a legitimate, autonomous government. Engaging in an actual *war* with us was a *de facto* recognition of our status as a power on par with Magical Britain as a whole, you see. I think he would have been satisfied, when I joined him, with that, with our autonomy. We could have built a new Miskatonic, a bastion from which to advance the Revolution. But the Light, the Ministry, would never have allowed it. They continued to escalate their efforts to quash our movement, so of course we retaliated in kind. The goal shifted from breaking *away* from Magical Britain to simply *breaking* it."

Dora actually knew all of that. Granted, Mum hadn't put it exactly that way, but she'd been in a unique position during the early years of the war — situated at the heart of a Dark noble house, the Blackheart's favored sister, she'd been hearing the rhetoric behind the Death Eaters' position — the Knights, back then — practically since she'd been in the nursery. And she'd seen it shift, over the years, even as she herself had begun to question their *right* to rule, their inbred sense of *superiority*. Not just the Death Eaters — the entire noble class of Magical Britain. There was a reason she'd made so many enemies, so quickly, when they'd returned from Canada. Taking a noble's education on the intricacies of custom, law, and policy in Magical Britain and turning it against the ruling class was, in its own way, as much of a threat to them as the Knights themselves.

Lestrange, oblivious to Dora's musings, continued to talk, her rambling nostalgia taking on a more vicious, hateful tone. "And then... Moel Tŷ Uchaf. That was the turning point. Lily *fucking* Evans — a jumped-up mudblooded twit two months out of school — broke into our ritual, subverted it, twisted it — it fell back on my Lord, rooting itself in his soul like a proper *tynged*, twisting his mind ever more quickly, until he became in truth the parody they had made of him in their propaganda, a mockery of extremes, so unlike the man he truly was, once. For a time he fought it, but..."

"But?" Dora repeated, trying to keep the interest from her voice. She couldn't help it. *This* she
hadn't known, she didn't think anyone did, at least on their side. Who went around talking to Death Eaters about what had gone wrong on their side of the war? The so-called former Death Eaters — the free ones — wouldn't talk about it, that sort of thing sounded too much like sympathising with the cause they had renounced, and the ones who had been captured and brought here, with dementors eating away at them for years, couldn't — they'd lost their bloody minds.

"But I betrayed him," Lestrange spat, her fury clearly only barely controlled. She spun away from Dora to pace her cell, stalking from one side to the other like a tiger in a cage. "I subverted his control over the Death Eaters, interpreting his commands to them, all in the name of returning him to the man he once was. And I failed. Evans is dead, there is no reversing the damage she wrought upon him. And— And he is still my Lord, I cannot forsake him, I will not denounce him, I am his, unto death and beyond. When he returns — and he will return, he is not dead, I would know if he died— He will return and he will come for me. And I will beg his forgiveness, for my betrayal and my failure. And then I will find a new way forward for him, a new path to greatness." She froze in her tracks, turned to face Dora, unnatural, impossibly quick motion contrasted with complete and sudden stillness — no wonder Scrimgeour had compared dueling Lestrange to fighting a fucking vampire, back in basic training — her eyes wide and wild. When she continued, though, her voice was nearly calm, and deadly serious. "This is a temporary setback at best, you know. Rest assured, Dora, dear, this war is far from over."

Dora, shaken, responded to that threat — was it even a threat? or had she meant it as simply a statement of fact? — without thinking. "What happened to you? You— Lyra would never— And isn't Chaos supposed to be about freedom? Why the hell would you enslave yourself to— to You Know Who?"

Lestrange cocked her head to one side. "Lyra?" she repeated, apparently too distracted to take offence to Dora referring to her loyalty to her lord as enslavement.

Dora froze. Yes, Bellatrix being distracted was probably in the best interests of her survival, but it suddenly occurred to her that no one had told Bellatrix about Lyra's existence because, well, Bellatrix was insane, and therefore unpredictable. (Well, that and, who actually talked to her besides Snape and dementors?) She could be completely indifferent to Lyra's existence, or she could tell everyone from Moody to the dementors that there was another version of herself out there, or she could leave Azkaban to track Lyra down and meet her for herself, or anything.

"Er. No one?"

Lestrange wasn't buying it. She was shaking her head slowly, a grin spreading across her face. "Are you sure you're Andromeda's child? Because I know she knows how to lie... Hmmmm..." Her eyes widened, ever so slightly, her grin somehow growing even broader. "Well, I suppose that would explain a few things, wouldn't it. Like the fact that you got my voice right, and Italy did say something about a quiet-thing threatening it in High Elvish..." She started giggling madly, barely able to say, "You're fucked. This entire universe — you're sofucked, you know that, right?"

"Er. What? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The Powers don't just drag people into different universes because they think it will change nothing. And I may be waiting for my Lord to return, but she's not, is she?"

"Who?"

"The other me. The younger one. You weren't wearing my face when you were here with Snape, you were wearing hers."
"I don't know what you're talking about," Dora said again. It didn't sound very convincing, even to her.

"I'm sure you do. But I can spell it out if you're so determined to maintain your shattered facade of ignorance," she said, slinking closer, her face falling into a familiar, cocky smirk. Before she could continue, however, she let out a pained sounding hiss, her expression collapsing in on itself, a hand rising to her temple. She actually reached out to lean on the wall of the cell for support.

"Er... Lestrange? Bellatrix?"

The woman didn't respond, beyond collapsing to the floor, her breathing heavy and far too fast, as though she was trying not to scream. After a few seconds, she lost the battle, a blood-curdling shriek echoing through the prison, cutting off abruptly as Dora cast a stunning spell on her. Probably not the most medically appropriate spell to use under the circumstances, but she was no healer, and whatever was going on — whether the witch was actually in pain or trying to trick Dora, somehow — it was probably better if she was unconscious.

Though, now Dora was functionally alone in the middle of Azkaban, surrounded by unconscious Death Eaters, with a bloody riot breaking out between her and the exit, and she had absolutely no idea what the protocol was for dealing with a sick or injured inmate — surely she wasn't supposed to just leave them here — the door to Bellatrix's cell wasn't even locked! But was there even a healers' hall on the island? She'd never heard one mentioned. And besides, she could hardly fight her way through a mob of madmen while dragging the unconscious Lestranges behind her!

Fuck.

At least there were no dementors around. She cast her patronus again, instructing it to go find Moody and ask him to rescue her. She was never going to live this down...

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So...remember how I said we have an outline and we're totally going to finish the thing, it's only going to take four more chapters, including this one? Well, the actual Walpurgis thing with Bellatrix is now its own chapter, so we still have four more chapters to go, not including this one. Sigh.

Notes!

[that was the whole reason Ciardha had taken her to see a mind-healer in the first place] — Seven-year-old Bella, under the mistaken impression that she could fly, stepped off a balcony, broke her arm, and had to ask Ciardha to heal it for her. He understandably asked what had happened, and then equally understandably decided that if his student was jumping out of windows because 'it seemed like a good idea at the time', he should probably make her talk to a professional about that. Because he is a responsible adult, unlike all the other adults in her life.

[if it's going to make you all awkward, I'd prefer you didn't, because I really don't get that, either] — Zee didn't prepare Lyra for people being awkward about...anything, because Zee is never awkward.

[the part where he thought he was going to get smited for not having refreshments on hand] — Kind of a silly thing to be concerned with, given that the Infernal Power has little reason to give a shit about any sort of human protocols, but hospitality was a very big deal in Ancient Greek myth and legend, so.
[being a black mage is incredibly illegal. Becoming one is actually considered an Unforgivable Act] — Hermione already knows this, which is why she threw in the 'hypothetically speaking'. Lyra actually doesn't — the act of dedicating oneself to a Power is not Unforgivable in her original timeline, though it does strongly imply that one regularly engages in felonious High Ritual magic, so is definitely not the sort of thing one talks about.

[the sort of thing the Hufflepuffs do around exams] — Hufflepuff, in addition to being the house of friendly, outgoing, inclusive people, is also the druggie/stoner house, and the house most likely to combat exam stress by throwing parties.

[even people with mage sight didn't really pick up on ambient background magic. Not well enough to actually perceive any sort of patterns in it, and certainly not without trying.] — Lyra actually can perceive patterns in ambient background magic all the time (because Eris's constant presence in her mind is basically like being low-key possessed all the time), but normally she can tune them out if she wants to. They're certainly not too distracting for her to sleep.

[the place even disrupted their communication mirrors, somehow] — Because if communication mirrors are a thing, people shouldn't have to use patroni to send messages. This would be especially useful in a place where you might need your Patronus to fend off dementors. So obviously the mirrors can't work there.

[her patronus — a fox, today] — In my headcanon, Dora's patronus is fairly malleable — if it were to get stuck as a wolf, the fact that it was stuck would be far more troubling than the fact that it's a wolf in the first place.

[how she could possibly tell them apart to name them, and why after countries?] — She identifies them and names them by the blotches on their hands, which are really their only defining feature. So France has a blotch that looks like France, etc.

[it's the magic that matters, and the children] — After twelve years away from Tom with his compulsions and propaganda Bella's hatred for muggleborns has waned somewhat. The fact that they're more likely to have kids that are non-magical is the ultimate basis for pureblood supremacists' position that muggleborns are generally inferior mages. Non-supremacist purebloods tend to consider them inferior potential prospects for marriage, but not necessarily in any other way.

[wherever one's personal magic came from] — Bella's connection to Eris is rather stifled by all the compulsions Tom used on her turning her into a less suitable dedicate, so she's not getting nearly as much magical bleed-through as Lyra, but it's still enough to show off a bit and intimidate the aurors. Normally she wouldn't be able to do anything without physically reaching outside of her cell (past the wards) which is what she did to throw fire at Severus.

[tynged] — Basically a fairy-tale style curse — a wandless imposition of will on an individual, place, or even an idea, with negative intent and consequences, and at least one circumstance which must be fulfilled in order to dispel the negative energy. Very old school. Very rare. Similar to a ghost's imprint.

—Leigha
In a clearing in a forest, people gathered, drawn by magic and tradition — drawn to celebrate freedom, choice, and their baser, more animal instincts, suppressed for so much of their lives by social contracts and obligations and expectations. Tonight, those meant nothing.

Or rather, they *would* mean nothing, the ritual hadn't started yet. There was a feeling of potential in the air, of magic, itself dancing with excitement, tingling against their skin, the faintest scent of lightning on the breeze. Some of the celebrants had clearly already begun their observance, drinking and smoking and playing music — a violin and a guitar began an impromptu duet from opposite sides of the clearing — lighting bonfires and meandering between them, laughing with friends more loudly than they normally might. Others danced or tumbled or sprawled themselves out on the forest floor, swept clear for the night of leaves and sticks that might otherwise distract from their distractions.

A girl, dressed in green and cloaked in magic, moved from one group of revelers to the next, her dark hair loose, a riot of curls, her eyes bright with excitement, a grin stretching her lips so wide she could hardly speak. "It's starting, soon," she said to each group, directing them to gather on one side of the open space. Many of them looked at her slightly askance — she was the youngest person at the gathering, and she hadn't (technically) been invited — but none of them truly doubted that she had been chosen as their hostess for the evening. Even if they had not known who she was — and the reputation of her family, which she seemed determined to live up to — they could feel the magic that followed her, washing over them, tugging their deepest desires to the forefront of their minds and whispering to their very souls — *you could*...

When every group had been approached, when every person had meandered over to the space she had indicated, she moved to the center of the clearing.

"Your attention, please," she called, her voice magically amplified, her tone suggesting that there was something inherently amusing about the phrase itself. The sound of the participants' talking and laughter died down to smoldering coals — enough that she could easily be heard above them.

"Just in case there's anyone in the entire bloody school who *doesn't* know who I am, I'm Lyra Black, and I'm your hostess for the evening, as we celebrate Walpurgis in honor of Choice and Freedom. For those of you who haven't been here before, this is the Unbinding. Hopefully everyone who *has* been here before has told you this, but just in case: If you choose to participate, you will, for one night, know what it is to be free to choose and act without external inhibitions, the only constraint that you may not force another to comply with your desires. Try it, and you get kicked out — and Choice tends to get a bit tetchy if you deliberately fuck this up, so yeah, negotiation, highly recommended. I know for a fact that you're still capable of rationality during this, so try not to be too stupid. If you want to leave, you may, of course, whenever you want, or just stay here to have a way more *boring* party, I guess."
"That said, I call upon the Deliberative Power to maintain the sanctity of choice among us tonight, and the Chaotic Power to release us from the chains of social order."

This was by far the least elaborate invocation of the Powers any of the prospective participants had ever heard, though they could not deny their presence as they answered the call, light energy and dark swirling around their hostess before spreading outward to blanket the clearing, calling to the magic in the souls of the celebrants, setting it to singing. It also swamped every spell in progress, leaving the space lit only by the flickering light of a dozen fires, and a few first-time attendees gasping in surprise.

The girl grinned, carving a rune into the air, in defiance of the apparent impossibility of casting any spell against the sudden influx of wild power. It doubled and split, arcing off to fall upon a matching pair of bonfires, unlit and unnoticed at the edges of the clearing until the runes' contact sent them bursting into flames, green and bright. Fiery filaments leapt between them, circling around to meet on the other side of the clearing before sinking to the ground.

"So, yeah. Think about it, and then whenever you're ready, choose. Cross the line and be Unbound," she finished matter-of-factly, stepping backward across it as she did, then spinning and twirling away into the shadows beyond, giggling madly.

The party followed her, slowly at first, but ever more quickly as pairs and groups of celebrants caved to the siren song of the magic in the air, passing between the fires and into revelry.

Meanwhile, on a very different plane of existence, the consciousness which called itself Eris narrowed its focus to two very particular dedicates, in a single universe and time. This was easier said than done, especially tonight, when there were so many other interesting things going on everywhere, but for her Bellatrices she would do it.

One was sitting in a terrible, boring little room, cut off from all magic but Eris's, speaking to the youngest Black metamorph, the one who insisted she wasn't really a Black. The other leaned against a tree at the edge of a clearing, giggling as she watched the children of Hogwarts loose their inhibitions at her invitation. Their voices and music rose in volume as they came together in lust and violence, giving in to the impulses they always felt, but never acted upon, their minds and magic turned toward Chaos, supporting them, raising the peak of their strength ever higher — supporting her, though few of them knew it.

Are you ready yet? that one asked, her tone full of giddy excitement, her mind flickering between half a dozen different topics — the problem of adjusting the boundary of her circle, now that everyone in the uncovered part of the clearing had either joined the ritual or left (no reason to waste half the space); the presence of all of Chaos (and more distantly, the Dark as a whole) focusing on her, rather than just Eris; the way the light magic of Choice danced around her, careful not to touch her, burn her — she'd long since made her Choice — but intoxicatingly close (mostly ignoring the self-destructive impulse to reach out and touch it); things she might see in the memories of the Bellatrix of this universe; the beauty of the night, all shadows and magic; everything she planned to accomplish once the Other Bellatrix was free to join forces with her; the triumph of her rune-cast firestarting charm (and the reckless joy that accompanied the decision to demonstrate such a skill before any number of potentially untrustworthy witnesses).

"Almost," Eris responded, narrowing her focus even more tightly, bringing all of her attention and strength to bear on the Bellatrix native to this universe. The Bellatrix who, even cut off from her as she was, was still creating chaos in her name, harnessing the energy of Walpurgis to break every lock on her prison island, returning the investment a dozen times over as the captives ran wild, overwhelming their guards with sheer numbers. Not that they would stay free for long, the
madmen were too disorganized to truly fight, and the aurors had magic on their side.

It was so annoying to be able to peer in on this one so distantly, and not be able to speak to her directly, her mind laboring under his artificial restrictions. Well, not anymore, she thought, throwing herself at the block he'd built as she'd longed to do since she first realised how it was stifling her connection to the girl.

It shattered, the concretion of compulsions and memories woven through them breaking into innumerable pieces, clearing the way for her to renew her connection with her dedicate properly. Of course, all the points to which it had been anchored in the Bellatrix's mind were also broken and torn asunder, but they'd get to that. First she had to copy the memories — referential knowledge was easy, she could just seize it and pull, but the experiences, those she actually had to get in order, so she would know how to give them back (in a way that would make sense from a human perspective).

A task which would be much easier if..."Could you stop focusing on being in agony, just for a few minutes? It's very distracting."

Eris? What the fuck? Bellatrix couldn't remember the last time Eris had spoken directly into her mind.

"I'm sure we'll find that memory eventually."

We? Eris, what are you doing to me? Tendrils of irritation and giddiness coiled through the pain in Bellatrix's head, the confused mess that had just been made of her mind.

"Fixing you."

...Since when do you fix anything? And what exactly do you think is wrong with me?

"Right now, and I'll tell you later."

But—

Before Bella could finish her thought, the metamorph cast a bolt of magic at her, dragging her into unconsciousness. Probably just as well, this would be easier if the witch was unable to fight against her burning of the compulsions (and everything else that got in the way).

What about now? Lyra asked. Eris was fairly certain her timing was entirely coincidental, though there was a small chance some echoes of her current focus were bleeding into the young dedicate, given the circumstances. They had been practicing that sort of thing for weeks, now.

Eris sent a wave of amusement at the girl. "No, but I suppose if you really want to do something so badly..."

She didn't need Lyra to articulate her response — she hardly ever did. Lyra knew this, Eris responded to ill-defined passing thoughts all the time, whenever they caught her attention. But it was true that thoughts were more likely to attract her attention if they were specifically addressed to her, and intentionally defined, so Lyra (like many of her Bellatrices) had made a habit of thinking at her as though they were actually holding a verbal conversation. Yeah! Let's do this!

"Well, hold onto your knickers then, darling."

Zee said wearing knickers to Walpurgis was entirely pointless. Not that Lyra really felt there was ever a point to knickers.
"Mirabella Zabini is entirely shameless." Eris did enjoy that girl. She wasn't one of theirs — those people naturally inclined toward Chaos — her soul resonated far more clearly with selfish Solitude. She was, however, very good at convincing other humans to freely give her...whatever she decided she wanted, really — often to her advantage, of course, but equally often simply because she could. Her little games were so amusing Eris didn't even mind when the minx worked her manipulative charm on her Bellatrices. (Besides which, the Bellatrices' own manipulative abilities tended to benefit immensely from their associations with Mirabellas.)

Whatever. Consider my hypothetical knickers figuratively braced.

Eris sniggered, wrapping her consciousness around Lyra's entirely, careful not to snuff it out — normally their contact was, well, not superficial. Her connection with her Bellatrices was far deeper than she'd established with any of her other dedicates, presumably because little Bella always made her Choice based on the resonance of her soul, rather than some conscious decision. But normally her presence within Lyra's mind and body was far less intrusive. Enough that her strength had a tendency to bleed over into the girls at this time of year, yes, and enough that most of them were far more aware of magic than any rational human had a right to be, but not enough to disrupt the connection between their consciousnesses and their bodies. Eris was always present, but she left control in the humans' hands.

Engulfing Lyra's consciousness entirely, pulling it down into herself, directing it into the part of her that was connected to the Bellatrix native to this dimension, did disrupt that control, leaving her body fully under Eris's command, which was...strange. It was almost as difficult to pilot this thing as it was to allow Lyra to manipulate that particular extension of herself directly. The first time they'd tried it, she'd let the stupid thing pass out from lack of oxygen almost immediately. (The sudden shadow of boredom in the imminent futures of this universe had unnerved Eris so badly she'd instantly shoved Lyra back into it, giving her a rather serious migraine.) In her defense, the few times she'd actually "possessed" a dedicate in the past, the contact had borne much more resemblance to her usual degree of contact with Lyra (and most of the other Bellatrices) — just enough to actively influence their thoughts and actions (if she wanted to, she hardly ever had), not actually operating the stupid fleshy bits herself. And when she created "physical" constructs for herself, they were little more than a hollow shell of glamoury and illusion, real enough to humans' perception, but far easier to operate.

After a bit of practicing, she'd figured out how not to stifle the autonomic processes of the body, letting it take care of the breathing and blinking and digestion, and the particular muscle extensions and contractions required to move from point A to point B without any conscious input at all, from her or Lyra, which just seemed odd. It was very convenient, however, and neatly explained how humans, unaccustomed to focusing on more than one thing at a time so consistently, managed not to simply die. (Which she had to admit, she had been rather curious about — it had taken her Bellatrices years to learn how to think about two or three things simultaneously, and as far as Eris could tell, she was one of the more intelligent ones.) She was already familiar with the sensory inputs from observing her Bellatrices, and once she'd managed to fully assimilate the idea that balancing would take care of itself, she'd figured out walking relatively quickly. Speaking had required rather a lot more practice than she'd expected, however; all of the bits involved were so finicky, and then there was the breath-control necessary — actively controlling the breathing without accidentally quashing the other automatic functions was unexpectedly tricky.

Now that she had the basics down, however, she was quite certain she could control any number of the meat puppets, as necessary. They could certainly have kept to the usual time travel schedule. When Lyra went back in time, there were just temporarily a few more Bellatrices in this universe. Eris herself didn't seem to be noticeably affected. Time normally sort of just...flowed around her and through her, or at least that was how it seemed to her. Time "travel" made it ripple oddly in
places, but it was a minor enough disturbance to generally disregard. She had admitted, however, that it was probably a good idea to limit the number of Bellatrices in this universe while she was supposed to be focusing on these ones in particular and the entirely foreign concept of fixing one.

She did want this to work out, after all. There was no point in transplanting Bellatrices to new universes if they couldn't find a way to free their counterparts from Tom Riddle's bloody compulsions once they got there.

*Hey, Eris, where'd you go? Did you forget it's Walpurgis?* another transplanted Bellatrix asked, Eris's passing thought enough to draw her attention back in her direction. This particular Bellatrix had, quite impulsively, decided to find out what would happen if she simply walked into a Walpurgis bonfire as though it was a Floo portal, dragging her Mirabella along for the ride. She had left several years after Lyra — a brief mention of that experiment having given her the idea — but reappeared several years sooner, in a universe that still had a Lily Evans, presumably due to some interest in her presence there on the part of Mystery, because Eris certainly hadn't arranged it.

"Of course not. I'll tell you if it works."

*If what works?*

"*You can help me with these,*“ she said, mentally shoving a tangled clump of memories at Lyra's consciousness, floating disembodied within her own. She had copied them wholesale, which meant all the associations other than the temporal thread needed to be broken. Once they got them straightened out, Lyra could take over with Bellatrix and they'd start giving them back.

It seemed she didn't need to actually articulate that. *Ugh, fine*, Lyra thought, her impatience to get to the fun part barely held in check.

"Oh, hi, Eris! Come to join the party?" Lily interrupted. She was hosting the Hogwarts ritual in that universe, of course, her consciousness diffused throughout the magic as Choice and Chaos possessed her body.

Eris turned most of her attention to the memories as well, though she was still drawn to the Revel. Using Lyra's body to shape the magic around her into a series of fantastical illusions and sending them to run amok among the celebrants was far more amusing than carefully, meticulously, breaking the associations between memories, straightening the twisted net of associations into a chronological timeline of this Bellatrix's life.

"No, I'm actually in the middle of something, this is just a stray thought."

Lips were pressing against the lips of the meat puppet she'd left mostly unattended-to for the past several minutes, recalling her attention to it as she continued to sift through the wreckage of Bella's mind, preserving the memories as she went.

*I feel so special,* the Bellatrix with Lily thought, her sarcasm undercut by her obvious amusement. She was well aware that the Bellatrices were Eris's favorite dedicates. She was also well aware that she was one of the more interesting Bellatrices, wandering off to other universes on a whim.

"I'll tell you about it later," she promised, wrenching her attention fully back to the proper universe.

After a moment, the lips pulled back far enough for Eris to identify the dark face of Mirabella's son, his faintly inhuman eyes dancing with mischief. Not that she needed to see him to identify the texture of his magic. Like his mother, there was something of the Solitary Power about him,
though he was hardly so drawn to the Dark as she. Eris was still uncertain, even after all these months, as to whether she actually liked Blaise. He was certainly useful, and Lyra enjoyed his company immensely, but mind mages, with their ability to so easily compel the obedience and cooperation of all around them, were somewhat annoying by virtue of their very existence.

Lyra definitely liked him, though. She carefully moved the girl's face into a grin. "Having fun, ducky?"

He blinked, obviously startled (but only briefly), before breaking into laughter. "Greetings, Lady Eris. Well met?"

"Blaise sends his greetings. Also kisses."

Well, of course, he is a Zabini. Feel free to return the sentiment.

"Hmm, indeed. Bodies are hard, really, I don't know how you mortals stand it. So in lieu of kissing, Lyra says hi."

"So is this a normal thing? You possessing Lyra for Walpurgis? I thought you were going to make an attempt to restore Other Bella's autonomy tonight."

"Ooh, I like that. We should put it like that from now on—"

"Lyra, from now on we're referring to this as restoring Other Bella's autonomy, not fixing her."

Okay, whatever. Stop distracting me. Mind magic is hard, and you know I'm mostly making this up as I go along. A faint trace of excitement accompanied that thought, probably because of the very real possibility of catastrophically ruining her counterpart.

"Fine, fine." Eris said, ignoring Lyra's presence within her as best she could — or at least not talking to her — focusing instead on untangling another set of memories and fitting them into the timeline.

"—much more suitable than fixing her. I don't fix things, really. It's not, and we are. We simply realised that there was no reason to leave this body vacant and vulnerable when I can occupy it in Lyra's absence."

Blaise fell into giddy giggles again. "So. You're...house sitting. At the moment."

Eris raised Lyra's shoulders, then dropped them in an approximation of a shrug. "Pretty much."

"And Lyra's off..."

"Helping me sort through the memories we need to feed back to Bellatrix. They got rather...jumbled, in the process of forcing my way into her mind."

That was a bit of an understatement, really.

What the fuck is this? Lyra asked, prodding at a twisted, confused memory — the sensory inputs were all wrong, and some elements didn't seem to have an external source at all — which had become completely untethered from anything else when she'd broken in.

"Ah... I think she might have been on some sort of hallucinogen. If we can't figure out where it goes, it's probably not important."

The boy put on an overly exaggerated expression of surprise. "I'm shocked, truly," he said,
completely deadpan, then smirked.

"Oh, shut up, you. Go, enjoy the party," she suggested, waving a hand at the clearing, slowly growing more raucous as each new impulsive action prompted others. "There are plenty of Hufflepuffs around for you to snog."

"Well, yes. I just saw you here and thought I'd try to catch Lyra before you started your thing, see if she wanted to have a bit of fun."

_Eris! I just found a memory of Other Bella fighting a werewolf — everyone says you can't use runic corporeal augmentation for direct, permanent physical enhancement, but they did — they totally did! And actually using it — it's beautiful._

She pushed a sensation at Eris, a strange melding of magical and physical — activating and deactivating runes to strengthen and speed her limbs in motion, dissipate energy and momentum, adjust the density of bone and elasticity of tendon, different sets working perfectly in concert to keep the force of turning and stopping and hitting and cutting from tearing her body to pieces, spinning and twisting and leaping in ways that simply defied the limitations of human biology. Eris couldn't imagine why she would want to have to manually control the movement of each joint and muscle individually — it just seemed unreasonably difficult and tedious to her — but it was obvious she did.

_Are you kidding? _A faint impression of dancing overlaid with casting an incredibly complex, multi-layered illusion overlaid by a memory of playing a clavichord accompanied her delighted disbelief. _We have got to try that!_

"Oh, believe me, she is," she informed Blaise.

"Focus, Lyra."

_Yeah, yeah. I think this is the right order for these chains? I mean, I'd have to actually watch them all to be sure, but. They did seem to fit together well enough, Eris thought, running through them. At least Bellatrix seemed to be older in each successive one, so it was probably fine. Right, then._

The boy pouted at her. "Fine, I'll go have fun— Well, I was going to say 'by myself' but that seems like a terrible waste when there's a perfectly good orgy right there." He smirked, then gave her an overly elaborate bow in farewell — the propriety of it contrasted delightfully with his complete absence of proper attire (or any attire at all). "My lady."

"And that's all of them?"

_I think so. All the ones you copied, anyway. Eris sent a wave of approval and excitement to wash over the little bubble of independent consciousness that was Lyra. So do I take over now?_

"No, I still need to be in control to get rid of the compulsions."

_I want to watch!_

There wasn't really much to watch, and in any case it would probably be rather dangerous for Lyra to get too close to the process — it would not be a successful night if she destroyed one Bellatrix in their effort to recover another — but Eris brought her consciousness as close as she dared, anyway.

Much as she had done when she accepted the young Bellas' sacrifices, she forced her way into the woman's mind, permeating every memory, every connection and most importantly, every _compulsion_. She was very careful _not_ to touch the processing parts of the mind, the parts that
felt and reasoned. Those were already exactly the way she wanted them, and unlike her earlier foray into...editing her Bellatrices, this time she would be leaving nothing in her wake. It would be a shame if, in an effort to restore her autonomy, she accidentally turned this Bellatrix into a mindless, drooling idiot.

Yeah, let's not do that. I like not being stupid, thanks.

Eris ignored that comment, pulling more and more energy into the part of herself in contact with this Bellatrix's mind, tainted with the rage she held for the very idea of such compulsions as these (even aside from the fact that they had been used on her dedicate). Memories and foreign magic alike crumbled before raw power, dissolving into nothingness. It was simply too much for them to withstand, far more magic than a human mage (even one improved as the Blacks traditionally were upon their dedication) could channel before their body gave out — the only way to get this much magic into a human body or soul was through a direct bond with the Powers. And even carefully controlling the areas of contact as she was, she certainly couldn't leave it there. It did bleed off of her, eating into the areas adjacent to the ones she was occupying — letting too much of it leak into Bella's mind, and from there to her physical body, would have the same effect as allowing her to channel it herself. (Well, it might be more explosive, but the principle and the outcome were the same.)

As soon as the last of the compulsions had been scoured away — no more than a few seconds, from a human perspective, she estimated — she withdrew, leaving only emptiness behind, a blank slate upon which they might attempt to redraw her Bellatrix.

That's it? That wasn't nearly as exciting as I expected. You said ashes, I thought that meant fire.

"The mindscape analogy has always seemed a rather silly human convention, but feel free to envision a fire burning down the house of her memories, if it will entertain you."

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

Eris turned at the sound of Hermione's voice, coming from somewhere off to the left of her puppet, tripping as she did so. She was forced to catch the stupid body against her tree, but she was at least able to see the girl, only a few feet away, now, picking her way across the clearing, looking vaguely horrified by the debauchery all around them. Eris wasn't really certain what to say to that. It wasn't as though she'd been hiding, she was just far too uncoordinated in this thing to participate in the fun in any meaningful, physical way. Staying at the edges of things and interacting mostly with the magic had seemed the obvious thing to do. Though that reminded her... "Can you hear it, now?"

The magic of the ritual seemed incredibly obvious to her, and to Lyra, even before she'd taken control of her body — a silent song of do as thou wilt, flowing through all of the humans in the clearing, each one a note in its score, coming together to become something greater than the sum of their parts, their own magic attuned, ever so slightly, to the chaotic energy in the earth and the air (and of course to Deliberation as well — much as she would like to pretend that this night was solely a celebration of Chaos, it was shared with the Light Power, in truth). Of course, it was always there, but the ritual amplified it enormously, drawing in the participants and running through them, rather than simply weaving around them.

Okay. Is it time now?

"Yes, yes, fine. Go ahead," she said, faintly amused, ceding control of one small part of herself to her dedicate.
Alright, she thought, now for the fun part!

"Here, put back the referential knowledge first," Eris suggested, handing over the rather sizeable chunk of information she'd simply stolen wholesale from the Bellatrix's mind. "Then we'll wake her up — I'm pretty sure she needs to be conscious to actually process the memories. Or at least to start." Really, she was making this up as she went along just as much as Lyra — meddling with humans' minds (outside of accepting her Bellatrices' dedication sacrifice) wasn't something she had much experience with.

Hermione didn't answer, just continued her approach, her face fixed somewhere between determination and fear. She came right up to Lyra's body, still leaning against the tree, and, with no warning whatsoever, dipped her head, pressing her lips against Lyra's. Even Eris, with her very limited experience of physical things could tell that Zabini was far more practiced, though the girl's stiffness might have had something to do with her obvious anxiety. She pulled back after a second or two, giggling nervously. "I don't know why I did that, I just— Well?"

Eris tried and failed to raise an eyebrow at the girl. Bugger this for a lark, she thought, casting a shell of glamor and illusion around the body, much like the one she would use for herself, if she were actually manifesting, not just 'house sitting'. She would still have to move the body into approximately the correct positions, but there was absolutely no reason she couldn't use a mask to act out the expressions and words she wanted to make.

What are you buggering?

"Humaning — this is terrible. Ready to wake her up?"

She raised the eyebrow of her illusion. Much better. Smirked. "I imagine you just did that because you've been wanting to for months. Unfortunately, you have terrible timing," she informed the girl, injecting a teasing note into her voice. (Auditory illusions were also much easier than physically speaking.)

I think so? I just kind of...let the information go wherever it settled. There's nothing to really connect them to, so I didn't think it really mattered where I put it...

Eris was fairly certain that as other memories were returned, the connections built between them and the referential knowledge would force them into the proper orientation, anyway. As far as there could be considered a 'proper' orientation. "Okay. Hold on, then, this may be weird." Before Lyra could respond, she sent a pulse of energy through her connection with Other Bella, prodding her back into consciousness.

Hermione, obviously confused, glared at her. Eris grinned. Annoying Hermione was always entertaining, she always took everything so seriously. That, along with her intelligence, made her a delightful foil and audience for Lyra's antics. She wasn't any more one of theirs than Mirabella or Blaise, but there was more potential about her. The idea of chipping away at her self-control until that facade of false morality finally fell was simply too tempting to resist. She wasn't sure what would happen, if (when) Hermione embraced her darker instincts, but with that combination of Wisdom and Destruction...

Revolutions were always so much fun — there was, after all, a reason she'd encouraged the Bellatrix of this universe (and many others) to associate with Riddle, despite her hatred of the man himself.

Yeah, that was weird, Lyra agreed.
"Lyra's not here, right now, but I'll tell her you dropped by," she told the muggleborn, in response to her unspoken *what the fuck are you talking about?*

"Lyra's not— But— Wh— who are you, then?!"

_Who— What— Who are you? Who am I?_ Anger and adrenaline flooded the Other Bellatrix's mind as she realised some foreign voice had just spoken inside her head, and that she had no memory of how or why this might be.

_Uh... This wasn't supposed to happen, was it?_

"No. I suggest improvising."

_As though we ever do anything else?_

"Oh, my God, you're not actually— Are you _possessed_ right now?!!"

Eris giggled. "No, I'm the one doing the possessing, obviously."

"Oh, my God," the girl repeated. "Theo _warned_ me about this, I just thought, well, this is just more Lyra being Lyra, but— Who _are_ you?"

_Wait — there are two of you? Who are you? What's going on here? What have you done to me? And WHO THE FUCK AM I?!_

"You can call me Eris, ducky. Well met."

Lyra was quite clearly amused. Before Other Bella could take offence to this, she began to explain. _You're Bellatrix Black. So am I — a Bella Black from a different dimension — but I'm going by Lyra these days._

_She is Eris, our Patron. We're, well... Answering the question of what it actually means to be Bellatrix Black is kind of what we're here to do._

Memories of facts began to shift as the amnesiac Bellatrix explored what she knew of their names, the concept of dimension-hopping, and what exactly Lyra might mean by _our Patron._

"Bu— You— Are you her, er, goddess, then? Her Patron?" Hermione stuttered.

"Ooh, look who's been doing her research," Eris grinned, her tone only _slightly_ mocking.

"You are. You really are. Oh, my God. I— God _damn_ it, Lyra! Why, _why_ are you— I thought you didn't like... _controlling_ people! Why is she..."

"Possessed? Like I said, she's not here right now. I'm just 'house-sitting' while she's out."

_Why should I believe you? As far as I'm concerned, you're possessing me, claiming to be me for some unknown reason. I don't even know if that's really my name!_

With an exercise of will that Eris found frankly impressive, Bellatrix wrenched her attention away from the voices in her head, instinctively shifting to an external focus, and forced her eyes open. The metamorph was kneeling on the floor beside her, inside her cell — apparently the aurors had yet to come fetch them. She jerked back in shock when the Bellatrix apparently awakened herself, scrambling to direct her wand at her 'prisoner'. "But— You were stunned!"

"Who am I?"

The girl — still wearing the shape of a much older, dark-skinned male — scoffed. _Even you can't_
just decide to not be stunned!"

Hermione stared at her for a long moment, mouth hanging open, before finally exclaiming, "Well, where is she, then?!" She sounded slightly hysterical. "When— She is coming back, isn't she?"

"Relax, Hermione. She'll be back tomorrow."

"Where is she? What is she doing?"

"No— What? I don't— Who am I? Who are you? Where are we?" *Fuck, my head hurts*, Bellatrix added silently, raising a hand to her temple, as though that would help.

*Sorry, that was kind of really necessary. You're a prisoner in Azkaban. You're Bellatrix Black. She's your niece, Nymphadora.*

*Shut up, I'm not listening to you!* Bellatrix snapped, dismissing the answer without even considering it. She might have no idea who she was or what the *fuck* was going on, but she was fairly certain the person holding a wand on her was male.

"That would be telling, ducky." Hermione glared at Lyra's body. Eris smirked back.

*Oh, for fuck's sake, she's a metamorph.*

"Ooh, that girl! Was this planned? Why would she invite me if she wasn't going to be here?!"

Eris sniggered. "She didn't think you'd come — didn't even consider it. And you were late." She certainly hadn't been meandering about the clearing before the ritual commenced. "But, since you're here now, you might as well go, have fun," she said, gesturing toward the revelers in the clearing.

"Are you— You're serious?" the metamorph stuttered, falling back into a more familiar (and far more feminine) form. *(See? Told you.)* "I— You're Bellatrix Lestrange. I'm Nymphadora Tonks. We're in Azkaban Prison."

"Lestrange? Not...Black?"

"Er. Not anymore. Née Black, I guess. Do you...not remember getting married?"

*Is it not fucking obvious that I don't remember anything?*

*Yeah, well, most people are stupid. And you will, if you'd actually cooperate — we weren't just going to leave you like this, obviously.*

That wasn't obvious at *all*. Bellatrix groaned, desperately wishing her head would stop hurting, she could hardly think, and that voice just would *not* shut up— *(HEY!)* "Are we related?" she repeated. "And why are we here?"

Hermione didn't appear pleased with that suggestion. "But— What am I supposed to do? I don't know anyone else!"

"Yes, you— You and my mum are sisters. Were, anyway. And we're here because *I'm* an auror, and *you're* a psychotic murderer — not sure how you could *possibly* have forgotten that..."

"Oh...good," Bellatrix muttered, her eyes falling closed again. She ignored her (apparent) niece's outraged reaction to her presumably inappropriate response, turning her full attention back to the voices in her head.
We take exception to being called psychotic, Lyra told her. We're not.

I'm not too sure about that yet, Bellatrix retorted. But I will allow that you...seem to be telling me the truth. Assuming neither you nor the metamorph is an hallucination.

Eris smirked at Hermione's confusion. "You're supposed to do whatever you want. Besides, if you can't make friends here, tonight, you can't make friends anywhere. Just talk to people. See what happens."

So, you'll cooperate?

The girl looked rather lost, but after a moment, frowning, she said, "Well fine then! I'll just...go. And...do something. Make it up as I go along, why not."

Do I have a choice?

"There's always a choice, ducky. But not really. Not if you want your memories back."

"Mmm," she hummed agreeably. "That's the spirit. Before you go, though, I think it will be more fun if you remember it tomorrow, don't you?"

Fine. But I want to know who you are and what you're doing here before I entertain the idea of trusting any memories you might give me.

Er... It's kind of a long story.

I presume you're not going anywhere, so.

Hermione's eyes grew very wide, but before she could say anything, Eris reached out and poked her in the center of the forehead, the brief moment of contact more than enough to tweak the magic that had attached itself to her as she crossed the boundary-line of the ritual. "Boop."

Lyra didn't even try to hide her amusement.

No. We're doing this.

Good. Start with the Dedicated-to-Eris part.

"Now, I believe I need to have a conversation with young Theo," she added. "Have fun!"

Before Hermione could think of a response, Eris slipped into the shadows. She stepped out of them in a corner of the Slytherin common room, hiding Lyra's body and her own illusory form from the young snakes with a thought and a bit of obscurity.

Not that there were many students about — it was rather late, now that she thought of it. Which meant the boy she'd come to speak to would probably be in his own room. She didn't bother slipping into the shadows this time: the vast majority of her Bellatrices had lived here at one time or another — she knew perfectly well how to navigate the twisted maze of the Snake Pit.

And those were supposed to be different memories?

Well, the whole process was admittedly pretty much the same. I didn't realise they were different until Eris showed me her perspective.

Why would that make it obvious they were different?

Because we were different, obviously. See, you had already met Not-Professor Riddle, and he'd already started turning you into a mind-slave with all his compulsions. I hadn't.
Not-Professor...? Wait, no, why are you in my head? What did you do to me?

It's kind of related. Actually, completely related. What do you remember about early childhood compulsions and mind molding?

Memories shifted, new connections building between facts and the current moment as the amnesiac Bellatrix tried to recall anything she might know about the topic. Enough to catch the implications, she realised, her wariness and discomfort surrounding them.

Right, good. Or, well, it kind of sucks, but yeah. This is what we actually did...

It was a matter of minutes to find the door marked with the Nott family crest. Eris stepped around the childish wards and wood of the door, abandoning her concealment as she dropped the body (and accompanying illusions) into a sitting position on the end of the bed.

The boy, still awake, reading a scroll at his desk, let out a shocked scream before recognizing her, or rather her puppet. "Nine bloody hells, Lyra!"

She grinned. "Try again, little brother." Oh, that terrified little squeak was adorable! "Eris, Aspect of Chaos. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Uh-huh," Theo managed to mutter, nodding mechanically. "I— Um, that is— Well met, Lady Eris. To what do I, ah...owe the pleasure?"

So, you believe me?

Tentatively.

Does that mean we can we start at the beginning now? Eris sniggered — Lyra was starting to sound rather annoyed with Bellatrix. It was almost as though she hadn't realised exactly how stubborn and demanding she could be when she wanted to.

I suppose.

 Fucking finally. At this rate we're never going to get to the good stuff! Okay, so we're pretty sure this is the first clear memory you had, Lyra said, dragging the beginning of the memory-chain they had assembled into Bellatrix's awareness.

The memory was something completely inane, sitting with an elf in what was presumably the nursery of the house in which Bella had been raised, chattering at the creature in its own language as it tried (in vain) to convince her to speak English. Bellatrix lasted all of two minutes before suggesting, Or...we could just skip to the good stuff. If it turns out I want or need more context for my life, I'll come back to boring shite like this later.

Er... Lyra obviously found the early memory just as tedious as Bellatrix, but equally obviously wasn't certain whether they ought to deviate from the plan.

"You might as well, the point was to build context from the beginning, but since you've already actively discussed what you're doing and why..."

The most honest answer was that Theo mostly owed her presence to the agreement Eris had made with Mystery to ensure the safe arrival of her dedicate in this particular timeline. She owed it a favor — specifically a dedicate of its own, here. It already had its eye on this one, he'd been seeking it out, in some ways, his entire life.
More immediately, however, "Hermione mentioned you, something about you suggesting my Lyra might be slightly more possessed than usual. So, you know, I thought I'd drop by."

Fine, then. Where do you want to start? Lyra asked, the tenor of her thoughts becoming much more animated with the prospect of skipping the boring parts of Bellatrix's life.

The boy swallowed hard. "Er, well. Given the circumstances, my Lady..."

She giggled. "I don't mind. I'm kind of surprised no one else noticed, really. It just reminded me that you exist."

"So you just...decided to stop by for a chat?"

"If you're going to be a black mage, you should probably get used to the idea. We do have a tendency to drop in on the ones we like." Granted, more often in dreams, and it was more like a tendency to drop in on any ritualist they liked who wasn't dedicated to themselves — they hardly needed to drop in on their own dedicates — but that was hardly the point.

Bellatrix sent a very, well...Bellatrix-like wave of frustrated exasperation at Lyra. Are you sure we're the same person? Because that was an awfully stupid question. I'm not the one who actually knows what the good stuff is, you know.

"You, uh...know, about that?"

Well it's not like I know either. I know you finally beat Cygnus when you were fifteen, I guess we could start there — if only because if we get to skip things I'd prefer not to live through the rape scenes again.

Rape scenes? Who the fuck...? Is that Cygnus our father Cygnus?

Yeah, it's fine, though, you got to kill him eventually.

We could start with that.

Done! That was one of the things I was looking forward to seeing.

"Yes I, uh, know about that. Did you think I'd miss Mystery giving you that little hint over Yule? What's taking you so long, anyway?"

"Erm... What's taking so long?"

"Asking Lyra about it. The black mage thing. You did get the hint, didn't you?"

Theo nodded. "I just, um... I didn't know how to...bring it up. It's, well... It's not the sort of thing you go around telling people, is it? I mean, even Lyra doesn't just...go around talking about being a black mage."

Who's that? Bellatrix asked, as they progressed through the memory.

Zee. She's a friend. And lover, by this time.

He tactfully left the fact that Lyra had very little self-control when it came to keeping secrets unspoken. Eris laughed anyway. "She would if she knew you already knew. Which reminds me, pass a message on to the Lovegood girl?"

And those girls are...?
You know, I'm suddenly beginning to understand why Blaise said it's annoying to watch films with me. That's Meda and the little one is Cissy, they're our sisters. For context, we both promised Meda when we were twelve and she was nine that if Cygnus ever touched either of them, we'd kill him.

Noted.

"Er...what? I mean, yes, of course, sure, but...why?"

"Because Gelach really annoys me, just hoarding potential away instead of letting anything interesting or fun or even useful happen, not to mention the whole parents dedicating children thing. It's fucking disgusting, is what it is. So tell the little moonchild that if she wants to leave her Patron, we can make that happen. We know she thinks we're trying to corrupt her, but we're not, really. We'll help her re dedicate herself to another aspect of the same Power, even, if she wants. Maybe one of the faces of Truth, instead of Innocence. Truth is generally much more tolerable, and Aletheia would like her. Or Frigga." Though Frigga was as much Deception and Fate as Truth, so perhaps not her.

"Wait — are you telling me Lovegood's a white mage?"

"Yes, obviously. Or, I don't know, maybe it's not, Lyra didn't notice either. Whatever. Yes, she is."

"Er, well... I can't really guarantee she'll listen to me, I'm not sure I've ever talked to her before. But yes, I'll tell her."

"Good. And you should ask Lyra about the black mage thing when she gets back."

"Yes, my lady," the boy said, a small smile appearing on his lips, apparently against his will.

"Where is she, anyway?"

—"And why, my Viper, do you require a dram of basilisk's venom at—" The snake-faced would-be Dark Lord checked the time, "—one in the morning?"

—"Cygnus. I want him to die screaming."

—"Birthday present to yourself?"

Both Lyra and Bellatrix found his deadpan delivery amusing, though Lyra seemed rather reluctant to admit it, trying to suppress her amusement before Eris noticed.

"You can ask her that, too," Eris told the boy firmly. "Now, I have places to be, ducky. Sleep well."

I take it my wanting to kill someone wasn't particularly unusual?

_Dora did tell you you're in prison for murder, if you recall. Incidentally, you're technically in prison for torture. But in any case, you were kind of a de facto Dark Lady for a few years, there. So I'm going to go with no, probably normal Bellatrix behavior._

She grinned and let Lyra's body fall backward into its own shadow, reappearing in her darkened dorm room — Hermione was obviously still at the Revel, and Ginevra's curtains were pulled. Good, she thought, allowing the body to fall into its own bed and closing the drapes with a lazy tug at the ambient magic in the room. Fuck trying to grab things, hands were so stupid.

There was no additional commentary on the memory until it blurred into an uninteresting series of chores, destroying the evidence. That was the point at which Bellatrix (with an air of rueful
reluctance) admitted, *Okay, that was...interesting. Very interesting, even. But I'll admit more context would be helpful.*

"You might start after your dedication to me, that was a point where things started to get more interesting."

*Why did we dedicate ourselves in the first place?*

*Uh...Cygnus, basically.*

*Care to elaborate?*

*Fine, we'll start with the Worst Day Ever! Don't say I didn't warn you, though, it's fucking infuriating. Yours is even worse than mine, because that was also the day you met Not-Professor Riddle.*

Now that Lyra's body was secure and Lyra herself was overseeing the process of restoring Bella's memories, Eris saw no reason she shouldn't leave them mostly unattended. If it worked, of course, it would be entirely worth it, but limiting herself so severely as she had been all evening — on Walpurgis, of all nights — was simply miserable. For the first time in what felt like ages, she relaxed, letting her consciousness expand. Her attention drifted, drawn to rituals in progress throughout the mortal plane, and the dedicates she'd been neglecting in favor of this single universe and its Bellatrices.

The other transplanted Bellatrix noticed the return of her attention almost immediately. *So. Are you going to tell us what's going on now?*

*I told you I'd tell you if it worked. I don't know if it worked, yet."

*Ugh, fine. You may have noticed, Eris, but I'm not a very patient person.*

*"There is no universe in which you are, really."*
What the term "black mage" means

Even as oblivious as she acknowledged she could be at times, Lyra would have to be completely blind, walking into the Great Hall for dinner the evening after Walpurgis, to not realise something had happened.

Turning to Maïa, she asked, "Did I miss something while I was out?"

Lyra did usually crash after Walpurgis — rather like after an episode of the Madness, actually, though not so bad — but this time she'd crashed hard. She assumed because of some combination of time turning drawing out the magic high (and consequently the usual pre-Walpurgis lack of sleep), her mind magic adventure with Other Bella, and being directly possessed by Eris for the night, she didn't know for certain. Apparently, she'd been unconscious for at least twenty-four hours, she didn't know exactly how many. Maïa had turned her unconscious body back a couple times (she'd missed Transfiguration, but that was fine — her skiving off on McGonagall was hardly suspicious behavior), but she hadn't been around when Lyra had initially passed out.

She was a little grateful Maïa had taken efforts to reduce suspicion for her — she could have dragged her off to Hospital, after all, that might have ended badly. Also a little surprised, because she was pretty sure Eris herself had confirmed for Maïa that Lyra was a black mage just last night. Lyra couldn't remember it very well — Eris had shared a few impressions with her, but they hadn't really stuck — and she couldn't just ask Eris (her Patron was always a little more...distant than usual, the first few days after Walpurgis), but she had the vague feeling that had happened. Which was kind of annoying, because that was practically the only thing about herself she'd really managed to keep secret from...almost everyone. (Zabinis didn't count.)

See, normal people tended to find the very existence of black mages, the very concept of them, to be terrifying. They were generally considered to be menaces at best, and existential threats at worst. Of course, as her arrangement with Arcturus had demonstrated, normal people (even Blacks) also generally found the idea of trying to get rid of them to be equally terrifying, but not the point.

So, she might have expected that Maïa would tell someone, if she realised that Lyra was a black mage. It was one thing not to turn her in as an unregistered time traveller — arguments could be made that the laws regarding time traveller monitoring only technically applied to people who went back in time, and there wasn't really any way a time traveller could endanger the time stream, anyway.

It was a very different thing not to notify someone that she was a fucking black mage. Even if being dedicated wasn't illegal on its own, it did imply that she engaged in High Ritual regularly, which was, and while Lyra might not be a potential threat to reality, she was a potential threat to the stability of society. She had been under the impression that Maïa liked to pretend she cared about such things.

Though, she wasn't so sure about that anymore. She'd never believed Maïa was nearly as light as she claimed — she was rather like Zee in that way, though she at least hadn't tried to lie to herself about it — but it had been becoming increasingly clear that Maïa was having doubts of late. Which was fascinating to watch, honestly.
In any case, she certainly hadn't expected Maïa to help her mitigate the consequences of Walpurgis. If she had needed confirmation she could trust Maïa, not reporting her for being a black fucking mage was a hell of a good start.

And she obviously hadn't. If she had, Lyra probably would have woken up in the Department of Mysteries rather than her own bed. In her own world, she would expect the Black Cloaks to confirm reports of threats like black mages and deal with them...extralegally, but since they didn't exist here anymore, Mysteries would probably take her into custody and justify it with some legal dragonshite categorising her as an object of study. (Not unlike the response she imagined if they learned she was a dimension hopper before she managed to get the House of Black back into a position to rebuff their efforts.) They were rather interested in proving the Powers didn't exist, after all.

But that was rather beside the point, and almost certainly had nothing to do with the unusual atmosphere in the Great Hall. Which meant she had no idea what was going on, and by the little frown on Maïa's face she didn't know either. Oh well.

When they got closer to the Gryffindor table, Lyra noticed there were copies of the Prophet everywhere — the special evening issue they did sometimes, by the look of it, when there was important news they'd gotten too late to print in the morning. Probably something more about Sirius and Pettigrew. They were in the early stages of proceedings running up to a proper trial, and the DLE had been leaking little tidbits now and again. (She still couldn't decide if that was intentional or if they were just that terrible at keeping secrets.) Everyone had been being told for a decade that Sirius was a total monster and Pettigrew was some kind of tragic hero — he'd been 'posthumously' named to the Order of Merlin and everything — so every time something new that contradicted the familiar narrative came out there'd been all this fuss over it.

Which was really quite silly, how...personally so many people seemed to be taking it, but it wasn't like she'd thought she understood normal people to begin with. Just another thing to add to the list.

So she didn't expect Maïa to start prodding at her a couple minutes later, when Lyra had already been busy eating. "Did you have anything to do with this?" she whispered, voice low and...suspicious?

She blinked. "You're going to have to be more specific."

Instead of actually saying anything, Maïa just pushed a copy of the Prophet at her. The front page story was something about a riot at Azkaban that had happened overnight, at a quick skim over the article mostly just reassuring the public that nobody had actually escaped and the Ministry had everything under control.

"Oh." Right, Other Bella had somehow unlocked all the doors on the island in the minutes before Eris had started taking apart her mind. (Something to do with blood runes? Lyra couldn't remember, which was quite unfortunate, it sounded neat.) But that didn't explain why Maïa was asking her about it. "You think I can stage a prison riot from hundreds of miles away? I'm flattered, Maïa, really, but you're giving me far too much credit."

Harry, sitting nearby, snorted out a laugh. Almost choked, actually, he started coughing and flailed for his water goblet.

"You know what I mean."

