"Now I have three heads: one for speech, one for sex, and one for second guessing." - Analicia Sotelo

Her door clicks open and nearly clips her in the face. It could be a sudden draft, but Amy is doubtful. Her fist clenches shut around the marble. It is pretty. She could look at it for hours, the way it catches the light. It’s almost like a sweet. Want curls up in her chest like a cat. She thinks she’ll keep it. A gift from the big grey orphanage, just to her.

“That’s mine,” comes a thin, cold voice, and she sees the boy across the hall for the first time. His room is directly across from hers. He is pretty, she thinks, like a drawing from a book. The lines of his face are smooth and pale. His hair is dark and neatly parted. He holds himself very rigidly, like a miniature soldier or a wind-up toy. “That’s mine,” he repeats, sharply.

(In which Tom Riddle is not the only strange