"I really don't."
With an odd little glare, Maïa pointed at the article — more specifically, a particular line in it. "You couldn't have, but perhaps through a...mutual friend?"

"Er..." Lyra read the paragraph quick: something about Other Bella being hospitalised, though for something completely unrelated, she hadn't been part of the riot. (They were very insistent on that point, which wasn't surprising, given how (justifiably) terrified everyone was of Other Bella.) Which...

Was Maïa suggesting she suspected Lyra and Other Bella had coordinated through Eris to plan whatever had gone on at Azkaban last night? That was...interesting. Less interesting was that she was suggesting this in public, at the bloody Gryffindor table, she'd thought Maïa had more sense than that.

Given where they were right now, there was really only one thing she could say. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're trying to say." She gave Maïa a flat look, hopefully indicating she knew exactly what Maïa was trying to say, but this really wasn't the time and place to be saying it.

Maïa let out a low huff, but dropped it.

It looked like they were going to have to have a conversation about this whole black mage thing once they had a moment in private. That was sure to go over well — nobody she'd talked to ever seemed to know how to handle that. (Except the Zabinis, anyway, but they were the Zabinis.) Meda's reaction when she'd finally put it together was particularly memorable. Though, now that she thought about it, it might go over easier than usual, since Maïa hadn't been raised magical, growing up she hadn't been indoctrinated with all the historical and cultural baggage where the Powers and their dedicantes were concerned. Obviously she would still be able to reason out that Lyra was potentially a threat to organized society, but she wouldn't necessarily think Lyra's relationship with Eris was inherently evil, as most non-ritualists would. The books Lyra had provided her with had been neutral on the subject, and she knew for a fact none of the classes here would have addressed it at all. Maïa's only real source on black (and white) mages was Lyra herself.

...Well, that was an interesting thought.

But it looked like that conversation would have to wait. Lyra and Maïa were on their way out of the Great Hall — Maïa still in that intense, thoughtful silence she got sometimes, nibbling idly at her lip, Lyra working out how exactly she was going to frame all this — when Theo just sort of appeared out of nowhere. Which was actually sort of impressive, people didn't sneak up on Lyra very often, but Theo could lurk for Britain. "Could I have a moment, Black?"

Lyra blinked at him for a moment, shrugged. "Sure. Catch up with you in the library later," she said to Maïa (who looked slightly irritated, probably over that conversation they really needed to have being delayed).

Theo led her off, down into the first floor dungeons, then immediately into a now-abandoned classroom that had been a NEWT student potions lab in the Sixties. Or, her Sixties, at least — the dust was rather thicker (except for the patch just inside the door, clearly used occasionally for private conversations) and the bits of potions equipment here and there more archaic than she would expect if it'd been in use that recently. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Theo's wand was in his hand, firing off privacy charms around them.

As he just kept casting more and more palings, Lyra's eyebrows slowly travelled up her forehead. That was quite a lot of care he was taking. Seriously, he'd gone so far as to put up palings against eavesdropping through even most common divinatory methods which... Okay, 'common' was a
relative term — especially given how divination was taught in Dumbledore's Hogwarts — between that and the anti-scrying wards that were _already on the Castle_, she _seriously_ doubted it could possibly be necessary to be quite _this_ careful.

Once he was finally done, Lyra said, "Feeling a bit paranoid today, are we?"

His wand vanishing back up his sleeve, Theo turned to her with an almost uncharacteristic exasperated glare. (She wasn't certain she'd actually seen Theo _exasperated_ before — vaguely sardonic and/or bored seemed to be his default expressions.) "I don't know about you, but I'd rather not spend the rest of my life in Azkaban."

Lyra snorted — if she actually _were_ sentenced to Azkaban, she doubted she'd end up staying there more than a week. Sirius had managed to break out, honestly. But, "That _would_ be tedious, I guess. So...what exactly did you want to talk about?" If one of the potential consequences _was_ _life in Azkaban_, well, she was rather curious.

That odd exasperation was still there, but there was something else. It wasn't entirely unfamiliar, that gleam in his eyes, a sort of quiet excitement, as gleeful as a person could look without actually smiling — he'd had the same look about him every time he dropped by the library at Ancient House, it was familiar by now. "I don't know how much you remember of what happened last night, but Lady Eris suggested I talk to you about..." He looked suddenly... No, she wasn't sure what to call that. Not exactly afraid, quite, but not exactly _unafraid_, either. It was weird.

_Eris? Did you forget to tell me about something actually important again?_ Now that he mentioned it, she _vaguely_ remember Eris talking to Theo at some point (possibly down in Slytherin?), but it was just that — vague. She didn't at all remember what they'd talked about.

There was no response, of course. Lyra could barely feel her there at all, actually, which wasn't unexpected, for the day after Walpurgis. It _did_ usually take a while for her to recover.

(Her theory was that Eris got a bit over-extended, being too interested in too many things at once, and had to pull herself back together afterward. _Everything_ was interesting on Walpurgis, after all, and Lyra was pretty sure aspects were finite consciousnesses, even if _they_ were so much more extensive than any mortal that they might as well be infinite.)

She let out a sigh. "Let's assume I remember nothing. Wait — did she just come out and _tell you_ I'm a black mage? She did the _same thing_ with Maïa, I— People think _I'm_ bad at keeping secrets, and she just— What the _fuck_, Eris?!” she shouted up at the ceiling, less because she _expected_ a response and more just because. "I mean, _fuck_, that's one secret I've actually managed to mostly keep, and she just—"

"She didn't tell me anything I didn't already know." Theo looked amused, with that damn dark smirk of his, which _was_ rather irritating. (_Really, Eris, what the _fuck_...) "Well, I didn't know which Aspect of Chaos it was, specifically, but I had figured out you were dedicated to Chaos on my own. You were really _quite_ obvious as Walpurgis came around, anyone who knew what to look for could see it. If they let themselves see it, anyway. And you _already_ outright told Granger yourself."

Oh, well, Theo _was_ a bit of a high magic swot, and magic _did_ tend to be a bit _odd_ around her around that particular day. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed, but there _were_ things you could do to enhance your perception of magic — rituals mostly. She wouldn't be surprised if Theo had experimented with some of the less dangerous ones just because he thought they were neat. But, "I didn't tell Maïa."
"She told me you told her you worship Chaos. What else is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, yeah, but she's muggleborn. I meant for her to think I meant the muggle sense."

Theo blinked at her for a moment, in what was clearly surprise — judging by how he'd reacted to her manipulating Cadmus, he hadn't expected she could be that subtle. (Which was silly, she had proven she could, she usually just didn't care to.) "Whatever, that's not what I wanted to talk about. Well, it is, sort of, but..." He trailed off, that fearful-not-fearful expression taking over his face again.

She waited for him to pick it up, for an agonising handful of seconds, before forcing out a hard sigh. "Gods and Powers, Nott, spit it out. For fuck's sake..."

Glaring at her a little, he finally got going. Though he took far longer to get to the point than was really necessary. "Last night, while Lady Eris was, er..."

"House-sitting." Really, Eris had probably ended up having more fun running around in her body that night than Lyra had had with Other Bella's memories — at least, she certainly remembered more of it. It had been terribly exciting and fascinating at the time, but most of it... She still had a basic outline of the major events of Other Bella's entire life — some things stuck out more than others, like the fact that she'd set off a goblin revolution during their war against the Ministry as a distraction, seriously, what the fuck — but unfortunately most of the details had slipped through her fingers.

She remembered Other Bella had successfully managed physical runic augmentation through a dozen parallel enchantments activated and deactivated in concert (and also that she'd broken her own bones repeatedly before she'd gotten it right), she was a much better duelist than Lyra was with a far more extensive library of memorised curses — had even been miles ahead of Lyra was when she'd been fourteen, having a Dark Lord for a tutor was cheating (though Lyra had the feeling she might already be the superior cursebreaker, having Ciardha bloody Monroe for a tutor was also cheating) — but she couldn't remember exactly how Other Bella had pulled off the former, probably hadn't picked up a single new spell. She knew Other Bella had assassinated most of the bloody House, which on the one hand was impressive as fuck, but on the other was incredibly annoying. She knew of a lot of things Other Bella had learned, people she'd known, things she'd done. She thought she might have a good feeling for exactly what Other Bella was capable of, certainly more than Other Bella would her if and when she woke up. But she hadn't actually learned much of anything from what she'd seen, at least nothing she could use herself. It was kind of frustrating, actually.

She had to wonder if Eris had made sure it'd work out that way on purpose. Experiencing Other Bella's memories as though they were her own (and actually remembering it) would likely have significantly altered her own personality — perhaps more than her own experiences, considering Other Bella was three times her age. Having two Bellas with significantly different perspectives and skill sets was probably more useful to Eris than two Bellas that were practically identical.

Anyway, Lyra being so casual about the whole thing didn't appear to make Theo any less uncomfortable. "Right, that. What the fuck was going on there, anyway? She wouldn't tell me, told me to ask you."

"I'm not sure if it worked out right, yet. I might tell you when I know." She would definitely tell him when Eris confirmed for her that Other Bella was—that they'd successfully restored her autonomy — it was so neat, she'd want to brag about it to someone, and she doubted Maïa would take it well. (Other Bella was probably the single most dangerous person in Magical Britain — even more so when she wasn't bound to do Riddle's bidding — and the likelihood of her deciding
to stay on that boring little rock when she woke up was vanishingly small.) "Suffice to say, I was elsewhere, so Eris decided to take over for me while I was away."

Theo seemed less than satisfied with that non-answer, but he moved on anyway. "Right. Well. Lady Eris suggested I... Mystery sent me a dream, over Yule."

*Mystery sent— "What? Are you a black mage?"

Other dedicates, she knew, mostly communicated with their Patrons in dreams — the direct line into Eris's mind she had was actually quite unusual. She wouldn't have said Theo's magic felt black, but it was certainly dark...and it wasn't like she'd realised Luna was a white mage until she'd said something about it, so maybe it wasn't as easy to tell as all that. (If it were, more people would probably have figured out about her just from contact, so mixed bag, there.) Of course, it was slightly odd that he'd just named a Power, and not a particular Aspect — for the most part, a dedicate of a Power just in general wasn't a thing — but it was Mystery, Mystery was sort of different. People who simply opened themselves to Magic, arguably, were dedicates of Mystery in general, and not any particular Aspect...maybe? She wasn't certain, she'd never actually met another black mage before, and she couldn't just ask Eris right now, but that felt like a thing that should be true.

"No, that's not— I..." Theo broke off again, with a frustrated-sounding sigh — rather more annoyed with himself than anything, she'd guess. Which was perfectly understandable, he was being irritatingly circumspect, just get to the point already, honestly. "I would, I want to, but...I haven't gotten that far, yet."

Lyra frowned. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean? It's really not that complicated, you know."

Frowning back at her, Theo looked about as confused as she felt. "Um... It is sort of a big deal, you know."

"Well, yes, obviously, but it's not complicated. You just...do it."

"Er, no, you don't just do it, it—"

"Which one of us is the black mage here, Nott?"

Theo didn't have anything to say to that — whatever protest he was making cut off abruptly, mouth closing so hard his teeth clacked together. He gave her a churlish sort of glare, but it was rather weaker than it might have been, a shade of doubt in his eyes.

Okay, fine then. This might be...tedious, but if Eris had told Theo to talk to her about it, she should just do that, then. As Lyra understood it, they did kind of owe Mystery anyway. A million things could have gone wrong in their little dimension-hopping adventure — that Lyra had arrived in one piece, and presumably exactly where and when Eris wanted her, was exceedingly unlikely without a little help from Powers other than Chaos. (Luck did like her, but not that much.) Eris hadn't said anything about arranging that sort of deal, but, well, she also hadn't told Lyra they were actually going to the future, and she was a hundred per cent certain Eris had planned the whole thing. So.

It looked like she got to explain how becoming a black mage actually worked. Goody.

Lyra held in the urge to sigh, before realising there was really no point to that, let the thing out anyway. "I'm getting the feeling that you're under the impression this dedication thing is a whole lot more involved than it really is. Really — how much do you even know about this?"
His glare grew sharper, but that shade of doubt wasn't going anywhere. "I decided I was going to do it when I was ten years old. I've been reading everything I could find on the subject ever since."

"I actually did it when I was seven, so, I win." Theo really looked like he wanted to say something about that, but it'd likely be pointless and annoying — people's reactions to her making the Choice that young usually were — so Lyra went on before he could. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume all that shite you've been reading, none of it was written by someone who'd actually made their own dedication."

That doubt totally overcame his annoyance now, Theo's face shifting into a distant, thoughtful sort of frown. "Well...no, I don't think so. At least, none of them wrote as though speaking from personal experience. I suppose it's possible some of those authors could have been black or white mages, but if they were they never said so."

Ha, knew it. "The thing you might not be getting is that... Well, the Powers aren't human, not even close. Why the fuck should they care about human ideas like protocol, or following the exact right steps for...any sort of thing, really. Okay," she said, shoulders lifting in a shrug, "there are a couple Light Powers that care much more about propriety and tradition, I can think of a handful of Aspects off the top of my head that can be...tetchy, if not given what they would consider the proper veneration. But, for the most part, they really don't care, especially the Dark. All they care about is the honest will to make the Choice — everything beyond that is window dressing."

"And that couldn't be just because your dedication was to, you know, Chaos," Theo said, low and flat, eyes not quite rolling with exasperation. "No, pretty sure that's just how this works." Granted, it wasn't quite so simple for all of them, Luna being a case in point, but, "We are talking about Mystery here. They're just as unlikely to care about silly human social conventions as Eris is. She does lean a bit into Mystery herself, after all, and the Infernal Power is literally all about things that are beyond human perception by definition. Honestly, expecting them to care about doing this sort of thing the right way, whatever the fuck that even means, is just, just silly." By the sheepish grimace crossing his face, Theo was starting to get that. Finally.

Lyra took a moment to gather her thoughts again, the significance of what she was doing here belatedly sinking in. She was...helping Theo become a black mage, basically. One dedicated to Mystery, of all things. Generally speaking, there was some significant overlap between Mystery and Chaos, they got along great. It could vary somewhat depending on exactly which Aspect Theo ended up dedicating himself to, assuming he picked a specific Aspect at all, but, having a black mage dedicated to Mystery for an ally could be a massive advantage. An occasional pointer on one magical project or another, maybe a ritual here or there, it could be huge.

There was no way she wasn't recruiting Theo for the Conspiracy to Kill Not-Professor Riddle. And she wouldn't just let their association lapse after that, no, Theo was far too (potentially) valuable a resource to not put at least some effort into maintaining some kind of relationship.

Okay, she completely forgave Eris for blabbing to Theo now. This was bloody genius.

"Let's take my dedication, for an example. I did it on my seventh birthday. Just a few weeks before that, I'd been taught about the Covenant between the Dark and the House of Black — how much do you know about that?"

"Um..." Theo looked weirdly uncomfortable, almost embarrassed. Which, that did sort of make sense — the Covenant was a big deal, and technically a House secret (though a badly-kept one),
people could get sensitive about that sort of thing. He was being silly again, but she could
overlook it this time. "I know the basic idea. It's discussed in some of your family's books you let
me borrow."

"Right. I'd just been told about Onyx and Mela making their deal with the Powers, and the idea
kind of stuck in my head. I thought it might be a way out. You see, my childhood sucked. And I
mean it really sucked. Your father actually reminds me of mine, a little bit, though not nearly as
bad."

Glaring at her again, Theo said, "Excuse me, but you have absolutely no idea what goes on there
when you're not around to distract him."

Lyra raised a single eyebrow. "Considering mine used the cruciatus whenever I even mildly
annoyed him, and the imperius to force me to suck his dick just to make the point about what my
place was, yeah, I think you have it rather easier than I did."

Theo's eyes went rather wide at that. "Ah... Yeah, I... Fuck, really?"

"Yes, really. Anyway, I did it entirely out of desperation. I honestly didn't even know a bloody
thing about what the fuck I was doing — I only had the most basic understanding of what the
Powers even were. I had no bloody clue, about anything. And it worked just fine."

She wasn't even the least-informed Black who had ever made the Choice — according to family
legend, Henry's Nymphadora had attracted the interest of the Dark when she was four.

"Generally speaking, when someone is making their dedication, they'll offer themselves to one
Aspect in particular, one they chose themselves. You don't have to do it that way — I certainly
didn't — and there are black mages under the Infernal Power sworn simply to Magic in general, as
I understand it. But if you don't have one in mind, they might just pick for you.

"When I did it, I lit a candle — mostly because fire is pretty, honestly, and it just seemed
appropriate. I'd been told true rituals involve a sacrifice of some kind, so I made one of blood, just
cut my wrist open. Again, no bloody clue what I was doing. And I called to the Dark, just in
general, begged them to help me protect myself from my father." And help her protect Meda, of
course, but she couldn't say that, Theo didn't know about the time travel thing — that was the only
reason she wasn't calling Cygnus by his name as well (calling him her father like this felt sort of
odd, actually). She could definitely inform him once he'd made his dedication and she started in on
properly recruiting him, but mentioning it now would probably get them going wildly off topic.
"And the Dark came to me, just in general.

"Since I had no bloody clue what I was doing, the Powers decided amongst themselves which I was
best suited to. Eris won out — I was doing it out of a desire for freedom, when you get down to it,
and I am a vicious, spiteful bitch, so that follows pretty easily." She had wondered, when Eris had
shown her Other Bella's dedication from the opposite side, at just how close she'd come to
becoming a dedicate of Eshu, who was, ironically, an Aspect of the Infernal Power (primarily,
anyway, Chaos and Mystery did tend to overlap a bit). But now that she knew she was supposed
to be an omniglot, that did make perfect sense. "I didn't pick her, I'd probably barely ever even heard
the name before, at the time."

"Seriously?" Theo looked more than a little doubtful, watching her with narrowed eyes, face
scrunched with an expression she couldn't quite read. "You just... Just like that?"

"Sure," she said, shrugging again. "As I said, the Powers really don't care that much about
ceremony. It's will and intent that matters. There is something of a trade that's made, of course. On
top of the traditional Black thing of sacrificing our humanity for power, Eris gave me total immunity to the imperius — a whole bunch of other mind-altering spells and potions too, actually, it's pretty great."

"That's why my fear curses did nothing to you!"

Lyra met his glare, half-astounded half-accusing, with a toothy smirk. "Yep. Of course, the traditional Black sacrifice left me constitutionally incapable of even feeling fear, so, I guess it's probably a bit of both. But, anyway. Your Patron won't change you like Eris did me — that's just a Black thing, a part of the Covenant. You will be a little different, just through contact, but you'll still be you. For the most part.

"Unless you ask for a similar trade, anyway, but that would be peculiar for a dedicate of Mystery. Usually, from what I've heard, the default gift is to remake how your magic works so you can use both dark and light magics — sort of like being attuned to both poles simultaneously, as I understand it."

She hadn't intended to stop there, but Theo interrupted her again. "You can do that?!" His eyes had gone very wide, an expression of awe on his face that was almost comically out of character, it was actually sort of hilarious. "I mean, even properly dark mages have trouble casting light magic — I'd think, for black mages..."

Lyra couldn't quite hold in a giggle. There was just something vaguely...adorable about the eagerness slowly bleeding into his eyes. Silly boy. "Of course you can do that. You don't even have to dedicate yourself to anyone to pull that off — there are people who've attuned their magic to the Light and the Dark simultaneously who didn't cheat and get a god to do it for them. It's very rare, of course, and I would assume both risky and extremely painful, but it is possible." She'd never met one herself, but Sirius had implied that Lily Evans had done it — he'd said something about her magic being weird, light and dark all mixed up, and Eris had later confirmed what he'd meant. Another point on the list of reasons Lyra was disappointed she'd never get to meet her, that just sounded neat.

But anyway, "Dedicates to the Infernal Power tend to be huge magic swots like you, after all — if they can find some way to not lock themselves out from practically half of all the magic in existence you can bet they'll do it." Lyra didn't mind effectively being cut off from the Light herself, though it could be a bit annoying at times. Some light magic was just flat useful — the best healing spells were mostly light, for example — and just being near offensive light magic fucking hurt. Seriously, Dumbledore's patronus had given her a horrid migraine, it hadn't gone away until she'd just slept it off. "You don't have to ask for that, but Eris did say most in your place do."

"So, you might want to put some research into which Aspect of Mystery you'd prefer — though if you don't pick one they'll probably just decide whichever you're most suited to on their own — and you'll definitely want to decide what you want in exchange beforehand. And then you just..." Lyra shrugged. "This really isn't that complicated. You just do it."

Somehow, Theo still didn't look entirely pleased with that. "You might have just done it, Lyra, but... I don't know, I just... Mystery might not care about how I go about it, but I do, it's important to me outside of any concern the Powers may or may not have for the particulars, so I still can't just —"

Lyra yawned.

The hesitant, uncomfortable sort of grimace on Theo's face was abruptly replaced with a sharp glare. "Oh, shut up, Black. You might not be properly human anymore, but I still am."
“No, that wasn't— I didn't mean anything by the yawning, I'm just tired." It had kind of snuck up on her there, but.

"Oh. Right, I..." Theo trailed off, frowning to himself.

"What?"

"I'm trying to remember if I've ever actually seen you look tired before. I really don't think I have. You're usually, you know..."

"...me?" Lyra suggested with a somewhat less-energetic-than-usual grin. "Just because I wasn't around doesn't mean I wasn't actually doing something last night — and no, I'm still not going to tell you what exactly that was yet. Also, pretty sure human bodies aren't really meant to have Aspects just hanging around in them, that probably wasn't great for me either. But, yeah, if I seem strangely flat today, that's why." Which was a little weird, since she'd been asleep for an entire (relative) day, and she hadn't woken up that long ago but, well, what she and Eris had been up to last night was...a bit much. She wasn't at all surprised she was a little worn out.

Actually, this right now was probably about as human as she ever got. What with Eris not whispering in the back of her head, and everything having...slowed down, a bit, yeah, those first couple days after Walpurgis were the closest she ever got to being a normal person again.

She wasn't a fan.

"But anyway, you're right — whatever silly normal person reason you might have for not just doing it I'm simply not going to understand. Bet Mystery won't get it either, but whatever — go about it however you like, it's not like it really makes a difference in the end. Oh," she said, straightening a little, "before you do, you should talk to Luna. Gelach warned her away from me — the moon says we can't be friends, honestly — but you're not a black mage yet, so she might not have bothered."

Theo gave her an odd, exasperated smile. "You know Lady Eris already told me to do that."

"Um, no, I didn't know that." At least, she didn't think she did — it was possible some less-than-fully-conscious memory had cued her to mention it in the first place, but she hardly remembered anything Eris-as-Lyra had done last night. She knew Eris had mentioned bumping into Blaise (lips first, unsurprisingly), but...

"But... Lyra, you can't just out and tell people someone's a black mage, or even a white one!"

She shrugged. "Why not? It's not like most people would believe me, anyway."

Oh, wow, Theo's face was starting to go an interesting shade of red. Odd, she didn't think she'd ever seen him get this worked up about anything before. "Because becoming one is an Unforgivable Act! If you just go around telling people, and it gets to the wrong—"

"No, it's not."

Theo's rant jerked into an awkward sort of halt. "What?"

"It's not an Unforgivable Act — I'm pretty sure it's not even technically illegal. I mean, it is a sacrificial high ritual, but it doesn't have any external effects, so, kind of a grey area, like the holiday rituals here..."

Now he just looked confused. Well, not just confused, there was more than a touch of concern in
there too, but mostly confused. "It is an Unforgivable Act, Lyra. I checked."

"Huh." That's...odd. It wasn't back home. In fact, she was quite positive she wasn't the only black mage in her 1960s — she'd never actually met one before, but she'd heard more than enough rumours to suspect there was truth to them, and she was pretty sure the Black Cloaks were behind Ignotius Wilkes's disappearance back in '59. White mages were probably more common, since they tended to be naturally innocuous by comparison. But just becoming one was Unforgivable here? If she'd known that, she might have been a bit more careful about keeping that secret.

It generally wasn't a good idea to let anyone know if you had or were going to go around committing Unforgivable Acts. Still, it wasn't as though it made that much of a difference — she seriously doubted that Azkaban could actually hold black mages, and she had already had some incentive not to make her dedication public knowledge, what with the possibility of becoming a subject of the Unspeakables, and all.

Lyra shrugged. "Oops?"

Theo looked less than pleased with her.

But there was nothing she could really do about that at the moment — not that she'd probably want to even if she could. "Unless there was anything else? I do have something I need to talk about with Hermione." Probably this same exact conversation, actually, or a largely similar one, with far more explaining what exactly she was talking about. Damn it. She yawned again at the very thought of it.

It did take some reassurance that she wasn't going to go around blabbing about him being, or soon becoming, a black mage — honestly, did he think she was a complete idiot? — and he still didn't look entirely satisfied with...whatever he'd gotten out of this conversation. But within a few minutes he surrendered without a fuss. Since there wasn't much reason to stall, Maïa certainly wouldn't just forget about the answers Lyra had indirectly promised, she made straight for the library.

Maïa was in their usual spot, at a table against a bank of windows deep in the theory section. Her Runes books were spread out in front of her, but it didn't look like she was getting much actual work done. When Lyra found her, Maïa was turned away, staring out the window, looking uncharacteristically...absent? Lost in thought, like, but usually when Maïa was thinking about something she only seemed to become more intensely present. Checking out like this was rather unusual for her.

Had she remembered something from the Revel? People could get like this sometimes, the day after, if they'd done something they wouldn't normally and could actually remember it. Which would make since, except Maïa hadn't been there. Or...had she? She didn't remember but, well, she didn't remember a lot of things that'd happened yesterday.

It was quite frustrating, honestly — she was accustomed to being the only person around who could remember the whole night. This normal person stuff, really not a fan.

"Hey, Maïa." Lyra dropped into a chair across for her with a thin sigh. Rubbing at her forehead, hopefully working some of the heaviness out of her eyes, she pulled out her wand, set the usual privacy charms around them. She'd done them so many times this year, she almost had them all down silently. "Right, there we go. Ask away."

Maïa's lips quirked in what might or might not have been concern, or maybe suspicion, or some combination of the two, hard to tell. "Are you okay? You seem a bit..."
"I'm just tired. I'll probably go off to take a nap as soon as we're done here."

That was definitely concern. "But you just slept for over twenty-four hours."

"Yes, well," Lyra said, shrugging, "as you pointed out yesterday, one-hundred and sixty-eight hours is not two days. And I did have a very interesting Walpurgis. And no, I can't tell you about it right now."

"About that, um..." Maïa glanced around, apparently checking for eavesdroppers. (Which was sort of silly, Lyra had already put all the necessary palings up, but still, at least she was trying.) "I do have...questions, about that."

Lyra smirked. "You, Hermione Granger, have questions? I'm shocked, really."

That right there was one of the weakest glares Lyra had ever seen. "Shut up, Lyra."

"I can't very well answer your questions if I don't talk, so."

Her eyes rolling, Maïa let out a light scoff. "Yes, yes, you're hilarious."

"I like to think so."

She certainly found herself funny, at least, but she wouldn't expect her sense of humour to be anything like a normal person's. "Anyway, the sooner we get to your actual questions, the more likely it is I'll have time to answer them before I pass out again."

"Right, um..." Maïa gave their surroundings another completely pointless glance. (Honestly, Maïa would've been an even bigger embarrassment to Slytherin house than Bella had been — doing that wasn't accomplishing anything, and really just making them look suspicious.) "First, I just... Is that...normal? Um, Eris possessing you, I mean. That was a bit..."

A supremely uncomfortable grimace crossed Maïa's face for a moment. "I mean, I don't have to worry about that happening...? Because, I don't..."

It was taking far too long for Maïa to actually get to the point, but luckily it was obvious where she was going with this. "No, it's not normal."

Not even a little bit. It also wasn't accurate. Eris hadn't been more present in her than usual, Lyra was just less present. It would be closer to say that Lyra's consciousness had been possessing Eris (and consequently un-possessing her own body) than the other way around, which just...wasn't a thing. And would consequently be too difficult to explain to Hermione's satisfaction in her current state.

She yawned before elaborating, though not on the technicalities or general impossibility of what they'd been doing, or even the fact that, if you wanted to think about it like that, then Eris was always kind of possessing her. "In fact, we've never done it before last night. Well, okay, a few times for a few minutes here and there the last couple weeks, just practice, but other than that. It's not something we're ever likely to do again outside of a very good reason. Eris hates being bad at things about as much as I do, and she's even worse at being human than I am — honestly, the first time we tried she forgot to breathe."

While Maïa did look a little...horrified? Maybe? Anyway, there was a bit of something very much uncomfortable there, but also a thin, reluctant sort of smile. (Lyra was funny, so there.) "It was a bit...scary. Though, a part of it might have been... Magic was being weird, at the Revel, I don't know..."

"Oh, you actually went?" Colour her surprised, she never would have guessed Maïa would get the stick out of her arse long enough to go. Of course, the Unbinding would have taken care
of that problem, but she'd had to decide to go in the first place...and now Lyra was kind of disappointed she'd missed it. Damn. "How did that go?"

"I..." Abruptly, Maïa's face went very red. "That's not— We're not talking about that right now. Or ever."

Damn, now she was really curious. Maybe Blaise could tell her, he seemed like he'd remember more than most people. "Uh-huh. It's not like I'm going to care much, you know, I was just wondering. Honestly, I tend to find people at the Revel far more...ah, less confusing, I guess. That and watching everyone make idiots of themselves is just kind of funny." Especially since there wasn't really any reason they had to act like idiots at the Revel, they apparently just...wanted to.

That blush wasn't going away, and Maïa was shifting uncomfortably in her seat now, but she still didn't seem inclined to actually answer. Of course, she likely didn't remember most of it anyway, but still, disappointed. (Damn it, dealing with Other Bella could definitely have waited a couple hours, if she'd realised Maïa was actually going to go.) "Is that... Do you always remember? Everything that happens at the Revel, I mean."

Lyra shrugged. "Sure. How much you forget is tied to how much losing your inhibitions changes you, and the Unbinding doesn't seem to do anything to me at all." She did end up with more energy than usual, but that was Walpurgis in general, really. The Unbinding itself just sort of tickled.

"So...that's what you're like all the time? That's what it's like?" There was an odd, soft sort of note on Maïa's voice she couldn't begin to read.

"Well." That was a complicated question to answer, really. Chaos at its heart was freedom from all external influence and socially-imposed constraints, those were the 'bindings' the Revel stripped away — either as a consequence of Eris's influence or the burning out of the greater part of her humanity, or some combination of the two, Lyra couldn't even remember what it felt like to care about that shite anymore.

But not really having those inhibitions anymore didn't seem to have the same effect on her as when normal people were Unbound. She figured because she was used to it, they weren't. Plus, a lot of them had internalised a lot of social ideals that they didn't lose when they were Unbound, like hurting people being wrong, simply because they were all people. (Lyra didn't really know where the line between internalised and external influences was, but that was the magic of the thing.) But they also actually had feelings, which made what they wanted kind of unpredictable, even without the influence of Choice and Freedom. That probably had a lot to do with it too.

So, it was complicated. "Sort of, I guess? I mean, when I dedicated myself to Eris, I was changed rather more than people are at the Unbinding. But, just, one hundred per cent not giving a fuck what people think, or about social expectations, whatever, making decisions based entirely on whether I want to or not, that invigorating feeling of sheer possibility, if that's what you mean, yeah, I guess that is what I'm like all the time." Or at least, that had been her understanding when Zee had described what the ritual did from a more normal perspective for her. Not that Zee was really a normal person herself, but. "Of course, I can choose to meet people's expectations if that serves my ultimate goals, or if the potential consequences of doing what I want in any given situation would be counterproductive in the long term — the freedom to choose is the whole point, after all. From what I can tell just watching, though, normal people just...don't want to act rationally, and Walpurgis is a great excuse not to have to. You're not exactly going to see people at the Revel making plans or agreements for the long term. But, it is sort of similar. I guess.

"All the time except right now, really. The only possibility I'm seeing in the immediate future is going right back to bed."
Nope. No idea how to read that expression. Lyra wasn't nearly as good at this sort of thing as she wanted to be — the things Zee could figure out about a person just from a glance, so not fair — and Maïa was being especially weird today, she had nothing. "I did wonder, how— I mean..." She trailed off, cleared her throat, shifted in her chair more. (Which was confusing, how obviously uncomfortable she was, but probably not important.) "I think I need to know...what is she?"

Lyra blinked. "You mean Eris?"

"Yeah, I mean..." With a helpless sort of shrug, Maïa said, "I don't know, like, are we talking the Eris? Daughter of Nyx, embodiment of all forms of suffering and discord? That Eris?"

"Well, no. That is where the name comes from, obviously, but no." Lyra took a second to decide on her plan of attack, clicking her tongue (mostly so Maïa wouldn't interrupt). "I know you read a little bit about the Powers and all. How much of that really sank in?"

Maïa looked oddly sheepish. "Not as much as I would like. That book you gave Harry was really confusing."

"I guess." Personally, Lyra didn't think it was that bad, but whatever. "All right, let's start at the beginning, shall we?"

After her dedication she had had her own questions about the Powers and what exactly Eris was, and Eris leaned hard enough into Mystery that she had absolutely no problem going on long, rambling discussions about the nature of gods and Magic, so she had a fair bit of information that she'd gotten directly from the source (sort of). Which, well, not very many people could say as much, the people who had a line directly into Magic were few.

Magic was, of course, far older than humanity. In fact, Magic was quite possibly the oldest thing in all of existence — Eris didn't seem to know for certain, her memories obviously didn't go back that far, but Lyra had a sneaking suspicion Magic had had something to do with that Big Bang thing a couple muggle writers she'd read recently had gone on about. Though explaining exactly what Magic was was a rather...complicated proposition. The simplest way to think about it was the source of all energy in all of reality, not just their universe, everything, it was Magic that everything came from, the threads that connected everything, the supports that held it all together.

Which actually explained a few of the holes in the muggle understanding of the physical world, or at least hinted toward proper answers. At some point in their letters, once he'd started catching up enough, Sam had started getting very excited, babbling on about dark energy and relativity and baryon asymmetry and vacuum energy and decoherence and chromodynamics and electroweak symmetry, less than half of which Lyra had been able to parse. It turned out muggle science was extremely complicated. Actually, some of the maths and concepts involved were tantalisingly familiar, if focused from a different angle and using different terminology — quantum physics was basically just arithmancy, with half of the terms and planes left out, which made things much more confusing than they had to be, but still. She was increasingly coming to suspect muggles were maybe a couple decades away from experimentally confirming the existence of magic, which, yeah, mages should really start seriously talking about the Statute if they didn't want to be blindsided. (Of course, it would be more fun if they didn't, but it certainly wasn't in their best interests as a society.)

But anyway, that was far off topic, she didn't tell Maïa any of that, despite how completely fascinating it was. Eventually, intelligent beings with identities and emotions started being a thing. Nothing that had existed previously had any will of its own — assuming aliens hadn't ever existed, she did have a budding theory about that, not the point. The mind being, in a way, an extension of Magic led to them having a larger effect on Magic itself, especially when the person
died, the energy of their mind rejoining the energy of the universe.

(Maïa was surprised when Lyra said the muggle mind was tied just as closely to Magic as theirs. Which was silly, muggles clearly had independent will of their own, she couldn't see how that should even have been a question. Just because they can't use magic doesn't mean they aren't magic.)

According to Eris, it had started with certain dynamic personalities — leaders, mostly, individuals who had somehow had a deep, powerful effect on the people around them. When they died, Magic would...preserve them, sort of, but not really, their independent will died with their body. No, it was an echo of them, aspects of their personality reflected back. Magic would, on occasion, when interacting with people influenced by them down the line, wear this dead person's face, using their words, keeping the echo alive.

Those were, basically, the first gods.

That was tens of thousands of years ago, though. As humans (and goblins and elves and all the other sentient species) interacted with Magic and the world more and more, as civilizations developed, they started creating far more complex ideas about the nature of reality and their place in it. Myths started being a thing. As people inculcated with these ideas died, thousands and thousands of them over generations, Magic gradually adjusted to match people's expectations, until the faces Magic wore became these gods humans invented in their stories, for all intents and purposes the same thing, developing personality and identity of their own to match humanity's conception of them.

(Of course it wore different faces with other species — goblin mythos was particularly interesting, especially since rituals made up like, ninety percent of their magic. But Eris was a human goddess, so Lyra resisted the urge to go on a tangent about goblins and animism and the difference between High and Low Ritual and how goblin magic was kind of both.)

The classical Greek Eris really had existed, in one form or another. She rose out of people's anxieties, about the inherent fragility of civilization, the callous indifference of the world to human concerns. But, that Eris and Lyra's Eris weren't the same thing. There were two thousand years separating them, Magic had changed in that time, as had humans. Technically, that old Eris didn't even exist anymore, not really. People hadn't truly acknowledged her for so long, her personality had lost coherence, sinking back into the undifferentiated Magic of all reality — it was a very similar process to what happened to humans when they died, actually. Gods were mortal too, in their own way.

Some centuries ago, ritualists came up with...sort of a unified theory of everything, a way of thinking of the various gods invoked for different purposes in myriad rituals. The idea of "Powers" was formulated to categorise the functions these "Aspects" of Magic served, simply as a way to help ritualists conceptualise what they were doing. But, as generations of mages who believed in this system died, their beliefs were absorbed into Magic, which, as it always has over human history, adjusted itself to accommodate them.

Even today, the Powers didn't exist — or, at least, not in the way humans understood them. (That was why Eris could be Chaos, but also Mystery and Destruction, that wouldn't be possible if the Powers were actually discrete things.) But it was a language Magic spoke, a dynamic the various faces of Magic could simulate when called upon...when it suited them. Calling on a Power as a whole to facilitate your ritual was still far less predictable than calling on a specific Aspect. Also, not all magical cultures used the theory, so Magic didn't present itself that way when dealing with them. Which, yes, that was sort of confusing, not the point.
But it was out of that concept of the Powers that the modern Eris, Lyra's Eris, had arisen. The writers who developed the Powers theory identified Eris as Discord, an Aspect of Chaos, which did sort of make sense — the problem was, these modern people defined Discord very differently than the ancients did. Chaos was defined as Freedom, wild, impulsive, at times destructive freedom, independent of any constraints or limits. Obviously, organised society wouldn't be able to maintain any sort of stability if everyone were allowed absolute freedom of choice, no culture has ever allowed that, ever. This tendency for freedom to lead to conflict, instability, and, well, chaos, this they called Discord. It is freedom, yes, but of the destructive sort, if that made sense.

Maïa had been confused, until Lyra asked her if she really thought British society would be able to function if people behaved like they did at the Revel all the time. Everything would fall apart very quickly, and it would be very, very messy, so, yeah, Destruction.

Of course, sometimes it was also just fun to break things, but not the point.

Anyway, a couple generations after the creation of these concepts of Chaos and Discord, her Eris gradually came into being. Eris was actually rather young — some of the older Aspects had been similar enough to their modern interpretations to just shift into the new role, but the old Eris had faded entirely. The new one was only...three hundred years old? somewhere around there? It was hard to say exactly. It didn't help that Lyra's Eris had memories inherited from the ancient Eris, and a panoply of gods that had faded back into Magic over the millennia, bits and pieces from random beings over eons, even just undifferentiated Magic (if those could even be called proper memories). They weren't nearly as clear as her own memories, feeling somehow more distant (watching Other Bella's memories had reminded Lyra of the distance in Eris's inherited memories, actually, though she obviously couldn't tell Maïa that), but there wasn't a clear break between Magic simulating Eris for ritual purposes as called upon and Eris being an independent entity — it had been a gradual transition, a process spread over decades, Eris's own estimation of her age had an uncertainty of about a century.

It was very possible muggle political and philosophical thought over the last few centuries had actually accelerated Eris's "birth" (for lack of a better word), and might have had something to do with her being propelled to power and influence over such a comparatively short period of time. Muggles did have their own influence over Magic, and Freedom had become a very important concept over there recently — certain prominent muggle cultures were far more Chaotic than most magical ones were, after all, where else would the will fuelling Eris's identity have come from?

Maïa looked like she had no idea what to do with that. Tee hee.

There were a few questions after that, but it seemed like Lyra explaining the whole thing by going all the way back to fundamental principles had mostly gotten the idea across. And in a way that didn't completely terrify Maïa, she thought — she seemed rather fascinated with the whole thing, actually. Which, Lyra could only consider that a success. She was trying to do this whole making friends thing, would probably end in complete failure if Maïa had come away with an overwhelmingly negative opinion of her Patron. So. Good.

But then Maïa asked how exactly Lyra had ended up dedicated to Eris in the first place. There was no way this part of the conversation was going to go nearly as smoothly. She'd anticipated this topic would come up, even considered how she would go about it ahead of time, but fuck, this was going to be a pain.

Lyra bit her lip for a moment, fighting down her reluctance. Maïa wasn't going to start crying again, was she? She didn't have a Zabini on hand to deal with it at the moment... "You do have
some idea already. I mean, I did practically tell you, I just left out the Eris part."

"What do you— Oh." Maïa's eyes went wide, her face slowly pulling into that bitter, vaguely sick look she always got when Cygnus came up. "You mean, when you told me about your religious inclinations. Embracing Chaos, because of your father."

"Yeah, that. I was referring to my dedication, I was just vague enough it could reasonably be interpreted a different way." Mages who heard that would suspect she was admitting-without-admitting she was a black mage, but they wouldn't know for certain. Though, she'd taken that tack before she'd known it was Unforgiveable, she might not have risked it if she had. She thought another moment, but ultimately decided there wasn't any way to get through this conversation without going back to the beginning — which, awesome, she'd just had this talk with Theo, just great.

In the beginning \textit{id est: five hundred years ago}, the last two Blacks swore themselves and their descendants to the Dark in perpetuity, in exchange Onyx asking for power, Mela that their family would endure as long as they served the Dark. But humans weren't meant to have that much power — Onyx and Mela were sane(-ish), but their incest babies and the first couple generations after them were completely mad, a few going on famously destructive killing sprees, blah blah. Eventually the Blacks settled down somewhat, within a couple generations stable enough to claw themselves back up into respectability, most obviously embodied in Henry Black, born about eighty years after the Covenant and to this day considered to be the most successful and widely-admired High Enchanter in history.

(Of course, he was still bloody terrifying — he'd had a spy network composed largely of muggle commoners stretching across the Continent, and his famously deadly granddaughter Nymphadora's 'career' as his personal assassin was a secret terribly kept by design. But that was Blacks for you.)

They were somewhat calmer now, yes, but the Covenant was still in effect. All Blacks born before Sirius declared for the Light in the Seventies — which was all of them, Other Bella had wrought enough havoc on the Family before then that Regulus was the youngest member of the House by Seventy-Six — were more magically powerful than other people, and somewhat less human.

See, the Powers hadn't existed yet when Onyx and Mela swore the family to the Dark. The Dark had, though. At its core, it was nothing more or less than all the things humans hated and feared about themselves and each other and the world around them — death and destruction and uncertainty; things they didn't \textit{couldn't} understand about their world; deceit and coercion; selfishness, shortsightedness, and conflict. It was as much an integral part of humans and society and the multiverse itself as the Light — there was no life without death — but it wasn't nice or good or sustainable on its own.

And the Blacks had \textit{embraced} it, rejecting the Light and the natural balance of a human soul altogether. If the Powers \textit{hadn't} been actively guaranteeing their survival, the Family wouldn't have lasted a second generation. The bloodline might have, but the House, as an organization and a political force? No. They were far too antisocial for that. Even as it was, they had teetered on the brink of self-destruction for \textit{five generations} before Henry was born. And even now, well... Aunt Dorea had once said that there was a reason so many Blacks were killed by their own children. Selfish, short-sighted, domineering people tended to raise resourceful, devious, independent children who hated them. (Bella herself was an excellent case in point.)

For Blacks who made their own more personal dedication to one Aspect in particular this deal was, to borrow the muggle idiom, taken up to eleven — they lost what remained of their humanity, and in exchange were granted even greater magical power. Which was why those stories of Blacks in
the first generations after the Covenant were so very extreme, nearly every one of them had made their own dedications. But they'd eventually learned better, Bella was the first one to do it in a century or so.

"So, wait." There was another peculiar expression on Maïa's face, something...wary? "You... The way you are, it wasn't because..." She trailed off there, seemingly unable to find the words for what she was trying to say.

But Lyra remembered what Blaise and Maïa had said that day in hospital, she could guess. "Arguably, Cygnus is still responsible. I would never have done it if he hadn't made me feel like I needed to. But, no, it wasn't, however Blaise put it, just turning out this way from all the shite he did to me, naturally. I made a deal with Eris. I asked for protection against the imperius, and also help to keep my sister from him. She gave me immunity to, well, most mind-altering magics, actually, along with the power and fortitude to shield Meda — in exchange..." Lyra spread her hands, indicating herself with a shrug.

Maïa didn't react to that anything like what she might have expected. Personally, Lyra thought it was a great deal — even the 'price' she'd paid was a benefit. Before her dedication she'd been miserable and terrified all the bloody time, but after she'd been physically incapable of feeling either. There weren't any downsides, as far as she was concerned, or at least none she hadn't been willing to take on.

But, inexplicably, Maïa reared back, quite abruptly looking horrified. "She just— She just took it all?" She opened her mouth to say something else, but abruptly closed it, chewing at her lip. Lyra blinked. "Well...yeah? Assuming you mean, like, feelings, human stuff, yeah. Okay, not all of it — she said she left my loyalty to the House because it was too intrinsic to my identity to strip from me and still have me be me, and my love for Meda because that was no small part of why I'd done it in the first place." A very large part, actually: Meda had just been leaving the nursery around then, Cygnus had kicked her into a bloody wall not a week before Lyra made her dedication, she'd been freaking out a little at the time. "But, yeah, basically."

That didn't seem to make Maïa any less horrified. "And you... She just broke you and, and..."

"It was a price I willingly paid."

"You were seven!"

The tone on Maïa's voice vaguely reminded her of that conversation they'd had about the Revel — she had the feeling this was going to be another confusing thing about consent. (She still thought "rape" was a fucking stupid word to use in that context; Lyra knew what rape was quite well, thank you, and that wasn't it.) "I don't see why it should matter how old I was. I told the Dark I would give them anything, and I meant it. It wouldn't have worked if I didn't mean it, ritual magic is funny like that."

Her face twisting in an odd scowl, Maïa said, "You can't expect me to believe you really knew what you were agreeing to."

"Well, no, but that doesn't matter. I said anything, and I meant anything. Anything that didn't interfere with my ability to protect myself and my sister, obviously," she clarified. just in case it wasn't obvious that the cost of a ritual couldn't undermine the benefit like that. "Just because I didn't know the full extent of what 'anything' entails doesn't mean I didn't still mean it." That was confusing. Was she actually tired enough she was starting to have trouble stringing coherent...
sentences together? Huh, couldn't remember the last time that'd happened.

She waited a couple seconds for Eris to comment before she remembered she was sleeping. Right...

While Lyra had been spacing out, Maïa had started in on one of those impressive rants of hers — though, this time 'annoying' was probably a better word. She hadn't caught the beginning of it, but it was obviously an infuriated, offended diatribe focused on Eris. The basic idea, so much as she could tell, was that Eris had essentially brainwashed Lyra at the tender, innocent age of seven — as though Lyra had ever been innocent, she was a bloody Black, they'd literally just covered that — and had been using her as she pleased for ineffable godly reasons ever since. It was silly and dumb, most of it, but Lyra really just didn't have the energy to interject. Maïa would run out of steam eventually.

But Lyra reached her limit first — she could only listen to Hermione saying things like that about Eris for so long before she started getting very annoyed. Silencing her with a sharp wave of her wand, Lyra pinned her with the hardest glare she could manage at the moment. (Probably not much of one, though, she was tired.) "Shut. Up, Hermione."

Hermione glared back at her, reaching for her own wand, cast a dispel on herself.

So Lyra silenced her again, summoned away her wand. "No. I'm not going to sit here and listen to you talk about Eris like that. I'm not." Which was...odd, now that she thought about it. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd felt legitimately offended by something. Generally speaking, she didn't care enough about anything to get offended. But, well... It was Eris.

(Though it probably didn't help that she was all tired and empty and less than at the moment, if Eris could wake up and let everything go back to normal, that'd be great. This being justhuman thing sucked.)

Focus, Lyra, you were in the middle of something, she reminded herself. (It was far too quiet in her head without someone talking.)

She took a moment, staring at the bookshelf behind Hermione, to try to figure out how to deal with this. Because, she was trying to do this making friends thing with Hermione, but she couldn't just... If they were going to have a thing, Hermione needed to understand. Eris was an enormous part of her life, after all. Part of her, even, hadn't she just been thinking how weirdly uncomfortable it was not to have her around? It wasn't like she was going away. "You don't understand, Hermione. I know you think you do, you think you already know all you need to know, but you don't. You're not me, you weren't there.

"I doubt you can even imagine what it was like. My parents were never around, you know, I was raised by the elves. The only times I ever saw them was when they wanted something. Social obligations, generally — that's the only reason people like them ever have children. And I was not a calm, obedient, demure child, I was simply incapable of being what they wanted. I'd get the occasional jinx or hex or smack for it — more, after Arcturus decided Cygnus was to train me as an Heir — but those were small things, just hurt a little. And I was too curious to really let it bother me too much. I'm a very curious person, you might have noticed that.

"It was my fifth birthday, the first time it happened. I saw Abraxas Malfoy, Darling Draco's grandfather, walking by with Cygnus. I rather liked Abraxas back then, though I can't remember why now. I assume just because he was an adult human who would actually talk to me, I'd probably spoken with him more than I had Cygnus or Druella at that point. So I thought, why not, grabbed a slice of cake and ran up to him with it, asked him if he wouldn't join us for a while. He
thought I was funny — I believe the exact word he used was precious.

"Once he was gone, Cygnus pulled me away from the party. I could tell he was angry, I knew I was going to be punished, but I thought it would just be one of those little jinxes or hexes, maybe a lashing curse — nothing serious. I was wrong. He cast the Imperius on me. He made me suck his dick. When it was done, he took the curse off, told me to clean myself up and get back to the party. Wouldn't want people to talk about me skipping out on our guests at my own birthday, now, would we?"

Hermione still looked horrified, but it was a completely different kind. Not the hot, angry kind, but a softer, quieter one, staring back at her still and wide-eyed. She'd probably be silent even without the jinx, now.

But Lyra didn't take it off yet. She wasn't done. "That became the standard punishment from then on, or one of them at least. Though the hexing gradually got worse too, and the beatings— Not the point. And, from what you said to Blaise, I'm pretty sure the thing you find horrifying about this is different from what actually bothered me. See, I didn't really get why he was making me do that particular thing — I had no bloody clue what sex was back then, in fact I didn't until Zee explained it to me first year.

"It was the Imperius that scared me. You know what that is, right?" Hermione nodded, her face still fixed in that soft-horrified expression. "The descriptions you've read of it don't really get across..." Lyra trailed off for a second, her fingers tapping at the table. "It feels good. You feel light, and happy, without a care in the bloody world, like everything is just fine and always will be. You don't feel forced, when you're under it, you want what the spell is making you do. While you're under it, it feels perfectly real. When it's gone, you remember how you felt under it, and you remember what you did. And you know.

"I am incapable of feeling fear now, but I still remember. There was nothing that scared me more than the idea of being put under that curse again. Nothing. And there was nothing I could do to stop it. I couldn't guess what would set Cygnus off, more often than not I couldn't think of anything I'd done to make him angry at all. It could happen at any moment. I tried to tell people what was happening, thought they might do something, but they didn't; they either thought I was making it up, or that I was just a weird, perverted child. I even tried to just do it myself, whenever he seemed even just a little annoyed, more than a few times. I thought, if I did what he always made me do on my own, he wouldn't have to make me do it.

"It's not like sucking dick is really that bad, so far as punishments go — it doesn't even hurt, I was perfectly willing to do it. To avoid that curse, I would have done anything. But, of course, that was wrong, he'd curse me every time I tried. Because that makes sense, sure."

And now Hermione was crying again. Silently, thankfully — it was far easier to ignore if she didn't have to listen to it.

"I still don't think you understand, I don't think you can. I lived in constant fear of it, of him, every moment of every day, for two years. I don't think you can understand how close I was to breaking. Eris, you know, she doesn't just exist in our timeline, she persists across all of them. There is no reality in which I exist and live to the age of thirteen where I don't dedicate myself to Chaos. It's not always the same way. It's not always at the same time. Sometimes, the Other Bellas aren't quite so well-suited to Eris, and we end up with a different Patron — or sometimes we go to Eris, but we grow out of our connection to her entirely, have to be let go after a few years. But all of us do it, if we live long enough, and most of us are hers.

"The ones who don't? Either Cygnus kills us, on accident or on purpose or sometimes in self-
defense — a couple of Dead Bellas tried to murder him in his sleep — or we kill ourselves rather than suffer living like that anymore.

"If Meda didn't exist... I'd like to think I would have been one of the ones who died trying to kill him. But she did, and I was her elder sister, I had to take care of her, she was the only thing keeping me going. But I couldn't, I couldn't keep her safe, not from Cygnus, not from anyone. Eventually, he would start hurting her like he did me. And I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't.

"When I told the Dark I would give them anything to get what I needed, I meant anything. And Eris answered. And she gave me what I needed." And Bella had given her everything, impulsively, yes, but absolutely willingly. (She always had been rather given to extremes and absolutes, but that was even more a Black thing than the Madness.)

Putting the hand holding Hermione's wand in front of her on the table, Lyra leaned forward, steadily meeting Hermione's eyes; she leaned away, almost cringing, silent tears running down her cheeks, but still staring back, seemingly incapable of looking away.

"You can think whatever you like of Eris. You can hate her, you can be afraid of her, whatever. But I won't listen to you talk about her like that. I won't. She saved me, Hermione. I don't care if you don't approve of how she did it. It's the truth. And in return, I am hers."

The way Hermione's eyes narrowed, lips twisting, brow furrowed, she didn't understand that either. Which, well...that was probably fair. She was almost certain muggles didn't go around swearing themselves into feudal hierarchies anymore, and that was the closest analogy she could think of.

"She is my Lady, my sworn liege. And even if I didn't know what it meant to sacrifice my humanity, I did know what it meant to swear fealty when I dedicated myself to her. My loyalty to her supersedes my friendship with you or Blaise or Zee, and my loyalty to the House of Black, and even my love for Meda." (If Meda had still needed her, that might have been in question, but she didn't, so.) "My life and soul belong to her, and she's quite possibly the only being I actually respect. So I won't have you talking about her like that in front of me.

"Now, I'm tired, and this conversation is over. If you still have questions, ask me tomorrow. I'm going to bed." Lyra stood up, leaving Hermione's wand on the table, and walked away.

Hopefully that wasn't going to blow up in her face tomorrow. (Though, honestly? She was pretty sure she was too tired to care.)

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, the last time we had a chapter that was exclusively written from Lyra's POV was the one where she was in hospital (17). That's not really significant in any way, I just couldn't remember if we'd ever had one... —Leigha

In case anyone was wondering, yes, the implication that modern ideas about personal freedoms and individual liberties growing so popular in muggle society is partially responsible for Eris's existence was completely intentional. —Lysandra
"Hey, Maïa, what's up?" Lyra said, dropping her bag and plopping into a chair, about twenty minutes into Charms. She wasn't actually going out of her way to annoy Flitwick, she didn't find him nearly as dull a professor as McGonagall or Sprout (though he also wasn't as amusing as Sev or Aurora). She just didn't particularly care to sit through the lecture part of the lesson alternating between being bored out of her mind and annoyed by the inaccuracies inherent in any theoretical representation of a spell that had been dumbed down for the average third-year class.

This did not, however, prevent Flitwick from becoming annoyed with her. "Miss Black! How good of you to deign to join us! Perhaps you would like to assist with today's demonstration?"

Yeah, that definitely wasn't a question. "Uh, sure?"

"Well then, if you would," he said, gesturing for her to join him at the front of the room.

She did so, making a show of not being put out at all by his demand. "What am I supposed to be casting, Professor?"

"Oh, dear me, no, I wouldn't expect you to demonstrate, Miss Black, not before discussing the casting process, at any rate!" Which was a bit silly, she was quite certain she'd made it clear over the course of the year that she was well beyond the curriculum. She'd been practicing silent casting during practical periods just to give herself some semblance of a challenge. She couldn't imagine they were covering something she didn't already know how to cast. "The charm simply requires a human target to demonstrate the full effect!"

"O...kay," she said, drawing out the word sarcastically. The only reason she could think of that he wouldn't have mentioned which charm it was was because he was trying to make a point about her coming to class on time. Probably something embarrassing, then — she couldn't imagine it would be anything dangerous, though.

"Now, remember," he said, turning briefly to address the class. "Your state of mind is as important with this particular class of charms as the incantation or wand movement."

"Wait, what?"

"Observe: Levo hilaritudo!"
Oh, *fuck* — was it more suspicious to *block* a Cheering Charm, or just...do her best not to react when the light magic hit her? She seriously had no idea.

But if she was going to be suspicious either way, she'd take the option that *didn't* involve light magic being cast on her, thanks — neither Cygnus nor Ciardha really used it much, so she'd never gotten used to the weird uncomfortable soul-burning pain of it. Eris had assured her (after Dora had discovered this weakness and begun shamelessly exploiting it) that it didn't do any permanent damage, but it fucking *hurt*, in a completely different way than physical (or 'physical') pain spells.

She flicked the incoming charm away with a silent *sesapsa*. "I've changed my mind, I don't want to do the demonstration."

Flitwick's eyes narrowed. He probably knew *exactly* why she'd avoided the light magic. It wasn't as though there were a lot of reasons to *not* want a Cheering Charm cast on you. She would put money on Flitwick (correctly) assuming that she just didn't want to get hit with light magic because it was light magic. Which suggested he was a lot more annoyed than he seemed about her showing up late, actually. Even if she was just attuned to the dark (and he had to know she was) and not dedicated to Eris, true light magic would still be *very uncomfortable* for her to experience. And he'd tried to sneak it over on her, in front of the entire class, like she'd be too slow to catch it. Fucking goblin sense of appropriate discipline.

"Care to explain your change of heart, Miss Black?"

"Well if I'd known we were doing Cheering Charms, I would've said no earlier."

"If you'd arrived *on time*, you would have known, wouldn't you," the professor said, giving her a rather stern look. "I presume you realise that your marks *are* dependent upon your participation in lessons, in addition to your exam scores."

*I presume you realise that OWLs and NEWTs are the only marks that matter*, Lyra thought, though she refrained from saying it aloud, as that would indicate that she was annoyed, and therefore that Flitwick's impromptu punishment was at least somewhat effective, despite her having avoided the painful light magic aspect of it. "Medical exemption?" she offered instead.

Flitwick snorted, amused apparently despite himself. Well, fine. She hadn't been *trying* to be funny, but she'd take it. "You're claiming a *medical exemption* from Cheering Charms?"

"Er...yes? Using euphoria-inducing spells on a Black is generally a really bad idea. I mean, unless you *want* to see a bout of the Black Madness first-hand." That was entirely true. Most people outside the House probably didn't know it, but all the children of the House had been warned to avoid that sort of thing well before they were allowed out of the nursery. Of course, this mostly just informed the children of the House that interesting things might happen if they cast the right emotional manipulations on each other. Deneb had been terribly disappointed to discover they didn't do much of anything to Bella, though that was probably a good thing — episodes of the Madness tended not to go as smoothly as the one she'd had over Easter.

Flitwick looked like he wasn't sure whether to believe her but apparently he didn't want to debate the subject in the middle of a lesson, in front of the entire class.

She smirked at him. "I know it's kind of out of character for me to be responsible enough to avoid it, but I live to undermine your expectations, so."

After a long moment of skeptical silence, he sniffed. "In that case, Miss Black, you will have no objection to *casting* the spell for the demonstration, instead."
Which, no, if she was using that as her excuse, she didn't have a good reason not to cast the stupid light charm, even though casting light magic was even worse than getting hit with it. Bugger. Should have thought that one through a bit more.

Though this was probably the best possible outcome — hiding how much it hurt to cast the fucking spell would be a lot easier than explaining it having absolutely no effect on her whatsoever. She glared at Flitwick for putting her in the position of having to make that particular choice in the first place. That was it, she was coming to every single Charms lesson next year, and commenting extensively on every single theory lecture. (He would come to rue this day, she would make sure of it.)

"No, sir," she said, attempting not to sound as put out as she was. What had happened to oh, I wouldn't expect you to demonstrate? "Does that mean I get to explain the casting process, too?"

Might as well do half of Flitwick's job, she was already doing half of Snape's. (Also, she'd be lying if she said she wasn't trying to put it off as long as possible.)

He grinned, baring his teeth, which could have meant he was pleased she'd acquiesced without an argument, or that he was annoyed by her suggestion, if he meant it in a more goblin way than human. "Oh, by all means, Miss Black," he said smoothly, gesturing for her to take center stage.

"Ugh. Alright. Cheering Charms. Incantation is levo hilaritudo, which is supposed to mean I increase cheerfulness in the target, but whoever designed the spell apparently didn't actually speak Latin, because it should be levo hilaritudinem—"

Flitwick cleared his throat, cutting her off. "We are not here for a Latin lesson, Miss Black."

Fine. "The wand movement is probably in the textbook, and you all just saw Professor Flitwick do it, clockwise spiral followed by an overhand-release self-referencing open circle." She demonstrated, for everyone who hadn't been paying attention earlier. Which was probably most of them — who actually paid attention in class? "This is light magic, so you have to maintain a specific emotional mindset in order to cast it properly, in this case, 'happy' or 'joyful' or 'cheerful.'" She put the emotions in quotations with the fingers of her off hand. "The general idea is that you're sharing your positivity and improving someone else's day. You should also use the lightest magic you can channel for the spell itself." Maïa, listening attentively in the front row (as always), raised a hand. "Yes, Maïa?"

"What does that mean, channel the lightest magic we can?"

"What do you mean, what does that mean?"

"I mean, there's nothing in the textbook about—"

"Why would there be? Using light magic to cast light magic seems like it should be pretty intuitive, and drawing from different parts of the spectrum of magical energy is incredibly basic. Didn't you cover it in first year?"

The expression on Maïa's face said that they hadn't, even before she added, "Er...no?"

Lyra raised an eyebrow at Flitwick.

"The mechanics of casting specifically light or dark magics are introduced in fifth year, when students are judged to be sufficiently mature to handle the temptation to do so," he explained, giving her a forbidding glare. Pity, she probably could have drawn that explanation out long enough that she wouldn't have had to cast the fucking Cheering Charm at all. "For individuals
whose magic is not attuned to either end of the spectrum, light magic will respond to positive emotional context without any need to explicitly seek it out.'
one else in the class spoke Gobbledygook, at least not well enough to know *that* sort of language. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" he asked, obviously not believing her.

"Yes. Are you two partnering today, then?"

"Can Cheering Charms actually induce a manic episode?" Maïa asked, apparently unwilling to simply move on and leave her alone to suffer in peace.

"Yes."

"Because we couldn't help but notice that you seem awfully..."

"Peaky," Harry offered.

"I don't feel well. Light magic doesn't agree with me," she explained shortly.

Maïa's eyes widened as she (hopefully) figured out the implication there, but before she could say anything, Spoilt Bitch, only a few feet away, managed to aim her spell so badly it hit Neville at the back of the room instead of Parvati six feet away from her, and cast it so poorly that he started reciting bawdy limericks. Which, while amusing, wasn't really a normal Cheering Charm effect. (Seriously, what the fuck?)

Lyra used the distraction to slip out of the classroom, switching places with Lyra", who was waiting in the corridor. "Wow, I *did* look terrible," she noted, smirking. Bitch.

"Fuck you."

"Well, I guess we *could*. But we both know you'd rather go hide in the loo and play with dark magic until you feel capable of pretending to be human again."

"Ugh, yeah. Is the one I was going to use free?"

"Doesn't matter. Just go up to the room. Gin's off with Theo somewhere."

"Right. Good." She headed off toward the nearest staircase before anyone could come along and question the fact that there were two of her standing around in the corridor, and hopefully before anyone noticed she'd stepped out of class.

"Oh, sorry— Er...Lyra? Why are you down here?" Harry asked, after nearly tripping over her as he opened the door of an unused storeroom on the first dungeon level.

Understandable, since she was sitting on the floor, but she hadn't really expected anyone to just wander into this particular abandoned room, so she hadn't bothered conjuring a chair. "There are no portraits down here."

"Yes, and?"

"And that makes it a perfect place to set *these* delightful little things loose," she explained, showing him the basket of prototype toys (or something) she'd gotten from the Weasley twins.

The boys hadn't decided exactly what they wanted to do with them yet, got distracted by their potions experiments, but as far as Lyra was concerned the six-inch-tall, spider-like automatons were the perfect vehicle for her latest idea. When she'd gotten them, they just scurried off in a
random direction for fifteen seconds — about two-hundred feet unless they hit an obstacle — then paused for a moment before taking off again in another random direction. She'd added a few enchantments so that they could run around on the walls and ceilings as well as the floor and locked a suite of audio-projection and camouflage charms to them. Each one now held a copy of a different muggle rock song, which would, when activated, be played throughout the school, on a loop, until someone managed to find them and deactivate them. She just had to set a timer on each one as she let them loose, so they'd have a chance to spread before they activated.

This was actually the seventh batch she was releasing — there were already two dozen of them running around each of the four house common rooms, the owlry, and the Great Hall. She was giving them another day to spread before activating them, just to let them diffuse throughout the school first.

"Why are you down here?"

He made a face. "Hiding from Hermione. She's absolutely mental when it comes to exams, you know."

Lyra shrugged. She'd noticed that, yes. The dementors had finally gone back to Azkaban just in time for exams to become an imminent threat, making everyone just as boring as the dementors had. Maïa had actually been more entertaining before the dementors had gone.

Granted, that might also have something to do with Walpurgis, and the conversations they'd had in the wake of it. After establishing what Eris was and why Lyra was dedicated to her, Maïa hadn't actually asked any more questions about the ritual, which had seemed kind of weird until Eris mentioned that she'd also bumped into Maïa lips-first. So of course Lyra had had to ask about that, and (after several minutes of teasing, rubbing it in that she'd totally known that Maïa wanted to kiss her) managed to establish that the muggleborn swot had followed up on kissing Eris by deciding that she should probably practice the whole kissing thing before giving it another go with Lyra, and had therefore ended up wandering around randomly kissing people like a fucking Zabini all night. And obviously she remembered all of it, because Eris thought it would be funnier that way.

For some reason, she apparently preferred to pretend that Walpurgis hadn't happened at all, burying herself in her books, rather than give it another shot, now that Lyra was Lyra and she'd gotten her practice-snogs in. (Lyra was fairly certain she would never understand that girl.)

"I told her if she kept nagging me to revise with her, I'd set her notes on fire. Worked like a Granger-repelling charm." Honestly, she had no idea what she would need or want to revise for. Reminding herself what she was actually supposed to admit to knowing? Yeah, she was pretty sure that carpet was halfway to Carthage by now. Maïa didn't actually need to revise, either, but she hadn't been willing to listen to reason on the subject, even when Lyra had promised not to tease her about the kissing thing anymore if she'd just stop being so boring.

Harry rather looked as though he wished he'd thought of that. "What are they?" he asked, plucking a music-bug from her basket, its exterior still replicating the color and texture of the container. He held it up to the light, examining it more closely. "They're not actually some kind of spider, are they?"

"No, just duplicated automatons. Something to make things a little more fun around here for the next...two to four days, depending on which professors get annoyed first." Well, her duplication spells would unravel in about four more days, even if no one did anything to disable the constructs, but that was beside the point. "Oh, hey, speaking of fun, what are you doing this summer?"

Harry sighed. "Going back to the Dursleys, I expect."
She raised an eyebrow at him, taking in the expression he had assumed. She still didn't understand his apparent reluctance to permanently solve the problem of his abusive guardians' existence. It couldn't be *that* difficult to make muggle deaths look like an accident. Though it would admittedly be easier to just leave their house and never look back — he wouldn't even have to leave the universe, he had plenty of options here. "Yeah, going to California sounds much more fun."

The boy glared at her. "Well, that's just *lovely* for you, isn't it. You and Blaise can both just—"

She cut him off before his little tirade could gain steam. "That was an invitation, idiot."

"Oh." Harry bit his lip and muttered something that might have been, "Bloody Slytherin could've actually *said* something..." which she took to mean that Blaise had, in typical Zabini fashion, subtly suggested that Harry should try to arrange his plans into accord with their own, and Harry had, in typical Harry fashion, not caught it. Much as he hadn't caught her own (undoubtedly more blunt) suggestion just a moment ago.

"Zee has...business things? I don't know. But she should be around part of the time. And you obviously already know Blaise is going to be there. Sirius is going to meet us — he might already have left, I'm not sure. But yeah, you should come."

"I would, but... I can't."

"Why not? I'm sure your muggles won't care, from everything you've said about them."

Harry, already leaning against the wall a few feet away, sank to the ground beside her, rubbing at his forehead. "They won't. They wouldn't care if I never came back. Or, well, they might throw a party, actually. They told me to see if I could spend last summer here, at school. And obviously I can't, but... You know how you told me Dumbledore's my guardian in Magical Britain?"

"Yeah, you really should let Meda do something about that."

He shook his head, otherwise ignoring the comment. "It's just — I asked him, a couple days after he had us up to his office to tell us Sirius was getting a trial, if there was something — anything — he could do so that I didn't have to go back there, I mean, if he is my guardian, you know? If, when Sirius's name is cleared, I could live with him instead. And, well..."

Lyra had a nasty suspicion this story did not end with Dumbledore wholeheartedly supporting Harry's adoption by the House of Black. "Well?"

"He said I have to go back. That there's some, some *charm*, or something — he put it on me, something to do with my mum sacrificing herself to save me, so as long as I still live with her sister, as long as that's still my *home*, and I go back there every year, Riddle can't get at me."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Do I even have to tell you all the reasons that's complete dragonshite? I mean, to start with, even if there *was* some kind of ward — it'd be something like the Fidelius, a ward or protection ritual that he doesn't want to call a blood ward or ritual because *evil blood magic is evil*— Even if there was something that could keep Riddle away from you wherever you are, and quite frankly I kind of doubt it, since you *have* actually run into him twice now, haven't you?"

Harry scowled. "They just protect me when I'm at the Dursleys' house, I think."

"So...they only protect you two months out of the year, in a place you hate, with people who hate you? Sounds fucking useless to me. And really, how much of a threat is Riddle, anyway? Didn't you tell me he's a fucking wraith at the moment? Okay, if the issue is just keeping him out
of wherever you're staying, the wards I put on Maïa's house could keep out a fucking wraith — they can't exactly do much cursebreaking, what with being incorporeal and all."

Well, as long as it couldn't shadow-walk. Which most couldn't — or, rather, wouldn't. Wraiths were basically just demonic ghosts. They wouldn't want to risk not being able to get back to this dimension, since they weren't actually supposed to be here in the first place. In any case, she was reasonably certain the wards on any of the Black properties would be more than sufficient to keep him out. Some of them even had wards against shadow walking (because there were a surprising number of people who had at one point or another wanted to assassinate the residents).

"And he can't get to you if he can't find you. You could just take off, not tell anyone where you're going — what's he going to do, search all of California for you? It is kind of big, you know." Even she didn't know which magical states they'd be visiting, there were several in the area, and Blaise and Zee had only really referred to the muggle cities they'd be staying in — San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the bay area which was apparently where all the business things were happening.

"I know, okay — it's just... It's Dumbledore, okay? He might not be the most...whatever, but I trust he has reasons for doing it this way instead of...some other way. I wish I could go to California with you all, but... I can't."

"Because of these super-special wards Dumbledore claims to have put on your muggle aunt's house."

Harry nodded.

"Fine. I'll look into it."

The boy startled, eyes going wide. He shook his head. "Wait — what do you mean, you'll look into it?!"

"I mean, I'll check out the wards, figure out what's so special about them, and whether there's a way to alter or reproduce it so you don't have to stay there. Obviously." She definitely didn't mean she'd just break the stupid thing and drag him off to California anyway, though that seemed like a perfectly reasonable idea to her...

"Lyra. You're brilliant, but..." he trailed off awkwardly. Probably didn't want to offend her.

"But?" she prompted him, quite certain that there was nothing he could say that actually would offend her.

"But you're not a wardcrafter. Not really, I mean."

Oh. That actually was sort of offensive, just on principle. She'd put a lot of time into her warding studies. "Dark Powers, do I have to actually get a mastery for people to take me seriously when it comes to this shit?"

Emma Granger was about the only person who seemed to — well, other than Zee and Meda, and they knew her (the other her), didn't count. Which reminded her, she should probably write to the Head of the Department of Education and make sure she was on the lists to take the Runes and Arithmancy OWLs. Babbling had insisted she have them in order to join the NEWT Runes class, which was somewhat annoying, but she supposed there were worse ways to spend an afternoon than designing elementary-level enchantments and modeling charms.

"Well, yeah," Harry said, rolling his eyes as though he doubted she could just go get one. Granted, the application process and paperwork would be enormously annoying, but the actual mastery
project aspect was essentially already done — he just had no idea how neat the wards she'd come up with for Zee actually were.

(Sh'd try to explain, but she hadn't gotten very far before Blaise had taken exception to her babbling interrupting his and Harry's mind-fucking, and tried to lock her out of the room. Not that he could actually keep her out, but she could take a hint. Eventually.)

"That might help, actually, but... It's just... Even if you were a wardcrafter, you're not Dumbledore."

"I trained with one of the preeminent wardcrafters and cursebreakers in Europe, for six fucking years. I am a wardcrafter, even if I'm not licensed. And me not being Dumbledore is kind of exactly my point. He's actually not a wardcrafter. He's an alchemist. He dabbles in enchanting, yes — he made most of those things in his office — and he has masteries in transfiguration, magical theory, and arithmancy along with alchemy. But he spends most of his time playing politics, and wards are not his area of expertise, at all. For that matter, neither are rituals, and if he tied the thing to you and your aunt, rather than her physical house, the ward would have to be ritual-based, rather than runic. Even if he did write it himself, and didn't just copy it out of a book somewhere, I can pretty much guarantee I can alter it or come up with something better. So, yes, I'll look into it. Where do they live?"

"What? I'm not telling you that! I– I don't want you to go off and, and I don't know, just fucking break them so it's no longer a consideration, or something!"

Well, someone was starting to get to know her a little too well. "I'm not going to get rid of something that's actually helping to protect you. What part of House Black being responsible for you do you not get?"

Harry scowled, clambering to his feet to pace around her. "Would you fucking stop that?!"

"Stop what?"

"You always treat me like a fucking child you have to take care of! I'm not, and you don't, and where do you even get off?! We're the same fucking age, Lyra!" The venom in his tone was even stronger than when he'd thought she was just rubbing it in that her holiday was going to be more fun than his.

And completely unfounded.

"I'm not treating you like a child." Just...a completely uneducated heir to a noble house, in desperate need of training and someone to get his life on track. If she was treating him like a child, they wouldn't be having this pointless conversation in the first place — she'd just go ahead and do something about his situation without involving him at all.

"What? Then what the hell do you call all this taking care of me, you're my responsibility shite?!"

"Uh...being the Acting Head of House Black? Our relative ages don't matter, or even that I know way more than you about how Magical Britain works. Even if you were thirty years older than me and had been raised by the Potters, it would still be my responsibility to look out for your interests." That would, admittedly, probably be more of a reciprocal relationship, but not the point. "It just so happens you're not, and you weren't, so at the moment, looking out for your interests mostly means encouraging you to learn all the shite you're going to need to know to be an effective Lord Potter, and, you know, making sure you aren't completely f*cked in the meanwhile because you're relying on some shitty wards thrown together by a fucking alchemist!"
Harry's eyes narrowed, glaring down his nose at her. "D'you... Do you even hear yourself, when you're talking? Do you have any idea how insanely arrogant that sounds, thinking you can do better than fucking Dumbledore at protecting me?"

Not really, no. She shrugged. "Do you think I care? Even if I didn't say it, I'd still think it. He's been a terrible guardian to you. He might be able to keep you safe from Riddle — maybe. What proportion of the times he's almost killed you have occurred under Dumbledore's protection, again?" All of them. It was all of them. "But even if he could protect you from the Undead Dork Lord, he's setting you up to fail as soon as you leave Hogwarts."

"He is not!"

"Okay, not intentionally." (Maybe.) "But he hasn't told you anything about Magical Britain outside of school or found someone to teach you the sort of shit you need to know to run a Noble House. He hasn't made sure you know how to defend yourself, in the event that you do encounter Riddle for a fourth time — which you almost certainly will, don't even need to do the arithmancy to know that. He periodically exiles you from magic, which is just— just insane." How was anyone supposed to get good at magic if they couldn't use it for months at a time?! Especially if they didn't even know it existed until they came to Hogwarts! "Honestly, even if his totally not a blood ward thing isn't complete dragonshite, I should still go check it out and see if I can put something in so the Ministry won't notice you using magic without disrupting it, at least that would be something..."

Harry's angry pacing ceased, his scowl vanishing in favor of a disbelieving stare. "You can do that?"

"Obviously. That's the whole reason I warded Maïa's parents' house." The fact that it had made enchanting Emma's teacups to keep their contents warm much easier was just a perk. "I'd've offered ages ago, but I figured you wouldn't want to go back, seeing as you have other options, now."

"Well, I don't. But if I could use magic—" His eyes took on a rather vindictive light. "I'd like to see Dudley try to kick the shit out of me while he's vomiting slugs all over himself!"

Lyra snorted. Watching his cousin puke slugs everywhere would be far less entertaining than going to California, she was sure. Plan A was still to see whether she could alter the ward so he could go — assuming it wasn't doing more harm than good, anyway. "Like I said, I'll check it out. So...where do they live?"

Ha! Called it, Lyra thought, casting another set of divination spells at the fog of light magic surrounding Number Four, Privet Drive. Like all the others, they came up empty (save for identifying the Ministry's observation charms). Which wasn't exactly unexpected, given that the 'protection' relied on Harry living with maternal blood relatives. Not to mention it didn't seem to be properly confined or directed like a normal, spatial ward. Unlike most wards, blood wards — true blood wards, not just normal wards that used blood as an identifier — were tied to people, not places. Which meant that if she wanted to figure out exactly what was behind the amorphous cloud of light magic that surrounded the house, she'd have to cast her divinations on Lily's sister.

From the little she'd heard about...Peony? Poppy? — some flower name that started with a P, anyway — this was going to be fun.

She was, of course, already using an ageing potion — she hardly ever left the Hogwarts grounds without one, so as to not raise suspicions about a second Lyra Black running around — but she cast a few glamours on herself as well before knocking on the front door. Felt a bit like walking into an
oven, pressing toward the center of the light 'protection', but it was hardly unbearable, so she couldn't possibly have actually triggered it.

Eris giggled at her disguise. *Her hair was darker than that, you know.*

Too late to change it now*, she thought back. She had already knocked, and could hear footsteps on the other side of the door.

It seemed the image was close enough, anyway, because Primrose(?) Dursley, a tall blonde who looked nothing like her sister, went very pale and staggered slightly, as though she might faint. She caught herself on the doorframe. "L-Lily? B-But you're *dead!* You can't be here, you're *dead!*"

Lyra grinned. "Oh, no. I'm very much alive, I assure you. Granted, I'm not Lily, but I'm definitely alive. May I come in?"

Petunia(?), recovering from the initial shock of seeing a twenty-something version of her dead sister show up on her doorstep, glared furiously. "No, you most certainly may not! I don't know who you think you are—"

"Angelos Black," she said calmly, slipping through a shadow into the entryway behind...Pansy(?). "Not my real name, of course, just a sobriquet — the Magical British criminal underground is fun like that. Now, how do you feel about never seeing your nephew ever again?"

The muggle spun on her heel, backing herself into a corner. "H-how did you do that? Get out!"

"But you haven't answered my questions yet," she pouted. "Not that I think you'll actually be able to answer them, but that's what analytic charms are for."

"VERNON!" ...Potentilla? *No, that can't possibly be it.* Posey? There really weren't very many flower-names that started with *P*, she reflected. Mrs. Dursley, anyway, shrieked, her voice shrill enough that Lyra was certain she visibly winced.

"What is it, Pet?" a man's voice called back. Right, Petunia, then. "Just tell them we don't want whatever they're selling and come sit down, your pork chop is getting cold!"

She opened her mouth to shriek for her husband again, but Lyra quickly silenced her. Bloody bitch's voice was worse than listening to Mermish out of water. This only made the woman cower further into her corner. When he received no response, the man apparently decided to come see what it was for himself, if the scraping of a chair and the creaking of the floor were anything to go by.

Half a second later an obese, florid-faced man rounded the corner and saw her standing over his wife with a wand. He scrambled back, a door slamming as he shouted, "I warn you, witch, I'm armed!"

"With *what*, a pork chop?" She followed him deeper into the house, beginning a trigger-drop jinx just in case he actually had some weapon at hand, and suddenly found herself face to face with a device she recognised from Blaise's muggle films, one of their piercing-hex machines. If the movies were anything to go by, letting him pull the trigger would be bad. "Er..." she said, trying to think of something to say to distract him as she finished her jinx. "Definitely not a pork chop."

Then a bolt of spell-light hit the muggle somewhat to the left of his center of mass — aiming from the hip was hard — and the weapon fell from his momentarily limp fingers. She summoned it before it hit the floor. The muggle, his face going a stunning shade of scarlet, balled up his fists and moved toward her, as though the appropriate response to her disarming him so easily was
"Don't try it," she advised him, leveling her wand at his throat. And then ducking, because a gust of air had ruffled her hair — Petunia's frying pan missed her head by what couldn't have been more than half a centimeter. "Dark Powers!" she groused, swinging the firearm by the metal barrel to knock the pan out of the muggle's hand, then kicking it through the open doorway behind her as she let out a silent shriek of pain.

"Don't even think about it," she said to Dursley, not bothering to look and see if he actually was moving to do something. She would be, if she'd been in his place, with a distraction like that at hand, but her wand was still pointed in his direction. If she heard or felt any indication that he was moving, he'd be going down. "Are you done now?"

Petunia, cradling a forearm that was almost definitely broken, nodded stiffly, tears in her eyes, but still glaring daggers at the witch who had invaded her home.

"Right, over there, then," she ordered the woman, a jerk of her head indicating that she ought to join her husband. She kept an eye on her as she sidled over to him — Dursley was an unknown quantity, sure, but she'd be willing to bet Petunia was the more dangerous of the two of them. She was Lily Evans's sister, after all. Even if she clearly wasn't a fighter — that swing of the pan had left her terribly overextended — she equally clearly wasn't the cowering housewife Lyra had initially taken her for.

"You won't get away with this, you know!" the man blustered, as Petunia's progress brought her slowly around to face him again. "Those freaks — your people, your government, they'll come — they'll know!"

Lyra smirked. Did Dursley really think it was a good idea to call mages *freaks* when one was holding a wand on him? Not that she actually cared, and he wasn't wrong (she was well aware that even Ciardha considered her abilities a bit freakish), but he couldn't possibly know that. "Well, they'll certainly know *someone* was using magic around here. I doubt they'll be very prompt in their response, however. The *Boy Who Lived* is, after all, safely away at Hogwarts. We have quite enough time for a little chat," she added, lifting the jinx on Petunia.

"You— You're one of *them*, aren't you! Like Snape, one of those murdering terrorists that killed my parents!"

Lyra only just managed to contain a giggle, then decided it hardly mattered — there was no way she'd be getting the information she needed voluntarily at this point, might as well be intimidating. "Dear Severus and I *do* have a few political opinions in common, but no. I've never been much of a follower. And that's not what I'm here to talk about. About eleven and a half years ago, a wizard asked you to take in your nephew. What did he tell you about the protections he'd laid on the boy and your home?"

Petunia scoffed. "As though the great Albus Dumbledore would explain anything to mere *muggles*! He didn't *ask* anything, just left the boy on the front step with a bloody *note*, said there was some ward on the house, and we had to keep the boy to keep ourselves safe!"

"Haven't heard a bloody thing from him since!" Dursley added.

Wha— *Really?!* That was just... Lyra found herself glowering at the absent wizard. "His exact wording in regard to the protections, if you please."

The Dursleys exchanged a terrified look before the man nearly shouted, "How the ruddy hell do
you expect us to remember his exact wording, it was twelve bloody years ago!"

She sighed. Perhaps that was a bit unreasonable of her — they likely wouldn't have known the importance of those few lines to commit them to memory, and she certainly wasn't going to let one of them go fetch the letter, assuming they'd kept it. "Well, in any case, I was always going to need to cast a few spells on you—" She nodded at Petunia. "—to figure out exactly what that old goat did. Or, narrow it down, at least."

The woman's eyes grew very wide. "N-no! I– I won't let you use m-magic on me! I—"

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her. "And you plan to stop me...how? I wasn't asking for permission, just informing you of the— Stupefy!" she snapped.

Dursley, apparently under the mistaken impression that she had stupidly decided to stand inside her minimum effective casting distance, moved to charge her while she was distracted, or so he must have thought, in speaking to his wife. Rather unfortunately for him, she wasn't — either distracted or a complete idiot. She did have to side-step rather quickly to avoid his body as it fell, but other than that, the attack was far less effective than the ear-piercing shriek Petunia let out as she saw the red spell-light flash. She fell to her knees beside the man, shaking him with her good arm.

"Vernon! Vernon! Wake up! Vernon! What did you do to him, you freak?! What did you do?"

"Morgen, Circe, and Lilith, he's only stunned — you'll be getting the same if you don't shut up." It wasn't strictly necessary that she be conscious for the analysis charms Lyra had in mind, the only reason she wasn't already stunned was that it would be easier to interpret the results if there was no other active magic working on the target. The muggle's cries subsided into much quieter whimpering as she pressed an ear to her husband's chest, apparently checking for a heartbeat.

"Good enough, now hold still."

Blood wards had been a comparatively small part of the magic Bella had studied with Ciardha. In addition to being anchored to people instead of places, they didn't really involve runic magic at all (most of them were actually ritually enacted) and runes were kind of his thing. He had, of course, still taught her the divination charms necessary to analyse them — you never knew what you might encounter in a cursebreaking scenario — but she'd never actually had occasion to use them outside of practice.

The general idea was that certain conditions were bound into the blood of an individual or bloodline — the people or place they were meant to protect and the source of energy they would use in order to do so, the terms that must be met in order to activate them, and so on. The divinations she was using were intended to examine the echoes of the ritual used to set the conditions, so their results could be rather vague, but as far as the technical elements like the power source went, they were unmistakable.

"This can't be right. You're muggles! Why the fuck would he use something that draws on magic?" She could kind of see it if it drew on the life force of everyone in the family to protect their home and each other, but... Honestly, if Harry was ever attacked by Riddle, the so-called protection would probably cripple him in the fight, if not kill him outright — actually, in that light, the whole burning-Riddle-alive, being-in-hospital-for-a-week thing at the end of his first year made a lot more sense (as opposed to Harry's own accidental magic explanation). If the Dursleys, as in, multiple of them, were ever attacked, it'd definitely kill him. "Fuck, I guess that rules out just killing you, then."

"WHAT?"

"What did I say about shutting up?" she reminded the shrill harpy with a stern glare. "I wasn't going
to anyway — stubborn arse didn't want me to, can't imagine why. All right, moving on... How do we go about breaking this stupid thing..."

She cast another charm, this one intended to show the activation terms. Weirdly enough, the result seemed to be tied up with the protection parameters and the initiation of the protection, which — Oh! Harry had said something about it having to do with Lily's sacrifice — if she'd been using soul magic (which she almost had to have done, if she was trying to counter a fucking Killing Curse) and Dumbledore had simply built on that, that would explain why it drew on magic rather than physical strength. It would also explain why, while it would keep most black (or even just dark) mages away due to the unpleasant lightness of it, it only seemed set to truly activate in proximity to Riddle (and possibly anyone bearing his mark, though she wasn't sure about that). Which meant she probably could just kill Petunia and her son to break the thing, but again, Harry didn't seem too enthused about the idea.

If she was interpreting what she was looking at correctly, she was pretty sure she'd read about something very similar — light blood wards were rare, so she wouldn't be surprised if Dumbledore had come across it in the same book she had.

Basically, as she'd understood it, it was kind of like a quick, cheap version of proper Family Magic. (That was actually what she'd been researching when she found it.) The whole thing depended on familial acceptance and belonging — love, as Harry had said Dumbledore had told him — and Petunia had said they'd had to take him in (accept him) in order to activate the thing. It was meant to be used on a household to protect the family and their home from external attackers. Theoretically, it should protect anyone who lived here from anyone who didn't, but basing it on Lily's own ritual and investing it in an existing bloodline, rather than using a separate ritual to attach it to all the people it was designed to protect, had clearly affected it. And if Harry, who was the only mage involved, ever decided this wasn't his home it would probably unravel entirely. He didn't actually have to come back and stay here every summer, Dumbledore probably just thought that would make Harry continue to think of this as his home.

Though, if she was seeing what she thought she was seeing, the aura of light magic around the house should have been much stronger than it actually was — even accounting for the fact that there was no true affection between Harry and his relatives, and there were only three of them in the bloodline, two of whom were muggles. "Are you sure Lily Evans was your sister, not your cousin or something?"

"Of course she was, my perfect sister," Petunia scoffed, still kneeling beside her fallen husband. Her voice wavered, as though she was trying not to cry.

"Well, I think he did something wrong, then, because this easily should have been strong enough to keep someone like me away. But whatever. I have everything I need, so best be off before the DLE get off their collective arse and come check on you. Feel free to tell whomever shows up that their response time is disgraceful. Imagine if I'd actually wanted to hurt you."

Before Petunia could respond, Lyra apparated away with a final smirk — she was quickly coming to prefer shadow walking, it was far more comfortable and far less traceable, but there had been no convenient shadows to step into in the Dursleys' dining room. Knockturn Alley, on the other hand, had plenty of shadows, and when the Aurors, tracking the unscrupulous witch had been terrorising Harry Potter's aunt, found that the trail ended there they wouldn't be remotely surprised.

Far less surprised than Lyra was about how easy it should be for Harry to do whatever he liked without breaking the ward. As long as he still thought of Number Four as his home, he could go wherever he wanted for however long he wanted, including California. Of course, they should still
break the bloody thing. It wasn't necessarily harmful to Harry unless the Dursleys were attacked by Not-Professor Riddle and/or (possibly) his remaining Death Eaters, but it did seem like a rather serious miscalculation, using Harry to protect people who weren't nearly so valuable to...anyone as the Boy Who Lived.

**Plus, there are definitely wards that we can use instead — not like that thing's doing anything a simple avoidance ward wouldn't, seeing as Riddle's a disembodied wraith at the moment.**

She wondered if Anomos would have a copy of Cavendish's *Compendium of Curious Rituals* — she was pretty sure that was where she'd seen the outline of the blood ward Dumbledore had adapted. She could pick it up for Harry to read before she convinced him that it was in his best interests to decide that his aunt's house never really had been his familial home, and if it had been, it certainly wasn't any longer.

He had better family, now.

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Owl post arrival was always a bit annoying, but this was just excessively irritating, Lyra thought, as the fourth owl of the morning touched down. Especially as it immediately decided to help itself to her eggs.

Apparently Maïa agreed. She looked up from her transfiguration notes long enough to ask, rather warily, whether Lyra was planning something she ought to have told her about, like, "Oh, I don't know. Another stupid prank to distract us all for the next week? Recreating the Nineteen Sixty Gringotts robbery? A bloody coup?"

"I think all that revising is driving you silly, Maïa. If I were planning a coup, I would be less likely to admit it at breakfast than if I'd staged a prison riot." Of course, if she were planning a robbery of Gringotts, she'd be even less likely to mention it — the goblins could be unreasonably paranoid about even speculative thievery, and she rather liked being on speaking terms with them.

"Oh, shut up."

Harry, sitting on her other side, snorted slightly, but didn't comment, waving it off in his conversation with Dean and Seamus. "Oh, it's nothing. So you're telling me we get to send two teams to the World Cup? Why?"

Bluh, quidditch. The sport could admittedly be exciting, but she didn't play, and she'd rather be doing something herself than sit around for bloody ages just watching other people do things.

"Who are all those letters from, though?" Hermione asked, drowning out Seamus's explanation of the International Quidditch League's criteria for 'national team' recognition. (Though it was sort of hilarious that they were the only international organisation to recognise the Gaelic nationalists' claims to independence.)

The first five, which she'd actually opened at the table, had all been delivered by a single owl, forwarded from the postbox she kept in Hogsmeade specifically so she wouldn't receive a ridiculous number of owls every morning (which didn't seem to be working very well today). Then there had been a second post-forwarding owl, from a different (anonymous) box in London, which she used strictly to collect mail from Anomos — she suspected he'd found a copy of the Cavendish for her, though she preferred to wait to read that one in private, even if he did only ever allude to anything in the vaguest of terms. Then the *Prophet* had arrived — their morning edition never made it to Hogsmeade in time to be included in her mail packet. It was the third Monday of the month as well, but she didn't mind waiting a day to get the Quibbler, so she'd get that tomorrow.
The fourth owl was one of the little ones that were sometimes used to carry notes around the school. "Well, this one's from Snape," she said, cracking the plain, Slytherin-green seal.

"Something to do with your...arrangement?" Maïa gave her the same disapproving glare she always gave whenever the subject of Snape's marking came up.

My office, morning break, regarding Surrey. —S

She snorted, passing the thing to the other girl. "If I had to guess, he wants to know what I know about the aurors questioning him yesterday. Dora mentioned it." Along with the fact that Bellatrix was apparently still unconscious — processing the memories they'd dropped on her two weeks ago, according to Eris.

"Why were the aurors questioning him?"

"All she said was that she'd been up to the school to talk to him, sorry to have missed me." Though if the discussion was regarding Surrey, they had probably been questioning him about a dark witch wearing Lily's face as a disguise who had mentioned dear Severus to Petunia Dursley. Oops?

"Oh. And the others?"

"Mmm... Meda thinks I may need to make an appearance at Sirius's trial, she's hoping I won't, but giving me a heads up I may need to pop back over here during hols. My goblin wants to meet next weekend about some new investment opportunities — Zee got me thinking about branching out into the muggle world, and I started to look into muggle home security after your mum mentioned something about their equivalent to wards. Seems like it could be—"

Maïa's eyes narrowed, her voice sharp. "You've been writing to my mum?"

Obviously? Emma had almost as many questions about Magical Britain as Sam had about magic itself. Though his theory questions did seem to be slowing down, now, in favor of discussions of more practical matters of enchanting. (Apparently the witch Zee had partnered him with wasn't very good at explaining even her own discipline.) Which reminded her, she should finish compiling all of the things she'd told him into a coherent, comprehensive treatise. She'd saved copies of her letters, of course, it was just a matter of organizing their content and making a clean copy.

"Was I not supposed to? She says to make sure you're not working too hard, by the way. Apparently she has every confidence in your ability to pass with 'flying colors', whatever that means."

"No, you weren't— Ugh, never mind. I knew this was going to happen," she added, muttering under her breath.

"Yeah, well, anyway, she sent me a bunch of questions about our legal system, since I mentioned Sirius's trial was actually starting. And Zee wrote me about vacation plans." Specifically, about the fact that she had gotten muggle papers for Harry, and generally taken care of all the legalities in the event that he actually agreed to join them — which Lyra had assured her that he would. She still had a week and a half to convince him, she'd go pick up that book during third shift. She'd also spent three inches complaining about Lyra asking to be added to the OWL rosters only two weeks before the exams, but she'd eventually admitted that she had indeed arranged it.

"Where are you going? You haven't said."

Because this was the longest non-academic conversation they'd had in weeks, no thanks to Maïa. "California. Possibly also New York for a week or—"
A shriek interrupted her — Trelawney, approaching the high table, looking absolutely horrified, pointing at Professor Snape. "Yellow! But— It's impossible! You would never! I—"

Snape glared at her rather weakly (he clearly wasn't awake enough to glare properly, yet), then pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh, do sit down, Sybil, and refrain from screeching at me until I've finished my coffee."

Trelawney, however, did not sit down or shut up, instead backing away slowly, clearly muttering to herself. She tripped over her hem and stumbled, making her look even more drunk than she probably was, before turning to face the exit she was headed for, throwing the occasional terrified, disbeliefing look back at Severus.

Well, that was coming along very nicely.

"What the hell was that about?" Hermione hissed.

Lyra smirked. "Well, you see," she said, casting a neat little anti-eavesdropping charm Blaise had taught her — apparently Snape had invented it. "Our favorite Seer has taken, recently, to predicting events that are incredibly unlikely, rather than those which, you may recall from the beginning of the year, were relatively likely to occur without any intervention whatsoever. Last night, she decided that Snape would wear yellow robes to breakfast this morning. A simple glamour on his robes as he came in, keyed to her specifically, and, well..." She sniggered — the look on Trelawney's face, honestly.

Maïa looked amused as well, though perhaps rather in spite of herself. "How long are you going to keep this up?" she asked, obviously trying to sound disapproving, but not quite managing it.

Well, she did have an endgame in mind, one large, final prank, assuming she could get Harry to play along — which she was certain she could, she still had a week and a half. (She would have to stop after that, though, because she couldn't very well fuck with Trelawney from halfway around the world.) And then when classes started again, she already knew exactly how she was going to reveal that all of Trelawney's "correct" predictions had, in fact, been falsified. She couldn't tell Maïa any of that, though — it would ruin the surprise.

She shrugged. "Until it's not funny anymore? Maybe I'll let it go at the end of the year, since I'm not taking Divs anymore."

She'd kind of just...stopped going to class weeks ago, and no one had seemed to mind. Well, Maïa, since they'd been partners, but since the Penultimate Weasley was also gone she could partner with Harry.

She did manage to look genuinely disapproving at the mention of Lyra's unceremonious dropping of the class. "You should still take the exam, just in case you change your mind. It shouldn't be too hard—"

"Well, of course not, it's Trelawney. But as long as she's teaching Divs, there's no point taking it, you know that as well as I do."

Maïa sighed. "Yes, but— Would it really be such a waste of time to go look at the bloody crystal ball, or whatever, and make something up?"

Well, she probably could find a way to use the opportunity to make Trelawney doubt herself and her sanity just a little bit more, maybe even drop a few hints that would make it terribly obvious in retrospect that Lyra had been fucking with her the entire year. It wasn't as though she'd really had
much opportunity to speak to her alone at any point, and she did enjoy making sure her victims knew who was to blame for their suffering, especially if they couldn't prove it. Their rage and frustration was always so entertaining.

She sighed back. "I suppose not. I'm still dropping the class, though, it's bloody stupid."

There was absolutely nothing Maïa could say in argument against that point.
People are Trying to Revise

Chapter Notes

You may have noticed that this appeared to be a double update — it's not. The last chapter posted [What the Term Black Mage Means] (June 23) really should have been split into two from the beginning. Back when we posted it, I stubbornly thought we could still meet the projected chapter count, but since we very obviously won't be making it, I saw no reason not to split it up now. So [Lyra Black is Not a Nice Person] is just the last four scenes of the chapter posted on June 23. The only new content this week is this chapter, [People are Trying to Revise].

—Leigha

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Exam weeks at Hogwarts were always a little weird. For the 'little exams' — first through fourth, and sixth years — the usual lesson schedule was abandoned in order to allow each professor two hours to give written tests to each year, and one hour for practicals for each House. Sometimes the practical times for upper years conflicted — the addition of electives made everything more complicated — but these were generally easily resolved by allowing students to take their practical exam with a different House, much as Lyra had been attending Muggle Studies with the Slytherins and Ravenclaws all year.

OWL and NEWT exams were spread over two weeks, administered by outside examiners — the Wizarding Examination Authority — with three-hour written portions, and individual practicals that generally lasted ten to fifteen minutes (or a second three-hour practical period for Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, and Potions). The first week tended to be fairly quiet, as it occurred consecutively with the little exams. The underclassmen (and sixth-years) had the second week free while the professors marked them. The Runes exam was held on the Thursday of the first week, and Arithmancy was on Monday of the second week.

Lyra was rather looking forward to those, though she couldn't really bring herself to care about any of the third-year exams. It wasn't as though the professors would actually refuse to advance her, even if she skived off on them entirely. She'd barely been paying enough attention to the whole revising process to know the times of them, but... "That can't possibly be right," she said, peering over Maia's shoulder at the schedule she'd written in her diary. "They scheduled elective exams at the same time as core classes?"

Monday (23 May)

9:00 - Arithmancy ("Practical")

9:00 - Transfiguration (Written)

1:00 - Charms (Practical)

1:00 - Ancient Runes (Written)

"What? Oh, but — you know..." she said, looking around furtively — not that anyone was paying any attention to their corner of the library whatsoever.
With the first exam less than twelve hours away, Maïa's revising obsession seemed to have become contagious. *Harry* was reading *history* notes, up in Gryffindor. Begged them off Blaise, because Maïa wouldn't let hers out of her sight, and no one else in Gryffindor (herself included) had bothered to take any, preferring to use History as a study hall or nap time. The Slytherin-Hufflepuff class, on the other hand, took it in turns to attend and take notes, then copied them and passed them around — far more efficient, each one of them only ever had to attend one or two lessons.

"I know you're not the only Gryffindor taking Runes, and I also know you've gotten less sleep than me this week, which is kind of saying a lot. Are you sure you wrote them down right?"

"Yes, of course I did!" Maïa snapped.

Lyra raised an eyebrow at her. "Yeah, well, I'd go to Transfiguration and Charms first, just in case." She knew those were going to be held at the times Maïa had noted.

"Ooh, nobody asked you, Lyra!"

"What, you think Deputy Headmistress Minnie would allow every other student in Arithmancy to fail one or more of their exams because they can't be in two places at once? That's like, all of Slytherin and Ravenclaw, by the way."

Maïa bit her lip. "Okay, fine, I'll do the core classes first — even though I really didn't want to do Runes and Arithmancy in the same iteration — and double check the others on the way through. Happy?"

Not really, this whole everybody revising thing was getting awfully tedious. She shrugged. "I'm going to head down to Hufflepuff, I think they're having a House-wide pillow fight tonight." She also had it on good authority that the sixth-years were holding a puppy-transfiguring contest, though she was far less interested in that.

"They're what?!"

Lyra giggled at the scandalized expression on Maïa's face. "Exam stress is apparently a thing? Besides, there are worse ways to practice motion charms. You're welcome to come as well — you know Hufflepuffs, the more the merrier."

"I will not! Not when— With exams tomorrow— Where did my copy of *Numerology and Grammatica* get off to...?"

"It's propping up your Transfiguration book."

The other girl glared at her amused tone, retrieving the book and flipping frantically to one of the appendices. "I'm not going to— to go off and be all irresponsible, and—"

"You really should," Lyra interjected.

"No! If you're not going to help me revise, go away and stop distracting me!"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, suit yourself." She hauled herself out of her chair, then had an idea. A few quick twitches of her wand and a whispered incantation later, the book in Maïa's hands rippled and transformed itself into a small black dog. It yipped.

So did Maïa. "Lyra! I was reading that!"
"Un-transfiguration is going to be on the exam," she pointed out cheerfully. "Better hurry before Pince realises there's an animal in the library." And with that she skipped away, cackling as quietly as she could. People were trying to study, after all.

"Er. Are you lost, Black?"

Lyra looked up from the translation spell she was diagramming — she was still going to figure out a spell to do marking, even if she (hopefully) would never have to read another abysmal potions essay ever again — to see Cedric Diggory, fifth-year Hufflepuff prefect, hovering over her, looking... concerned? "Uh...no?"

"Well, then, can I help you with something? It's just— The examiners will be here in a minute or two, we're using this room for the Runes OWL."

"Well, yeah, that's why I'm here."

Granted, she had arrived slightly early. Maïa wouldn't stop trying to rehash their last exam — the Defense practical. Lyra had thought it much more fun than exams generally were: Professor Wolf had set up an obstacle course for them, full of all the creatures they'd discussed in lessons. It had ended with a boggart, which was a bit of an anticlimax, though Maïa clearly hadn't thought so. She wouldn't say what she'd actually seen, but she hadn't actually managed to riddikulus it into submission, and accordingly couldn't stop speculating about exactly how much that would affect her final mark. Rather annoying, really.

What day is it? Eris asked, apparently randomly.

Thursday, the twenty-sixth of May, nineteen ninety-four. Why?

Other Bella wanted to know.

"Er..."

"Yes, Diggory?"

"Aren't you a third-year?"

He knew very well that she was — she'd been spending nearly as much time in Hufflepuff as anywhere else these past couple of weeks. "Your point?"

Before the boy could come up with one, the examiner — a tiny, frail-looking old wizard — arrived. "Sit down, everyone, sit down!" he said, doddering up to the front of the room and setting... Was that a sneak-o-scope? (Who even used those?) — on the desk beside a stack of what had to be the exams, and a cup full of charmed quills. "This is the Theory of Runic Magic exam. I am Professor Tofty, I will be your proctor today. Please come to the front of the room as I call your name to receive your examination booklet and quill. You may leave your bags here, and retrieve them after you finish."

So Bella's awake, then? Finally, I thought she was going to sleep forever. Do you know yet why they didn't just leave her in her cell?

As of a few minutes ago, yes. And no. She thinks she's being held by the Department of Mysteries, but no one's questioned her yet.

That actually explained rather a lot. See, Dora and the Prophet had reported that she was in
hospital, but there was no hospital on Azkaban — it was generally considered kinder to let lifetime prisoners die at the earliest opportunity, and those under shorter sentences were removed to less secure hospitals on the mainland. Lyra had been kind of surprised they'd moved Other Bella, even if she had been essentially comatose for the better part of a month, now. She was glad they had, of course — it would suck to have done all that work just to have Bella die in her sleep, she'd've had to try get a healer out there herself if they hadn't — but it was still kind of weird. Unless she was still alive because the Unspeakables wanted to study her. That made sense.

But she's sane? Memories intact? All processed and integrated and whatnot?

More or less. There was an odd, dissatisfied, annoyed sort of quality underlying that response, Lyra wasn't sure quite how to parse it. Oh, she's fine, it worked, the compulsions are gone. But she hasn't quite responded as we anticipated.

Oh?

She doesn't think Riddle did anything wrong.

What? How does she figure that one? Lyra wondered, trying not to wince. A fifth-year Slytherin had set the sneak-o-scope to spinning and whistling, approaching the table to pick up his exam. Well, that was one way to catch potential cheaters, she supposed.

Eris huffed, rather like Maïa when she was annoyed. Apparently she sees little difference between our restoring her autonomy when she almost certainly wouldn't have wanted us to, and Riddle adjusting her personality to suit himself. And if we weren't wrong to do so, he must not have been either.

Well...that was just... Lyra had no immediate rebuttal to that point, actually. It explained why Eris was apparently annoyed, anyway. So, wait. She doesn't want us to kill Riddle, then? That could be awkward, Lyra had already started to recruit allies for the project.

We haven't gotten that far — the Unspeakable interrupted, used some potion or something to knock her out again.

"Black!"

Speaking of interruptions, I can't talk either, I have an exam to take.

As though you can't talk and write at the same time.

Despite her having more to hide, she would bet, than anyone else in the room, the deception detector stayed quiet at her approach — either because she didn't feel guilty or nervous about being caught, or because it had been specifically calibrated to detect exam-related suspiciousness, which would be really neat... Maybe he'd let her see it, after she turned in her exam.

Of course she could talk and write at the same time, but Eris being all annoyed at Other Bella at the back of her head was rather distracting.

She didn't actually 'say' it, but the goddess seemed to get the message anyway, since she didn't respond again.

Tofty gave her a rather confused look. "Miss Black! Is Lyra Black here?" he called again.

"Hi? Yes, I'm here, obviously." She was trying not to be too sarcastic, but annoyance was contagious.
The wizard adjusted his glasses, looking down his nose at her — impressive, since he wasn't much taller than she was, and he was seated. "I may be getting on in years, my dear, but aren't you a bit young to be taking this exam?"

She folded her arms, doing her best to replicate his disapproving stare. "I am on your list, aren't I?"

He hesitated, still — long enough that Prefect Diggory volunteered, "She really is Lyra Black, sir."

"Irregular," the old man muttered. "Most irregular."

"What can I say, I'm a very irregular person."

The proctor's eyes narrowed, just slightly. He handed over her specially-charmed, anti-cheating quill and the exam booklet, but held onto the latter slightly longer than necessary, keeping her there just long enough to say, "I'll be watching you, Miss Black. Very closely."

As though she could possibly need to cheat. She was far more concerned that the examiners would consider too-advanced answers to be incorrect than that she wouldn't actually know said answers. "That is your job, isn't it," she observed, using Walburga's driest no of course I'm not being sarcastic tone and tugging her exam from his fingers.

As soon as she turned to go, he added, "Your bag, Miss Black."

"I didn't bring one." Shadow-pockets were far more convenient. Honestly, if that was the quality of his observational skills, she wasn't sure it mattered how closely he watched anyone. She'd also worn very simple, fitted summer robes (Zee had told her that was highly recommended — no sleeves or pockets to hide notes) and taken a seat in the front row — it hadn't escaped her that when (not if) she took O's in what were widely considered the most difficult OWLs (as a third-year, without even taking the damn classes), people would probably say she'd cheated. Or rather, it hadn't escaped Zee, but Zee had informed her of the probability, so whatever. Same difference.

She retreated to her seat to await the signal to begin, Tofty sending her the occasional suspicious glare between handing out exams and quills to other test-takers.

Which was just weird, no idea what his problem was. She passed the remaining minutes of exam distribution doodling idly on the cover of the test — ideas that might let the proctor's sneak-o-scope distinguish academic untrustworthiness from general untrustworthiness — and pointedly (trying and failing at) not thinking about Other Bella's opinion of Not-Professor Riddle. She had, in passing, considered that Other Bella might think of him the same way she thought of Cygnus — no longer a threat, and thus completely irrelevant to her life. She certainly hadn't thought Other Bella would think his actions unworthy of a painful execution, though, if only on principle, for Eris, or for what he'd used her to do to the House.

The ancient wizard eventually interrupted her musing, casting a timer charm to hover before them. "There will be no discussion from this point on. If you have a question, please light your wand and I will come to you. You may not leave the room for any reason. If you have an emergency of any kind, you must surrender your exam before leaving, and you may not return. When you have finished, if indeed you finish before the time, light your wand and I will collect your exam, after which point you may be excused. Time will be noted aloud at the half-way mark, the half-hour mark, and the five-minute mark. You have three hours, you may begin now." He sounded, Lyra thought, incredibly bored. She wondered exactly how many times he'd given that speech.

She, on the other hand, was actually rather curious about what this exam actually covered. She opened the booklet and began to skim the questions:
Discuss the arithmantic significance of rune-placement in limiting area-effect enchantments;

Fairly elementary, okay, not a problem...

When inscribing an enchantment on an object comprised of multiple materials, which tools and scripts should be used to most effectively integrate the functions of each element and why? Include examples. (Choose two or more of the following: stone, cold metals, wood, fabric woven from plant fibres, ceramic, hot metals, glass)

Could be interesting — since leather, parchment, and other animal products weren't listed, the obvious choice of example was a communication mirror or some kind of garment, but she was sure she could think of something better, she'd come back to it.

Explain Xatī's Paradox with reference to the Five Principal Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration and the Fundamental Laws of Runic Theory.

Well that was obscure. She found herself grinning as she set quill to parchment. Yeah, there were definitely worse things to spend a few hours thinking about.

Divination was, Harry thought, the stupidest subject taught at Hogwarts, and that was including Astronomy. And History. He hadn't learned a damn thing all year, except that making up horrible predictions about his own death got him extra points on assignments, and he that really hated patchouli.

Well, he supposed he'd also learned the Repairing Charm. Lyra had accidentally-on-purpose shattered their crystal ball in the last lesson she had attended, so the two of them and Hermione wouldn't have to spend the whole hour staring at foggy nothingness. Trelawney had repaired it, and she'd knocked it off the table again. ("Sorry, professor, I can't think what's come over me, I'm just so clumsy today...") The third time, even Trelawney couldn't give her the benefit of the doubt. She had ordered her out of the classroom, which Lyra claimed meant she wasn't obliged to attend any more divination lessons ever. But that had been enough demonstrations that Harry had been able to fix his glasses when Neville stepped on them later that night, so.

That didn't change the fact that the only real thing he'd learned in this stupid class had nothing to do with divination. Honestly, he wasn't sure why he'd even bothered to show up for the exam, he was starting to think Lyra had the right idea, dropping the stupid thing. Maybe Professor Burbage would let him switch to Muggle Studies next year. Hermione kept complaining about everything they talked about being decades out of date, but even if it was all rubbish, at least he wouldn't have to spend hours drinking revolting tea and trying to keep a straight face while doing what amounted to looking for shapes in the clouds. Seamus had spent a whole week learning a spell to make his tea leaves settle into the shape of a dick. Trelawney thought it looked like a rabbit. Which signified...

Bugger. Neville already had his book out. "Hey, Neville, what's a rabbit mean, again?"

"Ah..." He flipped a few pages. "Luck, abundance, and, um...fertility," he said, going slightly pink.

Wait — did that mean she'd actually thought it had looked like a dick? And she'd known they were having her on, and went along with it? Because Harry really hadn't thought it looked like a rabbit...

Apparently Seamus's thoughts were headed in the same direction. "You don't think we're going to have to drink more of that rubbish tea, do you?"

"Oh, God, I hope not," Hermione said, as she finally arrived — with Lyra in tow?
"Hey. I thought you'd dropped this class," Harry said.

"Hermione's going to predict that a lost sheep will return to the fold, thought I'd make it come true, just to mess with the old bat. Did I not teach you the tea glamour?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sure I'd remember if you had."

"You know a glamour for tea?"

"Of course I do, tea is the blandest drink in existence. Well, after water. And milk. And pumpkin juice, I guess. Okay, so it's not the worst, but it's still pretty awful. Right up there with the company for reasons to avoid tea parties."

Neville cracked a smile, just a little one, before frowning back at his book. "Have any of you ever seen anything in a crystal ball?"

"No," Harry admitted.

"I'm pretty sure no one has," Hermione agreed.

"No, I have." Harry was willing to bet this was a lie, because a smirk was already spreading across Lyra's face.

Seamus bit first. "What've you seen, then?"

"Oh, you know, demiguises, the odd wrackspurt. Untransformed boggarts. I saw a thestral once, but I think that was a fluke."

"Can't you actually see thestral?" Hermione pointed out.

"Yes, that's why I think it was a fluke."

Harry laughed along with Neville and Seamus before realising something. "Wait — are you saying untransformed boggarts are invisible?"

"Er, yeah. Also, squodgy. Blaise hit me in the face with one once."

Their laughter grew louder, prompting Parvati to snap at them from the end of the corridor closest to Trelawney's trap door. "Do you mind? Some of us are trying to revise, here!"

"Not at all," Lyra called back, over Hermione muttering, "Now I just know you're making things up."

"What, the wrackspurts didn't give it away?"

She wasn't kidding about the boggart, though. Harry remembered that — or rather, he'd seen Blaise's memory of it. Coco (that was the name of Blaise's pet boggart, the one he'd killed a kitten to summon) had just sort of bounced off her face, it had been hilarious. Somewhat unnerving, since it had just completely ignored her — Harry couldn't help but remember he'd never gotten a straight answer when he'd asked if she was human or not — but the weird part was, it hadn't been invisible. Squodgy, yes, it had felt rather like he imagined a jellyfish might. But he'd definitely been able to tell where it was after they'd thrown it, which he was fairly certain meant Blaise had to have been able to see it.

He'd have to ask him about that next time they were practicing. Which might be, he suddenly realised, the last time they had a chance before leaving school. Which was... Well, they'd still see
Okay, Blaise was confusing. Harry had spent quite a lot of time thinking about him lately, since he'd managed to get the Patronus Charm down. And he'd come to the conclusion that he was pretty sure he fancied him. He wasn't sure how you were supposed to know, he'd never really fancied anyone before, other than that...thing he'd had for Lyra, and this was different.

He hadn't really liked Lyra, he thought. He'd liked, well, he still did like, the way she never treated him like he was anything special, and the way she'd just waltzed into their lives, mouthing off to Snape and absolutely obliterating Draco in that fight, and facing down a fucking hippogriff like it didn't even matter it could rip her apart in about two seconds, if it wanted to. She'd made a hell of a first impression, basically. He'd liked the idea of who he'd thought she was, before he'd really gotten to know her.

And she was pretty, of course, that didn't hurt.

But there were also a lot of things that, as he'd gotten to know her better, had been, well...really off-putting, even before he'd realised how much she treated him like a helpless child. (No matter how she tried to dress it up — Acting Head of House Black my arse — she still think of him as someone who needed taking care of.) Even before he'd seen more of her in Blaise's memories, things like her being immune to the boggart and fighting Theo like she actually wanted to hurt him, and almost getting killed by an acromantula before Sylvia stabbed it with a fucking spear. (Though her reaction was the really disturbing part: "Morrigan, that was great — come on, Sylvie, let's go find another one!")

That fight they'd had, about clothes, for one. And Yule. Yule had been just creepy as hell, her eyes going all black like that, and just sitting around, hanging out with a fucking god like he was just some random bloke and it was any other Tuesday. And it hadn't taken long at all for him to realise that she went out of her way to annoy people, not trying to be funny like the Weasleys, but just to make them mad at her. For no reason Harry could see, she just...liked causing trouble. And he still didn't know who she really was or where she had come from. He was sure Blaise knew, but Blaise was still much better at occlumency than Harry was at legilimency, and refused to tell him anything about Lyra that he didn't already know.

Which was, Harry had grudgingly admitted, rather honourable of him. Even if it was bloody annoying. Blaise was a surprisingly nice person, under all the layers of cool and sarcasm and occlumency (and social training and self-preserving not-giving-a-shit). Not really nice like, say, Justin, but nicer than he pretended to be. He insisted he wasn't, really — even believed it, Harry thought. But Harry had been inside his head, he knew Blaise sometimes did nice things for people. Sometimes without even being asked. Like showing Luna how to use occlumency to block out everyone else's feelings, and offering to help Hermione with...whatever was going on with her and Lyra. (He still didn't want to know.)

He hadn't made a secret of the fact that he was equally willing to do really mean things — Harry had found a memory where he was helping Lyra figure out how to best torture Lavender, for example, and that game with the boggart that he and Theo played was just thoroughly fucked up. And his sense of humour was even more twisted and morbid than Harry's, which was saying kind of a lot. ("You can see Thestrals? Who've you seen die?" "Husbands three, five, and six. Obviously." "Are you kidding? I can't tell if you're kidding." "Of course I'm kidding, Maïa — I was far too young to help when number three died.")

But he didn't enjoy being mean to people, like Dudley did. He never hurt people just because he could, or even because they were prats to him — Malfoy, for example, was, well, not terrible at
occlumency, but not even as good as Harry was already. Blaise knew loads of things about him that could ruin his day if they got out, maybe even destroy what little popularity he had in Slytherin. (It had been a revelation of sorts, finding out that Malfoy didn't really have any friends or allies other than Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy. For some reason he'd spent more than two years thinking that Malfoy was representative of his House, and not just an enormous twat.)

But Blaise never told anyone that when Malfoy was five he wanted to be a dragon when he grew up, or that he had once wanked to an old photo of his own mum. (Of course, he hadn't known it was his mum at the time, but he'd still done it, and it was still hilarious.) He'd even told Harry not to tell anyone, that they weren't doing this so Harry could steal Blaise's blackmail material. And it definitely wasn't because he gave a shite about Malfoy — Blaise was the only Slytherin in their year who wasn't nobility, or at least closely related to nobility (which apparently, for some reason, mattered to Slytherins), and Malfoy brought that fact up at every opportunity. And it wasn't because he just didn't want Malfoy being all angry and scared or whatever around him. He might have told Hermione and Luna that was why he was helping them, but it wasn't, he didn't really mind. At least, not nearly as much as he pretended he did. Harry hadn't quite got the hang of interpreting emotions in memories, yet, but he was pretty sure of that, at least.

But, well... Harry got the impression that Blaise kind of thought using legilimency against people, at least for his own benefit, was cheating. He had once punched Malfoy in the nose, after a quidditch match back in first year, and he hated physical violence. But Malfoy was making fun of Neville and apparently somehow putting Theo in danger, because politics, and Blaise would rather get in a fistfight than admit he knew things about Malfoy that he really shouldn't. He might call all the secrets he knew 'blackmail material' but he'd never actually blackmailed anyone. At least, not that Harry had seen, and Blaise hadn't exactly been shy about sharing memories of the more questionable things he'd done, like helping Lyra prank Lavender, or killing that kitten (which still bothered him, just a little).

But the point was, even if Blaise did do really terrible things sometimes, he didn't do them just because he could. More like, because his friends asked him to, and he didn't mind. Harry got the feeling there wasn't a lot Blaise wouldn't do for one of the people he actually liked. Not because he owed it to them, or because they were his responsibility, just because he wanted them to be happy. It was kind of a short list — just his mum, Theo and Daphne, Lyra, and Harry himself — but he genuinely seemed to care about them.

Harry didn't know if he'd ever had anyone really care about him before. Hermione, maybe, but... no matter how much she acted like she cared about him, he didn't really know, not in the same way. She obviously liked him, they were friends, but...

There were these glib little exchanges the Slytherins liked to throw around. (Harry felt a bit guilty, all the time he'd been spending with Blaise and Daphne and Tracey this term, like a traitor to Gryffindor, kind of, but not enough to not hang out with them.) The answer to "What are you up to?" was always "Plotting to take over the world," and if one of them claimed to hate another because they were being annoying or whatever, the automatic response was "If lies make you happy." And occasionally, if they were sharing good news or had just done each other a favor without being asked or something, they'd throw out "How much do you love me?"

And the answer to that was a completely deadpan, "Enough to kill for you, but not enough to die for you." (More often just the first part.) Followed by an overtly suspicious "Why?" Because Slytherins were over-dramatic arseholes, every one of them. But he'd heard Blaise say it to Daphne, once, and he was uncomfortably certain Blaise had actually meant it. Not in the same uncomfortable way he thought that if he told Lyra she could kill the Dursleys she might actually do it, but in a far more serious, meaningful way. He would do whatever she asked him to do —
whatever _anyone_ he cared about needed him to do — simply out of his fondness for them, and, well... _loyalty_.

And Harry _knew_ that was pretty much the same way Blaise felt about him. He'd _been in his head_. They hadn't known each other nearly as long, of course, the feeling wasn't nearly as strong, but he _knew_ Blaise cared about him. And he was loyal and had a certain degree of integrity and if he wasn't actually _kind_, he wasn't actually _cruel_, either.

Well, most of the time. Harry was absolutely positive that if _he_ knew how Blaise felt about him, Blaise _definitely_ knew how Harry felt. (Including the fact that he _felt_ like a complete _girl_, spending so much time thinking about the very idea of feelings and the bloke he fancied. He blamed the occlumency, making him think about this shite.) He hadn't said anything, the closest he'd gotten to acknowledging Harry's fancy was the rather unlikely number of memories of snogging random people in corners he'd dropped Harry into over the past two months.

Which just— Harry had no idea what to think of that. Was he trying to say he wasn't interested? That he already had plenty of other people to snog? Or was he trying to make Harry jealous? Because if so, it was definitely working. He'd never wanted to hit a girl before, but that Chelsea Miller... Was he intentionally trying to drive Harry _insane_? Because he'd left every legilimency practice session they'd had lately _incredibly_ confused, and his roommates had definitely started to notice the amount of time he'd been spending in the shower and in his bed with the curtains drawn. Dean was convinced he fancied Tracey but wouldn't admit it because she was a Slytherin. (Tracey had somehow found out about this, thought it was hilarious. She and Daphne were doing... whatever they were doing, but she'd still started going out of her way to flirt with him in Potions, just to confuse Dean.)

And he had no idea what to do about it. (The Blaise thing, not the Tracey thing, he didn't really care about _that_, even if he did completely fail to think of smart come-backs more often than not.) And he had to figure it out _soon_, because they'd be going home in a week, and who _knew_ how long it would be before Harry saw him again? He'd write, of course — unlike Ron (who _still_ hadn't answered any of Harry's letters), Blaise actually kept up with his post. But he'd probably spent more time with Blaise than anyone else since Christmas, and he just—

He _really_ wished he could go to California with him, and _not_ just because he _didn't_ want to go home.

"Harry Potter!" Trelawney called down the ladder. She sounded more annoyed than ethereal, and nearly everyone else had gone from the corridor. It was just Hermione and Lyra left, arguing about... the Runes exam? Weird, Lyra wasn't even taking Runes. Anyway, Trelawney had probably already called him at least once, he'd just been completely wrapped up in his own thoughts. That happened kind of a lot, now. He blamed the occlumency.

"Er— _Coming_," he shouted back, scrambling to his feet and shouldering his bag.

The Divs classroom was just as miserable as ever, curtains closed, fires lit — as though Trelawney hadn't noticed it was actually starting to get nice out again — and he hadn't thought it possible to get _more_ incense in the air than usual, but it was so strong he choked on it as he hauled himself through the trap door.

He coughed and stumbled his way through the maze of chairs and tables, eyes watering, to the table where Trelawney was waiting with a large crystal ball. _Great_, more cloud-gazing.

"Good day, my dear," she said, her voice slightly more brisk than usual — clearly just as keen to get this over with as Harry was. "If you would, kindly gaze into the Orb... Take your time
now...then tell me what you See."

Fog. Swirling, white fog. Hermione had, back when they'd first started crystal gazing, predicted that the weather would be foggy every day for the next week. Which hadn't been wrong — it was spring, and they were on the Lake — but somehow he didn't think Trelawney would take that for an answer. Not for the exam.

But really, it's not like there was anything else. Just. Fog.

"Well," she prompted him after a moment. "What do you See?"

The heat was overpowering and his throat was burning. I see myself failing this exam— No, that wouldn't do. "Er...I see...a dark shape...um..."

"What does it resemble? Think, now..."

Harry cast his mind around. All he could think of was Lyra and her stupid invisible animals joke, earlier. "It's, um — a thestral," he blurted out. Hopefully she wouldn't ask him what it looked like, because he had no idea — they were bloody invisible unless you'd seen someone die, and apparently giant bloody snakes and horcruxes didn't count.

Trelawney sucked in a deep breath through her teeth, as though shocked. "Indeed! A terrible omen, the thestral — Death's own steed!" She scribbled something on a piece of parchment that was presumably his evaluation form. "What is it doing?"

"Er... It's just...standing there."

"Standing, not flying?"

"Yes," he said firmly. No point in contradicting himself.

"I see, I see... Is there anything else? Perhaps something that might represent a person?"

Something that represented a person, something that represents a person... "A cat," he said. His patronus was the first thing that had come to mind. Not surprising, he guessed, he spent an awful lot of time thinking about Blaise, lately.

"Ooh," Trelawney whispered intensely. "A warning, perhaps — look closer, my boy... This cat — what is it doing?"

"Shit. Making something up was a terrible idea, now he had to keep making things up. Fuck, what do cats even do? Best keep it simple. "It's sitting on the thestral."

"Interesting... Very interesting... And what do you think it means?" she asked, scribbling something down.

Right. He knew this. Horses meant...something about freedom and drive, he was pretty sure. Motivation. And riding them meant you had motivation and direction. But thestrals were a death omen, obviously. So, what, Blaise was going to kill people to get where he wanted to be in life? Probably not a good interpretation to make, even if it didn't seem as far-fetched as it probably should.

Maybe focus on the cat angle? He knew more about cats, he'd looked up the symbolism behind them when he'd finally gotten the patronus down, trying to figure out what they might stand for other than Blaise. And there were loads of things they could mean. Secrets and illusions,
objectivity, spirituality, instinct... But he'd already said it might be a person, hadn't he? Damn it.

Before he managed to come up with anything that might possibly let him pass this ridiculous excuse for an exam, Trelawney came over all...strange. Her face went blank and her eyes started to roll. For about half a second he thought she was having a seizure. But then she spoke, her voice harsh and loud and entirely unlike her usual overdone ethereal whispering.

"IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

"S-Sorry?"

"THE DARK LADY — THE BLACK LADY; BROKEN QUEEN AND WARRIOR PRINCESS. ENEMY OF ORDER, IN THIS WORLD BUT NOT OF IT, SHE HIDES WITHOUT HIDING AND STEALS FROM THE THIEF. WILLING PRISONER BOUND BY LIES, SHE BREAKS HER CHAINS, BETRAYS HER MASTER. TONIGHT IT BEGINS — THE BROKEN QUEEN, BROKEN AGAIN, FREE FROM HER MIND'S PRISON, RETURNED TO HERSELF, RETURNS TO LIBERTY. FREE FROM HER MASTER'S CHAINS SHE WILL RISE AGAIN, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER BEFORE. TONIGHT...THE DARK LADY...RETURNS TO FREEDOM..."

Trelawney's head fell forward onto her chest and she made a sort of startled snoring sound before her head jerked up again.

"I'm so sorry, dear boy," she said, in her usual dreamy voice. "The heat of the day, you know... Drifted off for a moment..." Harry just sat there, trying to figure out what had just happened. "Is something wrong, my dear?"

"You— You just told me that— that a Dark Lady was going to rise again — that she's going to break free of... whatever's been holding her back, and— and she's coming back."

The batty witch looked thoroughly baffled, as well as slightly worried. "I can't imagine... I certainly wouldn't predict anything like that — not when... No, my dear, I think you must have drifted off as well..."

"But—"

"Now, let's see," she said, entirely ignoring his attempt to explain as she inspected the notes she'd taken on his so-called exam. "Yes, I think that will do. You may go. Enjoy your evening, dear boy." And with that, she stood, ushering him toward the trap door. It closed behind him with a heavy thud, apparently signalling the end of the examination period.

Hermione and Lyra had vanished — probably off to the Library, they were always at the Library — leaving him alone to ponder exactly what he was supposed to do with that. He had no idea who Trelawney had been talking about, but he was pretty sure it had been a real prophecy, the kind that was guaranteed to come true, if only because she'd seemed awfully certain she hadn't said anything. Divination might have been a completely useless class, but he did remember reading something about that in their book, the difference between scrying and Seeing.

And if there was a Dark Lady coming into power somewhere, someone who might actually be able to make heads or tails of the thing should probably know. Even if they couldn't stop her, they could prepare to deal with her, right?

Right.

Surely Dumbledore would know what to do.
Severus was always slightly astonished, given that Albus Dumbledore was unquestionably one of the most intelligent men he had ever met, by the proportion of time his employer spent acting like a fucking moron.

Had he learned nothing about prophecies from the events of 1981? How could it possibly seem like a good idea to send Severus to check on Bellatrix and the Unspeakables? And of course he had refused to tell Severus the exact wording of the prophecy, only deigning to admit that a prophecy had been made when Severus refused to go unless he revealed the source of the 'anonymous tip' informing him that Bellatrix intended to make a bid for freedom only hours after regaining consciousness.

Not that it wasn't inevitable that she would escape, assuming she had managed to regain her memories along with her consciousness. Severus simply suspected that she would encounter some degree of difficulty freeing herself while under constant observation, restrained in a bed under the effects of paralytics and sedatives, in the middle of a magical dead zone, while attempting to overcome any side-effects of a three-week coma, not to mention the apparent mind magic attack which had landed her there in the first place. He might expect to hear that she had escaped only days after regaining her senses, but hours would be a bit absurd, even for her.

He had delayed as long as he could, in the hopes that he would not inadvertently fulfill whatever fate the prophecy dictated — let it fall on someone else's head, this time — but he would not be terribly surprised to discover in a week or two that his very attempt to improve the security of the facility (or at the very least, ensure that the Unspeakables were fully aware of the challenges posed by the prospect of keeping a fucking black mage in custody), he had inadvertently provided her with her means of escape.

That was simply how prophecy worked.

"Jones," he said, nodding shortly to the researcher from the Mind Division guarding the room where Bellatrix was presumably being kept. He had never seen his face before, always hidden behind that stupid cowl — the enchantment nonfunctional here, of course — but the texture of his mind was familiar enough.

"Snape? What are you doing here?"

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen..." The junior member of the Department who had escorted Snape through the labyrinthine corridors of the magic-dark research facility made his escape with a perfunctory bow.

"The Chief Warlock has expressed concerns about the security measures you've taken with this particular prisoner," he explained, handing over the orders Dumbledore had written to permit him access. "Consider this a...surprise inspection."

The researcher snorted. "She only woke up a day and a half ago."

"Indeed. He wanted me here sooner, but I had exams to proctor. Is Carmichael inside?" His guide had — supposedly — been bringing him to the Head of the Mind Division.

Jones nodded. "And Taggart, and Monroe."

Severus frowned slightly. Allison Taggart was one of his most reliable contacts within the Department. They'd met several times at various conferences, and once at a dinner hosted by Horace Slughorn. Despite her improbable degree of credulousness and faith in the
fundamental goodness of humanity, he liked her enough that he'd warned her to stay well away from Bellatrix if she could help it. It shouldn't have been difficult. Yes, Taggart was the Department's foremost expert on memory formation, and Bellatrix had supposedly lost her memories. But so far as Severus knew they had yet to break Bellatrix's occlumency shields, so there was as yet no reason to involve a memory researcher at all. "Monroe from Archives?"

The Unspeakable nodded again. "Rowle wanted a report from one of her own, apparently."

Good to know the internal politics of the Department of Mysteries were as divisive as ever. He had no objection to Monroe's presence, however. It was probably for the best, in fact — Bellatrix was technically in the custody of Rowle's division, even if they had shopped out the job of finding a way to ensure the veracity of her statements to Mind before they began questioning her about the nature of magic. Personally, Severus wished them the joy of it — though he hardly expected them to succeed. After all, she had never managed to break him, and the Blackheart was undoubtedly a far more skilled torturer than anyone currently employed by the Department. Especially when they were restricted to muggle methods.

"Very well. May I?"

"Yes, yes, go on." Jones handed back the scroll and let him pass, locking the door behind him.

The room was, Severus found, growing rather crowded. Carmichael, apparently a short, balding wizard, raised an eyebrow as he entered. "Severus Snape. To what do we owe the dubious pleasure?"

Monroe, a tall witch whose demeanor was even more severe than Minerva's, simply nodded, while Taggart, petite and grandmotherly as ever, gave him a brief smile. "Severus."

"Carmichael. Monroe. Allison. Dumbledore has ordered me to inspect the conditions and security of the prisoner."

The prisoner in question was lying in a muggle-style hospital bed, arms and legs chained to its rails, a heart-rate monitor beeping softly at her side. An intravenous line was dripping a paralytic potion into her, along with what appeared to be Veritaserum and... "Is that lysergic acid?" he asked, peering more closely at the bag.

It was Bellatrix who answered, eyes closed. "Mmm, yes. They didn't believe me when I told them the Veritaserum would largely negate the effects. But then, I suppose I had just told them that the paralytic was overkill, so."

"I see the rumors of your amnesia have been grossly exaggerated."

"So far as I've been able to determine, her referential knowledge didn't suffer from...whatever happened in the attack." Taggart sounded rather frustrated. Bellatrix hadn't been a cooperative patient over the course of the past...thirty-eight hours? Who would have guessed?

Bellatrix sighed. "I told you, it wasn't an attack, there were just some compulsions I had to deal with, which incidentally left me somewhat confused for a bit, there. I got better, obviously."

Severus suppressed a snort of amusement at the utter absurdity of that statement.

"Complete rubbish," Taggart muttered. "The only way 'dealing with compulsions' could have disturbed her memory to the point that she forgot who she was would be if they were part of the foundation of her identity. And, as you well know, recovery from such a degree of mental disturbance is unheard of."
Which certainly didn't mean it was out of the question, this was the Blackheart they were talking about. "Or she could have been lying about forgetting who she was," Severus noted, not bothering to whisper. From the way Taggart's eyes went wide, she hadn't considered that possibility.

"I could have been, yes," Bellatrix agreed. "But I wasn't — what purpose could there possibly be to tricking my niece into believing I'd lost my memory? Really, I'm curious, what do you think the end-game would have been?"

Severus ignored her. There was less point in his talking to her than in her tricking Nymphadora. Anyone who'd ever met her (either version) could tell you she hardly needed a reason to fuck with people's heads.

"LSD happens to be an almost perfect antidote to Veritaserum, in sufficient doses," he informed the Unspeakables. "And of course Veritaserum has equally neutralizing effects on the hallucinogen. Pulaski and Morton published an article on it in Seventy-Nine—"

"On the Integration of Muggle Truth Serums and Non-Physical Interrogation Techniques, I already told them," Bellatrix interjected. Severus continued to ignore her.

"I'm sure you have a copy somewhere in the Archives." It had been published in the Árthra, but Anathema or not, he was quite certain the Department didn't actually destroy every copy of it they managed to find. "The residuals produce a strong soporific effect, I'm surprised she's still remotely lucid. The paralytic, however, was most certainly not overkill."

"Noted," Monroe said, tightening a plastic clip to stop the flow of the muggle drug.

Carmichael frowned heavily. "Any other insights to offer?"

"I suppose it would be pointless to tell you you're wasting your time."

If Bellatrix had managed to maintain her unnaturally flawless occlumency in a bloody coma (which she had, or so Taggart had claimed), there was effectively no way that they could expect to wear her down to the point that her concentration faltered, allowing them to break in. He knew she could choose to let them in, he'd seen her let Riddle legilimize her on multiple occasions. But his working theory — based on his observations of her during the war and her younger self over the past months, as well as Taggart's latest report — was that she had somehow achieved perfect occlumency. Probably with the assistance of her Patron.

Until last week, Severus hadn't been entirely certain that perfect occlumency truly existed, but keeping her mind completely closed while unconscious for an extended period of time certainly suggested that she met the definition: her reflexive mental state, the one to which she would default when she was mentally exhausted by their efforts, was occlumentically guarded. Where everyone else required mental discipline to shield themselves, containing their minds and maintaining separation between themselves and others, she required mental discipline not to do so. (Which was completely unnatural, but what about Bellatrix wasn't?)

And he sincerely doubted that there was anyone in the Department would be willing or able to inflict more pain on her than she and Riddle had considered foreplay.

"Archives is determined not to waste the opportunity to question a self-professed black mage, so yes, it would," Monroe confirmed.

"The Department would be very grateful if you cared to...assist, in the matter of ensuring that we are able to verify the intent behind any statements the prisoner might be compelled to make."
Severus raised an eyebrow at the very...political phrasing of that request. "If you're asking me to help you torture the Blackheart until you manage to break into her mind... Tempting as it is to repay her for some of the fun we had together during the War—" and it really was, "—I'm afraid I must decline."

Taggart sighed. "Are you sure?"

"You're wasting your time."

"Oh, go on, Sev, they're terrible at this. And you know how I hate being subjected to incompetence."

"Give them some credit, Bella, dear. I see no knives or brands or little slivers of bamboo at hand, so I presume they intend to fully explore the psychological options first — perhaps subjecting you to their apparent incompetence is the first step in their plan."

He was certain it wasn't — the only truly sadistic Unspeakable he could think of was Rookwood, and he had been a Death Eater plant. Anyone with any real talent for or interest in torture had been on their side, and Truce or no, they certainly hadn't been welcomed into the Department with open arms at the end of the war.

Bellatrix knew it, too. "Everyone knows variation in technique is an interrogator's most valuable tool. They just don't have the stomach for knives and brands and little slivers of bamboo."

"You clearly have some idea as to potential approaches, Snape. Why so reluctant to assist?" Carmichael asked, suspicion clearly written across his features. Someone had grown too dependent on his enchanted robes to conceal his expression, Severus noted, smirking.

Surely he couldn't think Severus's time as a Death Eater would incline him to spare Bellatrix any pain or suffering — her trainees had hated her even more than his Potions students hated him. On which topic... "Well, for one thing, I have several hundred undoubtedly abysmal Potions exams to mark, and for another, I fully expect Bellatrix to escape and kill everyone involved with this little farce, therefore, I intend to have nothing to do with it. Though I suppose I could delay your inevitable murders by a few hours."

"I know you told me—" Taggart began, but Monroe spoke over her, cutting off what was undoubtedly an expression of doubt at the idea of Bellatrix's murderous intent. "What precisely is that supposed to mean?"

It meant that there had to be a reason Bellatrix had yet to fully focus on them, had yet to look at them. Yes, she had commented idly on the conversation of which she was the subject, but he was quite certain she was hardly paying attention at all. If she were, he would have expected several annoying taunts by now, and quite a lot more giggling mockery of the Unspeakables' inability to torture anyone properly, even her (or perhaps especially her). And the drugs clearly hadn't rendered her incoherent. Which meant she was focusing primarily on something else, something she considered more important than irritating everyone in her general vicinity, which was a relatively short list.

And the atmosphere in here seemed distinctly darker than it should, given the supposed lack of magic in the complex.

Given the observations he'd made of her younger, alternate self over the course of the year (particularly around Walpurgis), he suspected that she was somehow tapping into Magic itself through her connection to her Patron, channelling power into this plane from somewhere else.
Not a lot of power — he could only imagine it must be difficult, especially at this time of year, with the Dark nearing its nadir — but in a cave a candle could seem as bright as the sun. She had obviously developed some skill with freeform magic in the years she’d spent in Azkaban, it certainly wasn’t out of the question that she did already have an escape plan in mind, one that depended on her using magic to pick the locks chaining her to the bed or give her interrogators aneurysms or any number of other tricks requiring very little power to effect.

He gave the archivist his most condescending smirk before pulling his wand and casting a rather minor cutting curse. The magic around them, slight as it was, was transformed to physical force, directed at Bellatrix. Dozens of shallow slices appeared across her arms and face — hardly more than paper-cuts, there wasn’t enough magic in the area to do the spell justice. That it had worked so effectively was somewhat disturbing, given that she could only possibly have been channelling potential into the environment for a day or so, assuming she had begun sometime around the point at which Dumbledore had thought she was going to make her actual escape attempt.

She inhaled sharply as the spell struck, opened her eyes to glare at him. "Bastard! I was going to use that!"

Severus barely heard her over Monroe's "But— You—" and Carmichael's "How did you do that?! We're in a bloody vortex!"

Taggart's eyes went very wide. There was a reason Severus liked her. She might be far too trusting for her own good, but she was also very quick on the uptake. "A vortex is an artifact of variation and interference in magical currents, not a ward that continually absorbs any magic in the area."

"But there isn't any magic here!" Carmichael insisted.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. Obviously there was. "Remind me again — Bellatrix is of interest because...? Oh, yes, that's right, she's a black mage. Regardless of whether you believe the Powers exist or have any autonomy whatsoever, you clearly understand that black and white mages have a different connection to magic than the rest of us. Does the phrase unilateral disarmament mean anything to you?"

The three Unspeakables exchanged a rather uncomfortable look. "So she can still use magic, here?" Carmichael still sounded rather disbelieving.

Had he not just demonstrated that?

"It would seem anyone can use it," Taggart observed. Her boss scowled at her.

"More to the point, she can bring magic here. Somehow. In limited quantities, it would seem, but nevertheless."

"Fascinating," Monroe muttered, her eyes practically glittering with academic avarice. "How—?"

Bellatrix smirked. "Not telling. Family secret."

Severus ignored their little byplay. "But even under severe limitations... Surely you haven't overlooked the fact that she assassinated Norbert McPherson in this very facility back in Seventy-Nine."

Bellatrix abandoned her taunting of the researcher long enough to snap, "That fucking coward stole my time turner!" (Which was true, and the reason the Unspeakables had offered him sanctuary here, though it was hardly the reason she'd killed him.)
"Well if we can't keep her here, what do you suggest we do with her?" Monroe demanded.

There was no question of the archivist taking his advice — or allowing more level-headed individuals to carry it out — not now that Bellatrix had shown her a glimpse of the knowledge she so desired, but... "Kill her, and offer a thousand galleons to any white mage who agrees to answer your questions. That would be the reasonable thing to do. If you insist on questioning Bellatrix specifically, wait three days, then call in a necromancer. Quite honestly, I fail to understand why she wasn't executed back in Eighty-One, but Dumbledore insists he had his reasons."

"The Truce," Bellatrix volunteered. "Ask Zee about it. No killing prisoners, or it all goes poof."

"Executing her is not an option," Carmichael confirmed.

Severus considered his words for a long moment, lest he find himself cursing everyone involved in the cessation of hostilities in 1981 for simply putting off any true resolution to the war, rather than addressing the immediate problem. (He would save his rant for Dumbledore. Or possibly Mirabella Zabini, in the unlikely event that he happened to encounter her in the next few days.)

"If you simply want to hold her, any enchantment that could draw in and tie up any magic she channels into the environment would be a good start. And if you insist on wasting your time and resources attempting to interrogate her, you might consider bringing in someone who knows something about muggle interrogation methods. Like an actual muggle. Or Walden Macnair — I can't imagine executing dangerous creatures occupies all of his time, and he might be stupid enough to try. Rookwood might actually have succeeded. Pity he's still in Azkaban."

Bellatrix giggled. "Poor Gus, pity his mind's long gone, more like. He was one of our more creative interrogators. Even at his best, though, he couldn't have broken me."

"Or you could just ask your bloody questions and then ship her back to her demon-infested rock. She always did like to talk."

"That's not the issue — the issue is we don't know whether we can trust anything she tells us, because we can't get in her fucking head. We just need to wear her down."

Carmichael was, Severus thought, an exemplary politician, a very good mind mage, and an absolutely exceptionally stubborn bloody idiot. But there was nothing Severus could do about that. Perhaps Taggart would be promoted when Bellatrix killed him. (Assuming Severus could convince the bloody woman to avoid any further involvement with the process of "wearing down" the captive.)

"You're never going to. And if you persist in your idiotic attempt, I stand by my initial assessment: she will escape, and she will murder you all. And I shall have nothing more to do with any of it." Regardless of what Dumbledore might have to say on the matter. He could not be held responsible for the abject stupidity of others.

"You told them about the magic," Bellatrix pouted. "I should kill you just for that. Or maybe I'll kill your little friend there instead. Allison, was it?"

Somehow, Severus didn't really think she would. Which was odd, because before this very moment he would have expected Bellatrix to kill him (or anyone he was on familiar terms with) on the slightest excuse. But there was a certain...Lyra-esque lack of seriousness about the tone of her threat. (He was suddenly quite certain he'd been spending far too much time in the company of her younger alter-ego, but avoiding the drivel underclassmen presented in the guise of essays was entirely worth it.) And in any case, it wouldn't do to act as though he would care if she killed
Taggart, that might actually convince her to go out of her way to do it.

"Yes, well, if there's no challenge in escaping, then where's the fun?"

"In the murders, obviously. I haven't had anyone to play with in ages. Just dementors — and they don't bleed, so they don't count."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I rest my case. I'll see myself out. Allison, a word."

Well, that was fun, Lyra thought, making her way out of the Arithmancy OWL 'practical' along with the fifth-years who hadn't just given up and left halfway through. Or at least, she assumed they'd given up, she doubted they could actually have completed all three of the projects (modeling one charm, one transfiguration, and one event from a given list) to more than the absolutely most basic level in that time. Granted, she hadn't quite needed the full three hours to describe what she considered to be adequate solutions — she'd spent the last forty-five minutes on a recursive analysis of her predictive model for the Quidditch World Cup Final, checking its predicted accuracy. She was missing a few values to actually make a prediction (the data were widely available, she just didn't know the exact statistics off the top of her head), but the model itself should be more than sufficient.

"What do you think," one of the Weasley twins asked, throwing an arm around her shoulders.

"Ireland wins, but Krum gets the snitch?" the other offered, appearing on her other side. They'd split up for electives so they could take all of them, so only one had been in the exam room, but the other had obviously been paying attention as well.

"Depends — what are the Irish team's completed-pass ratios by play since Moran joined them?"

"Dunno, they've managed over three-hundred points in every playoff match so far, so we focused on whether Krum would be able to catch the snitch in time to stop them."

Okay, that was fair. She really hadn't been following the damn tournament, so she'd resorted to a technical analysis comparing a few dozen statistics for each team, predicted weather conditions, recent updates to the professional snitch randomness algorithm, mascot and crowd interference and so on.

"Pass ratios by play?" the other one asked. "How many variables did you use?"

Well over a hundred, if you counted all the subordinate formulae. "Probably more than I had to, but the accuracy analysis suggests predictions should be correct with better than ninety-nine percent certainty. I'll give you a copy, if you want to see if they're consistent. But if Ireland's play-weighted pass ratio is at least two points better than Bulgaria's, then yeah, Ireland wins with seventy percent certainty, regardless of all other factors."

She was distracted from their reaction — high-fiving over her head — and their shouted farewell by an overheard fragment of conversation. Three of the Slytherin fifth-years were discussing the exam on their way downstairs.

"—I don't know, I really don't."

"Well, at least it's over."

"Yeah, and it wasn't as bad as Runes Theory, I still don't know who Iksati is."
"I'm telling you, it was a trick question, Babbling said there is no Iksati's Paradox." Lyra couldn't help but laugh at that, and loudly enough that le Parc definitely heard her. He rounded on her with a furious glare. "Fuck off, Black."

"No, no," Wilkes — the one who had brought up 'Iksati' in the first place — hushed his...yearmate. (She was pretty sure he and Lestrange didn't actually associate with le Parc outside of classes) "What's so funny, kid?"

"Nothing, just— How stupid are you? That was a chi, not an X." (Lestrange groaned, burying his face in his hands.) "Chati's Paradox is the Egyptian one about objectivity in definitions and the self-fulfilling nature of magic. Also known as the Gamp is Full of Shite Paradox." Though the implications for the definition of categories of materials which could not be conjured (like food) really had very little to do with its relevance to Runes (underlying the first Law of Runic Magic — Rune Meaning is Subjective).

She sniggered again as le Parc thrust his hand into the pocket that held his wand, clearly furious with her pointing out his stupidity. Before she could point out that cursing her in the middle of the corridor (or trying to) would be equally stupid (and he wouldn't even have the excuse of orthographic confusion), Wilkes did it for her, grabbing his elbow. "Don't, le Parc, it's not worth it. Not here," he added much more quietly, his eyes darting off to her left. "Potter," Lestrange said, nodding past her in greeting. "Er...hi? Lyra, I was just—"

"Have you all met?" she asked, cutting him off. She knew they hadn't, at least not formally, Harry hardly knew anyone. And obviously still didn't understand that introductions were important — and also a great opportunity to insult people. (Intentionally. "Er...hi?" was admittedly a slightly insulting response, but didn't quite count since he almost certainly hadn't meant it to be.) 

"Lestrange, Harry Potter; Harry, this is Adrian Lestrange. Also Perrinwolde — Perry — Wilkes and Jasper le Parc. He goes by stupid cunt with a death wish," she added, grinning. "It's a term of endearment." Harry, of course, missed the joke, but Lestrange, who was trying very hard not to laugh, obviously had enough French to catch it, and le Parc looked about ready to strangle her, witnesses be damned. Tee hee.

"Fuck you, Black! You'll pay for your insults, you stupid little blood traitor bitch!"

She sincerely doubted it, especially since Wilkes and Lestrange were physically dragging him toward their common room, now. She grinned, waggling her fingers at him in farewell. "Ta, boys!" Then she linked her arm through Harry's. "Walk with me, Harry."

"Do I even want to know what that was about?"

"Philosophical disagreement. So, did you read that book I gave you? The Cavendish," she specified, though she hadn't given him any other books lately.

"Er, well... I was revising for exams, so..."

Lyra sighed. "Well, you still have a few days."

"Did you make plans and forget to tell me again?"

"Not plans, per se. But you should read it before we go to Hogsmeade on Friday."
You are coming."

Harry nodded. "McGonagall said that since Sirius is definitely in France, and not trying to kill me, there's no reason I can't go. So I can even ride down in the carriages instead of sneaking out."

Lyra still had to sneak — she was still technically being punished for blowing up herself and Hermione back in November. But that was fine, shadow walking was faster than the carriages, anyway. "I'll meet you down there. Just read the book before then. Particularly chapter six. I have a proposition to discuss with you."

Harry snorted. "A proposition?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, it's about hols."

He sighed. "We already talked about this, Lyra. And my mind's not in the gutter."

She sincerely doubted that. "Yes, well, read the book and then we'll talk about it again."

"Whatever. What are you doing this afternoon? I was looking for you because Justin wanted me to ask if you'd let us into the dueling arena again."

Lyra shrugged. She was pretty sure Justin had seen her renew that stupid ward gate enough times he could do it himself by now, but she actually didn't have any plans until dinner. Might as well. Hell, she could even stick around for a bit and see how the little dueling 'study group' was coming along. "Nothing that can't wait. Just let me run up to the dorm and change. You guys convince Theo to join you yet?"

Harry snorted. "No. He came once, wiped the floor with both me and Gin and told us to practice wide-area spells before he buggered back off to the library."

Pity, it had been ages since Lyra had had a good fight.

Chapter End Notes

So, yes, this update took over two weeks, and is another transition chapter. In case you have yet to notice, I am pants at estimating how much I can cover in a single chapter, and keep thinking of more scenes that ought to be included before the climax for various reasons. So we're going to continue having three more chapters left in this school year for the foreseeable future. But hey, the next chapter has Bella murdering a bunch of people, so there's that.

—Leigha
Bella's control slipped slightly, the magic she'd been pulling into herself for the past three days escaping her hold, just for a moment, but long enough for a noticeable amount of it to be absorbed by the enchanted panel that fucking archivist had hung on the wall beside her. *Shite.* It didn't actually *do* anything, just existed to waste power, her own personal ward-sapper. Well, that and it lit up, alerting whichever fucking Unspeakable was currently babysitting her that she was *up to something.*

Smith — the youngest of the Mind researchers involved with her 'interrogation' — was currently on duty, charged with the task of preventing her from sleeping for the fifth day in a row and occasionally asking her questions from a list they'd been through at *least* six times already. The first two times, she'd answered all of them exactly the same, to the word and intonation, but since they were apparently determined not to believe her no matter what she'd said, she'd started varying her answers after that, simply to amuse herself. They'd tried for a bit to mess with her perception of time, spacing out meals and changing the length of their observational shifts, but that failed rather immediately since she could check the actual time with Lyra whenever she liked. She'd also gotten her alter ego to look up random facts about the researchers whose names she'd caught (and their families) so that she could retaliate by taunting them with that information.

He started to ask what she was doing, but was cut off by a knock at the door. She had already told them, anyway, since there was nothing they could do to stop her short of knocking her out (and they couldn't keep trying to wear her down if she was unconscious). Instead of pulling magic from Eris's plane and channelling it into the space around her, she was storing it in her own body, protected from that fucking sapper by her own magical field, the one all living things generated. Which was rather painful and certainly not healthy — rather like holding herself on the very cusp of magical backlash, or under a *very* weak Cruciatux for hours and days on end, stimulating the nervous system in a similar way as she pushed her body's limits in a way human biology (even that of a Black modified by the Powers to withstand their presence) simply wasn't designed to accommodate. But sleep deprivation was one of the things that tended to make it easier to push herself into the Madness, so it didn't seem particularly onerous at the moment. (They'd kind of cursed themselves in the foot with that particular strategy.)

As she'd told Eris when the goddess had expressed concerns about Bella potentially melting her own brain, there would be plenty of time to consider exactly how stupid this particular plan was *after* she managed to escape. Lyra, at least, seemed to have more confidence in her ability to recognize the point at which she *really* needed to just let the magic go. (Her only comment had been — as relayed by Eris, after apparently trying it herself — *Oh, that does sting, doesn't it?)*

Marcus Carmichael, the one apparently in charge of this whole operation, entered, accompanied by a rather confused-looking Walden Macnair. Well, Wally — one of the less talented Death Eaters she'd trained over the years — always looked rather confused, but she was quite certain he was surprised to see her there. Though, to be fair, she was rather surprised as well. She'd expected that the Unspeakables would eventually resort to more physical methods of coercion — that *was* part of the plan — but she really hadn't expected them to take Severus's advice and bring in *Walden Macnair,* of all people.

"*Wally, darling!* It's been *ages!* How have you been?" she asked, pitching her voice annoyingly
high and employing the most \textit{vapid} tone she could muster.

"Er — Lady Bla— Bellatrix Lestrange?" he turned to the Unspeakable, visibly disconcerted. "Carmichael, what exactly is going on, here?"

"\textit{Ooh, ohh}, I know this one!"

"Is it someone else's turn yet?" Smith asked.

"Yes, Smith, you can go."

"Say \textit{hi} to Marianne for me!" Marianne was, according to the intelligence Lyra had gathered, Jonathan Smith's muggleborn fiancée.

"See if you can figure out how she's \textit{doing} that," he muttered to Wally on his way out, shooting a last terrified glance back at her, lying harmlessly in bed, half-paralyzed and giggling uncontrollably at his discomfort. (It was rather difficult to maintain a cool, intimidating facade in this state of mind, but fortunately, most people seemed to find inappropriate amusement equally intimidating.)

"What's going on here," Carmichael explained, "is an...interrogation. We've been tasked with finding a way to determine whether Lestrange is telling the truth, in order to allow Archives to gather information she may hold on the nature of magic."

"You\textit{...could} just ask her, she doesn't usually bother to lie. She's kind of bad at it, actually..."

Bella pouted at him. "I can lie when I want to."

"The Archivist insists on legilimency confirmation of her truthfulness. Which means we've been tasked with breaking her occlumency shields."

Bella \textit{did} have to wonder whether they just...thought she was completely incompetent at more complex occlumency techniques? Because it wasn't \textit{that} hard to trick a legilimens into believing that you believed a lie was the truth. Not that she \textit{would} — that would be counterproductive, since they would probably kill her once they thought they had all the (true) information she could give them. Well, \textit{she} would. It wouldn't be that hard to make it look like an escape attempt gone wrong to avoid shattering Zee's truce.

This was taking far too long. "They're worse at torture than I am at lying. Especially without magic. They want you to do it. Well, try, anyway."

"Er..."

Carmichael shrugged, nodded. "Whatever happens in this room, stays in this room. You will be authorized to use any and all techniques at your disposal. Are you interested?"

He definitely was. She could see it in his eyes, that familiar longing to see a sentient being helpless and suffering at his hand. She wondered how long it had been since he'd given in to it, taken a victim. Surely he would be kept under observation, even if he had somehow managed to convince the Ministry he had joined the Cause unwillingly. Years? Good. He'd want to take it slow, \textit{savor} it. That'd give the paralytic potion time to wear off. He licked his lower lip and cleared his throat nervously. "What about...after?"

"Oh, don't even pretend you're not going to do it, we all know you want to."

The men ignored her. Arseholes. "After?"
"After you've gotten whatever you want from her. Because if you don't kill her, or let me kill her, she will kill me."

"And them," she added. Probably not helping her case, but she was fairly bad at not just saying whatever smartarse remark came to mind at the best of times. And it was really annoying, being talked about as though she wasn't worrying right here.

Carmichael glared down at her, though it was clearly Walden he was addressing when he spoke. "What I want is for you to break her. Do it, and she won't remember anything after she passed out on the First."

Planning to obliviate her? Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. One of Zee's favorite literary quotes came to mind. "'I generally find that when a man sounds so very confident in his own ability to satisfy, he's often over confident.' Not that you're much of a Sebastian, but."

He definitely got the implication, and was apparently offended enough to offer a retort, but before he could say anything, Wally decided to make a bad life choice. "All right, I'll do it."

As though he was ever not going to do it. (Bella was fairly certain that she hadn't trained a single Death Eater who wouldn't appreciate the chance to torture her for a few hours, especially if they didn't expect her to be able to retaliate.) "Fabulous! Now that's settled..."

Carmichael gave her a rather unnerved look, but again spoke to Walden rather than her, gesturing awkwardly toward a small table in the corner. "We've acquired some...instruments..."

"Knives, Carmichael. If you can't say you've got a bunch of knives for Wally to use on me, I really don't think you should try to watch. You're just going to make everything really, really awkward — just think how hard it's going to be for him to come with you standing there being all judgmental."

Walden went very red — as far as she knew, torture wasn't actually sexual for him, but he was very well aware that it could be for her. She and Tom hadn't exactly been subtle about it, back in the Seventies. Carmichael started to say something along the lines that no one would be getting off on this, but cut off when he noticed, going equally red himself.

"Ha, first point to me!" Really, she could keep doing this all day.

"Just— Whenever you're ready," Carmichael said, retreating to a corner, obviously embarrassed.

"Oh, we're starting now?" Right, she should probably stop that potion drip, then.

"Do you need her to be able to talk?" Walden asked, sounding rather annoyed.

"Eventually."

"But not now?"

"No."

Walden was tearing a strip off the thin hospital robe she'd been dressed in and shoving it into her mouth almost before the word was out of Carmichael's. Which was probably just as well, she could only focus on so many things at once, and it was kind of important that she keep that fucking potion out of her bloodstream long enough for the dose she'd already gotten to wear off. An hour or two, she suspected, though it was difficult to calculate when it was being administered continuously, rather than periodically. Between that, maintaining the reserve of magic she was holding onto — maybe enough for one or two good offensive spells, or enough to heal a serious
wound or two, if Walden decided to incapacitate her — and the very distracting pain that was about to ensue, she had quite enough to concentrate on without keeping up a constant stream of antagonization. Besides, she was quite certain dear Wally was sufficiently invested, now, she hardly needed to continue to bait him.

No, she thought, as he sliced the front of her robe and yanked it out from under her, now all she had to do was wait.

§

One hour and thirty-seven minutes later, Bella's left foot twitched, an involuntary reaction to a deep stab wound in her thigh. Fucking *finally*. There were very few things in life Bella hated more than *waiting*. She'd never really had cause to consider it before, but she thought she might hate the waiting more than the torture itself.

Being tortured was, at least, a challenge — blocking out the pain or stripping meaning and consequence from stimulation, twisting it to pleasure, reacting or not, in such a way as to influence the interrogator's progress. She'd always thought of it as a game. The strategy depended on the questioner's goal — answers or access to one's mind, information unknown or confirmation of suspicions, sometimes simply their own gratification (and the victim's), or escape, in her case, though the best most of her own playmates could hope to achieve was a quick death, or to deceive her through one more drawn out, protecting their secrets to the end.

Like hunting, almost, or being hunted — speaking of which, she should look up Mikael when she got to Europe. Torture, regardless of which side one was on, though more mental than hunting, though — one's physical strength was hardly a consideration when bound to a bed and paralyzed on top. And any torturer worth his salt should be able to keep a prisoner alive until he thought he'd won the game, no matter how fragile their health might be. She knew she'd trained Walden well enough that he wouldn't get carried away and kill her accidentally, even if she was rather wasted and weak from years spent idle in a cell and the past month unconscious.

That would be a factor in the recovery period, however, and any escape attempt the prisoner might make, she supposed. In this case, the recovery would likely be a long one — Walden wasn't *so* stupid that he hadn't seen the value in immediately ensuring her incapacitation. He'd cut her Achilles tendons before reverting to more superficial damage. (They both knew this would be a long project — breaking a professional always was — and starting with extreme measures left no room to escalate.) He'd have been better off waiting until she was ready to make her move, but of course, he couldn't predict *that*.

See, *starting* with incapacitating wounds meant she'd had time to at least provisionally repair them. She'd never gone as far as Tom in making herself impervious to physical harm — Eris's presence tended to inhibit rituals involving Powers other than Chaos, Destruction, and Mystery — but she'd gotten a lot of practice using raw magic to patch herself together until she could be properly healed. *Hopefully* her efforts would be enough to get her out of the fucking vortex, fleeing on hands and knees would be...*much* more difficult. Her options were already severely limited without any ambient magic to affect. Her plan at the moment was to use the power she'd channelled through Eris to activate the runes Tom had carved into her limbs half a lifetime ago (at least those which hadn't been too severely damaged in the intervening years), strengthening herself with magic to win free and carry herself away despite her physical weakness.

Of course, the potion wearing off meant that she had to concentrate more closely on suppressing her reflexes — it simply wouldn't do to alert them to the danger before she was ready to go. A few more minutes, she thought. She'd still be sluggish, of course, but Walden had clearly gone to seed
over the past decade, and there was no conceit in her estimation that sluggish for her was still quicker than a desk jockey like Carmichael. Besides, Walden had no experience with muggle fighting, and Carmichael would be...otherwise incapacitated.

Ready, Eris?

No. I still don't like this plan. There's a seventy-five percent chance you're going to die tonight.

I've beaten worse odds. And now they've moved on to physical methods, it's only a matter of time until that statistic gets far too close to certainty for comfort. Unless you think I'd be better off waiting until they take my eyes and a few fingers. Because they will get there. Unless I let them in and answer their questions, and if I do, the best possible outcome is that they'll just try to obliviate me — of who knows how much information — and drop me back in my cell. And I'm good, but I can't fake being obliviated when they're in my head. So how likely do you think that outcome is?

We can always save your memories again, and—

No. I just got everything straightened out in here. There will be no more fucking with my memories, full stop. Obliviation aside, if I let them in, they'll almost certainly decide to keep me as a research subject for the Mind Division.

Lyra could—

Lyra is fourteen, and even if she uses an age potion to negate the physical disadvantages that presents, she is entirely untrained when it comes to offensive operations, infiltration, assassination...I might have managed to break someone out of the Department of Mysteries at that age, yes, but I was trained by Tom. Has Lyra ever even killed anyone? She has no experience fighting without magic — if she tries to stage a rescue mission, they're just going to end up with two of us to play with. If she doesn't die in the attempt. And assuming they don't panic and slit my throat when they realise they can't obliviate me.

They'd been through this already. Repeatedly. She wasn't going to change her mind now.

Fine. She could feel Eris pouting at her, still dissatisfied with the plan. Yes, I'm ready. I'll be very annoyed with you if you die, though. Keep that in mind.

Giddy amusement and anticipation rose up within her — what would be fear, if she weren't herself. Why would I care? I'll be dead.

With that, she turned her attention away from Eris, toward the shape of her own mind.

She'd gotten the impression, at some point in the memory-reviewing process she and Lyra had meandered through on Walpurgis, that Eris pretty much handled everything to do with mind magic for Lyra. Bella (privately) thought that Lyra was a little too dependent on Eris. Yes, it was very impressive to become an Avatar of your Patron, and Lyra was well on her way to managing it, but Bella had never been comfortable with the idea of Chaos entirely subsuming her own identity.

In any case, Lyra had seemed surprised to realise that she could relax the barrier between herself and the world, reach across that border or let things in, if she wanted to. Eris's gift to her wasn't actually being possessed all the time — that was the source of Lyra's 'immunity' to most magics that affected the mind, even if she didn't realise it, which Bella didn't think she did. It was what mind mages — those who believed such a thing existed, at least — called 'natural perfect occlumency' (an apparent misnomer, since there were no recorded cases of anyone actually being born a perfect occlumens).
Tom had found this fascinating — probably, in hindsight, because he'd managed to create a sort of accidental back door for himself by shaping her mind with his compulsions before Eris had isolated it — returning to the subject several times over the years. She'd never had much interest in it herself, but his theory was that most humans' minds were diffuse energy fields. It wasn't always entirely clear where they began or ended, and any 'borders' they attempted to enforce between self and other were, to a degree, arbitrary. The mind of a perfect occlumens (or, hers, at least), in contrast, was more of a (metaphorical) circuit, energy doubling back on itself rather than interacting freely with everything around it, creating a very obvious divide between self and other.

The obvious effect of this was that it was ridiculously easy to shield herself against external intrusions, including legilimency and the Imperius and all manner of illusions. The most useful effect, at least at the moment, was that she had far more awareness and therefore more control over her own perception of experiences and memories, and the shape of her mind in general, than the average legilimens. Which made it very, very difficult to influence her with truth potions or intoxicants if she didn't want to be influenced, even without Eris's direct assistance in managing the effects.

She was barely passable when it came to unstructured offensive mind magic, of course. Reciprocal legilimency was doable, but she had to use the charm if she wanted to initiate a connection. She doubted she'd be able to do it at all if she hadn't spent so much of her life with Tom as an example. Not only did he do that shite approximately as easily as breathing (and as often), but he'd also actively pushed her to practice it with him. But more advanced occlumency tricks like splitting her focus to think about two (or more) tasks simultaneously or experiencing one sort of physical sensation as a different one were relatively easy, and she was acutely aware of Eris's presence, enough to isolate instantaneous thoughts from her casual observation.

If she had realized Tom's compulsions were there (and had somehow been motivated to do something about it), she suspected she would have been able to root them out without Eris destroying everything they were attached to — she'd never had much respect for what other people considered to be possible.

(That line of thought, however, would invariably lead her back to the War again, and she'd already spent far too much of the past several weeks analyzing that period of her life.)

The point was that it was highly counterintuitive to weaken the border between her mind and the outside world, make it look like it was an artificial structure that was flawed and cracking under the pressure of the interrogation, rather than...just the shape of her mind. But it wasn't by any means impossible.

She noticed Carmichael noticing the simulated cracks, the deliberate weak spots. He redoubled his efforts, focusing on a single 'point' (though such a physical term didn't really make much sense in the context), and threw himself at it with a very solid burst of magic — one which she was certain would have left him near-exhausted if he hadn't brought a magic-charged crystal to tap, which he obviously had. (Quartz was much better at holding magic than human flesh.) Simulating a breakthrough was hard, since she'd never actually experienced one herself. It had probably been off in some of the particulars, but it must have been good enough, because Carmichael didn't immediately recoil in suspicion.

Quite the opposite, in fact. She felt his sense of triumph surge just before she sprung her trap, digging into the extension of his mind which he had so kindly offered to her and pulling, dragging his consciousness deeper into her own.

Fear shot through him immediately. What the fuck?!
Here, Eris, catch, she thought, audiating the sentiment deliberately, surrounding Carmichael with mocking laughter and cold amusement as she funnelled him straight through the metaphysical space occupied by her own mind and shoved him at her connection to Eris.

What? Wha— NO! What are you doing to me?! No! Stop! Let me go— Let me— His mental screaming cut off as Eris took hold of him. Poor little legilimens, human minds really couldn't function in that many dimensions. And by the time he managed to find his way back to his body — she hadn't cut him off entirely, she needed that connection he still held to form a reciprocal link — it would be dead.

And then he would be dead.

In the physical world, his body slumped in its chair, momentarily unconscious. Walden didn't notice, preoccupied by the pained whimpering that escaped her as soon as her focus shifted to more important elements of the plan than controlling her reactions.

Like dividing her consciousness sufficiently to maintain a hold over the magic burning in her veins and also perform reciprocal legilimency, both of which were far more mentally demanding tasks than casting a spell or maintaining a constant stream of distracting chatter in a duel.

This was probably the trickiest part of the whole plan, none of which was truly simple. It really wasn't exactly made easier by the way Carmichael's consciousness was lost, at the moment. Reciprocal legilimency was much easier than initiating a connection, but it always drew her to the target's point of focus, which had made fucking Tom very interesting, but would be counterproductive at the moment — she hardly had more experience than Carmichael when it came to functioning in the mind of a god, and she didn't want him to be able to follow her back to their own minds. Which meant that she had to pay quite a lot more attention to the legilimency than she otherwise might, to make sure she stopped in his mind.

Which meant it wasn't entirely surprising when she momentarily lost control over the magic, that fucking sapper lighting up before she clamped back down on it.

Walden, startled, looked up at it before grinning and redoubling his efforts. He slipped the blade into a cut he'd made ages ago — one that had long since stopped bleeding, though the nerves were still raw, the flesh inflamed — and began to work his way laterally, slicing the skin off her left forearm, very slowly, clearly trying not to cut too deeply and risk her passing out from blood loss. One half of her consciousness — the part of herself lying on the table, acutely aware of this process — screamed.

"Not so tough after all, are you, Trixie?" he muttered over her. "You were always quick enough to dish it out — can't take a little payback? Where's that smart mouth of yours now?"

The other part of her consciousness, well... It wasn't really that difficult to possess someone, at least when they were cooperating (or when their own consciousness wasn't fighting for control because it was lost somewhere beyond the mundane plane). She wrenched her focus around to Carmichael's senses and body, rather than his mind.

She performed a few quick tests — flexing his hands, arms and legs, bending and twisting to gauge his general degree of mobility — before rising to his feet, careful not only to not overbalance (Carmichael was taller than her, and his center of gravity felt off), but also to keep her movements as quiet as possible. She wasn't quite silent, but that was hardly a concern as she was still screaming on the bed, making her own distraction.

"Funny, I never realised, back then, how small you are, really. I could just..." He wrapped a hand
around her right wrist, began to bend it, pulling against the natural orientation of the joint, but the restraint stopped him short of breaking it, or even properly dislocating the ulna.

A breathy laugh escaped her. "You could what, again?" Her voice was rough from the screaming, but her tone was as mocking as ever, and now that she more or less had Carmichael's body under control, she could focus on suppressing the pain again. He growled under his breath, releasing the strap so that he could demonstrate his superior strength.

Still keeping as quiet as possible, she moved Carmichael's body toward the table of "...instruments" he'd provided for Walden, taking the sturdiest of them in hand.

"I could snap your arm like a fucking twig," he muttered, foiling her attempt to avoid his grasp by starting at her shoulder and working his way back down to her wrist.

"You could," she admitted, calmly enough that he ought to have been immediately suspicious. "But you won't."

"Ha! The fuck I—" His voice cut off abruptly as Carmichael's hand slammed the sturdiest of the knives into his carotid artery, the other coming up to grab his hair — leverage to tear it out, opening his throat. The gaping wound poured blood over her own body, but there was nothing to be done about that.

The plan had been to use the knife to cut her body free, but since dear Wally had so kindly freed her dominant hand, she simply let him drop and began disentangling herself from Carmichael's mind, her consciousness fully settling back into her own body just as she managed to loose the last buckle. It was weak — weaker than she had anticipated, even — and the magic she still held was searing every nerve, but it was still more comfortable than driving Carmichael. She pulled herself from the bed and tore the engraved rune-plate off the wall, scoring a series of lines through the symbols with the scalpel Wally had dropped.

Letting the magic go was, she thought, the sweetest sensation she'd ever felt, though that might have owed something to the relief that emanated from Eris's presence when she did it. (Apparently she had been more concerned about Bella hurting herself than she'd let on.) It flooded out of her into the air, but not for long. Carmichael had a rather sizeable chunk of crystal on himself, somewhere — attuned specifically to his magic, probably, but she could fix that, it was the same principle as attuning a dueling knife. She could force the magic into that instead, tap it, and everything Carmichael hadn't used trying to break into her mind, to power the charms and augmentation runes she'd need to get herself out of this fucking hellhole.

As she knelt to search his pockets, she noticed Wally wasn't quite dead yet — he'd managed to raise a hand to his throat, his eyes following her even as they dimmed. She grinned at him. "Sev always was smarter than you. Should've listened to him."

It was a matter of minutes to find the stone and use blood runes to attune it, funnel the magic into it, and retrieve the wand and keys she'd neglected to pocket the first time she'd fleeced the mind mage, followed by his outer robe itself, as she realised she had no pockets, or indeed clothing. It would probably be easier to escape if she wasn't completely starkers. (If that was the biggest mistake she narrowly avoided in executing this plan, she'd be very impressed with herself.) She bound her forearm and a couple of the deeper puncture wounds, the ones that were still bleeding, and selected a blade that bore a reasonable resemblance to her own preferred weapon before approaching the door.

The Unspeakables always knocked twice to announce that they were leaving, presumably because the guard(s) on the other side were under orders to cut down anyone who opened it without giving
them the signal. But if there was anything command had taught her, it was that subordinates never maintained proper vigilance. Guard duty was boring as fuck. Especially when you were alone at your post, and she could only feel the magic of a single life on the other side of the wall, at the moment.

She used Carmichael's stolen wand and the magic from the crystal to cast a very precise silencing charm on the mechanism — weakly, to preserve magic, but it only needed to last long enough to turn the key and the handle — and yanked the door open without warning.

The guard, predictably, startled. It took him an extra half-second to realise that she was crouching, her face about two feet lower than the spot he'd instinctively turned toward. That confusion cost him. He had a muggle weapon, but before he could get it pointed at her, she activated a particular series of runes, propelling herself forward (tendons creaking, but holding, by the grace of the Dark) and closing the distance between them, her off-hand shoving his gun up and away from herself, even as her blade pierced his femoral artery — it wasn't like she wouldn't be leaving tracks, anyway, she was already covered with Wally's blood.

And her own. She should do something about that, before she left. Blood really shouldn't just be left around for anyone to find and use, especially Unspeakables.

But whatever she did had to be quick, because the gun had gone off like a canon, deafening in the stone corridor. The only damage had been to the ceiling, but she had no doubt that reinforcements would be coming for her in a matter of minutes — if not less.

She ducked back into the room to ransack the cupboards, looking for anything that would corrupt the evidence, or even better, anything that would burn. An industrial sized bottle of the alcohol used to clean wounds would do nicely. She splashed it liberally over her hands and feet to ruin any traces she might leave behind her before dragging the guard into the room and pouring the rest of it over the three bodies and the ruined sheets, followed by everything that shared the same fire-warning symbol. Convenient, labeling them like that.

She should be more thorough, she'd flay anyone who was this sloppy cleaning up a raid, but she could hear boots approaching at speed down the corridor — at least two people, shouting for more as they saw the guard's blood on the floor — so it would have to do.

"Incendio!" As with the silencing on the lock, the spell didn't need nearly as much power as was generally used to cast it. A single lick of flame was enough to set the alcohol alight.

The flames climbed behind her, smoke beginning to billow as she crawled to the doorway, muggle weapon in hand. She knew these things had a limited number of projectiles in them, and had no idea how to reload one, nor any of the little bits of metal that they sent off like overpowered piercing hexes, but from what she'd seen — mostly from the receiving end, admittedly, during a particularly nasty run-in with muggle aurors — they were dead easy to use.

Not so easy to aim, though, she thought, pointing it at one of the swiftly approaching enemies and pulling the little firing lever. She'd been aiming for his center of mass, and missed completely. She did hit the one behind him, though, so that was something. He screamed, falling to the ground. It took a moment for the others to realise what had happened, by which time she'd pulled the lever again, another small explosion propelling a deadly bit of metal in their direction. They ducked into a room three doors down from her own and across the hall, taking their downed comrade with them. The fire was growing uncomfortably hot behind her, she had to move soon. And this seemed like as good an opportunity she was likely to get.

She could feel Carmichael struggling with Eris at the back of her mind, the burning of his body
recalling him to it, strongly enough, apparently, to give him some direction, even lost in the infinite. A quick glance back assured her that his body was already well beyond saving, even if not quite dead yet. You can let him go, she told the goddess. He fled the darkness in her mind, withdrawing entirely. For a brief moment, she envied Tom his ability to feel the emotions of everyone around him — she was sure Carmichael's agony was exquisite, and the sense of defeat, escaping from one hell only to fall directly into another...

I've been spending too much time with dementors, she decided, readying herself to run.

As she maneuvered herself to her feet — careful, careful, it wouldn't do to tear one of her own severely weakened muscles in her haste, and her ankles were still dangerously fragile — one of them stuck his head out of the doorway. She sent another projectile at him. It missed, of course, but it was closer, hitting the doorframe behind him (albeit several feet above her target).

He swore loudly enough for her to hear him over the crackle of the flames, withdrawing, presumably to consult with his companions about their course of action. As soon as he was gone, she flitted across the corridor, flattening herself against the wall, right beside the opening. There were four of them, she realised as she drew near enough to feel the magic in them, including the one she'd already hit.

Smoke was beginning to cloud the corridor with a noticeable haze. If she didn't clear the area soon, breathing was going to become a problem. She had been here before, but she had no idea where in the complex she was — she suspected they were underground — there were no windows, and she had seen a staircase at the end of the corridor from which the men had approached. She assumed that was the nearest way out. Which meant she had to get past them, and she wasn't about to leave them to follow and attack her from behind. She was in no shape to fight surrounded.

When the unfortunate lookout peeked out the doorway again, she finally managed to hit something she was aiming at. She wasn't certain whether distance was a factor in the effectiveness of this weapon, but at less than a meter it made a spectacular mess of his head — blood, bone, and brain spattering across the floor at her feet.

It took perhaps half a second for his death and its source to register with the survivors. She was already moving, hopping over the corpse into the room as they fired through the wall, at the spot she'd just vacated. She'd anticipated that: muggle piercing hexes were not so easily foiled as magical ones. They were far too fast to dodge and went through solid objects as easily as they did shield charms. The only way to avoid one was to move before the projectile left the weapon.

Her knife slipped between the ribs of the nearest gunman before he realised the danger. The corridor was only dimly lit, and the room had no lights at all. The smoke and dark, oversized robes had obviously obscured her form, at least enough that — focused on the spot he was firing upon, with the noise of the weapons covering the sound of her movements — he hadn't noticed her in his peripheral until she was directly upon him. She twisted the knife in his heart and tore it out, shoving what would soon be nothing more than a cooling corpse into the witch beside him. She, to her credit, noticed when he stopped shooting, turned in time to see his body falling, but not quickly enough to prevent it knocking her off balance. Bellatrix followed immediately, slitting her throat with a vicious backhanded swipe.

Crack!

A piece of metal stabbed through her right shoulder blade, hit from behind, by the one she had wounded. She fell on top of the witch screaming — more in rage than pain, though FUCK! Gods and Powers that hurt, especially rolling off the witch's corpse to flatten herself on the floor behind it, for whatever meagre cover it might provide.
The one who'd hit her, however, wasn't much better at aiming the muggle weapon than she was, or else he was firing blindly in her general direction, hoping to keep her pinned down long enough for help to arrive.

Well, fine. Two could play at that game. It took every piece of shot left in the first firearm she had commandeered, and four more from the one belonging to the witch whose body she was still using as cover, but she finally managed to tag the bastard again, the echoes from the weapons fading away. She crawled over to him to make sure he was dead this time, but it seemed after eight tries, she'd managed to get him in the head through sheer dumb luck.

Apparently distance didn't make much difference at all in the destructive power of these things, she noted absently. And when you actually managed to hit something with them, they were very effective. She'd have to acquire one and practice with it a bit when she got out of here, just in case she was ever caught in a situation like this again. Not that that seemed very likely, but.

At the moment, however, she could see light from the fire flickering in the corridor as it crept along the walls, and she didn't even know how to check how many attempts each weapon still held. At least one was spent, and the others had to be close. Better leave them, she decided. She could use her knife perfectly well with her left hand — far more effectively than a firearm, if not at such a range — and they were too heavy and awkward to just shove three or four of them in her pockets.

Right then, time to move. Hey, Eris, are my odds getting better yet?

Slightly. She actually sounded rather put out about that.

I thought you wanted me free.

Just...don't get overconfident. Save the I told you so for when you get to the veela in Gascony.

(Fourteen bodies, a transfigured boat, and two days later, Bella thought I told you so, before promptly passing out on a beach approximately two-hundred kilometers south of the French border.)

"So, I think you should break the ward, and just leave. From here, today. I can take all the tracking spells off of you, and you can stay at Ancient House until we're ready to go. Cherri's got the residential wing pretty well fixed up by now. And then, we're travelling as muggles, because...reasons. I didn't ask, really. But if no one has any way to track you or trace your travel plans, they can't possibly sell you out to Riddle, and, as I think we've established, there's no way he could possibly search all of California for you. I'm not even sure he could get there — depending on the exact reason he's a wraith and not dead, the best protection for you might actually be an entire bloody ocean between the two of you."

Harry simply stared at Lyra for a moment. He really had no idea how she'd managed to talk for a solid five minutes without letting him get a word in edgewise. She had to have breathed at some point. Probably. Assuming she was actually human. He'd tried to interrupt, she just...kept going.

"Did you say you actually visited the Dursleys?" He was pretty sure she had, about three-and-a-half minutes ago — he hadn't really been able to pay attention to anything after that.

"Well, yes. How else was I supposed to properly investigate the blood ward? I'd already looked at your end of it..."

"But you— I thought you were just going to, I don't know, poke around the back garden a bit and see if you could do something so I can do magic there!" That was certainly what she'd implied,
when he'd finally given her their address. "I didn't think you'd actually go in and— You didn't kill them, did you?"

Honestly, he wasn't sure whether he'd actually be upset if she had. Or, well, he thought he would be, but more because she might get caught than because they were dead. (It was possible that Blaise was rubbing off on him — he probably wouldn't have admitted that, even to himself, before they'd started doing legilimency together.)

Lyra gave him one of those flat, unimpressed looks of hers. "No, of course not. If I'd killed them, there would be no ward to break. Well, I guess I could theoretically have killed your aunt but not your cousin, he wasn't there, anyway. But no, I didn't. You did read the book, didn't you?"

He'd read parts of the book. It was stupidly dense — some of the terms he'd asked Hermione about and she'd had to look them up — and he was sure it hadn't originally been written in English. "I skimmed it, but— Not the point! You actually talked to my aunt. She just let you in? You?"

Because Harry had never met anyone who was worse at pretending to not be magical than Lyra, and he really couldn't imagine Aunt Petunia just letting a teenage witch in to discuss the bloody wards over tea, or something, it was just surreal.

"Well, no... I didn't look like myself, for one, and she actually told me I couldn't come in, but I'm not a vampire, so."

So she'd just barged into his house and bullied Aunt Petunia into answering her questions. God, he wished he could have seen the look on her face. "But you didn't hurt them, or anything?" Because if she had done something...particularly Lyra-lish, he'd like to have a heads-up before going home. Aunt Petunia would definitely still be furious about their house being invaded either way, but Uncle Vernon probably would have calmed down after a few days as long as no one got hurt.

"No. Well, I might have broken Petunia's arm— "You what?!" —but in my defense, she tried to knock me out with a frying pan."

"A frying pan? You used a bone breaking curse on her over a frying pan?"

"Uh, no, I hit her with the gun your uncle pulled on me." Vernon had pulled a gun on her?! "One of those long ones. She tried to hit me in the head from behind while I was distracted, but frying pans aren't very aerodynamic." She grinned, as though being threatened with firearms and frying pans was fucking hilarious.

"Oh fuck, I'm going to be in so much trouble— I... Well, now I can't go home! Was this your fucking plan all along?"

She just rolled her eyes — because of course Lyra wouldn't take this seriously, she never took bloody anything seriously. "Pft, it's not like they'll remember it. The aurors obliviated them after they were done questioning them. Snape went to ask a few questions himself after they questioned him and he questioned me, and your aunt had no idea what he was talking about."

The fact that he could actually go back without fear of being murdered — assuming they weren't still mad about his blowing up Marge — was completely overshadowed by, "Snape visited the Dursleys?!"

"I'm sure he obliviated them, too."

"Why?"

"Well, I might have mentioned dear Sev and I shared certain political views implying that we were
both Death Eaters and prompting the aurors to question him about who might have been fucking with your aunt. And I told him I was there to have a look at the wards, and I guess he wanted to make sure I didn't leave any traces of my actual identity or fuck them up or something? He thinks they're stupid, too, by the way. They didn't keep him out, and he has a bloody dark mark on his arm."

Somehow, it was not surprising that Snape heard someone had been fucking with the Dursleys and calling him dear Sev and his first thought was Lyra. It was surprising that he'd go visit them, whether it was to make sure Lyra hadn't fucked up the wards or to make sure that she wasn't going to get caught, but probably not as surprising as it would have been a year ago. One of the most unexpected things he'd learned about Slytherin hanging out with Blaise was that Snape was...a lot more complicated than he'd thought.

If Snape had found out one of the Slytherins was living in a cupboard or locked into a bedroom all summer — or living under wards that were possibly not as good as they could be when they had an undead Dark Lord trying to kill them — he'd actually do something to fix the situation. Not just hypothetically, either: Tracey was convinced he'd threatened to kill her grandfather if he didn't rein in the abuse the rest of her House dumped on her for being a halfblood and their heir.

Plus, he apparently had reasons for being a dick in potions. After one particularly bad lesson, he and Ron had been complaining about Snape taking so many points for such stupid shite before they'd even gotten out of the classroom, and he'd overheard. He hadn't given them the reasons himself, he'd just suggested that Lyra enumerate the myriad methods by which the incomparable dunderheads I am forced to call students might have prematurely terminated or permanently damaged themselves over the course of today's lesson. Which, there had been a lot. Snape had held them all over for ten minutes while she listed them off.

"Or did you mean why did he obliviate them? Because I'm pretty sure it's some sort of Secrecy violation to tell muggles they've been obliviated, even if they're allowed to know about magic, so he would have had to obviate them again to cover it up after establishing that they had no idea what he was talking about. Anyway, it's fine, if the aurors had anything they could trace back to me, Dora would have heard about it by now. And I didn't do anything to the wards, but you really, really should."

Harry groaned, tugging at his hair in frustration, her last comment bringing him fully back to the issue at hand. "I can't just...run off to California for the summer!"

"Why not?"

"Well, because..."

"No, seriously, why should you go back to that muggle hellhole? Even if you don't break the blood ward, you don't actually have to. As long as you still think of your aunt's house as your home, the stupid ward will be fine."

"I can't just disappear, though—"

"Why not? It's not a security risk as long as you don't tell anyone where you're going, and we both know the Dursleys won't care, and... Do you just not want to go? Is it because you're being all awkward about Blaise?"

Harry felt his face go very red. "No, of course not— I mean, yes, I want to go, it has nothing to do with Blaise — er, or, I mean— If you could stop smirking at me like that, that would be great."
"Who's smirking? I'm not smirking," she said, *smirking*. "Just like you don't fancy Blaise."

"No, I-- er, I, um..." *This is a private thing, I haven't talked about it with anyone, and I don't want to talk about it with you, please let's change the subject.*

And there she stood still smirking at him. Bitch. "Don't even bother denying it, everyone knows. Or, well, I assume everyone knows. I mean, I noticed, and I'm terrible at that sort of thing. Blaise *definitely* knows. Neither one of us know why you haven't *done* anything about it, though."

She'd talked about it *with Blaise?* Wait, what was he thinking, of course she had, she talked to Blaise about *everything* that confused her about everyone else. "Er, well... I don't know, I just...didn't know if he wanted me to, I guess. And I didn't want to...mess things up, you know, if he didn't, and I did, and..." *Was that even a sentence?*

"If by *things*, you mean your mindfucking arrangement and the way you spend all your free time together, I'm pretty sure it's impossible to *mess things up* with a Zabini by snogging them. If by *things*, you mean your hair, yes, things may get messed up."

"I'm not going to just-- just *snog* him out of nowhere!"

"I don't suppose I'll get an answer if I ask *why*."

"No." Not one she would accept, anyway, and he was *not* getting dragged into another stupid argument about something every sane person thought was so perfectly obvious and reasonable they didn't even have to think about it.

She sighed, *very dramatically*. "*Fine.* Tell you what, you and Maïa can go off somewhere and be awkward together, and I'll spend the summer snogging Blaise in California."

Harry somehow managed to choke on *air* at that. "*What?*

She giggled. *Giggled.* "*Gods and Powers, the look on your face...*"

*Bitch.* Sometimes he wondered why he was even friends with her in the first place. For a second there he'd actually believed she was interested in Blaise, which just— No, he wasn't going there.

"So, we've established you *want* to go. So you're coming, then?"

There should be a law against changing the subject that quickly. "I, um..." He'd completely forgotten where they'd been in their argument... Not to mention, he *did* actually want to go, he hadn't quite put his finger on why it seemed like a bad idea to just *do it*. "What about Dumbledore, though?"

"He's only your guardian in Magical Britain. As soon as you leave the country, whether you go back to Surrey or the Americas, the Dursleys are officially responsible for you. And I know you know they don't want you in Surrey any more than you want to be there."

"Yes, but he's trying to protect me, I should—"

"California will be perfectly safe. You can ask Snape if you don't believe me."

"I thought you didn't want me to tell *anyone.*" She'd been very clear about that, back at the beginning of the conversation.

"Snape is fine. He knows what the Death Eaters would be capable of as far as tracking you goes—"
"Yeah, because he was a bloody Death Eater!" Which was one of those things that made him complicated. He was very obviously and completely unapologetically a dark wizard, even now, but he'd also been a spy, and the Slytherins were quick to point out that he consulted for St Mungo's and the aurors when they needed it, too. So, he was an awful arse, but...on their side? maybe? It was confusing.

"Yes, exactly. And he's not going to tell anyone because he swore to protect you after your mum died—" Harry grimaced. He had no idea where Lyra had come up with that, but he actually believed it. Sirius had been very clear about Snape's relationship with his mum. The phrase bloody worshipped had featured. "—and I guarantee he'll agree with me that it's safer for you to just disappear for the summer than sit at home with the Dursleys. There's an anti-scring spell on you, so people can't just search for you, but the Ministry knows where they live, so anyone could find out if they wanted to. And there's nothing stopping someone blowing up the house or setting fiendfyre to the neighborhood or just walking in and apparating you away or—"

"Just– just stop, okay? I get it, you can think of a hundred bloody ways to murder me at the Dursleys, but—"

She let out a frustrated groan. "It's not just me! You have enemies, okay? Not just Riddle, not just marked Death Eaters — Riddle blowing himself up ruined a lot of families, politically, and Dumbledore did a great job setting you up as the ideal person to blame for that. I'm sure there are people in Slytherin right now who would love the chance to set your hair on fire."

"Wait — what is that supposed to mean, Dumbledore set me up?!" Harry was quickly becoming annoyed with this conversation.

For a whole second, she said nothing, just staring at him as though he'd said something so stupid it was completely incomprehensible, which didn't make him any less annoyed. How was it even possible to be that condescending without saying anything?

"Where else did you thing that fucking Boy Who Lived nonsense came from? I mean, it might have been a Ministry leak that got out to the Prophet to start with, but he definitely could have stopped it if he wanted to, he is your guardian. But he didn't. He leveraged it to build up Light Unity — completely whitewashed your mum and made you out to be some sort of mythical creature so light you couldn't be killed by a fucking Killing Curse. The Dark was already associated with the Dark Lord because, well, it's in the name, even if the extremism of the Death Eaters didn't actually reflect the mainstream Dark agenda. So Dumbles basically put out a lot of propaganda associating you and the downfall of the Dark Lord and the Light." She pouted, glaring off into the middle distance. "It worked really well, too. I know why Cissy instigated the political shift she did, but I still think she conceded too much..."

Harry ignored that last bit. Lyra's political views had come up before, he knew she thought the Allied Dark — which was the party Narcissa Malfoy headed — was too "light" in their politics and that the Statute of Secrecy was the worst idea in international politics since...forever. (Her words.) But he still didn't really care about politics. And he definitely wasn't familiar enough with Magical British politics over the past few decades to even know what Mrs. Malfoy had been conceding, or why that might be bad. Or 'bad' — he wasn't really certain he agreed with Lyra on everything. And the fact that she was insane had to be taken into account.

Besides, "That can't possibly be right," he said, shaking his head firmly. "He might have taken advantage of the situation, but he wouldn't have engineered propaganda, or whatever."

"Of course he would, he's a politician — everyone in positions of power engineer propaganda, it's just what they do. I can find sources, if you want. Things he said that were quoted in the Prophet,
and the Wizengamot session transcripts. Actually, the Quibbler did an article on it in...Eighty-Five?"

Harry let out an unamused laugh at that. He'd read the Quibbler. It was funny sometimes, but it was a bloody tabloid. "You're taking the word of a Quibbler article on this? Seriously?"

"No, I just said I'd find primary sources, didn't I? I'm just saying, they already did the legwork, makes it easier. Look, that doesn't even matter. What matters is there's no reason for you to stay in Surrey. You don't owe it to Dumbledore to be miserable all summer."

"It's not because I think I owe it to him, or-- or anyone, really—" Even if Dumbledore had nothing to do with it, Harry was very aware that before this year, everyone in Magical Britain (outside of Hermione and Ron) really had just looked at him as the Boy Who Lived. Last year had been particularly bad, all that dragonshite about him being the Heir of Slytherin... If he just up and ran away for the summer... "I guess... I guess I just don't like the idea of going without telling anyone. I mean, what about Hermione? And Justin?" He'd said something the last time they were dueling about trying to get together over the summer, just to hang out, even if they couldn't really practice.

"I'll explain it to them. Well, Maïa already knows I've been trying to get you to come with us, but she doesn't know the specifics. And I can tell Justin that we're going on holiday with Sirius. I just won't say where, or I'll tell him we're going to France or something. I'm sure he'll write."

Yes, that was it, Harry thought, his uncomfortableness with the idea of leaving the country for the summer was already dissipating slightly. Not entirely, he'd still rather tell them himself, and probably Daphne and Tracey, too, but enough that he was sure that was the main reason he'd been resisting the idea. "And Dumbledore?"

She put on a rather pained expression. "I don't trust him. I don't think he'd intentionally compromise your safety, but I don't think he'd keep it to himself if he knew you were abroad."

"Fine," Harry said. The idea had just occurred to him that he could think about it a bit more and then send Dumbledore a letter or something if he decided he really wanted to.

Because much as he'd been trying to deny it for the better part of half an hour, he knew he really wanted to do this, have a proper holiday, see somewhere other than Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, and Little Whinging for once in his life. And why shouldn't he, really?

"God, I can't even believe I'm saying this, but yes, I'll go."

Lyra grinned, bouncing slightly on her toes and clapping like a little kid, which was kind of adorable, if you didn't consider the fact that she was so happy because she'd just convinced him to do something bloody mad. "Okay, then, I'll take care of getting your trunk and things together, bring them to Ancient House, and—"

"Wait — you want me to go now?"

"Why not? Exams are done, the train is tomorrow, there's no real reason to wait, and this way no one will be able to track you from King's Cross. I really do need to take all those tracking spells off you first, though, there's no point in hiding your travel plans if someone has you on a leash. Or like, six someones."

"Wait — tracking spells?" This was, he was fairly certain, the first he was hearing of any tracking spells on himself.

"Uh, yeah. I could have sworn I mentioned that earlier..."
Well, she might have done, he'd been distracted by the thing with the Dursleys. "But people put spells on me so they know where I am all the time?" That was just...seriously creepy, really. And absolutely infuriating. Seriously?!

"Yes. Half a dozen of them, though I'm sure some of them were cast by the same person, just for redundancy."

You know what, fuck it. The idea of a bunch of people, or even just one really paranoid person, using magic so they knew where he was all the time was just the last fucking straw. He didn't know who had done it — well, Dumbledore had probably done at least one, and he suddenly realised it couldn't possibly have been coincidence, how fast the Minister had found him last summer, when he'd blown up Marge — but he hated the idea that people were just watching him, constantly looking over his shoulder. It was slightly less patronising for actual adults like Dumbledore to look out for him than it was for, say, Lyra, but that still didn't mean he liked it. Especially since they didn't even tell him they were doing it. He didn't even know who they were.

It was almost as bad as the idea of unknown numbers of legilimens wandering around and stealing secrets out of his head. Maybe worse, now that he knew how rare natural legilimency actually was. And that had gotten him to take up occlumency, which had made him far more uncomfortable, at first, than the idea of running off and forgetting about Magical Britain all summer ever had.

Just up and vanishing on them all might not be the most mature thing for him to do, but he didn't need or want anyone tracking his every footstep. Maybe if he gave them all the slip, went off and did something he wanted for a change and came back perfectly fine, they'd even get that message.

"You know what? Fuck it. Just— Fuck it. Go ahead, take off the tracking charms, and tell Hermione and Justin and Tracey and Daphne that I've left early for hols to avoid the crowds at the station — they always stare—" Actually, if not taking the train was an option, he'd probably do it every year, just for that reason. "—and bring my trunk to Ancient House, and whatever else, I'm sure you already worked out all the logistics."

Lyra was grinning even more broadly than before. "Yeah, I've got it covered. Ooh, this is going to be great! I'll meet you at Ancient House tomorrow evening. Zee and Blaise are coming over for dinner so they can see the renovations, she can fill us in on the details of the itinerary then. Here, just stand still for a minute..." She trailed off in favor of muttering spells under her breath, the magic prickling and tickling across his skin.

After considerably more than a minute, she stopped casting. "Right, I think that should do it. Now for the hard part—"

"That wasn't the hard part?"

She shrugged. "No, none of the tracking spells were very complicated, just kind of obscure, and I spent all of first term looking up obscure tracking spells trying to find Sirius. The hard part is getting you from here to Ancient House without leaving any traces. Generally, I'd say you should apparate somewhere with a public floo, floo somewhere else, then apparate from there to Ancient House. But since you can't apparate, we're going to use a portal spell."

"A... portal spell."

"Yeah, or, sometimes people call them gate spells. They're not really popular anymore because they take a while to set up, and they take a lot of ambient magic to power, so they tend to bugger up any other enchantments or enduring charms in the area until the patterns stabilize again, and you have to have access to your destination to put a matching circle there, too. There's
one at Ancient House already, though, so I made a portable one that we can activate from here." She pulled a folded bit of cloth from her pocket, unfurling it to reveal a very complicated rune-scheme stitched into the cloth with what appeared to be...

"Is this gold?"

"Technically, no, it's just cotton thread alchemized to have certain magical properties of gold. Same for the silver and lead and iron ones," she said, pointing at a few different runes.

"This had to have taken forever — how long have you been planning this?"

She shrugged. "I found the one at Ancient House ages ago, but I didn't start working on this until Yule — it's basically the same kind of enchantment as the Doorway we used to get to Zee's wedding."

Harry just stared at her for a moment. "Why?" Because she could apparate. And do that creepy thing he'd seen her practicing in Blaise's memories, where she just disappeared into one shadow and reappeared in a different one.

"Because it's a portable portal? One that's not a huge bloody box that you can't shrink without wrecking the enchantment? I didn't realise I needed a reason to make neat shite," she said, grinning. Right, so, because she'd wanted to see if she could apparate. And it circumvents apparation wards, which is convenient if I want to just pop over from Hogwarts for a couple of hours."

"Er...right. So, I just step through the portal, and that's it?" That...really didn't sound very hard.

"Yep!" she said brightly, popping the p. "Just kill time at Ancient house for like, a day and a half. Cherri's dealing with some stuff in London, but she should be keeping an eye on the property, so you can call her if you need anything."

She led him off the path a bit — they'd wandered well past the end of town and up a hill during the course of their conversation, Harry hadn't really been paying attention to where they were going — just far enough to find a pair of trees she could pin the portal-curtain between. With hairpins, which seemed a bit odd, but he figured maybe she couldn't cast magic on it, or something.

He expected the activation of it to be more...dramatic, than it was. She just ran a finger down the middle of the sheet, and the runes began to glow. After a second, the person-sized oval they outlined dissolved into a sort of swirling vortex of... It wasn't really light. Maybe the same stuff spells were made of, when they were cast? She stepped through it, just for a second, presumably to make sure it was working, then gave him a mad grin and gestured for him to go ahead.

"See you tomorrow, then," he said, grinning back. This was going to be great — a whole summer away from the Dursleys, actually going on a proper holiday, and with Blaise...

§

Lyra waited three seconds after Harry vanished through her portal to deactivate it. She folded the silk carefully and tucked it in a shadow pocket before pinning a much cheaper, much more fragile version — the runes just painted on plain, undyed cotton — in the same place. This one's twin was hanging in an abandoned building in Knockturn Alley, and was specifically designed to channel magic inefficiently enough that it would burst into flames after about thirty seconds, destroying the actual evidence, but still leaving enough of a trace for the aurors to follow to the Knockturn flat, if
they decided Harry's disappearance and presumed death warranted such an investigation. (Which they almost certainly would, he was Harry bloody Potter.) She'd already cleaned the flat itself, using spells specifically designed to foil forensic investigation, to imply that Harry's kidnapper/murderer had tried to cover their tracks behind them.

In order to make it look like he'd been murdered, not just kidnapped, she'd also updated the wards on Ancient House to interrupt all three of the monitoring spells she'd left in place, assuring whoever had cast them that Harry was dead. She assumed the same person had cast them all, since they'd used three very distinct registers for them — she'd had to go to quite a lot of trouble to figure out a way to disrupt them all without destabilizing the wards themselves. The solution she'd finally come up with was a counterintuitive mess, she'd be coming back to fix it as soon as they were settled in California. But it was worth it because practically anywhere else Harry might go, at least one of them would be able to transmit confirmation of his health and wellbeing. Well, until he left their range. They'd almost certainly fail somewhere between here and California, anyway, but this way, they'd all cut out together, which would otherwise only happen if Harry were to die. Presumably the alarm would be raised well before they flew out on Tuesday, after which point it wouldn't really matter if anyone realised he wasn't dead. They wouldn't be able to find him to prove it.

Once the portal had been reduced to little more than ash on the breeze, she worked her way back to the path and down the hill toward Hogsmeade, obscuring the traces of their presence well enough to make it impossible to figure out she had been the one accompanying Harry off past the end of town, but not so much that it would be impossible to tell he'd been brought this way in the first place.

She was so preoccupied by this task (and mentally revising the plan to fake Harry's death) that she completely failed to notice the incoming spell until it struck her from behind, knocking her to the ground with a burning wave of light magic. That the follow-up stunner hit so quickly there had to be two of them, at least, was her last thought before unconsciousness overwhelmed her.

"Guys! Guys, she's waking up!"

Lavender? Lyra pried her eyes open with effort, blinking against the light, her head muzzy enough that, after she remembered what had happened, she thought she must have hit it when she fell. Wait, no, that light spell had knocked her down before they'd stunned her. Her head did hurt, though. Had one of them kicked her or something?

She was in a dark room, surrounded on all sides by spotlight charms, preventing her seeing more than a few feet — and also preventing her escaping into the shadows, she wondered if that was intentional — but there were definitely people moving over there.

People who had tied her up — with actual rope, what the hell?! she thought, as her freeform finishing charm failed to break what she'd initially thought was an incarceroius — and brought her... Where the fuck even were they? Somewhere dusty and dark, but the only feature she could really make out was the battered wooden floor, and that was hardly identifying.

Eris, what's going on?

The goddess declined to answer, which suggested Lyra wasn't going to like whatever was about to happen to her, or the fact that her Patron hadn't warned her to avoid this...whatever this was.

"Good," an older, male voice said. Before she could place it, le Parc stepped into the light, wearing
a scowl and holding his wand at the ready. "Good afternoon, Miss Black," he said.

She snorted, his overly formal French coming off as more affected than intimidating, despite the fact that she was obviously at his mercy, tied on the ground with a weapon trained on her. She couldn't help it, being in danger always made her giddy and excited, and that made her even more prone to antagonising people than usual. Including people who had her at their mercy, tied up on the ground with a weapon trained on her.

"Stupid cunt," he spat, casting a striking hex directly at her face, slamming the back of her head into the floor — guess that explained the headache. Though she had no idea why he would have bothered doing that before she'd come 'round.

"Le Parc," she muttered, struggling to sit up with her hands tied behind her and her legs. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"We're giving you a lesson in manners, cousin," Draco said, joining the older Slytherin in the light.

"Who's we?" She was positive, now, that she'd heard Lavender — she and Draco had been colluding about something for ages. Lyra had entirely forgotten about that, actually, it had been months, and they hadn't done anything.

Cissy's brat declined to answer the question, throwing a nerve-tweaking hex at her instead (pathetic). Someone outside the circle of light followed up with...some kind of nightmare hallucination curse, she thought, there were hundreds of them, she didn't know all the incantations. It didn't do anything, anyway. She definitely recognized Lavender's voice in the wake of it, though.

"I told you, she's some kind of dark creature — dark magic doesn't hurt her."

"And I told you, she's not," Malfoy said. "Father said she's human."

"You...asked Lucy if I'm human? Really, Draco?" That was kind of hilarious, actually.

"Aspernor!" Another wave of burning light magic washed over her. This time she recognized it as the repulsion spell Lupin had taught them to deal with minor dark creatures, doxies and so on, at the beginning of the year. "See," Lavender added when Lyra failed to conceal a wince.

"Shut up, you two," Le Parc ordered them, shoving Draco back into the shadows with Lavender and whoever else. "She's human enough to bleed," he added, throwing a cutting curse at her shoulder to prove it.

She glared up at him, ignoring the pain. She'd had worse. "Where are you going with this, you fucking moron?" Because really, there were only two outcomes, here: either she lived to wreak retribution on this moron, or he killed her. And she was pretty sure he didn't have the balls to kill her.

"Just making certain I have your undivided attention," he said, sounding...almost pleased.

"Because...?"

He smirked, pulling her wand out of his pocket. "Because I wouldn't want you to miss this, of course." He trailed a finger down the length of the dark wood before seizing the tip as well as the handle and unceremoniously snapping it over his knee, tearing the heartstring from its core. The pieces burst into flames as the enchantments worked into the magical instrument were disrupted, the energy they channelled unravelling violently.
"You—" Really, she had no word insulting enough. "You uncultured fucking barbarian!"

It was extremely taboo to even touch another person's wand without their permission. (There was a reason she hadn't told Maïa she was taking the Trace off hers, back at the beginning of the year.) Even in circumstances where it was expected that someone else might touch your wand, like if you were disarmed in a duel, they would never use it outside of a life or death situation, and breaking a wand was...practically unheard of. Yes, Ciardha had made the point that in a real fight, if you wanted to be sure your opponent wouldn't be able to recapture their weapon, breaking it was the only real option, but hardly anyone ever did, preferring to take them as trophies. She knew Meda had snapped Cygnus's wand when Other Bella killed him, but aside from that...

Not that her wand was that special to her, she'd been thinking about getting a new one, anyway — the walnut and dragon he'd just destroyed had been a perfect match when she'd been seven, but she'd noticed when she was looking for heirloom wands for Siri that it wasn't much more responsive to her anymore than most of the other family wands. Presumably for the same reason it physically hurt to cast light magic, now — Eris and the Dark as a whole had become much more a part of her over the past couple of years than they had been in the immediate wake of her Dedication. But she hated being defenseless, and it would take time to get a new one, even one of the heirloom wands that were still at Ancient House.

"Where are you going with this?" she asked, her voice as cold and even as she could make it when she was this angry. Because there were only so many ways this could play out, especially if they were serious enough to break her wand. "I doubt Darling Draco and his little girlfriend signed up for murder."

"Murder?" Lavender repeated.

"You can't possibly expect me to let this little...incident pass un-challenged."

"It amazes me, your arrogance," le Parc said, throwing another cutting curse at her, this one leaving dozens of small slashes across her chest and face. "To threaten us even now?"

Well, she could have offered to pretend all this never happened if they released her right fucking now, but somehow she doubted they'd take her up on it. Plus, she'd just said the first thing that she thought of, and trying to de-escalate a situation was never the first thing that she thought of.

"Er, maybe we shouldn't..."

Draco's hesitant objection — perhaps he wasn't as stupid as he generally acted — was cut off by someone, an older girl, casting a bone-breaker at her. It hit her in the leg, her left femur cracking with a sound like a gunshot.

Lyra screamed. Cutting curses were one thing, but she hated broken bones. Ow, ow, fuckity OW.

Le Parc gave her a sinister smile as a pummeling curse struck her from the opposite direction, bruises blossoming under her robes. If she hadn't already realised they weren't fucking around...ERIS, if these idiots beat me to death because you couldn't be arsed to warn me...

"Stop it!" Lavender shrieked. "I didn't help you just so you could— could kill her! I don't like her any more than you do, but you said we were just going to teach her a lesson!"

"This is a lesson," another older Slytherin said — Rowle, she thought his name was. He stepped out of the shadows to give her a hard kick in the gut. She curled inward reflexively, screaming again as she unintentionally moved her broken leg. "A lesson about what happens to blood traitors
"Line theft?" she coughed, trying desperately to get some air back into her lungs. She wasn't a blood traitor, either, but that was more debatable, given the politics of the last generation. The fact that she was a Black was not.

"Triterrum demergunt!" another voice cast. As water filled her lungs, choking what little air she'd managed to recover out of her, the girl added, "Your mother killed my parents like this..." Just as she was on the verge of passing out, the water vanished. "Made me watch as she cast it again..." She gasped for air, but the process began again almost immediately. "And again..."

The third time, she actually did pass out before the suffocating water vanished. She was revived with a lightning hex, her muscles twitching uncontrollably, pulling at her broken leg and the ropes around her wrists.

"...can't actually kill her!" she heard Draco saying, somewhere out of sight. "Mother would kill me..."

"Mummy might kill you anyway," Lyra managed to rasp out. "If I don't do it first."

"Still so arrogant... I marvel, truly," le Parc said, as someone — Rowle? — cast half a dozen caloris jinxes at her, each one burning as though someone had touched the end of a hot poker to her skin. She flinched. It wasn't unfamiliar — it was one of Auntie Walburga's favorites, actually — but some of them had fallen in rather sensitive places.

"Unless you really do kill me, there's nothing you can do to me that hasn't already been done," she spat. "By wizards more powerful and far more experienced than you insufferably moronic children! I will—"

"Crucio!" the same witch who had almost drowned her shouted, the curse hitting Lyra in the same shoulder le Parc had cut. She screamed as every nerve burned, but it wasn't anywhere near as bad as it could have been. She could still perceive the passage of time, for one thing, and Draco interrupted after only a second or two.

"Morgan! What are you — That's Unforgivable!"

Lyra giggled, panting for air. The moment of absolute bliss that followed the Cruciatus being lifted (along with the growing excitement that would...probably be fear, if she weren't herself) made it really hard to stay quite as furious as she'd been before it was cast, and he just sounded so outraged.

"Fucking freak," someone muttered from the dark — the one who'd broken her leg, she thought. Lyra ignored her. That she was some kind of freak was nearly as widely-held an opinion as that she was insane, and she was well aware that being cruciated didn't improve normal people's moods.

"Nice try, Morgan. Victoria, right?" A seventh-year Hufflepuff, that would explain why she hadn't recognized her voice. She'd hardly talked to the older Puffs at all. "But you have to mean your Unforgivables," she said over Victoria slapping Draco and cursing him for revealing her identity. Not that Lyra was exactly likely to turn her over to the aurors for casting a fucking pain curse on her (and rather ineptly, too). She'd much rather deal with them herself than report any of them for this little adventure, actually, though there was, she supposed, no way they could know that.

"Hatred isn't enough, especially when you hate Other Bella, not me—"

"Fuck, doesn't she ever shut up?" Rowle complained, cutting her off with the same kiddie silencing
charm she used so often.

She cracked it immediately — that one was vulnerable to her finishing spell, unlike the actual physical ropes they'd used to tie her up like fucking muggles. (That was just cheating, seriously!) But before she could say something to the effect that she wasn't a fucking child, le Parc said, "Don't worry, Morgan, she won't remember to tell anyone."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means there are ways to keep you quiet without killing you." He threw another striking hex at her face, apparently just for the hell of it. "Go ahead and do whatever you like to her, we'll just obliviate her after, and she won't be able to tell anyone anything."

Obliviate her? Oh.

She hadn't even considered that option, honestly. Mostly because she knew that they wouldn't be able to. But obviously they didn't. And unless le Parc was a hell of a legilimens — which he wasn't, she'd have felt him trying to get into her head by now if he was a legilimens at all — he wouldn't know his charm had had about as much effect on her as a nightmare curse.

Without killing you still covered an awful lot of very painful ground, but she also kind of doubted they had the balls to do anything permanently or even semi-permanently debilitating, like putting out her eyes, or something, and only Lavender seemed willing to use light magic — where had she gone, anyway? Lyra hadn't heard her say anything for...a while, now...

So yeah, she was going to stand by her earlier statement: there was nothing they could do that Cygnus hadn't already topped.

"Wait — I thought we were teaching her a lesson about respecting her betters!" Draco objected. "If she doesn't remember, then..."

"I'm sure she's smart enough to put it together, the reasons she's been punished, even if she doesn't remember the event. Isn't that right, genius?" le Parc explained, kicking her left foot.

She bit her lip to avoid screaming. "Not according to my father..." she muttered.

No one heard her — Rowle had come forward into the light to give her a sadistic grin. "Well, in that case," he said, drowning her out, "there are a few things I've been wanting to try..."

Was— Was that a transfiguration? What was he— He was conjuring *aqua fortis*?! Okay, maybe semi-permanently debilitating was on the table. *Fuck*, this was going to hurt...

Some time later — Lyra didn't know how long, she kept fading out of consciousness and getting shocked back awake — Lavender came bursting into...wherever they were.

"Guys, we need to get out of here!"

Draco was quickest to react. "Why? What's going on?"

"I don't know, but there are aurors in town, they're sending everyone back to the school, if we don't want to get caught, we need to go now, just— Holy shit, what did you do?" Lyra didn't have the energy at the moment to laugh at her one-time roommate's reaction to her current appearance, but it was actually pretty funny, her hands flying to her mouth in shocked horror.

Morgan had objected to Rowle's nitric acid almost immediately — which was also kind of funny,
because drowning her and using the fucking Cruciatu were much worse in Lyra's book — so the acid burns weren't too extensive, not as bad as when she'd exploded that cauldron of half-completed burn paste in her own face. (Probably still looked terrible, though.)

Instead, they'd given her a fairly serious physical beating — almost as bad the time Cygnus had hit her with bludgeoning curses until she'd started coughing up blood — chopped her hair off with cutting curses, which meant she'd gotten slightly scalped in places — plus one had missed, nearly taking out her left eye — and the Bletchley bitch — she was the one who'd broken her leg — had decided to follow up on that by breaking every bone in her right hand and wrist. Individually. She was probably going to have to have them all removed and re-grown, and she fucking hated Skelegro.

"So we got a little carried away," Morgan said, completely unrepentantly. Bitch.

"It's nothing permanent," Bletchley added. Which was true. She'd probably be healed in a day or two, though there was no way in hell she was taking the train like this. "Obliviate her, le Parc, and let's get out of here."

He cast the charm as the others started to clean up, removing and destroying traces of their magical and physical presence. It washed through her, breaking against Eris's protections like all other mind magic, but dragging at her mind enough to pull her back into unconsciousness yet again.

Though that might have just been exhaustion, honestly. She'd lost track of how many times she'd passed out already.

Chapter End Notes

We're using Lysandra's headcanon here, so Brittany (the province in the northwest of France) is part of Magical Britain.

This chapter has been a pain in the arse. Over the course of writing these three scenes, I wrote and deleted (or rather, cut and saved to maybe use later) another 6500 words. Seriously, every one of them got re-written at least once. Also like 8000 words of Bella hanging out with werewolves over the summer — Mikael is Fenrir Greyback's given name. He and Bella were kind of bros once upon a time. This should surprise exactly no one.

Because focus? What focus?

—Leigha
Sunday morning dawned warm and bright. Entirely too warm and bright for Severus's tastes, even if the child he had sworn to protect wasn't missing — despite Dumbledore's certainty and the rumors already racing through the school, Severus was not convinced that Harry Potter was truly dead — and the one person most likely to know anything about it lying unconscious in the hospital wing, recovering from what seemed to have been a spectacular beating, though her assailants had stopped short of anything permanently damaging.

Well, she might be conscious by now. Poppy had said, when she turned him away, that the aurors needed to question her before anyone else was allowed to speak to her. As though they were likely to get anything out of her. Aurors, on the whole, were unwilling to throw pain-inducing magic at fourteen-year-old potential witnesses, or threaten to poison them if they didn't cooperate. Or, if it proved necessary, actually poison them and refuse the antidote until they'd cooperated.

Severus wasn't.

Not when the life of Lily's son was on the line.

He would simply ask her first, but she knew as well as he did that he would use more extreme methods of interrogation if he felt it necessary — even the unspoken threat might be enough to get something more from her than she would tell the Aurors. Some confirmation that the Aurors were wrong, and Dumbledore's monitoring spells had somehow been fooled — that Severus was right, and Potter wasn't really dead.

The Aurors believed, based on the scene, that both Potter and Black had been assaulted at the same place — taken by surprise, perhaps, as there was no evidence of an altercation at the spot where their paths diverged — after which several of the attackers dragged Black off to the Shrieking Shack, presumably to conceal her body and give them more time to get away, while one of them continued on with Potter to a place where, they were certain, a gate spell had been used to whisk him off to Knockturn Alley.

That trail ended there, as they apparently set fire to the building before apparating or flying or even just walking away, their trail lost among thousands. No one had seen anything, because of course they hadn't, it was bloody Knockturn. Similarly, those who had remained with Black waited until a lookout alerted them that Potter and Black had been discovered missing, then lost themselves in the crowd of Hogwarts students headed back to Hogwarts, probably disguised as students themselves. The wards did not recognize anyone entering who was not a professor, an Auror, or currently enrolled as a student, which meant they had managed to slip away somewhere along the way back, perhaps using a portkey to depart from one of the carriages on the way up to the school.

Severus had his own theory.

He had been the first person alerted to the situation. Miss Granger had found him when Bellatrix failed to show up to turn back with her at three o'clock (and after Miss Granger had failed to find her in her second iteration of the period of time during which she had to have gone missing). At first, Severus had thought little of it. Had in fact dismissed her concern. Because, out of all the students at Hogwarts, Bellatrix was not only the most capable of taking care of herself, but also the
most likely to decide that she could not wait another twenty-four hours to run off to London or Edinburgh if it struck her fancy, and quite frankly, he couldn't care less.

So Miss Granger had turned back again, wasting their last chance to head off the disaster. He had had a time turner of his own, a relic from the days when the senior Bellatrix had used him as a test subject for that project, but the junior Bellatrix had broken into his office after she realised he must have one, to be filling in for Lupin and also teaching his own lessons, and had somehow managed to render it non-functional in her efforts to study it. It could have been worse — she could have blown up the dungeons. And at the time Severus had seen it as a foolproof excuse to tell Dumbledore to bugger off when he asked him to fill in for the wolf, so he hadn't put up much of a fuss about it, or made any efforts to repair it. (Though he had gotten Filius and Ashe to re-work his wards.)

He therefore held himself at least partially to blame for the disaster, which of course they hadn't yet known was an impending disaster.

Granger had knocked on his door again only seconds (and/or eight hours) after she disappeared, looking uncharacteristically grim. "I can't find Harry, either."

"What does Potter have to do with anything?" he'd snapped, far more interested in the article he had only just picked up again upon her second interruption than in the interruption itself.

"Lyra said she had something to talk to him about this morning — she implied it was some House Black matter — and they wandered off toward the Shrieking Shack together, and—"

That was the point at which Severus started to get a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, anxiety worming its way to the forefront of his consciousness. "Potter was in Hogsmeade?"

"Well, yes — Professor McGonagall said it was okay, since Sirius is definitely in France and probably innocent, anyway."

Because no one had told Minerva that the senior Bellatrix was on the loose. So far as Severus knew, no one had told anyone. He only knew because Dumbledore had wanted his 'professional opinion' on the 'events' — read: massacre — outlined in the Aurors' preliminary report.

(In Severus's 'professional opinion' — it always irritated him slightly when Dumbledore referred to Severus's time as a Death Eater in such a way as to imply that he didn't constantly judge him for the mistakes of his misspent youth — a couple of complete morons had underestimated the Blackheart despite his warnings, allowing her an opportunity to free herself and gain control of a knife (through some method as yet undetermined). And after that, well... Anyone who'd fought on either side of the war could have predicted what would happen next. Quite frankly Severus was surprised she'd left any survivors at all, though those who had escaped had thought she'd been wounded, so she might have had incentive to choose the most direct untraceable route off the island: heading straight for the shore and transfiguring a bloody boat for herself.)

That had been two days ago. There had been no sightings of her since. The DLE had yet to determine exactly how they were going to handle the news — so far they'd managed to keep it quiet. Severus suspected they might try to cover it up entirely, to avoid a similar panic to the one surrounding her asinine cousin's escape last summer.

He'd reached for the tracking spell he'd laid on the boy — not that it worked on a target within Hogwarts, of course, but after he'd run away from Petunia over the summer Severus had thought it best to have some way to find the boy outside of the school — only to find it...missing. Or rather, deliberately untethered, broken in such a way that he wouldn't notice until he made to use
it. *That* was the point at which anxiety became fear.

Dumbledore had been out of the castle — something to do with the Wizengamot, he thought, but that didn't stop Severus from entering his office to look for one of the trackers he had enchanted to find the boy. Their anchors were, he believed, more subtle and esoteric than the one Severus had used, it was possible that they hadn't been detected or removed. He never got as far as looking for it, however, because as soon as he entered the room, he was assaulted by alarm-bells whistling so loudly and shrilly he was surprised no one had heard them even *through* the sound-dampening wards.

All three of the indicators which were meant to track Potter's general health and well-being were reporting...nothing.

Severus thought he could be excused for calling the Aurors at that point. Dumbledore had been rather annoyed with him when he'd finally returned from London — even with *Harry Potter* missing, he would have preferred to keep the investigation in-house — but that was largely overshadowed by the fact that Dumbledore's own enchantments, designed so that no matter where Potter went at least one would still function despite interference from various wards, were telling them that Potter was *dead*.

Dumbledore had been...well, after the initial shock and disbelief had passed, Severus didn't think he'd ever seen the man so close to losing control, horror and grief and loss and guilt nearly overwhelming him. (*He* had not for a moment considered that the boy might *not* be dead.)

It hadn't taken long to find the junior Bellatrix, unconscious in the Shrieking Shack, covered with spell damage, including traces of an Obliviation Charm and the Crucius Curse, the broken pieces of her wand left lying beside her like so much rubbish. Potter (or his body), however, eluded the search party. It was actually another Auror squad, tracking the source of a suspicious fire in Knockturn Alley, who had put them onto the trail, following the path of a gate spell to an unassuming spot half a mile up the trail from the turn-off which led to the Shack, the traces of Potter's passage and that of his abductor nearly — but not *entirely* — obscured.

Severus hadn't had time to closely examine the scene before Poppy had summoned him back to the school. Light healing spells were doing more harm than good for Bellatrix, and Poppy's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy regarding the illegal and/or idiotic circumstances under which students were injured made her loath to send the girl to St Mungo's. *Their* healers were legally bound to report such things as fourteen-year-old black mages.

By the time Bellatrix was sufficiently repaired that Poppy saw fit to release him, Severus had managed to calm himself somewhat — had managed to think through the situation more rationally. If the Blackheart had taken Potter, Severus was certain she would either have left his body for them to find, or else the monitoring spells would still be reporting him as alive, giving them false hope that they might find him even as she slowly tortured him to death for his involvement in the Dark Lord's fall.

He had also, in that time, had an opportunity to closely examine the remnants of the spells cast on the junior Bellatrix, and (despite their attempts to conceal the fact) had come to the conclusion that at least five or six casters had been involved. Given the nature of the curses they had used, aiming for pain rather than debilitation or permanent injury, and the inexpert casting of some of the more advanced spells — neither the Waterboarding Curse nor the Obliviation Charm should leave *that* many traces, assuming the caster knew what they were doing — he was inclined to say that *her* attackers had been students. Dark Powers knew she'd had something like this coming.

However, this strongly suggested that Potter's disappearance and Bellatrix's abduction were
unrelated events, or at least not perpetrated by the same individuals.

Given the little he'd seen of the scene of Potter's disappearance — *not* murder, there was no point in carefully removing all of the tracking charms on him if his abductor was just going to kill him — he had developed an altogether more absurd, and paradoxically more likely theory.

Dumbledore, the Aurors, and soon quite possibly all of Magical Britain would believe Potter dead, resulting in nation-wide mourning and political upheaval as Dumbledore's failure to protect the national treasure that was the Boy Who Lived shook his followers' faith in him. The method used to abduct him relied on complex, archaic enchantments, and the collateral damage had involved a building burning down.

The whole situation had Bellatrix *Black* written all over it.

(The fact that Dumbledore and Filius insisted that it was *impossible* to disrupt all three of the monitoring charms at once without actually breaking them — any spell that would mask one or two would interfere with spells to mask the others — really only made it more likely that she was involved.)

And as soon as he was allowed to speak to her, he *would* have confirmation.

§

"Enter," he called, in response to a firm rapping at the door of his office.

A small tug of freeform magic opened it to reveal a very unhappy-looking Nymphadora Tonks. She flopped into a chair without being invited and sat there with her lank brown hair and worried frown, apparently waiting for him to say something.

"Am I to take it that you and your fellow Aurors have concluded your interrogation, Miss Tonks?" He'd asked Poppy to floo him when they'd finished, but he wouldn't be surprised if she'd delegated the task to Nymphadora — he *had* been rather short with her, earlier.

"*Auror* Tonks," she corrected him halfheartedly. "She says she doesn't remember anything, and Pomfrey says there were traces of an obliviation on her, but she wouldn't let our legilimens in to look for anything salvageable."

Severus snorted. Before he could say something disparaging about the Aurors' interrogation strategies, however, she cut him off.

"Oh, don't give me that, I know she's lying. I was there when she woke up. She didn't ask what happened, or why she was in hospital, just went for her wand to check the time. Stopped when she remembered it got snapped, which she *obviously* remembers, because she didn't ask what the fuck we'd done with it." That was...a surprisingly good bit of deduction on Tonks's part, Severus thought. "And I'm pretty sure she knows what happened to Harry, she wasn't nearly concerned enough, when we told her he was missing, presumed dead. I thought she'd be furious — she considers him her responsibility, you know." Severus tried not to feel too relieved as his suspicion was confirmed, or at least corroborated. "And Pomfrey said she's likely still in shock, but... I just don't know why she's lying, or what to do about it."

"I believe standard protocol states that you ought to inform your Senior when you need advice on interrogating a witness, not your former Potions Professor," he snapped, eager to have done with this conversation so that he might go interrogate the girl himself.

"Fuck you, Snape."
"Some other time," he replied automatically — the only other person who routinely used that phrase with him was Aurora Sinistra.

Tonks pinked slightly at that — her hair as well as her face — which was vaguely amusing, but certainly nothing he cared about at the moment. "Oh, shut up, you know what I... It's just...she's family. And on top of... Do you, um, know what happened on Mann?"

"If you're referring to the escape of your favorite Auntie, then yes, I am aware."

She sighed. "Of course you are. We're not supposed to tell anyone. Not even people who really, really ought to know. Like my mum, for example. And... They showed us a bunch of memories from the war, so we know what we're up against, and if she decides to go after her... But she doesn't even know she's escaped. I just don't know what to do."

Severus rolled his eyes. He sincerely doubted Andromeda Tonks would tell anyone that her daughter had broken secrecy to warn her that her murderous ex-sister was loose. He also rather seriously doubted she hadn't taken precautions as soon as she'd realised Bellatrix was no longer in Azkaban — surely she would have been able to predict her impending escape as easily as Severus. "Do I look like your bloody mentor, Tonks?"

"Yeah, well, I can't ask him, he'd say to—" She cut herself off rather abruptly, realization dawning on her face. Something along the lines that Moody would tell her she owed her loyalty to the Aurors, and she clearly didn't want to hear that, he expected. She nodded, just once. "You're really good at this advice thing, you know."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." It wasn't as though he'd made that comment with the intent of her drawing the obvious conclusion about her divided loyalties. He simply had no desire whatsoever to play therapist for the conflicted Auror, especially now, when he had much more important problems on his mind. Such as the whereabouts of Lily's missing child. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have business elsewhere."

"Er, yeah, right. Sorry. We're done talking to Lyra, Pomfrey said to tell you..."

§

Bellatrix was sleeping when Severus arrived in the Hospital Wing — or pretending to do so rather convincingly. She stayed still and silent, eyes closed and breathing regular for the several minutes it took for him to raise proper privacy palings around them.

He paused for a moment to summon the appropriate emotion. "Levo hilaritudo."

"Aaah!" The girl writhed in pain under the unexpected light magic, her eyes flickering open after a second or two.

"Where is he?"

"What the fuck, Your Honor?!"

"Where is he?" Severus repeated.

"Where is who, you sadistic, spiteful bastard?"

"Potter. What have you done with him?"

"Er... Nothing?"
"Did the Cheering Charm not indicate to you that this is a situation in which it would be best not to test my patience? Because I assure you, it was intended to."

"I don't remember anything, I was obliviated."

Ha. "And I'm the bloody Queen. What. Have. You. Done?"

"What do you think I've done?"

"Harry Potter is missing. The monitoring spells on him all went silent at once indicating that he's dead. The trail goes cold at a building in Knockturn Alley that burned down earlier this afternoon. You were ambushed, taken from a point where your path and Potter's apparently diverged for no obvious reason, while he ostensibly continued on in the presence of someone who obscured the traces of their passage just enough that they would certainly be found, and yet rendered unidentifiable. The authorities are in a panic — they suspect your alter-ego, but then, they don't know there are two of you..." He wasn't going to tell them, either, unless she really had done something to endanger Potter's life. He was still cognizant of the agreement they'd made at the beginning of the school year. But she didn't need to know that.

"So, what, you think I kidnapped Harry, then ambushed and tortured myself?"

"Were it not for the fact that Miss Granger alerted me to the situation when you failed to appear to turn back with her this afternoon, I would not consider it to be out of the question. But no, I think you kidnapped Potter, laid a false trail, and were ambushed while backtracking and obscuring the traces of your initial passage."

She pouted at him, looking uncharacteristically pathetic. Whoever had abducted her really had done a decent job of working her over. (Albeit with spells which should have been easily reversed, if this Bellatrix weren't somehow even more thoroughly steeped in the Dark than her counterpart.) Probably better than the Unspeakables had managed with the senior Bellatrix before she'd escaped. Severus had only dealt with the more serious wounds — burns, the deepest cutting-curse slashes, and those broken bones which weren't beyond salvaging — before returning to his analysis of the crime scene, leaving the girl to deal with the more superficial cuts and abrasions herself. Poppy had been annoyed about that, but she couldn't force him to waste time and energy on injuries that were cosmetic at best, and she was perfectly capable of vanishing bone fragments and administering Skele-gro and bruise balm without him.

"How the fuck do you do that, just fucking know what I did? Because I know you're not reading my mind, and it's just— Really? You couldn't even let me have one day to enjoy it?"

He almost laughed at that. How could he look at the results of one of her ridiculous plots and instantly deduce that she was behind it? Years of practice. Years of staging and cleaning up crime scenes, years of unraveling the plots of his Slytherins, years of studying her older counterpart, trying to understand what passed for logic in her mind out of sheer self-preservation. "That depends entirely on what you have done with Potter."

"So, if I tell you, you won't tell anyone?"

"That depends entirely on what you have done with Potter," he repeated, growing more annoyed by the second.

She sighed, but capitulated shockingly easily. "He's fine. He's at Ancient House. He agreed to go on holiday with Sirius and me. Don't tell anyone."
"He agreed to— Where are you going?"

"Abroad."

He cast the Cheering Charm on her again, simply to vent his irritation — though he was immensely reassured by the fact that she was openly discussing Potter as though he was still alive. Bellatrix simply wasn't subtle enough to toy with him by pretending that Potter wasn't dead. Not this one, at any rate.

She winced. "We're going abroad, travelling as muggles. He'll be using an assumed name for anonymity so Not-Professor Riddle can't track him down. I'm not telling anyone where we're going, so you might as well stop with the light magic, but you have to admit it'll be a hell of a lot more difficult to get at him if no one can find him than if he were just sitting in Surrey relying on that stupid blood ward."

Well, Severus couldn't actually argue with that. Anonymity was a hell of a protection — probably safer than sending him back to Petunia, even if the blood ward Dumbledore had enacted wasn't almost entirely useless.

(He had not been pleased with the memories he'd seen when he'd asked the muggle twat about Bellatrix's little visit. Which of course she'd had no recollection of whatsoever. Severus's presence, however, had made her think of Lily, and then her son, and then the abuses she and her husband and the fat pig they called a child had visited upon him over the past ten years. If Bellatrix wasn't already clearly addressing the situation — he assumed for reasons related to the Blacks' responsibilities toward Sirius's godson — he would have had to take steps to deal with it himself.)

Considering whether the Blacks would challenge Dumbledore for custody, however, brought him to the...slightly horrifying and yet entirely hilarious thought that... "Does Potter know you faked his death? Or...does he just think he's going on holiday?"

Bella shrugged. "I'm sure he'll figure it out...eventually. By the time we come back to school for sure."

So, no. The entire student body was already whispering about what might have happened to delay their return home, rumors of Potter's death or Bellatrix's or both, spreading like wildfire. It was only a matter of time until the entire bloody country was looking for him, alive or dead, and he had no idea. Severus stifled an entirely inappropriate bubble of amusement.

Encouraging Bellatrix could only end poorly.

"And I'm certain it was entirely necessary to foil Dumbledore's monitoring spells in order to do this." Because while it made sense to remove the tracking charms on Potter in order to secure their anonymity, the monitoring charms would not help them locate him, but simply reassured them that he was alive and well.

"Well, no, but Trelawney did predict that he was going to die, so."

So he should be pleased she hadn't actually killed him, Severus supposed. Though he would still be demanding proof of the boy's wellbeing before he left.

"Wait, did you say Dumbledore's monitoring spells?"

"Whose did you think they were?"

She shrugged. "I didn't really think about it at all. But if it's Dumbledore... Oh, this is going to be
even better than I expected!” Her delighted grin was rendered lop-sided and grotesque by bruises and bandages, but she was unmistakably pleased as she realised the potential consequences of her little prank.

"I don't suppose it would do any good to point out that causing an entire nation to mourn the loss of a celebrity figure and publicly embarrassing the Supreme Mugwump when he turns out not to be dead, causing the destabilization of the current political status quo and making Magical Britain even more of a farce in the eyes of the world, is unreasonable on an entirely different scale than giving the whole school a babbling potion."

"Um... Does that mean you're going to tell him? Because I didn't think you actually supported the Light. And I didn't do anything bad to Harry, so..."

He glowered at her. His involvement in politics was almost entirely non-existent — the only bloc he had publicly expressed support for in the years since the war was the Nexus, whose primary goal was to create a House of Commons for the Wizengamot — but it was hardly a secret that his ideals were still more closely aligned with Narcissa and the Allied Dark than Dumbledore and the Light. It was also not a secret that he had only avoided Azkaban on Dumbledore's testimony regarding his role as a spy. He held no love for the old goat, and had made efforts to build up an independent reputation of legitimacy for himself over the past decade, but it was not out of the question that if Dumbledore's star waned Severus would be dragged down with him.

"I don't. But I made a vow to serve Dumbledore and his interests until the Dark Lord is dead, which would lead to difficulties if he were to realise I had known this information and failed to act to prevent the destabilisation of his political position."

"A, that was a really stupid thing to vow. B, weren't you a spy? I mean, it's not like I'm going to tell him. Dora did corroborate your claim that I accidentally burnt down a building in Knockturn, and I don't really need a felony arson charge to deal with at the moment."

It continually astounded Severus how very bad this Bellatrix was at maintaining any semblance of control she might have over any given situation, especially in comparison to her counterpart. At the very least, he would think she ought to recognize when she was handing over significant leverage to someone she had no reason to trust. "An excellent point, Bellatrix. If I were to reveal your actions to the authorities right now, not only would I be reducing a potential risk to myself, but also ensuring you are safely removed from a position to retaliate."

She frowned. "I think you're underestimating Meda. Plus the House of Black still has some influence, and I'm not stupid enough to leave actual proof that I did it, and you're a legilimens, so no one is going to trust any memories of this conversation that you provide to the Wizengamot. Dealing with getting an arson charge dismissed would definitely ruin my holiday, but I highly doubt I would end up 'safely removed from a position to retaliate.' Not to mention, even if I did, Eris's reach is far greater than mine. She was unusually enthusiastic about this whole Trelawney thing, I'm guessing this is why."

Well, fuck.

Being a black mage was just cheating, as far as Severus was concerned. For a brief moment he considered dedicating himself to one of the other Powers just to even the playing field, but that would be absurd.

"I could still convince Dumbledore not to invest himself in publicly confirming Potter's death—"

(Possibly — he had already advised waiting until the aurors had independently confirmed the evidence of his monitoring charms. Albus had dismissed the advice on the grounds that the rumors
would soon grow entirely out of control. But there was no reason Bellatrix needed to know that.

"—and frankly I see no reason not to do so. As I understand it, your Patron has no objection to my attempting to mitigate the damage you cause, so long as I do not act against you directly."

Granted, he was largely extrapolating from the lack of retaliation in the wake of his circumventing the Tower of Babel prank and a few random comments Lily had made about the Powers nearly two decades past, but his working theory was that Chaos found conflict far more appealing than the actual dissolution of social order. After all, complex societies offered far more opportunities to upset order than did simple ones. 'Winning' the eternal battle between Chaos and Order would be boring. Therefore, so long as he didn't prevent Bella from acting entirely, Eris would not mind his opposing her plans. In fact, he suspected she might find it more amusing than if he'd stepped aside and allowed her Dedicate free rein.

The girl pouted at him again, suggesting that he was sufficiently correct to warrant negotiation. "Fine. What do you want?"

Fair question — what did he want? Something other than limiting the disruptions she caused, he knew better than to ask the impossible of her. "Of course I will require confirmation of Potter's health and wellbeing," he began, simply to give himself more time to consider. He hadn't been angling for a bribe, but since it was now on the table...

"That's it? Done. But only if you promise not to tell anyone anything about my role in Harry's disappearance."

"No, that's not it, that's simply a prerequisite for any deal whatsoever — without proof of life, we have no grounds for negotiation."

"Ugh, fine. So what do you actually want, then?"

"You are aware, are you not, that the Department of Mysteries will be demanding the return of Miss Granger's time turner when she returns to her parents' home tomorrow?"

"Yeah, she's really annoyed about it. Even though I promised I'd make her a new one, I just need to get the enchantment schematics from Other Bella."

Severus refused to be distracted by the horrifying idea that the junior Bellatrix was somehow in contact with her older, more homicidally dangerous counterpart. "Well, until that happy day, my leverage over you seems on the verge of expiration, does it not?"

Bella's eyes grew wide as she realised where he was going with this. "No, you can't mean—"

"How much do you want to see Dumbledore publicly humiliated, Bellatrix? How much do you want to see the political instability which will inevitably erupt in the wake of this little deception unfold?"

"You are so fucking spiteful, you know that? You have to want to see the Dark make a comeback just as much as I do, I refuse to believe you don't."

"But I can live with the status quo. Have been, for years, in fact. You, on the other hand... Let's just say that as long as something hurts you more than it hurts me, it's worth it." He cast the Cheering
Charm at her again, just to emphasize the point. It was rather uncomfortable for him, and ridiculously difficult for such a juvenile effect, but it didn't hurt him, not like it clearly did her.

She winced again, scowling at him. "Stop it, I get it, okay. But I'm not going to have a time turner next year, making me mark all the bloody essays you assign is completely unreasonable."

That actually startled a laugh out of him. "You're concerned about something being reasonable? You? Let me remind you that you just faked the death of a national hero as part of a prank on your bloody Divination teacher. I manage to mark all of the essays I set without time travel, you spend significantly less time in class, ergo you should have plenty of free time to mark the first- through fifth-years'."

"Not if you keep assigning extra essays just because you don't have to mark them," she grumbled, which he took as an encouraging sign. "And Harry's only a national hero because no one in this bloody timeline has the slightest bit of common sense."

Severus strongly doubted whether people in her original timeline had had much more common sense. "One essay per class per fortnight for the first four years, one essay per week for the fifth-years," he offered. That was the schedule he'd kept to before this year.

"One per month for the firsties and second-years," she countered, pouting again. "There's going to be at least twice as many of them as the third- and fourth-years."

"Done. Provided you also provide proof that Potter is alive and well. And in exchange, I will tell no one about your role in his mysterious disappearance."

He extended a hand for her to shake. She crossed her arms stubbornly. "I want more than that. I know you got around Dumbledore's orders not to let us know Professor Wolf Wolf is a werewolf."

That was because Dumbledore was an overly-trusting old man, and "Professor Wolf Wolf" a potential danger to the students. He'd had no intention to attempt to circumvent his side of this deal. It wouldn't even matter after Dumbledore announced Potter's death, which he was bound to do soon — at that point, he would hold Severus equally responsible for failing to report her in time to stop him. He repeated the offer, adding, "I further swear that I will be bound by the spirit rather than the letter of this agreement."

"Fine. I swear that I will immediately provide a means to confirm Harry Potter's health and wellbeing as of this moment, and mark your stupid essays under the terms discussed, upholding my side of our agreement in good faith, with no intention to deceive."

She took his hand, a spark of magic shivering between them in recognition of their agreement. It wasn't a properly binding contract or vow, but it did hold some significance — if either of them broke their word, the other would know.

Then she stuck her tongue out at him before demanding, "Send Blaise to come see me."

"Surely you have not already forgotten you promised immediate proof of life."

"I said I'd provide a means, I didn't say I'd provide it to you. Severus's eyes narrowed into perhaps the fiercest glare he'd ever given anyone. Bellatrix giggled. "You couldn't go, anyway, you're not keyed into the wards at Ancient House. Blaise is. You can illegalize him when he comes back, and you'll have your proof."

"Very well, then," Severus ground out. Not that he actually thought, at this point, that Potter wasn't exactly where she claimed. Her offer of proof was most likely legitimate, if only
because if it wasn't he would almost certainly discover that fact before she was able to escape Poppy's watchful eye and find a wand with which to defend herself from his wrath.

"Right. Are we done, then?"

He considered whether there was anything else he needed to discuss with her, taking a moment to calm himself. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me who cast the Cruciatius on you."

"I don't remember. I was obliviated, you see." She managed to say that much completely straight-faced before smirking and adding, "Besides, I really don't think it should count. I mean, if you're going to get a life sentence for an Unforgivable, you should at least have to cast the Unforgivable properly to earn it." Severus had to raise an eyebrow at that — the senior Bellatrix had said something very similar when she'd been teaching his group of recruits the Unforgivables. "So no, I'm not."

"Detention, after dinner, first day of next term, for being out of bounds in violation of your punishment for practicing Runic Casting back in November." It might have been petty of him, but he felt it was warranted, given her little semantic evasion a moment ago. Not to mention, he was quite certain she was going to punish her attackers herself at the earliest opportunity, which would undoubtedly be more trouble for him to deal with. He smirked at her before rubbing it in just the tiniest bit more: "Now we're done."

She scowled at him. "I hate you, Your Honor."

"What is it the kids are saying these days? Ah, yes: if lies make you happy."

He grinned, then tore down his privacy spells and strode away before she could come up with a suitably scathing response, his mood considerably improved. He wouldn't feel fully reassured until Zabini reported back from checking on Potter, of course, but he never had entirely believed the boy was dead, and if he had to keep that knowledge to himself and let Dumbledore twist, well, it was hardly the worst thing a Bellatrix had ever convinced him to do.

(Not even close.)

Hermione couldn't help but wonder if this was it. If this was the day Lyra went too far, and she just couldn't make excuses for her anymore.

Because, it did sort of feel... She didn't know. Like she were on the edge of something, that odd tense anticipation in that moment before stepping over. It had been looming over her all night, ever since the Professors had finally found Lyra and whispers had started shooting across the school.

She wasn't worried about Harry, not really. Lyra might be insane, but she wouldn't hurt him, and she had said she would be taking him on holiday. That was probably all this was, she'd probably just convinced him to leave early for...some reason. Harry, of course, should have known better than to just disappear on them all, but Hermione knew better than anyone how reasonable and convincing Lyra could make the most terrible ideas sound.

That didn't mean there weren't consequences, though, and this was... She could tell that this was going to be much bigger than Harry could possibly have imagined, he would never have left if— People were saying he was dead!

If he came back within a couple of hours, proved himself to be alive and well, it would just be another stupid Hogwarts rumor, less memorable than his disappearance into the Chamber of Secrets last year. But if he didn't...
She'd had trouble sleeping, even more than she usually did, her brain absolutely refusing to shut the hell up. She couldn't even say what she'd been thinking, exactly, it was just...

It was just big, a subtle weight hovering over her, the significance of the moment too tangible to ignore. While everyone else went whispering and panicking around her, she narrowed further in on herself, thinking, thinking about...well, everything.

Somehow she knew everything would change today. The thought was rather frightening, she tried to not dwell on just what this could all mean for too long.

In the end, she didn't get an opportunity to see Lyra until midmorning. She had gone straight to the Hospital Wing after she'd heard she'd been found, but she'd been turned away, told it was late and Lyra was being treated, come back tomorrow. Just so she wouldn't have to wait as long, she'd forgone several turns back, some of the last she'd ever get. She'd been turned away again earlier in the morning, told Lyra was still resting, come back later. Now, finally, giving her a fondly exasperated sort of look, Pomfrey was stepping out of the way, and Hermione was finally let in.

Hermione wasn't entirely surprised to find a few of the beds were occupied — people did always lose their minds a bit in the last weeks before summer, accidents and scuffles were more frequent than in the rest of the year. It wasn't hard to find Lyra at all. The curtains were at least partially pulled around all of the beds, but Hermione would be able to track her down from this distance with her eyes closed.

On Lyra's advice, she had been working to refine her ability to sense magic, and Lyra's was quite distinctive. Now that she could feel it, Hermione was honestly surprised more people couldn't tell what she was. Couldn't most purebloods do this kind of thing? They had all been taught it as young children in Lyra's time, apparently, but...

Pushing her way through the heavy white fabric, Hermione had barely even caught sight of Lyra before she was already speaking, her voice touched with an unusual raspiness. "Gods and Powers, there you are. I'm so bloody bored, Maïa, I hate being in hospital."

For a few seconds, Hermione could only stand there, silently staring at Lyra, all thoughts of the confrontation she'd known was coming temporarily wiped away. Lyra... Well, she looked terrible.

Her hair was just gone, leaving her looking peculiarly small and lopsided, her head covered in a dozen bandages, coloured faintly greenish-blue with some kind of potion or something. The skin on a portion of her face, her right cheek stretching up into her temple, had taken an odd, unnaturally smooth texture, visibly more pink than anywhere else — freshly healed, Hermione knew, the both of them had had patches much like that after they'd had to have skin replaced after blowing themselves up. Hermione noticed a few more bandages here and there, all down her arms and legs, a few sickly-looking yellowish-greenish patches, mostly-healed bruises soon to vanish completely. She looked uncharacteristically tired, face drawn, but eyes still bright, still smiling up at Hermione as though genuinely pleased to see her.

(No, that wasn't fair — almost everything about Lyra was genuine, when it came down to it. She was quite possibly the worst liar Hermione had ever met.)

At some point, her tone somewhere between irritated and amused, Lyra said, "Didn't Emma ever tell you staring was rude? I know I look like shite, Maïa, but come on..."

"What the hell did you do to yourself?!"

One of Lyra's eyebrows ticked up, trying to make one of those flatly unimpressed expressions she'd seemingly copied from Snape. It didn't quite work though, the bandages stretching down her left
temple were getting in the way. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what I mean, Lyra! God, you always—" Hermione forcibly cut herself off, swallowing down whatever that needless tangent would have ended up being. Letting out a harsh sigh, she dropped into the chair next to Lyra's bed, shaking her head to herself. "I really don't understand how you could... This just seems like really far to go, to me."

Lyra actually had the nerve to look confused. With a narrow-eyed frown, her voice slow and dumbfounded, "You think I did this to myself? Why?"

"To sell the story, obviously." Honestly, did she think Hermione hadn't been paying attention to the shite she'd pulled the whole year?

She blinked. "Yeah, if I were to fake being attacked, I wouldn't go nearly this far. You know I had to have all the bones in my hand and wrist regrown?" Lyra lifted up her right hand — she was holding...well, it looked like a stress ball, smooth rubber a dull green. She let her hand fall back to the surface of the bed, then squeezed the thing, slowly and carefully. A few pained flinches twitched across her face. "Skelegrow is fucking awful, you know, and with all the finicky tendons and ligaments and such, it'll be days before I have full function back. I'll admit I'm insane by any normal standard, but I would never subject myself to that if I didn't have to.

"Also, I'm told I was hit with the Cruciatus at least once, and it's simply impossible for someone to cast that on themselves. So." She shrugged.

"Shrugged."

Lyra had actually been...attacked and...

And Hermione had come and...

She ran a hand through her hair, taking a moment to collect herself again. And, for once, thanked her lucky stars Lyra was a bloody psychopath — anyone else, if they'd been assaulted and...apparently, tor— Well, if she'd come accusing anyone else in Lyra's position that they'd faked the whole thing, they'd doubtless take that very, very badly. Lyra just thinking she was being a bit of an idiot at the moment was getting off lightly, really.

Oh, God, Lyra had actually been... "Are... Are you okay?" She probably should have started with that...

And Lyra rolled her eyes, because she was absolutely bloody absurd like that. "Gods and Powers, I'm fine. By the time I woke up Pomfrey and Severus had already healed the worst of it. It's not like I even remember it, it's not a big deal."

Okay, ignore the fact that a normal person would be completely horrified at not being able to remember what had happened to them, that was a filthy lie. "Don't give me that shite, Lyra."

Lyra blinked. "Language, Granger."

"I don't know what you..." Hermione leaned a little closer over the bed, her voice dropping into a whisper. "Do you think I'm a complete bloody idiot? I don't care what story you've been feeding everyone else, I know you can't be obliviated."

"I've never said I can't be obliviated. I never said I was obliviated, either, actually. I hear trauma can do weird things to people's memories."
"No, but if you're immune to most mind magic and even the Imperius, then obviously memory charms won't work on you either. And I'm not convinced you even know what being traumatised looks like."

Her lips quirking into a pout, Lyra muttered, "First Severus and now you. I was bloody tortured, and you both _still_b thing I'm up to something. So cruel, I think I might be offended."

...No, Hermione, don't get distracted by the torture part, she didn't want to know. "You _were_ up to something. Something to do with Harry."

"I'm certain I have no idea what you're talking about." Lyra's eyes darted away from hers, shooting the rest of the room a significant glance.

"You cast them, if you care so much."

Abruptly, Lyra's face pulled into a glare, one harsh enough Hermione started. "I might," she hissed, "if my wand hadn't been snapped."

Hermione heard herself gasp — her wand had been... But that was _huge!_ She hadn't grown up magical, of course, but she'd still picked up on a few things here and there, and mages took their wands _very_ seriously. A mage's wand was only destroyed under certain limited circumstances. Perpetrators of capital crimes, essentially, and even then only sometimes — it wasn't unusual for the family to be given someone's wand after they're sentenced to life in Azkaban or executed. Snapping someone else's wand, just because they could, that simply wasn't done.

She'd _really_ been attacked. Lyra wasn't just messing around, she...

Doing her best to suffocate the squirming of guilt in her stomach, Hermione cast the privacy charms herself.

"You're right, Maïa, I _can't_ be obliviated, I remembered what happened — the parts I was fully conscious for, at least. I didn't do this to myself, _obviously_, that would be fucking _stupid._" All hint of solemnity instantly vanished, Lyra breaking into a grin. "It did work out, though. I didn't even get to finish faking the scene, but I didn't have to, someone else did it for me. The story of the murder of Harry Potter pieced itself together quite nicely without me. I like this version better than mine, actually, it's perfect."

Of course, the instant Hermione started feeling even a little bad for her, Lyra had to go say something completely absurd like that. "What? Why would you try to _fake Harry's death?"

And how had she for even a single moment thought that there might be some completely innocent explanation for Harry's disappearance? It wasn't until this very moment that she realised how much she'd been hoping for an explanation like— like Harry had mentioned that he didn't want to deal with the crowd at the train station and she'd immediately apparated him to London, or something.

But no, apparently the whole thing was part of some unfathomable bloody plot of Lyra's. Or it _would_ have been, if Lyra had actually been able to finish her plotting, before...whatever had happened to her. And it had just worked out in her favour anyway (except for the _being tortured_ part), because things just had a habit of doing that around Lyra.

Learning that Luck and Fate were closely tied to the Chaotic Power had put the absurd shite Lyra somehow always managed to pull off into a whole new light.

"Come, now, Maïa, you know the answer to that." With perhaps the most transparent fake-innocent expression Hermione had ever seen, Lyra said, "Trelawney _did_ predict this, back in September."
Clearly it had to happen — you can't fight Fate, after all."

"You... You faked Harry's death...because our Divination Professor made a fake prophecy about him dying."

Lyra grinned. "Yep."

That... She didn't...

It took far more effort than it really should for Hermione to keep her amusement off her face. It was just so absurd. She didn't— She was going to hell, that was all, Hermione was so going to hell.

"Regardless, you..." Hermione broke off, took a moment to force her voice level — sounding like she found the whole thing funny would just undermine anything she could say. (It was too late, though, Lyra was already smirking.) "You can't just... You have to tell someone, Lyra. They think he's dead, the rumour's already spreading."

"Well, yes, that is the whole point."

It suddenly became much easier to keep her tone steady. "Lyra, you can't let people think Harry is dead."

"Why not?"

Hermione had absolutely no idea what to say to that. "There—there will be consequences for this — He is going to come back next year, isn't he? There— You can't just fake someone's death, Lyra! You just can't!"

"Obviously I can. Just did, in fact. And yes, he will be coming back. And I'm fairly certain that these consequences of which you speak are of little consequence to me, so."

"You— he— You're insane, Lyra. You're actually bloody insane."

"Er...yes? I thought everyone knew that?"

Well, everyone said it all the time, Hermione had more or less come to terms with her psychopathic logic and chaos-based morality, but this... This was just so far beyond anything she'd done so far... And she was just sitting there grinning like she'd just released another batch of Speaker Spiders on the school. As though it was a mildly annoying, highly amusing diversion with no real consequences for anyone! "You just can't let everyone think he's dead, okay? Do you have any idea how... Everyone's going to know about this, it'll— He's Harry Potter, Lyra."

Because she was just absolutely insufferable like that, Lyra rolled her eyes. "I had noticed that, believe it or not. So?"

"When the news gets out, it'll be huge, and... It'll be everywhere, Lyra, it'll practically be a bloody national tragedy."

Lifting her bandaged shoulders in a light shrug, Lyra said, "Yeah, well, fuck them."

"Lyra, you—!"

"They don't own him, Hermione." Either the sudden sharpness in her voice, or the glare, or just that she'd used Hermione's proper name — Lyra almost never did that anymore, only when she was especially annoyed — whatever it was, Hermione's protest died in her throat, leaving them just
staring at each other, silent for a few awkward seconds. "All this Boy Who Lived fucking nonsense, they all act like... He doesn't owe them anything. If he were anyone else, and not their precious fucking saviour, would they make a big 'bloody national tragedy' out of it? No, they only care because of that moronic myth, their ridiculous attachment to the Boy Who Lived, and I don't care, Maïa, I don't give a single, solitary fuck. They can all go fuck themselves.

"I'm taking my baby cousin on a bloody vacation, and you can't make me care about these idiots working themselves up while we're gone."

It took a moment for Hermione to regain the ability to speak again. Just, she thought that was the most strongly she'd ever heard Lyra emote, ever. Well, except maybe that time she'd gotten offended over Hermione bad-mouthing Eris. (Which, in retrospect, had been extremely tactless of her — she had essentially been insulting Lyra's god to her face, she couldn't reasonably expect anyone to react well to that.) And, well, it wasn't made easier by...

Dammit, this was supposed to be a proper confrontation, she didn't... Why did Lyra have to be so bloody reasonable all the time? Well, okay, no, this was only reasonable in Lyra logic, but... They really didn't have the right to obsess over Harry the way they did, he really didn't owe them anything. Hermione wouldn't go so far as to think faking his death was a good idea, but...

Lyra always had to make everything so bloody complicated.

Still, she couldn't just leave it like this. This was just... Lyra was creating a huge bloody mess, and a lot of people would be hurt, if only temporarily and if only due to their own silly hero-worship, but... "If you don't tell anyone I will."

Lyra snorted. "No, you won't."

God, if that smooth overconfidence wasn't just infuriating. "You can't stop me from telling whoever I like whatever I like." Well, she could, obviously, but she would have to somehow compel her, something Lyra was philosophically opposed to, or just kill or otherwise incapacitate her. By this point, Hermione was all but certain Lyra wouldn't actually seriously hurt her unless she gave her a very, very good reason to — threatening to ruin her little prank wasn't nearly enough. So Lyra could theoretically stop her, but she wouldn't, so it didn't really matter.

"Well, no," Lyra admitted, with a hint of exasperation, all but confirming Hermione's evaluation of her, "but you're still not going to. You wouldn't like the consequences."

She gave Lyra back one of her own unimpressed stares. "And what consequences are these?"

"If you did tell someone, how would you explain knowing what you know? You can't, really. If you admit I told you, that would mean I lied to the Aurors about being obliviated, which is bad enough by itself, but they know someone tried to obliviate me, so you'd basically be telling them I can't be obliviated, which will directly lead to them wondering why. They'll almost certainly figure it out eventually — there are only so many reasons one might be able to resist obliviation, especially after being tortured for a few hours, and no one would believe I'm a legilimens. Since becoming a black mage is Unforgivable in this timeline, I would have to leave, and I could never come back. Somehow, I don't think you'd be comfortable with risking that."

Hermione glared back at her, jaw clenching hard enough it actually hurt a little. Because she wasn't wrong.

In all honesty, most of the time Hermione tried to avoid really thinking about the whole...black mage thing. Rather like knowing who Lyra had originally been and where she'd come from, it
made everything a whole lot less complicated if she just...pretended there wasn't anything so
surreally strange about her. Because... Well, it made her feel kind of awful, but mostly because if
she pretended none of that stuff was a thing, she didn't have to...do anything about it.

And she knew she should do something about it. Or, at least, she was pretty sure she would have
felt she should do something about it a year ago.

Just who she was... Okay, yes, Lyra didn't bear any responsibility for anything her counterpart had
done here — they were literally from different universes, after all, saying Lyra was guilty of
Lestrange's crimes would be completely absurd. Hermione had had some time to think about it
now, and she was...mostly certain that Lyra was even far less of a danger than Lestrange was.
Apparently, Voldemort had been twisting Lestrange to suit his needs since she was five years old,
had personally taught her since she was seven, he'd essentially created the monster Lestrange had
become.

On the other hand, the person who'd had that role in Lyra's life, the person she'd been apprenticed
to at seven (which Hermione still thought was absurd, but purebloods), had apparently been a
wardcrafter–cursebreaker of some kind. Hermione didn't know who that was — she assumed the
"Ciardha" Lyra had offhandedly mentioned a few times, not that that was particularly helpful —
but it didn't matter so much. He would obviously have been a far better influence than a bloody
Dark Lord.

If Lyra was going to do something just for fun, she was far more likely to come up with some
complicated enchanting project — those portals of hers came to mind — than run around cursing
people. She was frustrating, and confusing, but she simply wasn't dangerous the same way
Lestrange was.

And Hermione was almost certain she wasn't just making excuses for her.

But that aside, she still felt she should maybe be tempted to tell people about the time-travel thing
anyway. If only because, well, she was lying to everyone, including the Ministry — falsifying
official documents was just as illegal here as it was in the Britain she was more familiar with.
Hermione couldn't even guess how many laws Lyra had broken just getting herself into Hogwarts.

And she was pretty sure she should care about that...but she didn't. It wasn't like whatever Lyra had
had to do to legitimise her existence in this timeline was really hurting anyone. And, really,
what else was Lyra supposed to do? If she just came out and said she was Bellatrix Lestrange from
an alternate dimension thirty years ago, she somehow doubted everyone would just calmly accept
that (or even believe her). Lyra hadn't even intended to come here, she'd essentially just been
making it up as she went along. When it came down to it, committing who knew how many counts
of fraud had been her only choice.

But that was Hermione coming up with excuses. If she were being completely honest with herself,
when she'd first learned who Lyra was and how she'd come to be here, the thought of informing
someone in a position to do something about it, turning her in, it had never even crossed her mind.
Not seriously, anyway. No matter how...uncomfortable the revelation had made her, Lyra was still
her friend.

If nothing else, her first two years at Hogwarts had already proven that Hermione was perfectly
willing to go to unreasonable lengths for her friends. And she honestly did get on with Lyra better
than she ever had either of the boys, so, just, not turning her in for committing victimless crimes
was hardly a dilemma at all.

Even if she felt it probably should be.
Even with something far more illegal than a little fraud here or there. By magical British law as it stood, Lyra had committed a capital offense — she could literally be executed if it ever got out. Though, if anything, Hermione was actually less conflicted about that than she was the time-travel and the fraud. For one thing, civilized nations had serious issues with ever executing a minor for any crime, no matter how serious. Especially given that the...event itself had happened when Lyra had been seven, yeah, if something similar were going on in the muggle world she could just imagine the public outcry such a thing would cause, it would be a massive scandal.

Especially given the nature of the 'crime' itself. Hermione would admit she didn't know everything there was to know about black mages, of course. The very idea of the existence of the Powers was still a little overwhelming if she thought about it for too long. But, when it came down to it...she didn't think it shouldn't be thought of as, well...

It was basically religion, wasn't it? Religion that happened to be factually true, yes, or at least true enough, but that wasn't the point. If Hermione were to put what Lyra was in more familiar terms, she was essentially clergy in a minority church. Sure, certain...radical elements of this church had done horrific things in the past, but the same could be said of virtually every religion on the planet. Religious ideology, whether Christian or Muslim or Hindu or whatever, had motivated people to do despicable, violent things innumerable times over the course of history, and even through to today, but all modern followers of those faiths weren't held collectively responsible for the crimes of adherents they had nothing else in common with. In fact, civilized nations guaranteed their freedom to exercise their faith however they wanted, so long as they harmed no other people in doing so.

If a black mage committed a serious crime, sure, they should be prosecuted for that. But, just for being a black mage? Lyra might be unnervingly powerful, and just unnerving in general, and the Eris stuff plain scary, but just being what she was, that wasn't actually hurting anybody. There wasn't any good reason to just execute her. Hermione wasn't convinced the whole thing was any different, conceptually, than mundane religious oppression. Especially since white mages were (theoretically) just as vulnerable, despite their beliefs and practices being almost entirely beneficial to society — black and white mages both were being targeted simply for their private religious expression, and nothing else.

Since the Powers did actually, demonstrably exist, it wasn't quite the same thing, but Hermione still thought the comparison was applicable. She had no doubt that, should the Statute crumble tomorrow, this was the position most first-world governments would take on the matter.

Hermione wasn't even close to comfortable with it herself, which was why she preferred to just not think about it at all. But when it really came down to it, how she felt about Lyra being a dedicant of Eris was completely irrelevant. She had every justification, both personally and on principle, to make sure the authorities didn't find out about it. She certainly wouldn't go blabbing about it intentionally, but she shouldn't let it get out accidentally either — she had tried to reduce suspicion the day after Walpurgis for a reason, after all.

(Which, technically, meant she was sort of an accomplice now. She felt she should feel guilty over that, or at least conflicted, but... She wouldn't feel guilty for hiding Jews from bloody Nazis — the comparison wasn't entirely appropriate, but...)

She wasn't entirely convinced Lyra's logic was flawless — whatever Eris had done to her wasn't the only way to resist obliviation, it didn't necessarily follow that the Aurors would figure out everything if they knew she was lying. It was, however, possible. Though, it also wasn't the only potential negative consequence: she wasn't familiar with the law on this side, but faking someone's death had to be illegal, especially since Harry was technically a Lord of the Wizengamot and
everything, there was probably some ridiculous aristocratic nonsense involving that. Lyra could get in serious trouble if they found out.

And she would have to leave, and she could never come back.

Admitting it in her own head did make her uncomfortable, she couldn't help the thought that she was somehow...she didn't know, that it was some kind of moral failing. But she was perfectly willing to say nothing if the consequence of speaking out was losing Lyra.

(Hermione didn't know what was happening to her, but she wasn't certain she didn't like it. And that made her uncomfortable.)

But, thinking about it... "No, I wouldn't tell them you told me. I'd tell them Blaise told me."

Lyra blinked. "What?"

"The train was delayed, yes, but he's already moving his stuff back home, since he has travel plans and all. Harry is part of those travel plans, so he'll surely 'discover' Harry in the process. He has no obligation to tell the authorities, but it's not unreasonable to think he might tell Harry's friends. And he'll back me up for exactly the same reason — if he told them I was lying, they'd eventually work out that I was protecting you and ask why. So I don't need to implicate you at all."

"Um..." Her face had gone peculiarly blank, flatly staring at her for a couple seconds. "Well, you would in the end, though. If they find out Harry's still alive, and that I got him to Ancient House—"

With an almost vicious smirk, Hermione said, "Before you were obliviated. No one could blame you for not telling them about something if you don't remember it."

Lyra's mouth opened, then closed a moment later. She frowned. "But I didn't just send him to Ancient House, I made a false trail for them to follow and everything. Apparently my gate spell collapsing even burned down a building in Knockturn — which is more dramatic than I was aiming for, but still. I count five separate Azkaban-worthy offenses right there."

"I'm assuming you covered your tracks." Hermione did know she was capable of it. Before moving it all to Ancient House through one of those neat portals of hers this spring, they'd been using spells designed to fool forensic magic whenever handling their illicit books — she'd looked into the subject herself, and there were plenty of spells to remove traces after they were already laid as well. And she had to have planned on an investigation.

"Well, yes, but—"

"So, there's no proof you did it. You can just continue to claim to not remember anything, which you're already doing. In fact, you were going to end up questioned about it eventually anyway, when you get back from California — I'm just moving it ahead a few months."

Lyra glared at her, though the expression was far less effective than it might have been. There was an odd sense about it, a lightness, obviously fake, weakened by the laughter in her eyes, the hints of a grin pulling at her lips. "How devious of you, Maïa." If she hadn't gotten the hint already that Lyra wasn't actually angry, using her nickname sealed it. "Someone has been a terrible influence on you."

Glaring right back at her, Hermione felt the warmth spread across her face. Because, well, she wasn't wrong, but "You don't have to sound so damn pleased about it."

The fake annoyance vanished entirely, Lyra brightly grinning — which was less...distracting than
it might have been, with all the bandages and wounds and such, she did look rather horrid. "But I am pleased, though. I wasn't sure about you at first, but you're far more fun than you seemed back in September."

Hermione just frowned back at her. She wasn't certain whether that was meant to be a compliment or not.

"Honestly, you're my favourite person I've met since coming here." Lyra paused, blinking. "Well, maybe Sylvie, I guess — favourite human person, anyway."

Okay, definitely meant to be a compliment. Not that she had any idea at all how to respond to it, probably better to just ignore it. "Could we get back to the subject at hand, please?"

Smirking, Lyra drawled, "You and Harry, both so awkward all the time, don't get it. But, fine, I can be nice." (Hermione doubted it.) "I guess there's nothing else for it. If you really want to go about telling people Harry isn't dead, that's fine, your choice."

Hermione should be pleased — she had just essentially won the argument — but instead she couldn't help a peculiar sense of wary unease. If she really had won, Lyra shouldn't still be smirking at her. She spent a couple seconds thinking the whole thing over, what she knew of what was going on around their ears and the whole conversation they'd just had, trying to find what it was, she had to be missing something. But she couldn't think of anything. "Oh, just come on out and say it, then."

That damn smirk only grew wider. "You can ruin my scheme if you like. Of course, I have already gotten what I wanted anyway, so it wouldn't actually be ruining it, but limiting the damage, I suppose. You'll just also be ruining the first real vacation Harry'll get in his entire life. It's up to you."

"You— He doesn't... What?!"

"Well, you did say the rumours are already getting around. If only to stop something really crazy from spreading, people coming up with whatever absurd theories they like, Dumbledore will need to provide an official narrative. And soon. I wouldn't be surprised if he decides to announce Harry's death to the entire school at lunch. Of course, he could try to cover it up until he knows what happened, tell them Harry just left early, but he believes he does know what happened, and he likes to seem decisive in times of tragedy. So. Lunch is, what, an hour away? Unless you turn back to tell him, which will create other problems, it's probably already too late to do anything about it. Which means he'll make the announcement, Trelawney will probably flip, everyone will be reminded about her prophecy from the beginning of the year.

"And then — a day or two later, however long it takes for whoever you tell to get their shit together — the announcement will be retracted. Cue doubt and disparagement directed at Hogwarts, the Ministry, and prophecy in general, and Trelawney and Dumbledore specifically. I get what I wanted out of this scheme. But, there will be a big media circus, and probably investigations and hearings and whatnot, which will require Harry's and my participation to some degree. Which means we won't be able to leave the country, which means Harry doesn't get to go to California. Being stuck with me and the Zabinis is better than his muggles, but still, no proper vacation. And he'll have to deal with everyone being fucking morons about the Boy Who Lived all bloody summer."

"So." Lyra shrugged, her grin sharp and bloody. "Go ahead and tell whoever you like, if you want. You'll just be hurting Harry, in the end, for the benefit of people who you don't even know and I doubt you honestly care about the slightest bit. Because it's the right thing to do — as if that means
anything," she finished in a derisive mutter, rolling her eyes.

... 

Hermione had absolutely nothing to say. For long seconds, she just stared back at Lyra — still grinning at her like a lunatic — struggling to compose any sort of response. Finally she stood, walked out of the Hospital Wing without another word.

She...

She was right. Hermione couldn't bring herself to do that to Harry, even if she was just putting it all off until September.

God, she hated that bitch sometimes.

(She didn't, she really didn't. But she couldn't help feeling she should.)

The Gryffindor table was unusually subdued on the day after the last day of term. Of course, unusually subdued still meant there was quite a lot of gossip — in this case about what had happened to the two third-year students who'd gone missing the day before — and speculation about why the train wasn't running.

The two things were probably related, Neville thought, though no one asked him.

"I heard the train caught on fire!" a second-year girl 'whispered' to her friend, loudly enough that half the table probably heard her.

"You just made that up," Ginny Weasley said flatly.

"Shut up, Weasley, no one asked you!"

Ginny met the girl's furious glare with cool disdain. "Stop spreading filthy lies, Janine, and maybe I will."

"I heard Harry Potter got into a fight with Sirius Black, and Black killed him. That's why the Aurors were in town, yesterday," the younger Creevey told his brother, sounding very worried.

"Don't be stupid, Sirius Black is in France! I heard he got into a fight with Lyra Black — no one's seen her since yesterday either!" Neville didn't recognise that kid, but his theory was even more far-fetched than Creevey's.

Lyra was scary, yes. She was insanely smart (and also just insane) and had a terrible sense of humor and was way too good at magic to be fourteen. But he didn't think she would have hurt Harry. She might be insane and weird and deliberately unconventional, but under all that, she was exactly what he would expect from a properly trained heiress of her House — Gran had been making noises about trying to get an introduction, and figure out if she's been talking to anyone about a betrothal (which Neville didn't even want to think about) — and Harry was the bloody godson of her Head of House. She'd been treating him like a younger cousin since her first day here, but if she was Sirius's ward, or would be when his trial ended, then they were really more like brother and sister (even if they hadn't met until this year). Either way, everyone knew the Blacks were insane about their Family (as well as just insane).

Neville could see Lyra killing someone for Harry — his muggles, maybe, some of the things he'd overheard Harry telling Ron made them sound worse than Gran and Uncle Algie — but not
killing *Harry*.

...Unless there'd been an accident of some sort. Like she'd dragged him off to the Forest again and something had happened...but Neville was pretty sure the main reason Lyra went out there was to hang out with the wilderfolk. Which was...really weird. Like, *uncomfortably* weird. Just the idea of wilderfolk was kind of... And quite frankly, he didn't see the appeal. Even if she didn't mind where wilderfolk came from (which apparently she didn't, which was itself uncomfortable and weird), they still weren't *human*. Not really. It would be like going to hang out on a werewolf reservation, or something — it just wasn't done, yes, but why would you *want* to, anyway? Harry had gone with her once, just to meet that one wolf Lyra had brought to the quidditch match with the dementors, and he'd said it had been awkward. But he'd also said that the wolf-girl knew the Forest really well, and she wouldn't have taken them anywhere that wasn't safe.

Besides, if Harry were dead, he was pretty sure Hermione, who had been cornered by the Weasley twins at the other end of the table, would be more weepy-mourning upset and less furious-frustrated-guilty upset.

"What do you think, Nev?"

It took a moment for Neville to realise Dean had been talking to him, lost in other people's conversations as he was. "Huh? What do I think about what?"

Dean gave him a how-are-you-this-stupid look. "First Ron, now Harry and Lyra... Something's going on with our year."

"Something's always going on with Harry at the end of the year," Neville pointed out.

Seamus frowned at him. "Yeah, but something we all know about — he doesn't just *disappear*. The *Aurors* don't get called."

That was true. The Aurors *hadn't* been called before, as far as Neville knew — and his Gran was on the Board, she'd have said something for sure, if they had been. But, "He did disappear last year. Him and Ron both, you know, when Ginny was..." He cut himself off, shooting a guilty look across the table.

She had looked up at the sound of her name, and had obviously put together what they were talking about because she glared at him.

"...missing," he finished weakly.

"...in the bloody Chamber of Secrets," she corrected him, her voice *very* even and *very* cold. "There's no point avoiding it, everyone knows."

He nodded in acknowledgement and she went back to her book. He couldn't see what it was about from here, but it looked bloody ancient. There was something weird going on with her this year, too, he thought. Probably not *bad*, like last year. She was just starting to give off the same dangerous vibe as Lyra, but more serious and dragging around books like Hermione. He'd heard she was sleeping in their room, now, too. (Lyra had somehow managed to get a separate room for herself and Hermione. Neville still didn't know how, none of the girls would talk about it, though they all obviously knew.)

"Yeah, but when that happened, they had us stay in our commons," Seamus objected. "Didn't Weasley say we all had to be here for lunch, some kind of special announcement?"

"Some special announcement they couldn't've just told us yesterday, and let us go home today? My
mum's going to go spare, you know," Dean said. "I haven't got any way to tell her the train's not running, and it's not like she can get on the platform to look for me even, she'll be frantic."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Dean," Hermione snapped, plopping onto the bench on Neville's open side. "Just tell McGonagall after lunch that you need to use her floo and **floo** to King's Cross. You'll get home at the same time we would've anyway."

"Are you going to do that?"

"No, I owled my mum telling her not to come, that the engine had a break-down. I'll just floo to Oxford when we get in tomorrow and they can pick me up there."

"There's a public floo in Oxford?" Neville said. "I didn't know that." He did, actually, he just thought it was weird that she did. Not that there was any reason she shouldn't, he just couldn't imagine she'd spent much time flooing around during hols, what with her parents being muggles, and all.

She clicked her tongue at him. "Yes, of course there is. Though Lyra didn't tell me until after I'd already taken the Knight Bus to London to floo to the Zabinis' for Yule. Bloody inconsiderate..." she muttered, trailing off into mumbling silence.

Maybe Lyra's weirdness was contagious, Neville thought. Because the idea of Hermione going to a Yule celebration at the Zabinis' was just... It was weird that Zabini would invite her (or more likely, allow Lyra to invite her), and it was even weirder that she'd **gone**. What did a muggleborn care about Yule?

"I don't suppose you know what happened to her," Dean asked.

"Or Harry," Seamus added.

Neville was almost certain she did, but equally certain she wouldn't tell them. She obviously hadn't told anyone else, so it came as somewhat of a surprise when she scowled and cast a privacy charm around them. "Lyra's in hospital. She was attacked by someone. They used the Cruciatius on her and broke all the bones in her right hand. And **snapped** her wand."

The boys gasped. They'd **snapped** it? But a wand was... It was almost a part of you, wasn't it? An extension of your magic. And a witch **was** her magic. Breaking it was like... Neville shuddered, his fingers straying involuntarily toward his own wand pocket, just because... well, to reassure himself it was still there, he supposed.

Ginny, obviously included in Hermione's spell, despite being on the other side of the table, dropped her book. "Are you fucking kidding me? They— **Who**?"

"Yeah, what she said," Seamus muttered, nodding.

"She says she doesn't know, that they obliviated her."

Something about the way she said that made Neville think Lyra knew **exactly** who had attacked her, even if they **had** obliviated her. And he was pretty sure he did, too, now that he knew she wasn't dead, or even seriously — **permanently** — hurt. (Though snapping her wand was just... **barbaric**.) It wasn't really that hard to put together.

A few weeks ago, maybe a month, Draco Malfoy had cornered him in the dungeons after Potions — Snape made him stay behind to explain **exactly** how he'd managed to mess up his potion with the available ingredients, which he **couldn't**, because there was literally no way to make those
ingredients do \textit{that}, unless one of the newt eyes had really been a transfigured beetle or something... (Which was the answer Snape eventually accepted, much to Neville's surprise.)

Anyway, Malfoy had been waiting for him by the stairs, dragged him into an empty room and asked him how he felt about Bellatrix Lestrange.

Which was a bloody stupid question — Bellatrix Lestrange was responsible for every single bad thing that had ever happened in Neville's life. \textit{Every single one}. If he could choke the life out of her with his bare hands, he thought he might actually do it. He hadn't actually \textit{said} that, of course, he'd managed to stutter out something much more political, seeing as Lestrange \textit{was} Malfoy's mother's sister. (Lady Malfoy \textit{had} practically disowned Lestrange in the wake of the War, but that didn't mean she might not secretly still be as insane about her family as any other Black.)

Malfoy's eyes had narrowed dangerously, obviously knowing exactly what he'd meant, anyway. "What if I told you Black is her daughter?"

Well, then...Neville would probably be a lot more concerned about Gran's hints about a Longbottom–Black union than he already was, honestly.

(She couldn't \textit{possibly} be serious about that. If she was, he might have to tell her about the wilderfolk thing. Because Lyra might be a brilliant witch and the obvious heir to her House, but she'd also \textit{obviously} gotten the Black Madness in \textit{spades}. That \textit{alone} should be a disqualifying factor, because her children would probably be equally \textit{insane}. All the more so if she was Lestrange's daughter, because the crazy obviously bred true. Not to mention — Lestrange's daughter \textit{by whom}? You Know bloody Who? Because she \textit{did} look like Bellatrix, but she didn't look like a Lestrange \textit{at all}.)

He knew that wasn't what Malfoy had meant, of course. He'd probably expected that Neville would want to get some kind of revenge on her, for her mother's crimes against his family — the Longbottoms \textit{had} had a couple of rather notorious blood feuds with other Houses over the centuries — but...Lyra was the same age as them. If she \textit{was} Lestrange's daughter, she wouldn't even be able to remember her, and it wasn't like she could help who her parents were, anyway. She'd always been nice enough to him. Nicer than Malfoy, at any rate.

Plus, he somehow doubted Lestrange would \textit{care} if he cursed her daughter on her behalf, so there would be absolutely no point in it at all. Which was what he'd actually ended up saying, when he'd managed to find the words. Malfoy had called him a pansy (more or less cordially), and Neville had told him to bugger off (more or less cordially), and they'd both left. Overall it had been one of the least terrible interactions he'd ever had with Malfoy — he was a lot less intimidating without his pet trolls following him around — and Neville had managed to forget about it fairly quickly, because as far as he knew nothing ever came of it.

He'd thought Malfoy was just trying to make trouble among the Gryffindors. But if he'd been trying to rally people against Lyra, there were \textit{plenty} of older students who'd lost family to Lestrange in the War, it was hardly just \textit{him}. And \textit{they} might not know Lyra personally well enough to care that she wasn't the Blackheart, even if they \textit{were} related.

So he didn't know exactly who had tried to use Bellatrix Lestrange's favorite spell on her daughter, but he had a pretty good idea who might have been responsible for arranging it.

\textit{Fuck.}

If she didn't do something to get back at Malfoy, he'd probably have to tell her, Neville decided. But it could wait — it wasn't like she'd be able to do anything \textit{now}, except tell the Aurors, and
knowing her she wouldn't. Humiliating her cousin in front of the entire school like she had back in September was big and showy and intimidating and, just...well, very House of Black. Telling the Aurors that Malfoy might know something about her being Crucio'd wasn't.

"Yes, yes, she's fine," Hermione said impatiently, drawing Neville's attention back to the conversation, of which he seemed to have missed a few exchanges. "She looks like shite and she'd been alone for all of twenty minutes between talking to the Aurors and Snape and me, so obviously she was bored silly, but she's fine."

"Yeah, but what about Harry? We heard they were together when they disappeared," Dean said.

Hermione bit her lip, then set her jaw stubbornly and muttered something that sounded very much like stupid bloody prophecy before saying, "She was planning on taking him on holiday, and he really hates crowds, everyone staring at his scar, you know. She might have sent him on early, helped him sneak away, or something. I mean, I don't know, and if she was obliviated, she obviously wouldn't either, but it makes more sense than these ridiculous rumors that he's dead, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, but—" Seamus began, but he was cut off by Dumbledore's entrance.

He came in not through the side door nearest his office, or the one behind the High Table, but through the main doors, walking slowly down the centre aisle of the Hall, between the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, silence spreading in his wake.

He was wearing black, and for once looked every bit of his hundred-plus years, haggard and old.

The professors were waiting at the High Table, every bit as impatient as the students to have out with whatever announcement had required their presence. Even Hagrid and Trelawney were there, and they never came to lunch. Even Madam Pomfrey — Neville didn't think he'd ever seen her in the Great Hall before.

He turned to face them, sorrow etched in every line of his face. Neville was pretty sure that everyone knew what he was going to say, even before he said it.

"I may have your attention, please." (The Hall was already quite silent, every eye trained on the Headmaster.) "Many of you will have already heard the terrible rumors that have been spreading since the Aurors arrived in Hogsmeade yesterday. Most unfortunately, and to my great sorrow, I must confirm them: Harry Potter is dead."

"I told you so’s" fighting to be heard over denials and disbelief; Hagrid sobbing into his hands; Professor McGonagall, grim faced, shouting for order as the Headmaster just stood there, head bowed, hands clasped before him, staring out over the crowd, waiting for the impact to fade.

All Neville could do for what seemed like a very long time was stare back at him. He heard Dean saying, "He, but— He just can't be— I... We just saw him yesterday..." but distantly, as though he was suddenly on the other side of a quidditch pitch.

He paused then, as though to let the words sink in. For the space of a heartbeat, maybe two, shocked silence reigned, but then... It seemed as though everything happened at once, everyone suddenly talking — "I told you so’s" fighting to be heard over denials and disbelief; Hagrid sobbing into his hands; Professor McGonagall, grim faced, shouting for order as the Headmaster just stood there, head bowed, hands clasped before him, staring out over the crowd, waiting for the impact to fade.

After...maybe a minute, maybe five — Neville couldn't tell — Professor Snape stood, his face completely impassive, as though Harry's life and death meant nothing to him. He silenced the hall with a wave of his wand. Neville didn't feel the magic, it definitely wasn't any silencing charm he'd ever seen before, but over the course of a few seconds, the commotion died away, even Hagrid's
sobbing dying down, though his shoulders still shuddered silently.

"Thank you, Severus," Professor Dumbledore said quietly. "Many of you knew Harry personally. He is — was — a—"

The Headmaster was cut off there, his speech interrupted by Professor Trelawney standing so suddenly that her heavy wooden chair overturned.

"No," she muttered, her voice carrying as well as Professor Dumbledore's in the sombre silence which otherwise filled the Hall. She backed away from the table slowly, nearly tripping over her felled chair, one of her scarves catching on one of its legs, her rheumy eyes, magnified as always by her enormous glasses, blinking furiously. She pinched herself, still muttering, ever louder, "No, no, NO, NO, NO—"

"Sybil?" the Headmaster said, cutting her off, or trying to.

She just kept backing away, shaking her head. "It can't— NO, I'm dreaming, it's not real — it can't be real, I didn't mean it— I didn't mean it!"

"Sybil?" Professor Dumbledore said again, sounding even more concerned this time.

"I'm sorry!" she wailed, breaking into pathetic sobs. She'd backed herself all the way into the wall behind the high table, slowly began sinking to the ground, as though her legs could no longer hold her. "I'm SORRY! I didn't mean it! He wasn't going to die, he was never going to— It was— It was fake— It just — to make it more interesting — I— This can't be real— can't be— can't—"

The Headmaster cleared his throat quietly. "Poppy, could you...?"

Madam Pomfrey stood, her own eyes and nose rather red. She nodded, approaching the now completely incoherent Divs professor, raising her from the floor, still crying and muttering, leading her out of the Hall.

A wave of whispers and giggles and comments rose in her wake, the one which drew Neville's attention coming from Hermione, watching the drama with an oddly...sour expression. "I suppose it's something she didn't get to be here to see that."

"Er...what? Who?" he asked. He wasn't really sure why. Maybe so he didn't have to think about the speech Dumbledore had returned to at the front of the Hall, talking about Harry and his life and friends and how they still didn't know what had happened, but the Aurors were on the case.

Hermione glowered into the middle distance for a second, then bit her lip before apparently deciding to tell him. "Lyra." Neville didn't think he'd ever heard her say her best friend's name with that much...rage? Scorn? He didn't know, really, but it left no question in his mind that Hermione disapproved of whatever Lyra had gotten up to now. "She's been trying to drive Trelawney mad all year, you know, making her stupid fake prophecies come true."

Trelawney's words suddenly made sense: I didn't mean it; It was fake; To make it more interesting — a memory of their very first Divs lesson came to mind, his worry about breaking his teacup driven entirely from his mind by the professor declaring dramatically that Harry's cup held the Grim...

"She's been... What? But...how? And why?"

Hermione's face twisted into...almost a sneer, though Neville didn't think it was directed at him, so much as at the absent Black. "Why does Lyra ever do anything? Because she thinks it's bloody
hilarious, that's why. It's all just a prank to her, a ridiculous, esoteric game that no one else knows they're playing."

"So, wait," he said, as quietly as he could, leaning in slightly closer. "Are you telling me that Lyra actually did...this...somehow? That Harry's not..."

"I'm sure he's fine. Didn't I just tell you she's been planning to take him on holiday? I bet you anything he'll be back in the fall, even if she somehow manages to keep him out of the public eye all summer."

"Er... Hermione... Not to sound, well..."

Hermione fixed him with an almost pitying look. "You think I'm in denial."

Neville shrugged, becoming uncomfortably aware that his earlier confidence in Harry being fine, or at least alive, was based on Hermione's reaction. But it kind of seemed more likely to him that she was in denial, if Dumbledore was saying Harry was...

"It's just, Professor Dumbledore seems awfully convinced," he said carefully. "He wouldn't tell us all if he wasn't, would he? And didn't you say Lyra was obliviated?"

"She designed a babbling potion with secondary effects to give a cold to the entire school. She sat the Runes and Arithmancy OWLs last week without even taking the classes. She tricked the bloody Castle into giving her her own bedroom, and has all the resources of the House of Black at her disposal, including their library! You really think she couldn't find a way to trick Dumbledore into thinking Harry's dead?"

Her volume rose over the course of her little rant, enough that Dean, on Neville's other side, overheard at least part of it. "No offence, Hermione, but that sounds like something you'd read in the Quibbler. I know you don't want to believe it, but..."

The girl turned a furious glare on him. "Why do you all want to believe it? Where's the proof? Dumbledore just said they don't have his body, how do they even know he's dead, not just preemptively running away from his horrible aunt and uncle instead of waiting until halfway through hols? Even if he was really kidnapped, there's no reason to assume he's dead! Why are you all so quick to give up on him? Do you want him to be dead?"

Neville exchanged an uncomfortable look with Dean, and Seamus down the bench beyond him. Neither of them had an answer, so he supposed it fell to him. "It's...it's not that we want him to be dead — of course we don't! But it's just...no one's seen him, and Dumbledore has to have some reason to think he's...you know, even if he can't tell us what it is. He did say the aurors were still investigating, that happens sometimes, that they won't release the details of an open case..."

"Of course they won't," the muggleborn scoffed, her voice low, but vicious. "But they will let people just go around declaring missing people to be dead, when they've yet to close the case! Why not just say that the investigation is ongoing? It's not like anyone making up rumors has any idea what's going on! But no, we've got to be all overdramatic and— and— He's not dead, okay? Harry's not dead. Lyra faked his bloody death. Even if no one can prove it, they can't prove he's dead either because he's not!"

"Er... Hermione," Dean said softly, as though he thought she might do something irrational at his words. "Are you... Maybe you should go up to the Hospital Wing. Just, you know, something to... help you calm down. A little."
Neville nodded. "I don't want to believe it either, Hermione—" He couldn't even bring himself to say it — couldn't even think it. "—but...Dumbledore wouldn't tell us if he wasn't sure..."

Hermione's furious expression froze, then vanished, as she looked from him to Dean and Seamus. "Oh. My. God. This must be how Cassandra felt..." she said, half under her breath — then more loudly, pushing herself up from the bench, "That's it. I'm going to sit with the Slytherins, at least they don't believe our bloody Headmaster is infallible!"

"I'll come with you," Ginny said from the other side of the table. Neville had forgotten she was apparently in on the privacy charm, though a quick glance around them suggested that no one else was. The students all around them didn't even seem to have noticed Hermione's ranting, and while she hadn't been loud, she hadn't exactly managed to keep it down entirely.

Hermione didn't acknowledge Ginny's tacit support. She stormed away toward the back of the Hall, ignoring Professor Dumbledore's ongoing speech. She wasn't the only one out of her seat, though most were heading for the doors, overcome with grief. Neville himself felt like he might be ill, his stomach in knots, heart pounding what felt like way too hard, mind scrambling for a distraction, for anything to think of other than Harry being...

"You'll...make sure she's alright, won't you, Ginny?" He found himself asking. She had sounded rather hysterical there, toward the end.

Ginny fixed him with a completely unreadable stare which seemed to last much longer than he thought it must have done, really.

After a short eternity, she said, "I think she's right. She knows Black better than anyone. If she says Black could trick Dumbledore into believing Harry's dead, I believe her. And, well," her mouth curved into a tiny, slightly sardonic smile. "Harry may not like being the Boy Who Lived, but he is very good at not dying."

Neville wished he could believe Hermione, too, but he just...couldn't. There was nothing to be gained in deluding himself when even Dumbledore said it...

Harry was dead.

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—Well, fuck, Blaise thought, going to tug back the curtain around the bed Pomfrey had indicated Lyra was occupying, only to find it fixed in place with some sort of sticking charm.

—"Lyra?" he said, though without much hope of a response. If Lyra had wanted to keep the curtain closed, it was a good bet she'd cast anti-eavesdropping spells, too. Even if they could hear him, they wouldn't be able to respond.

—Great. Snape was going to be so pleased, delaying his confirmation that Harry was completely fine for however much longer Maïa took, talking to Lyra. At least, he was pretty sure it was Maïa, there was something familiar — recognisable — about her mind, even though she'd gotten good enough at occlumency that he couldn't just casually eavesdrop on whatever they were saying. Not to mention, that particular attempted-denial-of-amusement/socially-mandated-outrage feeling was almost characteristic of Maïa talking to Lyra. Even if it was mixed with genuine horror and guilt at the moment.

—He flopped onto the next bed over to wait — knowing Maïa, this could take a while. He didn't imagine she was pleased with Lyra right now. Faking Harry's death was orders of magnitude more disruptive than anything else Lyra had done this year, even if it was a logical conclusion to the
Trelawney prank. Of course, he didn’t think she really comprehended how everyone who actually knew Harry personally would take the news of his death. It had taken weeks for him to convince her to tell Harry's friends that she was taking him on holiday rather than just disappear with him.

—She still hadn't told Harry. See, when she'd floated the hypothetical plot, asking about the likely fall-out and whether Harry would go along with it, Blaise had told her that if she gave Harry a choice between leaving and having everyone think he was dead or staying, he would stay. So Lyra had decided not to tell him. She was, in fact, planning to keep him ignorant of the rumors of his demise and the consequent chaos as long as possible, because the longer he didn't know the funnier it would be when he found out.

—Blaise thought this was incredibly stupid, but not nearly as stupid as her asking Blaise to keep it from him. True, he could easily keep Harry away from the pertinent memories. He was still a much better occlumens than Harry was a legilimens. But there was absolutely no way he would later be able to deny any knowledge of the prank — it was patently impossible that he wouldn't have heard something before returning home for the summer. And when Harry inevitably realised Blaise had chosen to deceive him on Lyra's behalf, all the progress he'd made in getting Harry to trust him would be ruined.

What a tragedy, cutting off your ridiculous teenage romance before it could bear fruit.

Romance probably isn't the right word... Blaise thought back. Not that he knew what the right word was. Harry's feelings about their relationship were definitely headed in a more romantic direction, but he didn't think his own feelings toward Harry were really different from those he held for anyone else he considered to be one of his people. More like a sort of ownership and accompanying responsibility than romance, really...

He caught a complicated sense of nostalgia and a brief flash of Lily Evans before Snape shut down his response. He ignored Blaise's unarticulated question, too. I'm not your bloody therapist, Zabini. I have no desire whatsoever to discuss the intricacies of your feelings for Potter or the lack thereof.

Good, neither did Blaise. Now to make sure Snape would think twice before mocking his "ridiculous teenage romance" again... We could talk about yours. Was that Lily Evans?

Snape forcibly re-oriented his point of focus toward the memory — the mind-magic equivalent of grabbing him by the hair to turn his head. While they'd been chatting, they'd missed several minutes of Blaise lying around speculating about Lyra's likely reaction to his just telling Harry.

Because while he didn't think Harry would leave if he knew people were going to think he was dead, he was pretty sure that he could convince him not to go back.

—A thought slipped through Maïa's occlumency, tinged with misgiving and half-denied joy. I'm her favourite person? But— Okay, definitely a compliment, then, but...I have no idea what to think about that.

—Well, someone was laying it on thick. Maïa must have been even more annoyed with Lyra than he'd expected. Probably because she wasn't in on the plan.

—A few minutes later, the privacy wards fell. Maïa heading directly for the door, seemingly not even noticing the greeting he called as she walked away.

—"Maïa's your favorite person?" he said, in lieu of a greeting to Lyra. "I think I might be hurt."

—"You're not people and you know it."
—Blaise, unlike Maïa, knew a compliment from Lyra when he heard it. "You say the sweetest things. So. Snape said something about proof of life?"

—"He can't possibly actually think I killed Harry."

—"Well, no, I don't think he thinks it's likely, but that doesn't mean he doesn't want proof. He did know Bellatrix, you know."

—Lyra pouted. 'Other Bella wouldn't have actually killed him either. Fake prophecy, fake murder. Actually murdering him wouldn't make sense. But I need you to go to Ancient House anyway. There's a bag of wands in the second drawer to the left of the range in the kitchen, I—"

—"Wands?"

—"Yes, wands, those bloody twats snapped mine. Fuckers. So, I need you to go get one for me."

—They snapped her wand? That was just... Even if she didn't seem particularly angry about it — annoyed and edgy, sure, but not nearly as furious as he knew he would be, if someone had the temerity to destroy his wand — that was just incredibly stupid of them. Blaise didn't even want to know what she was planning as retribution.

Probably something mind-bendingly absurd and gratuitously painful, though not permanently damaging, Snape thought, his mental 'voice' unmistakably resigned.

—"Er. Which one? Or just bring all of them...?"

—"It really doesn't matter. I only kept the ones that worked passingly well for me. Here," she said, plucking something white from a shadow beside her and throwing it at him.

—He caught it, barely. A bundle of white cloth, apparently, with runes stitched into it. "What is it?"

—"It's a portal. It goes to Ancient House. Don't use it here, it'll kill all the enchantments in the area, and then Pomfrey will kill you."

—"A portal?" he repeated, unfolding the thing. "You...enchanted a bedsheet as a bloody gate?"

Snape's incredulous disbelief echoed Blaise's own, confirming his initial impression that this wasn't the sort of thing people did.

No, Zabini, that isn't the sort of thing people do. He didn't elaborate on why not. Ask Ashe. She'll explain exactly why it's impossible. Then ask Bellatrix how she did it. While they're in the same room, if possible.

—"It's not a bedsheet, but yeah, figured why not?"

—Well, presumably for all the other reasons no one used these things anymore outside of international travel, but Blaise wasn't objecting. He liked gate spells much better than the Floo. "Er, right. So...how does it work?"

—She grinned. "Well, the paired enchantments create basically a tiny trans-dimensional tunnel through—"

—"I'm sure you know I meant how do I turn it on."
Lyra rolled her eyes. "Psh, you have no appreciation for awesome enchanting. Just push enough magic into it to activate the siphoning array, that will draw in enough power to activate the rest of it. Uh...you can cast a Protego around it to snuff it out, I guess." Presumably there was another, far more complicated 'correct' way to terminate the enchantment, but the Protego option sounded just fine to Blaise. "Don't cast any magic directly on it, though."

Blaise didn't think he wanted to know what would happen if he did cast magic at it directly. "Er...right. Anything else?"

"Uh...don't fold it up while it's activated?"

"Don't fold up a hole in the fabric of reality, yeah, I think that's pretty common sense, Lyra."

"Well, actually, I kind of want to see what would happen if you did, so just don't do it without me. And yeah, I really need that wand, so."

"Yes, yes, going. See you in a bit."

Blaise skimmed over the part of the memory where he walked down to an unused former potions lab and cast spells to prevent interruption by anyone else looking to use the abandoned space for a clandestine meeting. He tried to skim over the part where, because he couldn't use magic to stick the thing to a wall or something, he'd opted to just spread it on the floor, and consequently fell flat on his arse as soon as he stepped through it, but Snape obviously still caught it.

His mocking amusement echoed through Blaise's mind. That may be the least graceful thing I've ever seen you do, Zabini.

It was, he was pretty sure. At least no one else had seen it. And Blaise was pretty sure Snape had already seen every embarrassing thing he had ever done, anyway. Not that there were many, but he was always acutely aware of those moments when he failed to meet Mirabella's standards of grace and comportment.

(The exasperation Snape always felt when Mirabella came up was barely noticeable. Blaise ignored it. He was well aware that Snape considered her expectations of him to be entirely unreasonable. Snape was equally aware that his opinion wasn't going to stop Blaise acting in accordance with them.)

—He picked himself up, straightened his robes, and shouted for Harry. Harry, predictably, wasn't within earshot — it took a few minutes of wandering around to orient himself, but when he did, he realised that he was in an entirely different wing of the house than the one that elf had been renovating as Lyra's living quarters. He headed in that direction, under the assumption that Harry would have taken one of the bedrooms that actually had a bed, wondering exactly what the best way to broach the issue of his supposed death might be.

—He eventually located Harry in the bedroom closest to the only working kitchen in the house, ghosting past the doorway to grab a wand for Lyra, first — she would be beyond annoyed if he got distracted and came back without it. There were half a dozen in the drawer she had mentioned, and though she had said it didn't really matter which one he grabbed, he still found himself lingering over the choice, picking up one, then the next, trying to decide which one felt the most like her magic. None of them really did — a couple would work well enough for him, but Lyra's magic was darker than his and more... He couldn't really put his finger on the difference, but he knew they couldn't possibly actually be well-matched to her.

—He was still trying to decide which one to take when Harry, drawn by the sounds of his
rummaging about, appeared in the doorway behind him.

—"Blaise? What are you doing here?"

The tension in Snape's mind hadn't really been noticeable until it relaxed with the confirmation that Harry was in fact alive, at Ancient House, exactly where Lyra said he ought to be.

That will be sufficient, Zabini.

Yeah, but you should keep watching, you're going to think this is hilarious. Blaise had come up with a rather tidy solution to the problem of Lyra's ridiculous demands conflicting with his own plans for Harry, if he did say so himself.

—"Hey! Um...I wanted to talk to you about something, but Lyra asked me to grab one of these for her while I was here, and I didn't want to forget."

—"No, I mean, I thought the train didn't get in until later this afternoon." Though I guess if the train was here, Lyra would be here, too... And are those wands? Why would Lyra need a spare wand? Why couldn't she just come get it herself? "Is something wrong, Blaise?"

—"Ah...you should probably sit down."

—Harry, of course, did not sit, instead coming closer to grab his arm and look him directly in the eye. "Blaise. What's going on?"

—"Nothing. It's just a misunderstanding."

—"Blaise. Why aren't you on the train? And where's Lyra?"

—"She's still at school. Everyone's still at school, actually. The train isn't running today."

—"Are you specifically trying to not tell me something?"

—"No, I'm just...trying to find the right way to tell you something."

—Harry stepped back, made an open-armed I'm-right-here gesture. "Just tell me."

—Blaise grabbed a wand at random and shoved it into his pocket alongside his own before dragging Harry into the nearest sitting room and shoving him onto a sofa. "You know how there were a bunch of tracking charms on you?"

—"Yes..."

—"Yeah, well, there was also a set of monitoring spells, you know, the kind of thing that you put on nursery kids just to make sure they're happy, safe, and so on."

—Harry very clearly didn't know what to say to that. His thoughts were a jumbled mess — They put fucking baby monitoring charms on me?! warring with Lyra didn't say anything about anything like that... and Wait, but. What would be the problem, then...? In the end, that one appeared to win out. "I don't get it. I mean, if they know I'm safe and happy... How is that a bad thing?"

—"Ah. Well. It would be a good thing, actually. I think Lyra was counting on them reassuring everyone that you were fine, despite disappearing on them, but, well... They're only a good thing if they work. See, the wards here are interfering with them, somehow, and, well..."

—A sneaking suspicion was growing in the back of Harry's mind — not only that this was a Very
Bad Thing, but also that Lyra would definitely have mentioned if there was some way that everyone would know he was okay while she was trying to convince him to leave in the first place. "AND?"

—Best to just do it, Blaise decided — tear off the bandage. "Dumbledore thinks you're dead."

—Harry was momentarily stunned, his mind going entirely blank in shocked disbelief before stuttering back to life. "I— You— What?! Dumbledore thinks I'm dead?! Why? How? I mean..."

—Right. Better distract him before he realises Lyra did this on purpose... He was close, after all, with that thought that she would have told him if she'd known the monitoring charms would work in their favor. Fortunately those poor idiots who had attacked Lyra had provided just the thing. "Well, it's not just Dumbledore — between you disappearing and Lyra getting attacked—"

—"Lyra got attacked?! Is she okay? She didn't kill anyone, did she?"

—Well, that worked perfectly. Blaise laughed. "No, she didn't. She actually got her arse kicked for once. She's in hospital, looks like shite." He pushed an image of a pathetic, bandaged (but awake and clearly furious) Lyra at Harry.

—"She looks... Fucking hell, Blaise, what happened? Who did that to her?" It...wasn't Riddle, was it? he wanted to ask — it was the right time of year for that sort of thing, and he couldn't imagine anyone else managing to do that to Lyra. But it was just too absurd to actually say aloud (even if he did think it clearly enough that he might as well have).

—"Snape thinks she got ambushed by a bunch of students. Take away her wand and tie her up with actual ropes, and Lyra's not much more dangerous than you are." Blaise was good enough at mind magic that he'd probably be more dangerous than Lyra if they were both wandless and tied up. That was a very weird thought... "She's claiming they obliviated her, but I guarantee she knows who they were. She just doesn't want to get them chucked in Azkaban for torturing her."

Do you know who they were? Snape asked, a distinct note of suspicion radiating from his presence.


No. But you know as well as I do that she will take their actions as a guideline for the severity of her retaliation, and those morons have almost certainly escalated the conflict beyond a level of violence they are capable of tolerating or maintaining. I would simply like to know which students may be in danger of...somewhat overzealous payback.

Blaise threw a wave of exasperation at him. It wasn't like Lyra was ever very subtle about her plans. He was pretty sure he'd be able to manage whatever she decided to do to them, steer her away from hurting them too badly. But, fine, I'll find out.

—"Torturing her?"

—"Ah...Snape gave me the run-down, but I don't think you really want details. There was at least one Cruciatus, and she had to have all the bones in her right hand re-grown."

—Harry winced, recalling the de-boning of his own right arm. "Isn't the Cruciatus Unforgivable? They should be in Azkaban!"

—"Nah. She's annoyed. I mean, they did break her wand." Harry winced again, this time recalling his and Weasley's ill-fated trip back to Hogwarts for their second year. "But she's not ruin their lives and burn their Houses to the ground annoyed. I kind of got the impression that she's actually a
little pleased with whoever it was."

—"What—" Harry said abruptly, cutting himself off sharply when he apparently realised he didn’t
know how to finish that question. Blaise assumed he meant, what kind of twisted, Lyra logic leads
to her being pleased about being tortured?

—"If people retaliate, you know, for her pranks and generally acting like an arse, they're engaging
with her, playing her game."

—"Game? Blaise, you said they used a fucking Unforgivable on her!"

—"Yes, game," he smirked. "You may have noticed, Lyra likes to play rough." He pushed a
memory of Lyra wrestling with a snarling Sylvie at him, followed by one of Lyra's duels with Theo,
before school started. He considered throwing in the highlights of one of their snogging sessions —
he didn't mind her being a violent heathen child nearly as much when he was getting off on it —
but Harry didn't know about that. "I guarantee that's not the first time someone's cast an
Unforgivable on her, and it's not like she doesn't know she pisses people off all the bloody time, I'd
be shocked if she wasn't expecting someone to try something like this eventually. She will
do something to get back at them, but nothing that will end the game."

—Harry just gave him a flat, disbelieving look.

—Blaise sighed. "Just chalk it up to Lyra's insane and leave it at that. She's not going to turn them
in. It wouldn't be cricket." Judging Harry's initial outrage to have worn off sufficiently to return to
convincing him not to ruin the prank, he added, "Also, she thinks it's hilarious that between their
attack on her, and your sudden unexplained disappearance, everyone thinks you're dead. In fact,
she asked me not to tell you, because she thinks you're going to run off and ruin our holiday just to
reassure your adoring public that you're alive and well."

—"My adoring— I call dragonshite! She just thinks it's funny that Dumbledore's—
Wait, everyone?!"

—"Well, obviously our friends aren't going to believe the rumors. I mean, if Lyra tells them she's
taking you on holiday and I tell them I've seen you in person since you 'died', do you really think
they'd believe gossip and Dumbledore over us?"

—"Well, no, but..." Harry very nearly objected on principle before Blaise nudged his thoughts
toward the way Magical Britain had reacted to his reappearance in 1991 with their fawning hero
worship, and how quickly they had turned on him with the revelation that he could talk to snakes.

The memory froze. Shite. He'd forgotten about that. Now he was going to have to sit through—

Zabini, what have I told you about that sort of manipulation?

—that.

Blaise knew the conversation Snape wanted him to recall. Well, his habit of reminding people of
certain facts and events that were relevant to the conversation at hand in such a way that they were
unlikely to think he was blatantly manipulating them had actually come up several times.
Technically it wasn't even a compulsion, just a suggestion, but Snape still didn't approve. He'd
asked why once, and Snape had refused to tell him, but after looking at Gin and Harry's memories
of Riddle's horcrux he suspected it was just because it reminded him of Not-Professor Riddle. It
certainly hadn't stopped him from using it on Blaise in their lessons, anyway. But he's a legimins,
he's fair game.
Have you taught him to recognise such subtle alterations in his thought patterns?

Well, no, but you never taught me, either. Hardly the same situation, since Blaise had figured out suggestions when he was ten, but.

You realise your attempts to feign stupidity are even more transparent when I'm in your bloody mind, do you not? Potter is hardly a competent legilimens — he hasn't even fully come into the talent. He can hardly be considered fair game.

Fine, whatever, Blaise thought emphatically, putting as much exasperation behind the idea as he could. He didn't do it very often, anyway — Harry wouldn't take it well if he realised that Blaise was manipulating him. He probably also wasn't going to take it well when he got good enough to realise that there were memories Blaise had been hiding from him entirely, but he was quite certain Harry wasn't ready to know that Blaise had been an accomplice to multiple murders.

He's also not going to take it well when he realises the extent of your relationship with the junior Bellatrix, Snape noted.

Oh, shut up.

It wasn't as though Snape was actually concerned for Blaise's relationship with Harry — he just really didn't like the fact that Blaise and Lyra were snogging. (Given the two options, he would much rather see Blaise play Evans to Harry's Potter than Riddle to Lyra's Bellatrix.) He wasn't wrong that Harry wasn't going to take it well, but Harry had comprehensively failed to make any sort of a move on Blaise himself, and Blaise wasn't about to stop snogging Lyra or his Hufflepuffs while he waited for him to work up his nerve. And he definitely wasn't going to escalate their relationship himself — with Harry's control issues (or rather issues with his complete lack of control over his life), it would be far better to let him set the pace.

If and when Harry decided to move things in a more romantic and/or sexual direction, Blaise would tell him about Lyra. Until then... Well, he could reasonably claim he hadn't thought it was any of Harry's concern.

Before Snape could tell him that was a terrible plan (in defiance of his stated disinterest in Blaise's romantic entanglements), Blaise resumed the memory.

—"Dumbledore wouldn't even think you were dead if he hadn't been spying on you." (Good. Fucking. Point, Harry thought.) "Or if he was willing to listen to Lyra, or investigate properly rather than just trusting his monitoring spells to be infallible."

—"Are you really going to tell me that Lyra told Dumbledore that I'm alive?"

—"Well, no. Actually, I don't think she's seen him since she woke up. Pomfrey's still got her locked up in hospital. But Snape went up and threw Cheering Charms at her until she admitted he was right about what happened — you know, her sending you off and then getting ambushed—" (He sent over a second-hand memory of Snape looming over Lyra's sick-bed all furious and protective on Harry's behalf, with Lyra pouting at him and complaining about his immediately unravelling her plots.)

Was that really necessary, Zabini? Snape complained, embarrassment shading his annoyance as though the consequences of his own ill-fated teenage romance were somehow shameful. Granted, Blaise didn't know Snape's exact circumstances at the end of the War, but he had managed to piece together that he had decided to protect Harry after Lily's death. That duty weighed on him even more heavily than his duty to his Slytherins (and Blaise was pretty sure Snape had killed Defense
Not really, no. But he was starting to get angry at you for hurting her after she was just, you know, tortured—

(Disbelief and a hint of scorn rose in response to the idea of Lyra being tortured, the mental equivalent of scoffing and rolling one's eyes. Blaise declined to pursue the thought, or more likely memory, behind it. It was probably something with Other Bella, during the War. Blaise suspected that Snape had been intentionally allowing him to gather an impression of the sort of crazy Lyra might eventually grow into, as though that would put him off.)

—and as funny as it is when Harry goes off on a Snape-is-evil rant, I was trying to have a conversation with him.

Oh, yes, I'm so evil, throwing Cheering Charms at an agent of bloody Chaos.

Blaise radiated amusement in response to the snark. He could tell Snape wasn't nearly as put out as he sounded, presumably because he appreciated the irony, even if Harry, who had no idea that Lyra was a black mage, couldn't.

Yes, yes, I'm sure Potter's ignorance is a constant source of amusement to those who are not responsible for his safety and general well-being. I do, however, have other things to do today. Is there a point to this little recitation, aside from showing off your ability to manipulate an ignorant half-wit?

Oh, fine. It was a more impressive bit of manipulation than Snape was willing to admit — Harry was actually relatively suspicious of others' motives in regard to...pretty much everything. But that wasn't the part he'd thought Snape would enjoy. He skinned forward, skipping the twenty minutes or so he'd spent convincing Harry not to just go to Mira's house (away from the wards disrupting the monitoring spells) and generally getting him on board with the idea of letting 'The Boy Who Lived' spend the entire summer dead.

—Harry nodded, then half-seriously asked, "Do you think I could just arrange to come back as a transfer student? Just, I don't know, pretend to be my own cousin, or something? Because I really don't want to have to deal with all that shite when we come back, either."

—"Ah...probably not. Mira could get the transfer papers, sure, but there'd be issues with House Potter...stuff." Blaise wasn't actually certain what that stuff entailed, but Lyra had definitely mentioned something about it not being a problem over the short period of the summer holiday, which meant it probably would be a problem if Harry tried to stay dead indefinitely.

—Harry pouted (adorably). "I didn't ask to be the last Potter any more than I did to be the Boy Who Lived, you know."

—"Yeah, but see, being Lord Potter means you can propose a law to abolish Mondays if you want. That's much less stupid than the whole Boy Who Lived thing."

—He chuckled at that, genuine amusement washing over Blaise. "Yeah, well, no arguments here. I still don't buy that Lyra didn't do this on purpose, though."

—Blaise shrugged. "You don't really care, either." Harry gave him an exasperated glare — it always annoyed him when Blaise told him what he was feeling, even when he was right. Sometimes especially when he was right. "If you really want to do something about it, just don't let her figure out that you know until we get back to Britain."
—"Er...what? Why would that...?"

—"She thinks it'll be funnier to just not tell you and let you find out when you get back to school. If you manage to keep the fact that you know from her all summer instead of her keeping your 'death' from you, she'll be forced to recognise that she's not as smart as she thinks she is, and you're not that easy to fool. And also, she'll spend the whole summer trying to keep you away from newspapers and anyone who might mention your 'death' for nothing, it will be hilarious."

—A slow grin spread across Harry's face as he considered this idea, quickly developing into an evil smirk. "Yeah, alright. Let's do it. I can't wait to see the look on her face..."

Snape pulled out of the memory, dragging Blaise's focus back to the real world as well.

He was laughing.

Snape.

Blaise gave him one of his own flat, sardonic expressions in response. "I told you you'd like it."

After a few seconds, he managed to get a hold of himself. "For once I find myself in complete agreement with Potter — I do hope you manage to pull it off, because the look on her face..."

"Five points to Slytherin, Zabini."

It had been three hours — three hours and twelve bloody minutes — since Dumbledore had announced Harry's death, and everything was...

Well, quite frankly, everything was terrible. Just...awful.

Hermione was beginning to think she'd had no idea what guilt felt like before today.

She'd spent the last couple hours telling herself, over and over, that she'd known this was going to happen, but she was also beginning to think that was just making it worse. Nothing had actually changed since that annoying (and confusing) conversation in the Hospital Wing. She'd known the Headmaster would have to make an announcement soon. She'd hoped Lyra was wrong, that Dumbledore was smart enough to wait and let the Aurors decide whether Harry was dead or not, and make them break the news, after everyone was home — let them read it in the Prophet, let the news pass relatively unnoticed, avoid creating panic and spectacle, rather than make a huge bloody production about it. She hadn't held much hope for it, but enough to convince herself that maybe she didn't even need to say anything, and everything would be — well, not fine, but not...this.

Not Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump and generally speaking the most well-respected person Hermione knew of in Magical Britain, standing before the assembled student body and delivering the crushing news with the full weight of his authority behind it: Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was dead.

Harry being who and what he was, there couldn't not be a reaction to that. And she just...

She'd just let it happen.

And now...

She hadn't realised what it would mean, was all. Well, she had, but— The...mess it would cause
had been just theoretical, and she'd thought she could handle it — just keep her bloody mouth shut, for Harry (and Lyra).

But now it'd become all too real, and she didn't know if she could handle it — it was just—

The ridiculous theatre of Dumbledore's announcement and the immediate aftermath had been bad enough. She'd just... It'd been hard, sitting there, witnessing everyone's shock and horror and grief. Harder than she'd thought it would be, even — seeing Hagrid crying was particularly difficult — knowing it was pointless, the whole thing was a lie, but she couldn't do anything about it, it was too late, and worse, knowing she could have— Well, she might not have been able to do anything, Dumbledore might not even have agreed to see her before lunch, but she hadn't even tried.

Lyra had won.

Not just the— the stupid prank, the lie, not just that she had made this happen, all these people were miserable and it was all her fault, but she'd won...whatever silent, half-acknowledged ethical struggle Hermione had been trying to ignore for months, now.

She'd been amused at Trelawney's little breakdown — it hardly mattered that the sharp joy of schadenfreude had been followed immediately by a surge of self-hatred and hatred for Lyra (though not enough, not nearly enough), for having done this to her, to all of them, because she knew it wasn't all Lyra's fault. Every minute that passed she became more certain of it, in fact. The mean, vindictive pleasure that Lyra didn't get to be here to enjoy it did nothing to assuage the guilt threatening to overwhelm her because Burke had been right, and she had done nothing.

She'd intentionally focused on the conversation at the Gryffindor table, so she didn't have to listen to the Headmaster's attempt at memorialising Harry. It'd quickly become clear, in only a few sentences, that Dumbledore really didn't know him at all. When she thought about it, why should he? They'd had very little interaction, really — the few times Harry had talked to Dumbledore he hadn't come away with the best impression, he'd told Hermione he thought Dumbledore was bloody confusing and maybe just a little bit mad. (And also rather condescending, apparently, but most adults were when dealing with children.) From what he'd told her, they'd certainly never talked about anything personal. Unless Sirius being innocent counted, but Harry had really just been present for that one, listening to Lyra and Dumbledore snark at each other like crazy people.

If she'd had occasion to consider it beforehand, she wouldn't have thought Albus Dumbledore and Bellatrix bloody Lestrange to at all get on, but she did sort of see it now. They were both brilliant and flamboyant and absolutely insane, it made a mad kind of sense.

What she'd heard of that speech of his — Dumbledore cementing the public image of Harry as some kind of heroic mystical savior (not his words, obviously) — had unpleasantly reminded Hermione of Harry's mother. There had been hints, reading between the lines in old issues of the Herald and the Prophet, that Lily Evans hadn't been the gentle, maternal, self-sacrificing Healer she was made out to be. Hermione had put together that the modern characterisation of her was fabricated on her own — Lily was an incredibly famous muggleborn Head Girl, Hermione had started reading everything about her she could find before even getting to Hogwarts — but she hadn't realised just how thorough it was until this last term.

Apparently, Eris had told Lyra all about Lily — apparently, she'd been a talented ritualist, and one of the Powers' favourites, at that. Hermione had no idea what to think about that.

Nor did she know how to feel about Dumbledore seemingly trying to do something similar with Harry. He hadn't done anything nearly so controversial as his mother, true, but... The boy Dumbledore was talking about, he was a complete stranger. That wasn't Harry at all. Hermione
couldn't even listen to it for more than a moment, she...

It made everything more complicated, somehow — Harry wasn't actually dead, true, but if he were...

Nobody would remember him. Everybody would remember *Harry Potter, Boy Who Lived*, but nobody would remember *him*. Just Hermione and Ron, Lyra, Hagrid, maybe Zabini, Ginny...the Quidditch team? His roommates? When she thought about it, Harry really *didn't* have that many friends, only had to look at the absurd drama that had been last year to realise that most of the school had absolutely no idea what he was really like. If he really had died, it'd be the Boy Who Lived who would be remembered. Harry would be forgotten, all too quickly. That realisation made her feel...

Angry. It made her angry.

Hermione *hated* feeling angry. Especially over something she could do nothing about. *Especially* when that thing was as stupid as the *fucking* Boy Who Lived myth.

(She hated that she felt *more* guilty about focusing on the things that made her angry so she wouldn't have to feel so guilty because — she *could* have done something about *that*, about the announcement (*maybe*) if she hadn't been so... If Lyra hadn't *won.*)

This whole thing, Harry being 'dead', everyone breaking down over it, it was almost overwhelming. Some of it was just making her *furious* — she didn't know which was worse, how the real Harry disappeared entirely or the students here and there who didn't care or even seemed *pleased*. (Bloody racist Death Eater fascist *shites*, Jesus *Christ*, she'd been *this* close to punching Malfoy in his pointy fucking face.)

Some of it was making her feel awful — this was all Lyra's fault, and Hermione was *protecting* her, and she *should* feel guilty about *that* but she just *didn't* — she should have tried to stop it, yes, she knew that, but— but... There was no bloody justification, she just couldn't bring herself to betray Lyra, even when she was doing something like *this* — telling herself that she'd only done it, only kept quiet for Harry would be a *lie* — she just— She *knew* she'd been doing something wrong, and she'd done it anyway, because...because it was *Lyra*.

(God, she was a *terrible* person, what was *wrong* with her?! Why had she— *How* had she possibly thought this would be okay?!)

And some of it was just frustrating, she'd never felt so helpless — and talking to the Gryffindor boys didn't make *that* any better. Bloody *idiots*. *Nobody* believed her, aside from Ginny and Lyra's friends, not even Hagrid, she'd *tried* to tell him Harry was fine, it hurt seeing him hurt so badly, but he *wouldn't* listen, if Dumbledore said Harry was dead, it was *Dumbledore*—

And she couldn't escape from it. She'd left Gryffindor tower almost as soon as she'd returned, rather than sit there, watching everyone and their suffering and offering their entirely genuine and completely insufferable condolences to her. She couldn't stay in Slytherin, either. Not because she wasn't welcome — it was still a little uncomfortable, but they'd grown weirdly tolerant of Hermione the last couple months, probably because Lyra's friends didn't mind having her around — no, Slytherin dealing with Harry's 'death' was almost as bad as Gryffindor. Maybe *worse*, though in a very different way.

It wasn't grief, exactly, more a sort of anxious excitement, knowing *something* was about to happen, and not being entirely sure what, but something *big*. 
Bracing for impact, maybe.

It was partially because of their Truce, Daphne had explained — nobody knew what consequences Harry's apparent murder would have for the silly little social ceasefire the nobility had maintained since the end of the War. Everyone would be holding their breath until they knew who had 'killed' him. But beyond that, the political winds were shifting: Harry Potter being 'murdered' right under his nose would have massive consequences for Dumbledore. (And Hermione could only imagine that when it eventually came out that Harry wasn't dead it would look even worse for him.)

Nobody knew exactly what would happen, but nobody doubted the Dark would capitalise on it — with a leader as brilliant and devious as Narcissa Malfoy, there was simply no possible world in which they wouldn't. Zabini was confident he'd keep the Headmastership — the Board was less susceptible to external political shifts, it'd take something monumental for him to be sacked — but Tracey claimed he'd be very lucky to still be Chief Warlock a year from now. Especially if tidbits about Harry's homelife got around, which some muckraker would almost certainly dig up in the next weeks. Dumbledore's days at the head of the government were numbered.

Hermione hadn't believed it at first, but she noticed the completely serious looks on the other Slytherins' faces, how none of them argued the point. They were more informed about this sort of thing than she was. Maybe...

Maybe this was going to get far bigger than Hermione had assumed it would.

Far bigger than she'd ever realised it could.

(Maybe there was no maybe about it. And that was terrifying.)

Had she— Had Lyra known the complete clusterfuck this would become?! Hermione...couldn't believe she hadn't. Much as she disdained the political state of Magical Britain, she was ridiculously well-informed about its intricacies and the balance of power within it (even if she sometimes got universes confused). Did she have a plan, or did she just...just disrupt things, and let the chips fall where they might?

Hermione didn't know which answer would be more disturbing.

This was getting out of hand. Hermione had to do something.

She couldn't just... She had to do something.

This was just— This wasn't just letting Harry have a holiday and showing everyone how stupid they were about their bloody Boy Who Lived myth, this mattered. Hermione might not agree with some of the political positions of the Light — she might even agree with the Dark about more issues, honestly — but she wasn't kidding herself. Even if Lady Malfoy was willing to say all the right things about muggleborn integration on behalf of the Allied Dark, the sentiments and cultural divisions that had given rise to the Death Eaters still lurked under their politically correct surface.

This was...big. Bigger than Hermione and Lyra, or Trelawney and the absolutely abysmal teaching standards at this school, or Harry and the Boy Who Lived. So much bigger than the cruel but ultimately petty mischief she'd thought Lyra was creating... She couldn't just...

It had been wrong of her not to try to stop Dumbledore making his announcement, but not so wrong that it hadn't seemed worth it, for Harry's happiness and Lyra's protection.

Letting this continue would be worse.
She wasn't sure she'd be able to live with herself, if the entire political landscape of Magical Britain imploded and she hadn't even tried to stop it.

If she... It felt like a betrayal to Lyra just to think it— (God, she had a problem, she should have distanced herself from Lyra ages ago, before she'd managed to turn Hermione into...this.) —but if she told Dumbledore now, he could— could make a retraction, or, or something, stop it getting out to the public, stop everything falling apart. She didn't know, this was too big for her. But Dumbledore would. He would have to.

At least, that was what she wanted to tell herself, her feet carrying her toward his office on instinct. But she wasn't entirely certain she believed it. It'd been growing increasingly clear, over the last couple years, that Dumbledore...wasn't perfect. Which, obviously he wasn't perfect, he was mortal like the rest of them, but try telling the rest of the bloody Gryfffindors that he's not infallible, they'd look at her like she'd pulled out a knife and started in on some nasty blood ritual or something. The faith many mages had in Dumbledore was absolutely absurd, he was just a man. He made mistakes like everyone else.

Not that all those 'mistakes' were necessarily bad. She'd noticed, before, that Dumbledore had a tendency to handle whatever happened at Hogwarts himself, without involving outside authorities. If he didn't, Hermione might not consider going to him at all — even if she did say something to incriminate Lyra, intentionally or otherwise, she thought it likely Dumbledore wouldn't tell anyone. He hadn't told anyone about that time Lyra had blown them up practising runic casting, after all. No matter how absurd she thought it was, runic casting was a restricted Dark Art, they could both be sent to Azkaban just for owning the book they'd been learning it from, much less actually doing it. (And Dumbledore had found the book — he'd confiscated it, they'd had to pop down to the Bookstore to get a replacement.) They, two minors, could be locked up with soul-sucking demons, for who knows how long, over reading a book. Sometimes keeping the things that happened at Hogwarts from the 'proper' authorities was not at all unreasonable. But sometimes...

Sometimes it really wasn't. The whole basilisk incident came to mind. She knew for a fact Dumbledore had managed to keep that hushed up remarkably well — there hadn't been any articles in major publications (the Quibbler didn't count) until he'd been suspended, and even then they had been very sparing on the details. There'd been a monster terrorising the school, presumably directed by one of the other students, petrifying some of them, leaving them laid up in hospital for months, and nobody had known about it.

(Hermione still wasn't comfortable talking to Ginny. She wasn't angry at her for it, of course not, never had been. She understood the poor thing hadn't been able to do anything about it, she was as much a victim as anyone else. It didn't even bother her that much — she hadn't been permanently harmed, and she hadn't even been out that long, it hadn't even hurt, it wasn't a big deal. She'd said as much when Ginny had apologised, back in September. But she could tell the younger girl still felt terrible over the whole thing, and... She didn't know. It was just always there, hanging over them unspoken, it made her uncomfortable.)

Other people she'd talked to, they thought, it was Dumbledore, surely nobody could have handled the situation better than he. But...couldn't they? They didn't have a cursebreaker on staff — the closest thing they had was Professor Babbling who, while brilliant, was more a wardcrafter and enchantress than anything. It had taken a while for Hermione to realise, since Lyra had a distinct predilection for runic magic, but cursebreakers did deal with a much larger range of spells than malicious (and/or protective) enchantments and wards. Who could say what a proper cursebreaker might have been able to do about that petrification, they might not have needed to wait for the
mandrakes at all. (Hell, *Lyra* could have broken it — she'd found an article in some Indian journal — said it would have taken blood magic, which *was* illegal, but she claimed it wouldn't even be difficult.)

And, that diary, it sounded like a *bloody horcrux* — which had unpleasant implications, considering that one had been destroyed and Riddle was *apparently still out there*, which meant he had *more than one* — and that was *seriously* powerful dark magic. Seriously dark magic that was, all things considered, quite easy to detect. Give Hermione a month or two to work on her divination (*the proper* stuff, not the nonsense that drunken fraud babbled on about), and she probably could have tracked it down. Dumbledore was very knowledgeable, yes, but he was focused on light wizardry; the closest thing the school had to an expert in dark *witchcraft* was Snape, and his focus was on potions and mind magic, not divination.

Not that *anybody* seemingly knew divination anymore.

Ignoring the *fact* that anyone with the proper qualifications could have broken the petrification without too much difficulty, ignoring the *high probability* that the diary could have been traced, ignoring the *fact* that the puzzle of what was happening had *not* been difficult to solve — *Hermione* had figured it out, and she'd been *thirteen* — one would think securing the school should have been *bloody easy!* *Nobody* could tell her the attacks could have continued uninterrupted if the Ministry had, she didn't know, posted a handful of Hit Wizards or Aurors at the school. The *second* Creevey had turned up petrified, Dumbledore *should* have called the authorities, gotten people with the proper training in to deal with it. Instead, he'd floundered around, it'd taken *Harry* to put everything to rights — *Harry*, a *twelve-year-old* boy who had *no business* killing a basilisk with a *sword*!

It was nothing short of a miracle that nobody had died last year. And yet, Dumbledore had been reinstated as Headmaster. And things went on, as though nothing had happened.

And...it wasn't just that. There were a *lot* of things that happened here that probably shouldn't be kept in-house. Most of the scuffles and harassment didn't get *too* serious, but Hermione was far more familiar with magical law now — some of the spells she'd seen used, even some Malfoy and his cronies had used on her before this year, were...borderline *at best*, and a few incidents she'd heard of *definitely* crossed into assault. She wasn't saying those students should be thrown in *prison*, especially since prison in magical Britain meant *bloody dementors*, but... Well, it was setting a harmful precedent, wasn't it? That they could hurt other people without seeing real consequences for it, that wasn't a good thing to be telling them. She was certain Death Eaters had started with similar things, when they'd been students.

(Hell, Tracey had outright *told* her that the original Bellatrix had helped Blaise's mother consolidate power in Slytherin when they were in school, threatening and cursing anyone who challenged their authority. However downright surreal it still was to think the semi-famous CEO of a quickly-growing muggle tech company, one she'd *seen interviewed on television*, had apparently been childhood friends with Bellatrix *bloody* Lestrange, she still wasn't over that.)

And then there were the problems that were... Well, they weren't more systemic than the bullying and assaults, but... Maybe the word she wanted was *institutional*. Problems that didn't just happen *at* Hogwarts, but were a part of the school itself.

Maybe Hermione had been spoiled a little, with the schools she'd attended before, but she had *serious* doubts about the suitability of some of the staff. Babbling and Vector were *brilliant*, Flitwick was good, McGonagall was acceptable. But the rest? For an educational institution that was *supposedly* the best in the country, and even one of the best in all of Europe, she couldn't help
feeling the instruction was, at times, barely adequate. Well less than adequate, in some cases — Snape was plain awful, and she liked Hagrid just fine, but he was not suited to the job, he clearly had no idea what he was doing at times. Binns was dead!

And Filch? What possible justification could Dumbledore have to keep that horrid little man around? What the hell did he even do here? They had a veritable army of elves on hand, honestly...

And that was without even getting into more...philosophical issues. Hermione tried not to think about all that. But she couldn't entirely help it, sometimes.

So, by the time she got up to Dumbledore's office, she found herself in an utterly peculiar mood.

Dumbledore was there at his desk, still in those solemn black robes — he looked, just, surreal in plain colours, it was off-putting. Fawkes was perched on the back of his chair, tail turned to drape feathers down his shoulder, head buried in Dumbledore's hair, fussing at one knot then another. (Hedwig played with Harry's hair too, apparently it was a bird thing.) She'd walked nearly halfway across the room before Hermione realised it was unnaturally quiet in here, the constant noise of all his little devices, whatever the hell those all were, completely absent. At least some of them did look to still be working, must be silenced.

"Miss Granger." His voice seemed weaker than normal, thin and harsh. He looked much the same, for once actually appearing his age, frail and tired and defeated. (Hermione couldn't help another twinge of guilt, despite it not being her fault, not really.) "I am sorry, dear girl, but I'm afraid I can't tell you whatever it is you wish to hear."

Hermione wasn't certain what that was supposed to mean, so she just ignored it. Collapsing into one of the chairs across from him, she said, "Harry's alive."

Afterward, she wouldn't remember most of those next few minutes of conversation — mostly because, honestly, she was hardly even listening at the time. He just wasn't taking her seriously, kept turning around with platitudes about how hard it must be to believe, blah blah. It was incredibly frustrating...but not altogether surprising. After all, why should he believe that a fourteen-year-old girl was able to block his suite of monitoring charms? (Wait, what the hell was Dumbledore doing putting monitoring charms on— No, never mind that, didn't matter right now.) She couldn't deny it, it was absurd to think Lyra could best the spellwork of adults far more qualified than she.

But it was far easier to break a thing than to design it in the first place, and Dumbledore didn't know Lyra like she did. Lyra lived and breathed the absurd. The impossibility of a thing held no bearing on the probability it would happen, once Lyra got involved.

(That was part of what made her so fascinating. No, stop it, brain, she's terrible, and it's contagious!)

It didn't take Hermione very long at all to decide she wasn't going to get anywhere, he was simply never going to believe her. Which, frustrating, yes, but she honestly couldn't blame him for it. But it did... She'd tried, at least, and even if it didn't do any good it did make her feel a little better. It wasn't her fault that the truth sounded so absolutely absurd, it wasn't her fault that so many of the students and even Dumbledore himself refused to accept it. She'd done what she could. It was out of her hands.

It was possible she was just making excuses for herself, but she would rather believe it wasn't her responsibility. And why should it be? She was fourteen, honestly...
"I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Dumbledore cut off in mid-lecture, sat blinking at her for a moment. "I'm sorry?"

Yes, he should be. She'd thought it before, she'd thought about it rather a lot over the last year, that something about the magical world was... She didn't know exactly how to put it. Whatever disagreement one might have with the government — and she had certainly heard a lot of disagreement over the years, her parents were bloody Co-operative supporters — there was no denying that there was at least a certain level of competence and... professionalism wasn't quite the right word, she wasn't certain what she meant to say. Integrity? Corruption did crop up from time to time, but it was at least recognised as a bad thing that should be avoided. And various schools she'd been at over the years, there were times that, looking back, she didn't entirely agree with decisions the staff and administrators made. But, in both cases, outside of a few particular exceptions, she could see there was at least an honest effort to try to fulfil the responsibilities they'd been trusted with, enough that she could respect them, whether she agreed or not.

She was finding it increasingly difficult to respect authority figures in the magical world. The more she learned, the more she saw, the clearer it was becoming that the people in positions of power had absolutely no respect for that power, they didn't take their responsibilities seriously. Too many seemed to act out of ruthless self-interest — "corruption" wasn't even a concept in magical government, patronage and market-fixing was how their economy worked — or, failing that, simple incompetence.

Which wasn't too surprising, when she thought about it. Magical Britain was an extremely isolated, extremely conservative society, and one with a comparatively small population. She wouldn't expect their priorities to align with those held by the more socio-politically advanced muggle society. The seeming floundering incompetence of their leadership was a natural consequence as well — that was just how population statistics worked, they had fewer available people and thus fewer available exceptional people.

She'd thought Dumbledore was one of those exceptional people. And, in a way, he was — he certainly was a genius, had been a singular prodigy when he'd been her age, there was no denying that. But competence in one area didn't necessarily guarantee competence elsewhere. The magical government was oppressive, much of their law contradictory, poorly-executed, or just plain silly (prison sentences for reading a book, honestly), an incestuous mire of favour-dealing and corruption. The administration of Hogwarts was little better, hardly half the professors seemed to know what they were doing, the students were left to their own devices with no adult supervision far more than would ever be allowed back home, and their safety risked far too often. It'd taken her a while to be honest about all that, but it was what it was.

And, she'd admit, she had swallowed a bit of the propaganda about Dumbledore, at first. But...

He was in charge here at Hogwarts, he was the presiding officer of the Wizengamot. He couldn't be blamed for everything that was wrong with both but, well, one of the first places to look when a ship wasn't running properly was to its captain.

She didn't think Dumbledore was malicious, of course not — he did seem to care, to be genuinely trying. But she definitely didn't agree with him on a lot of things. (His support for the censorship of magical knowledge in particular came to mind.) And, no matter how uncomfortable it might make her to think it, some portion of his inability to effectively combat the worst elements of magical society might be owed to simple incompetence.

Not that she was particularly surprised, or angry or hurt or whatever. More than anything else, her growing disillusionment with the magical world was just...disappointing.
Something she'd read a while ago floated up out of her memory. Instead of elaborating on her disappointment with the authority figures of the magical world, Hermione recited a particular passage. "There is a temptation to view institutions as monolithic, fixed structures isolated from the biases and foibles of humanity. But we mustn't forget that society is a collection of individuals, the nature of power emerging through the character and interests of the dominant class. Societal institutions, which exist solely as devices to exercise that power, must be analysed as a reflection of the character of the rulers, and their attitudes toward the ruled."

As she spoke, Dumbledore's face gradually hardened, even paling a few further shades, staring at Hermione with eyes still and sharp. Once she'd finished, he said, "You must be cautious, Miss Granger, to not let yourself get carried away. Things may seem so compellingly simple when seen with the passion of youth, but some ideas have gone out of fashion for a reason."

Hermione couldn't help an amused snort — she'd quoted the former Premier Comtois, probably the most popular politician in the history of post-Grindelwald France. She couldn't stop herself saying, "Neo-Gemeenschoppismus has hardly gone out of fashion, Professor," but she almost immediately added, "Sorry, sir, it's just...

Frustrating. It was incredibly fucking frustrating, was what it was. So much so that she was having trouble keeping tears from her eyes. And she wasn't sorry, not at all. She just really didn't want to get into an argument with the Chief bloody Warlock over politics and political philosophy. For one thing, she still probably wasn't informed enough about things on the magical side to perform too well, but more importantly, she doubted they'd actually get anywhere. After all, Dumbledore had little reason to take the opinions of a fourteen-year-old girl seriously, especially on a topic about which she acknowledged he was far more thoroughly knowledgeable than she, and even if he was willing to engage in an actual discussion, rather than immediately dismiss her ideas as childishly under-developed, she found most points of his own political agenda problematic in one way or another — for being the so-called progressive bloc, many of the ideas the Light espoused regarding muggles and non-human beings were shockingly paternalistic, their attempts at fostering muggleborn equality ineffective at best, and he was simply never going to talk her around to accepting censorship as beneficial.

A shadow crossed his face, his eyes drilling into her own for several long seconds, a legilimency probe brushing against the edges of her mind, though he didn't press the issue when she turned it away. Which probably only made him more suspicious, but fuck him.

It was incredibly unethical for him to try reading her bloody mind, even if she had just sort of implied she agreed with post-Grindelwald populist anti-Statutarianism — she hadn't expected Dumbledore of all people to take that well. She'd known he wouldn't when she'd said it, it was even part of why she'd said it. (It was probably the most Lyra-ish thing she'd ever done, intentionally saying something pro-Grindelwald right to the face of the man who'd defeated him.) But she wanted him to know how far he was falling in her estimation right now, even as they spoke. His continued insistence on ignoring the information she was offering, simply because he believed himself so superior to everyone else that he would believe Hermione deluded before he would consider that he could have been tricked was bloody well characteristic of the attitude reflected in the agenda of his political party and the policies of his school.

The moment passed, Dumbledore finally dropping his gaze from her accusatory glare. When he finally spoke, his voice was very quiet. "I quite understand, my dear. Loss and the desire for justice can motivate one as surely as youthful idealism. But I must caution you again not to...not to allow it to consume you. It may seem expedient, in times like these, to turn to the Dark, to embrace radical ideas in pursuit of vengeance, but Harry would not have wanted—"
Hermione's eyes narrowed at that. She wasn't entirely certain what Dumbledore thought was going on here, and she might not know more about magical politics than him, but she did know more about Harry, and she wasn't going to sit here and let him try to— to bloody well gaslight her into accepting his white-washed portrayal of the Boy Who Lived as being in any way related to the real Harry. "I'm not being funny, sir, but I think I know a bit better than you how Harry would or wouldn't want me to mourn him, if he were actually dead, which he's not."

Confusion and concern warred on Dumbledore's face before he settled on the latter and started in on the platitudes again. Hermione wanted to scream. There was simply no point in continuing this conversation. There was nothing to be gained from it.

She found herself standing rather abruptly. "You know what? Just— Thank you for your time, sir. I won't take any more of it."

The old man nodded, an expression of grandfatherly understanding plastered across his face. "I know it's hard, my dear, but the first step toward healing is accepting the loss."

She had nothing to say to that. It had only been four bloody hours since he'd made his stupid, stupid speech — even if she wasn't in denial, and Harry wasn't dead, dictating her mourning process was just a step too far. Especially since that didn't even make sense — surely accepting the loss should be the last step in the process.

But fine, she thought, as the spiral staircase carried her away from the infuriating man. She would accept Harry's 'death'. The most influential wizard in Magical Britain was convinced that he was dead, so he was, at least for the purposes of Lyra's bloody prank. And (unintentional?) impending political upheaval.

She had won.

And, at some level, Hermione wasn't certain anymore that she shouldn't — if the authorities were too bloody stupid to figure it out on their own, it really wasn't her job to convince them of it.

She still felt terrible, letting everyone mourn Harry — or rather the Boy Who Lived — for nothing, but she had at least tried to get the statement retracted, and knowing, after that conversation, that telling Dumbledore before his announcement wouldn't have made any difference at all did make her feel much less guilty. And not just because Dumbledore was bloody infuriating.

Bloody stubborn— I suppose I understand why the Slytherins call him the Old Goat, now...

She didn't want the former Death Eaters taking advantage of the power vacuum that the Slytherins seemed to think would inevitably develop over the next year or two. It wouldn't necessarily be the worst thing in the world if the Light was no longer the prevailing ideology in British politics, though. There had to be some alternative viewpoints in the Wizengamot. She was pretty sure Neville's grandmother was part of some other bloc, for example, and there were quite a few more liberal thinkers like Lady Zabini who didn't vote with any bloc consistently. Breaking the status quo would give them a chance to make a power play as well...

Hermione was so wrapped up in her attempt to find some silver lining in this whole fiasco that she very nearly walked into Luna Lovegood. She wasn't sure how, since Luna was still wearing her characteristically bright and clashing colours, but the girl still managed to surprise her, greeting her out of nowhere. Perhaps it was because she hadn't seen much of the younger girl for months now. Lyra claimed they'd broken off their friendship due to a philosophical disagreement, though Hermione suspected Lyra (accidentally) poisoning Luna with that babbling potion had more to do with it than any philosophical considerations.
"Oh! Luna! Hi. Where did you— What are you doing?"

"Thinking. And not thinking. And walking," she said, falling into step with Hermione. "You're not sad."

Hermione flinched slightly. That was one of the reasons she hadn't really tried to figure out why Luna wasn't hanging around Lyra anymore — the little Ravenclaw made uncomfortable observations far too often for Hermione to actually enjoy spending time with her. She was just so...odd. "Er. No, not really. I'm— Well, I've just been talking to Dumbledore and, well... It didn't go very well."

"About Harry? Ginny told me you don't think he's dead."

"He's not, Lyra's taking him on holiday. But of course Dumbledore didn't believe me, wouldn't even listen, really, just kept repeating his bloody platitudes, as though if he called me my dear enough times I'd stop trying to convince him that he'd been tricked, because obviously it's impossible that Albus Dumbledore could be fooled and, well, I...might have ended up quoting Comtois at him, if that gives you any idea..."

Luna gave her a half-hearted smile, though she sobered again almost immediately. "I believe you. Even though it's well after breakfast. Impossible is less absolute for people like Lyra Bellatrix than it is for everyone else."

"Thank you!" It was a bit reassuring to know that at least one other person realised that...even if that person was Luna Lovegood. "But no one else does. They're all just— just following Dumbledore on blind faith, nevermind that he hasn't provided them any proof— The whole reason he thinks Harry's dead, by the way, is a bunch of monitoring charms he had on him. Apparently corroborating evidence is unnecessary to establish whether a national bloody hero is dead!"

"Harry's a national treasure, not a national hero," Luna corrected her, absently. "Lily Irene was the hero, though Mummy always said that was a matter of perspective. Daddy says everyone is the hero of their own story, and the villain of someone else's. Some people just find their way into more stories than others. Like Grindelwald, for example. I've been thinking about him too, lately, you know."

Hermione took a deep breath to steady herself, dragging her thoughts away from Dumbledore — she didn't want to think about how— how stupid he was being. "Why have you been thinking about Grindelwald?"

Luna took a deep breath herself, letting it out in a long sigh. "Responsibilities untended fall to the ones who suffer by necessity," she quoted cryptically. "And the conflict of duty and conscience."

Silence settled between them as the little Ravenclaw apparently drifted back into her own thoughts. Hermione scowled at the floor, entirely incapable of not thinking about the conversation she'd just had with Dumbledore, especially when Luna brought up such a relevant point.

Hadn't she just been thinking that it wasn't her responsibility to try to fix this bloody mess? But if she didn't try, who would? Not Dumbledore, he was part of the problem. Maybe not even just the immediate problem of Harry's supposed death. She hadn't quoted that passage accidentally — there was a not insignificant part of her that did lay the blame for the state of Hogwarts and Magical Britain at his feet.

A part of her that thought that if he wouldn't even consider that Harry might not be dead, he deserved whatever happened to his political career when the truth finally came out.
In fact... A devious, perhaps slightly insane idea started to take form at the back of her mind. Also perhaps slightly cruel, at least to Dumbledore, adding insult to injury — Lyra really wasa terrible influence. But he had tried to use legilimency on her, and completely dismissed everything she'd tried to tell him. Not to mention, it would send a message to Lyra that Hermione really didn't approve of this prank. Dumbledore might not believe her, she might not be able to mitigate the effects there, but she could still give everyone who didn't think him infallible an alternative narrative to consider.

That sounds like something you'd read in the Quibbler, does it, Dean? Well, let's see what Dumbledore thinks when it comes out not only that Harry isn't dead, but a fourteen-year-old muggleborn knew he'd been tricked and told everyone before he did. When the Quibbler is a more reliable source of information than the Chief bloody Warlock.

If she just framed it as Lyra and Sirius taking Harry on holiday (anonymously, for his own protection, because he's Harry bloody Potter), didn't even mention the false trail Lyra had laid to make it seem like he'd been kidnapped, and explained Dumbledore's announcement as a misunderstanding based on some sort of malfunction with his monitoring charms (because, as far as she could tell, that was the only real 'evidence' they had that Harry was dead and not just missing) — the "malfunction" easily "inferred" from his telling her why he believed Harry was dead, and the fact that she had been informed ahead of time that Harry would be going on holiday anonymously...

Yes, she was pretty sure she could do that without implicating anyone (because she'd be entirely avoiding any crimes that may or may not have been committed in the course of planning Harry's escape), and Harry would be long gone by the time it was actually published, so she wouldn't be ruining his holiday, either. She was certain that even if Lyra hadn't considered the consequences of the eventual revelation that Harry wasn't dead, Zabini (and Lady Zabini) would have, they must have some plan to deal with the aftermath of apparently kidnapping him, or at least removing him from Hogwarts without the permission of his guardian, so they'd probably be able to handle it if anyone realised they'd taken him to California, and when Harry eventually told everyone where he'd been, or the official cover story, Hermione could plead ignorance (or claim that she'd been deceived for security reasons) for getting the details wrong.

And maybe no one would believe her, at least at first — it was the Quibbler, after all — but time would prove her right (in a way even Dumbledore couldn't ignore), and at least she wouldn't be just keeping her mouth shut and letting Lyra do whatever she bloody well pleased, toying with the emotions of the entire bloody country like this.

Because Lyra might have won — might have managed to fake Harry's death, might have corrupted Hermione so thoroughly that she would compromise her morals to protect Lyra's safety and admit (at least to herself) that she didn't care if people she didn't like or respect were made to suffer for her amusement, and had just deliberately antagonised the head of the bloody government because he was being stupid and stubborn and wouldn't listen to her — but that didn't mean this was okay.

Luna looked at her, her head cocked to one side in a silent question, an instant before Hermione turned to her to ask, "Luna, if I wrote something — an article, or...an open letter, maybe, telling people that Harry just left early for the holiday, do you think your father would publish it?"

"Oh, yes. Daddy always publishes the truth. I already owled it to him, actually."

"Er...what?"

"One of the other Hermione gave it to me right after lunch."
Albus Dumbledore had known tragedy, in his life.

Harry Potter was hardly the first casualty he had witnessed over the past century, hardly the first for whom Albus held himself responsible. *(So many people had died, trying to correct Albus's mistakes...*) But this death struck more deeply than many of the others, coming as it did, not in a time of war, but entirely without warning. It might be more terrible to have ordered soldiers to their deaths, setting children hardly out of school against an evil they could hardly hope to stop, let alone destroy, but he could not help but feel Harry's loss more strongly.

Harry, like Ariana, had been an innocent.

His parents and their friends, everyone who'd set themselves against Tom, everyone who'd fought Gellert's rise, even — they had chosen to fight, knowing that they might die, that they would **most likely** die, before the end of their struggle. They had fought to defend themselves and each other and the Light, regardless of the danger. Those who had died, died fighting for something they loved more than their own lives, the ultimate sacrifice.

Harry... What had Harry died for?

Nothing.

And to make matters worse, Albus was beginning to fear that the loss of the Boy Who Lived would drag down more than the nation's morale — whoever had killed Harry had achieved a master-stroke in simply **vanishing**, leaving no trace of him to be martyred. Albus could think of no more ignominious ending to Harry's story than to simply disappear with no fanfare or drama whatsoever. But moreover, the effect on those closest to him... Well, Miss Black seemed to be selfishly unaffected — she had refused to allow a legilimens to attempt to help her recall anything that might be of use in their search on the grounds that she had no desire whatsoever to remember being subjected to torture. But Miss Granger...

He had thought before, on occasion, that Lyra Black reminded him of Lily Evans. Hermione Granger was beginning to remind him of her in an altogether different, and perhaps, given the circumstances, a more **disturbing** way. It had hardly been a secret that Lily had been politically inclined toward the Dark, as well as a dark witch — it followed rather naturally from her ritualistic bent, he thought, that she would disdain the attempts of more cautious, more **rational** wizards to curtail certain practices. And now Miss Granger, already involved in at least one attempt to practice forbidden magics along with Miss Black, was apparently reading radical political theory, embracing the ideas that had so enthralled Albus himself when he was only a few years older than she was now. Between that and her obviously emotional denial of Harry's death, he could not help but see Gellert reflected in her as well, history repeating itself yet again, a new variation on the theme...

"Dumbledore!"

Albus startled, jolted out of his thoughts by the appearance of a head in the floo. He'd meant to... He looked down at the half-completed letter before him. Oh, yes. Remus. His resignation. Citing the likelihood that Peter Pettigrew would be asked about the circumstances under which he and Sirius Black had become animagi in the course of his upcoming trial. Albus agreed that it was likely best that Hogwarts **not** have a known werewolf on staff... Though now, he would have to find **yet another** Defense Professor. Perhaps he could convince Olympe to bring one of her professors to act as a guest lecturer for the subject...
"Albus!"

"Yes, Severus?"

"I'm coming through," the dark wizard informed him, stepping out of the hearth almost before his words registered.

"Er... Yes, Severus, what is it?"

The young man glowered at him. "Surely you have not forgotten that you ordered me to report before I depart for the continent."

Oh, yes, he had. There was a small part of Albus which resented Severus's insistence on attending the annual potioneers' conference in Brussels, when everything here was spiralling so entirely out of control, but he was aware that this impulse was irrational — there was nothing Severus could do to make Harry Potter less dead. He might be able to do something about Sybil's apparent psychotic break — yet another staffing problem to handle — but he wouldn't admit it if he could, and Albus wouldn't actually condone such an invasive use of mind magic anyway. And Severus certainly couldn't help with the political situation already brewing in London.

There was one thing, however, that only he could help with. One thing only he and Albus knew of. One thing upon which the entire future of their nation might turn. "Yes. Tell me, Severus, what do you think of Neville Longbottom?"

Severus's eyes narrowed, his lips twisting into a sneer. "I think he would be an even worse candidate to fulfil that bloody prophecy than Harry Potter — if, indeed, the prophecy was not fulfilled in Nineteen Eighty-One — and moreover, the point is entirely moot, because—"

"Yes, yes, I know you think there is a chance that Potter may still be alive, but you must admit, my boy—"

"Ashe agrees with me," Severus interrupted, sneering triumphantly as he drew a scroll from a pocket, throwing it onto the desk between them. "She asked me to give you this, but I'll save you the time deciphering her incomprehensible chicken scratch — it is theoretically possible to block your bloody monitoring charms."

Albus felt his eyes narrow. He ripped the scroll open rather more violently than necessary, his eyes flying over the arithmancy and the notes his Runes Professor had scrawled, a seemingly random tangle of rune strings and arithmancy and predictive geomancy. It was clear from the general messiness that this was Ashe's original work, handed off to Severus to bring to him without actually composing it into something that could more easily be interpreted. Ashe was fully capable of communicating a proof like this in a way that was easy even for amateurs to understand — she had, in fact, literally written the book on ward optimisation — but the work she did for herself was often confusing, elements of larger functions broken down and rebalanced in isolation, before coming back together again in a web of arithmancy that wasn't simple for anyone not already an expert in the field to pick apart.

Luckily, Albus had become passingly familiar with Ashe's methods over the last few years, managed to identify the solution she'd found after a brief moment of scanning the scroll. Ashe had gone a little further, characterising the waste energies the ward would produce — these would have to be compensated for by the greater system over the property, lest the whole thing collapse from deconstructive interference or literally explode due to cascading resonance. She had managed to come up with a solution to that as well, though the exact execution would depend on the structure of the rest of the wards, the character of the ambient magic in the area.
It was possible, yes, through meticulous use of down-tapping and isolation gates, but... "Ashe is an expert in her field, one of the most talented wardcrafters in all of Europe. Are you honestly suggesting that Lyra Black—"

"Not I," Severus interrupted smoothly. "I simply observe that there is no reason to block the monitoring charms and remove the tracking charms if Potter's abductor — or, as is beginning to seem more likely, the facilitator of his escape — intended to kill him. It was Miss Granger who suggested that Miss Black is responsible. And in any case, yes, I do believe Black to be capable of reaching the solution before you."

Albus twisted his face into an expression of abject disbelief. Lyra Black might be exceptionally clever — even Severus and Minerva had admitted as much, and Albus himself would admit that a certain streak of mad brilliance did run in that family — but she was fourteen. And Severus might have spent more time with her than any other adult in the castle — Albus was not the only one who had set detentions for the girl and promptly assigned them to him, Minerva and Sybil had done so several times as well — but he had himself little understanding of Arithmancy. Surely he couldn't understand how utterly absurd it was to suggest that Lyra Black could not only come to a solution that he and Filius had believed impossible and Ashe had clearly spent considerable time working through, much less that she had somehow managed to implement it.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, a futile gesture which Albus was certain did nothing more than express his frustration with any given conversation. "You were still teaching when Bellatrix attended this school, were you not?"

He had been. He had taught the first years and NEWT students, in those days. And he would admit that Bellatrix had been one of the more talented students he'd ever had. Also one of the most infuriating — one of those students who never paid attention to the lesson and yet could always answer any question put to her. She had, as he recalled, spent every lesson her first year illustrating (and animating) the effects of the curses in some obscure grimoire. From memory, of course, the book itself was Anathema. He hadn't realised what she was drawing until some years later, he'd simply thought her a very disturbed child. (Not entirely surprising, given her family.)

He was certain, however, that Severus was referring to her NEWT Arithmancy project, which had attained a semi-legendary status in the years that followed: combining the effects of half a dozen spells into a single multi-sensory illusion, reifying it, then translating it into three non-human languages to demonstrate the conceptual influence of casting language on the effects of the spell. It would easily have qualified as a mastery project, and everything about it — from the effects she had chosen (butterflies and sweet nothings, among others) to the presentation (claiming that combining the spells made the exercise simpler, rather than exponentially more difficult) — emphasised the fact that it was all little more than an elaborate jest to her.

"Miss Black is hardly the same person as her mother."

"No," Severus said, sounding faintly amused. "No. Bellatrix spent the vast majority of her life — from the age of seven or eight, I believe — learning to fight and kill and inflict pain. I daresay that by the time she was Lyra's age, she could have bested most grown wizards in a duel. I assure you, Lyra is every bit as intelligent, and she spent her formative years learning cursebreaking and wardcrafting. Bellatrix wouldn't have been capable of solving this particular problem at fourteen, and perhaps not even now; Lyra, on the other hand, might very well be.

"Though, now that I think on it, whether or not Black could accomplish this is irrelevant. It is altogether possible she isn't working alone."

...That was a possibility Albus honestly hadn't considered. Which, well, it was possible he had
relied on the givens he'd been provided longer than was reasonable — that was a common fault in the reasoning of many people, a failure to reconsider old information, he was hardly alone in that. He'd had no reason to doubt the general outline of Miss Black's background at the time — that she'd been raised by a 'travelling cursebreaker' (one of the few remaining legacies of the old French nobility, he'd assumed), but had come to Britain after being orphaned in the recent past — so it hadn't occurred to him to wonder whether she might have support from outside the school. Which, it should have, given her demonstrated ability to somehow smuggle in illicit reading material. The easiest solution to that problem was that someone on the outside was supplying her — the very people who had raised her, perhaps, exiles attempting to find a home in the House of Black? It wasn't implausible.

It would explain rather a lot about the curious young woman, in fact. "I take it you have reason to suspect she has confederates out there."

"You do as well, if you would think on it a moment." When Albus didn't immediately respond, Severus let out a thin sigh, eyes tipping to the ceiling for a moment. "Black and Potter did separate in the forest, a third, unidentified individual leaving with Potter. Also, recall the visitor the Dursleys had last month. What is the simplest explanation?"

Albus had assumed the simplest explanation was that whoever had attacked Harry had first checked up on the blood wards, to design some method to harm him that wouldn't trigger a response. Though, now that he thought about it...if that had been their intention, why not simply break the wards? It wouldn't have even been particularly difficult — in theory, killing Petunia and her son should have left him unprotected, which anyone intending to kill Harry should certainly have been willing to do. True, the wards should have prevented anyone harming them...though they were obviously more limited than Albus had thought — according to one of his contacts in the DLE, the intruder had harmed Petunia, broken her arm...

Come to think of it, he wasn't certain the blood wards would trigger at all with Harry so far away — some magics drawing from a physical attribute, such as blood, also required physical proximity to function properly. They should still work if Harry were threatened, but his family...

Albus was skilled enough to invoke them, but he himself was not an expert in blood-bound ritual magics. He had thought it an elegant solution to the problem of protecting the boy while allowing him to be raised in the muggle world — unlike traditional place wards, blood-bound wards had no apparent effect on muggle technology — but he had recently become uncomfortably aware that he couldn't say for certain what the effects would be in extremis. "Why, then would this hypothetical ally of hers visit his family?"

Severus's brow twitched slightly, a momentary glare swiftly halted. "If I were to guess, the Blacks wished to determine whether these blood wards of yours were worth the trouble." They'd already had this discussion — Severus had already argued for their dissolution, in fact, a hint of sharpness on his voice suggesting he still wasn't pleased with Albus's argument on the matter.

But Albus was distracted by something else. "The Blacks? You can't mean Sirius — you believe there are more out there?"

"Obviously. Remind me, Albus, which British family has, over the centuries, produced more metamorphmagi than any other? In all likelihood, there are still dozens of Blacks out there — we just don't usually consider them to be Blacks anymore, don't pay them any mind." For just a moment, Severus hesitated, an odd sort of indecision crossing his face before disappearing again. "Back in September, the Tonks girl intimated to me that her family had recently been contacted by Cassiopeia Black. You remember her, I presume."
"I do, yes." Cassie Black had been in one of his Transfiguration classes, long ago. She would have left school in...Twenty-Three? Sometime around then, he thought, she would have started at Hogwarts in his first decade of teaching. It was a very long time ago, but he wasn't like to forget: metamorphmagi had natural, intuitive talent for transfiguration, she was still one of his all-time favourite students. Like most Blacks, she had been a bit unnerving at times, but while she had certainly been just as mad as the rest of her family, hers had been a less vicious, more joyful sort of madness. Unsettling, but not particularly threatening.

Rather like, say, Nymphadora Tonks — which wasn't at all surprising, as they were two of only three metamorphmagi to pass through Hogwarts during his tenure, and closely related at that. Cassie had been a bit more...intense, in a way, but she hadn't been unpleasant company. She'd been one of only a handful of dark mages he'd had a passingly decent relationship with, in fact. Albus had actually been considering recruiting her for the Order when she'd abruptly vanished from Britain in the early seventies.

If Cassie Black were helping Lyra... Well, she would certainly be capable of impersonating Lily, as whoever had dropped in on the Dursleys had done. Sneaking off with Harry and Lyra without arousing suspicion, that shouldn't be a problem for a metamorph either. The wards, that wasn't quite on, he didn't recall Cassie being particularly gifted with Runes. If it wasn't just Cassie, though, if she'd recruited more Black metamorphs to...to what, help revive the House? It wasn't entirely out of the question — the Blacks were famously mad in general, but especially mad about their family.

Which would also explain why they would want to block his monitoring charms: Harry was their Lord's godson, their responsibility, and he rather doubted they would appreciate what they could see as Albus sticking his nose in their business. They could just break them — neutralising them was far more difficult — but it also sent a very different message.

It was possible they would have intended to send a message, which could then be misinterpreted as Harry being dead. Say what one would about the Blacks — and they were often quite brilliant — but they had a marked tendency to not properly think through the potential consequences of their actions. (With Severus standing right in front of him, it was impossible to not recall that debacle with him and Sirius, that had been a very Black thing to do.) Perhaps it simply hadn't occurred to whoever had planned the whole thing that Albus would read his monitoring charms going silent as Harry being killed. Perhaps it had, but they hadn't anticipated the panic that had broken out, the pressure of rumour and building scandal necessitating Albus make some official statement, the only one he could in such a situation...

Which, none of that might have happened if Lyra hadn't been attacked. They'd assumed her assault and Harry's disappearance were connected, but if they weren't...

The whole thing, what Severus had suggested, did make a mad sort of sense. Albus wasn't saying he believed it was true — as painful as it might be, that Harry was dead was by far the simpler explanation. It was, however, possible, he couldn't deny that. He could understand how Severus, Miss Granger, whoever else, how they might be able to convince themselves, when the Blacks' history and reputation made such a convenient device for implausible circumstance.

He wanted to believe it. He was quite certain that Miss Granger, when she'd come to see him, had gone away without seeing that. If he could wish it otherwise, he would.

But he would not allow himself to indulge in comforting delusion.

Severus's glare redoubled, even as he came to that conclusion. Albus reflexively checked his occlumency barriers, though he hadn't felt any sign of intrusion. Severus obviously noticed, despite
not apparently attempting to gain access to his thoughts, as he gave Albus a sinister smirk.

"Unlike some people, I don't casually use legilimency on people." Albus did his best to suppress a wince — had he somehow heard about Albus's attempt to read the Granger girl, when she'd gone quoting Comtois's bloody book at him? "Your face is all too easy to read, however. Whatever you were about to say, save your breath. You are wrong. Not only were your monitoring spells not impossible to block, but your precious albeit useless blood ward is still intact—"

Albus inhaled rather sharply — he hadn't even thought to check that, he'd been far too caught up with the monitoring spells and Harry's obvious fate, hadn't even considered Petunia's wellbeing... But that proved nothing — Lily's sacrifice had been soul magic, it could easily be the case that the wards based upon it would only fail after Harry's soul had entirely moved on, and it hadn't yet been a full three days.

"—and, as Miss Granger so adroitly noted, there is no evidence of foul play to do with Potter's disappearance beyond the use of a gate spell to remove the boy from the outskirts of Hogsmeade — a reasonable alternative to employ even if he left voluntarily, given that she claimed he intended to remain untracked and anonymous outside of Hogwarts for the sake of security."

A rather nasty smile bloomed on Severus's face even as Albus attempted to work his way through that last point. He did recall Miss Granger saying something to that effect, but he couldn't imagine she had gone to Severus and outlined her reasons for believing Harry to still be alive. Not after Albus had so emphatically attempted to disabuse her of her delusions, and especially not considering that Severus was hardly likely to be willing to suffer the hysterical ranting of an overwrought teenager.

"Miss Granger?" he repeated.

"Oh, yes. Had you taken my initial advice and withheld any definitive statement on the matter, perhaps all this could have been avoided, but you were so very determined to dig your own grave and, well..." He pulled something else from his pocket, tossed it casually onto the desk, as he had Ashe's scroll. It was a rather cheap-looking pamphlet, half a dozen magazine-sized pages, the cover sheet declaring it to be an Emergency Edition of the Quibbler. "It seems Miss Granger is rather determined to push you into it."

Albus reached for the pamphlet with quite a lot more trepidation than he had seized on Ashe's notes. Xeno Lovegood was not among his most ardent supporters, to say the least. He was, of course, firmly on the side of the Light — though he did share his sister's anarchist bent, if in a far more moderate form — but he had rather vehemently disagreed with the way Albus had portrayed Lily to the public in the wake of Tom's fall. The Quibbler was still Albus's favorite British news-source, its biting satire and political commentary hidden behind a facade of whimsy and elaborate conspiracy theories, but it was also the most likely publication to shine a harsh light on his statements and actions. No more than any other political figure, and Xeno was meticulous in his reporting standards, but he had a habit of revealing the truth as he saw it with no consideration for political realities and consequences. If Miss Granger had spoken to him...

This was going to be bad.

"I'll leave you to consider this development," Severus said, his tone falsely accommodating. "My portkey leaves in an hour. I'll be back Tuesday next. If you wish to reach me, I will be staying at the Metropole. It's a muggle hotel. I've left the telephone number with Aurora, since I doubt you've the slightest idea what a telephone is. Don't call."

"Yes, yes," Albus muttered as he skimmed through the Granger girl's article — an open letter to the people of Magical Britain, apparently a response to the article which had announced Harry's death
in yesterday's Prophet, though it must have been written before the Prophet article, in order to have been published and distributed today. He hardly noticed as Severus swept out of his office.

His initial feeling had been accurate: it was bad. Well, that wasn't entirely fair. It could have been much worse — what Granger had written to Xeno was more or less no different from what she'd told him. Harry was rather shy, extremely uncomfortable with his fame, uneasy with crowds. (Was that true? He'd been a rather quiet boy, yes, but Albus had never noticed...) Black had sent him ahead so he wouldn't have to take the train; she'd then been attacked on the way back to Hogwarts, by some person or persons unknown. With Harry having disappeared, and the last person to have seen him tortured and then obliviated, the investigators had jumped to the worst possible conclusion.

All things considered, Granger seemed to be trying to give them the benefit of the doubt — at least, she was being far more...forgiving, where he was concerned, than he would expect of an overwrought fourteen-year-old girl. She did say the only evidence they had of Harry's death was the failure of Albus's monitoring charms, suggesting the ancient and esoteric wards on some Black property or another had simply done a better job of cutting them off than any would expect; but she framed this as an honest misunderstanding, one that had simply gotten blown out of proportion. If Black hadn't been obliviated, and thus rendered incapable of just telling them what she'd done with Harry, or if the two of them hadn't thought it necessary to sneak around instead of just being open about their intentions for the summer, and if Harry weren't the Boy Who Lived — in the letter Granger showed a surprising degree of scorn for Harry's renown, which was interesting — the whole thing would never have gotten out of hand, and none of this would have happened. Granger clearly thought the whole debacle absurd, but she was just as clearly trying to be charitable.

Funnily enough, the people who got the worst of her ire were actually the Aurors, the investigators on the case. As far as anyone could tell, they had absolutely no idea who had attacked Lyra Black, seemingly hadn't even any suspects, instead focusing entirely on whatever had happened to Harry. But there was no evidence anything had happened to Harry — of course there wasn't, Granger claimed, since he was perfectly fine. However, there was evidence of what had happened to Black. A third-year Hogwarts student had been abducted from the outskirts of Hogsmeade, tortured for who knew how long, and turned up covered in cuts and burns and broken bones, the initial analysis even coming up with traces of the Cruciatus, of all things, undoubtedly a very serious crime all on its own. And yet, Granger accused, the Aurors had summarily dismissed the assault as a less important event related to the abduction and murder of Harry Potter, despite there not being any actual evidence of wrong-doing where he was concerned.

The worst Granger had to say about Albus personally was that he'd jumped to an unwarranted conclusion and that he'd tried to legilimise her. Even there, she said the former was understandable given the circumstances, and the latter mostly harmless, since he'd abandoned the attempt the instant she moved to counter it, soon enough he'd never actually gotten anywhere. Which, by the tone she was using, Albus got the feeling she didn't fully understand just how damaging those particular accusations could be. If anyone with significant influence actually took her seriously...

This could be bad. Very, very bad.

But, despite himself, Albus couldn't help acknowledging that she wasn't...entirely incorrect — the evidence that Harry's abduction and Black's assault were at all related was circumstantial. It was true that the Aurors had swiftly abandoned the attempt to track down Black's attackers in preference for scouring Knockturn Alley in a futile effort to find some sign of Harry. Granger's claim that Harry's disappearance itself wasn't at all suspicious was faulty, though. His trail ended at a jury-rigged gate, the opposite member found at the source of a magical fire, one that had brought the whole building...down...with it...
He found his eyes trailing toward Ashe's proof, remembering Severus's claim that young Miss Black could certainly have solved it independently. He still had his doubts about that, but if Black was working with people outside the school...

Severus had suggested they might have chosen to use a gate spell to transport Harry simply because it was untraceable, a paranoid effort to ensure his privacy. As an added benefit, most other forms of transportation would require keying a person into the wards — if Harry had never been wherever they were going before, using a gate spell would be...comparatively convenient. The greatest problem was, of course, the gate spell itself. They had gone out of fashion for a reason, after all, they were very complicated and infamously delicate. Creating a portable gate would be absurd, but if one truly wished to exploit the benefits of such a thing, and were possessed of mad brilliance such that it seemed worth the difficulties...

It wasn't impossible. These were Blacks they were talking about — "mad brilliance" wouldn't be a bad descriptor of several Blacks over the years.

What if the fire in Knockturn...had been accidental? A portable gate must be terribly unstable, it wasn't at all out of the question that it could fail spectacularly. Whoever might have been escorting Harry had obviously made it out — there had been no signs anyone had died on the premises. Of course, there had been no signs anyone had left either, but it wasn't impossible the fire itself had covered up any traces of magical travel. Especially if it were shadow-walking or something of the like — if Lyra were bringing in Black metamorphs, that wasn't impossible. They could have just shadow-walked Harry straight from Hogwarts, but that was detectable, if barely, perhaps they'd simply done it there out of panic, surprised by the fire. It wasn't impossible.

Perhaps Harry's disappearance and the attack on Black were unrelated — given what he knew of the scene itself, that might actually be a better explanation of the evidence. Perhaps... Perhaps Black's attackers were students. According to the Aurors, the attackers had slipped into the carriages, losing themselves among the students, where their trails vanished under far too many magical signatures to distinguish reliably. But, what if that hadn't been a trick to shake pursuit, what if they'd simply been returning to the castle?

That was a disturbing thought.

What if...

What if Granger was right? His immediate reaction had been that it was impossible, that Granger was thinking with her heart rather than her head — understandable, yes, he truly couldn't blame her, he'd much rather think Harry was alive himself. But, it wasn't impossible, Ashe had proved as much, and Granger's argument here was far more rational than it'd seemed in person...

Then...

If Harry hadn't been harmed, Albus slowly realised, it would mean Lyra Black had betrayed him. And not just her, but Harry too.

He'd thought to himself, not so long ago now, that there could be great advantages to letting a clearly dark witch like Lyra watch Harry's back. But, no matter the possible benefits, it was playing with fire — it could go badly, catastrophically so. One of the issues was that Lyra's loyalty to the Light, to Albus himself, was born entirely out of association with Harry, his well-being was the only concern they shared. If they disagreed on how to secure their one shared concern, well, he couldn't guarantee she would cede to his opinion on the matter. In fact, if she'd absorbed enough of the mindset of the nobility where internal family affairs are concerned — which, he didn't think it absurd to assume she had — it was quite likely she would consider Harry no legitimate concern of
his whatsoever, that he had absolutely no right whatsoever to dictate...well, anything, concerning his life outside the school.

It was quite possible that, should Lyra and the Blacks decide to make any sort of arrangements for the summer on Harry's behalf, they wouldn't even consider it necessary to inform him. Their Lord was, after all, his godfather — their rights superceded Albus's.

But it wasn't just them, no, Harry would have needed to be in on it as well. They could have just taken him whether he liked it or not, perhaps without even informing him beforehand, but...

Harry had come to ask why he needed to go back to the Dursleys' for the summer. Albus had thought he'd convinced him, but...

The Dursleys had gotten that unknown visitor shortly afterward. A visitor Severus suggested might, in fact, be Cassie Black.

Cassie might have gone to analyse the blood wards. She might have come to the conclusion that they weren't worth keeping — much as Severus had, a handful of days later.

Cassie might have told Lyra, who might have brought Harry around to their way of thinking.

Harry might well have gone voluntarily. Despite everything Albus had said on the matter.

It...wasn't impossible. In fact, the narrative he'd just constructed was...darkly compelling. It made a mad, Black sort of sense. A rather large part of him wanted it to be true. No matter how...complicated it would make things, it would mean that Harry was alive and well.

But even if Harry were still alive, Albus might have a very serious problem on his hands.

(He tried to quash the self-interested thought that if Harry wasn't dead, he had just dealt a staggering blow to his own credibility with his mistaken declaration.)

At that very moment, he was drawn out of his thoughts by a soft, pleasant tone, a slow arpeggio of notes coming from shortly away to his left. From behind a very particular selective silencing.

The silencing he'd put over the anchors to his monitoring charms.

Unconsciously, Albus jumped to his feet, his palms slammed onto the desk, leaning forward, staring wide-eyed at the devices, ones he'd personally designed and enchanted twelve years past. Forms of skeletal metal and glowing crystal, they had gone a moody black, blaring with alarm, sick and loud and grating. He hadn't quite been able to bring himself to deactivate them, holding on to some irrational hope he hadn't even been fully aware of, instead blanketing them with a silencing skewed to block out the specific tone of the alarms, and nothing else. Looking at them now, he could only stare, for long seconds unmoving.

They'd changed.

The colours had turned soft and bright, green and blue and pink. Low notes sounded from one or the other every few seconds, forming a subtle pulse, a song always playing at the edge of hearing for seemingly as long as he could remember. With a slight energy to them, but not a bad one, exactly, not under threat — nervous, but excited.

Healthy. He...

He was alive. Harry Potter was alive.
Albus was overcome with relief, drowning out everything else. But only for a minute, one blessed minute, before the mounting horror started to take over. He'd...

He'd made a mistake. A terrible, terrible mistake. Harry was alive — he was alive — but it was too late.

Albus saw, abruptly, the storm on the horizon. And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Chapter End Notes

We actually finished a thing! No fucking way. I don't think I've ever actually finished anything before, heh...

Took longer to get this chapter out than I thought it would...but it's also a triple-length chapter, so, deal with it xD —Lysandra

So, that's one school year down. We'll post an update/link here when we start posting the sequel, but it's going to be a month or two — we're taking time to actually outline the next one properly. Mostly because, well...these last couple of chapters didn't work out exactly as I'd planned.

Originally, Lyra was supposed to make Harry 'die' and not tell anyone what she'd done, just let Harry think he was on vacation, and Hermione think he was dead. Then I realised that there was no way Blaise would not anticipate the fallout of such a plan and do something to mitigate it. That is his job, after all. So things had to be considerably re-worked, and Hermione's character development arc shifted from what I'd originally expected. Sigh. —Leigha

Not even close to the only things that went off. In the original outline for this we made ages ago, Lyra didn't prevent the hippogriff thing. Buckbeak was moved to another holding site due to an earlier incident (that certainly involved Lyra), and she and Hermione exploited the time turner to break into the Ministry and steal him away. Just goes to show how much spur-of-the-moment decisions we make can throw off major plot points — Lyra deciding to save the idiot just because Narcissa completely ruined one of the major side-plots. The Pettigrew plot also went way different than originally planned, due to Lyra simply being too competent for canon bullshit. Oops?

Though, I'm far more comfortable going off-script than Leigha is — I don't make formal outlines at all for my own work, and I like a lot of the changes we made to plot/character development more than what we originally came up with anyway. But there are a whole lot more threads to keep track of fourth year, so, yeah, I acknowledge plotting it out might be a good idea. I fully expect to fuck it up at least a little within a few chapters, though.

I'll also be rereading the entirety of this monstrosity, taking notes on hanging character/plot threads, just to make sure we don't miss any. So, yeah, might be a little bit of a delay. —Lysandra

We've been throwing around the idea of publishing a few scenes that take place over the summer focusing on...random summer stuff all over the place before we really get into the next part of the narrative. If that happens, we'll post an update/link here as
well.

(In case anyone's wondering, Severus doesn't consider arguing that Lyra could have been responsible for Harry's disappearance to be a violation of his agreement with her because A) he wasn't the one who suggested it in the first place and B) there's a rather large difference between saying that such a thing is possible and telling Dumbledore that she actually admitted it to him. Also, C) providing a plausible explanation in the suggestion that Cassiopeia and/or some other Black Metamorph is involved would make Dumbledore less suspicious of Lyra personally, and therefore less likely to look into her abilities closely enough to realise that she's a black mage.) —Leigha

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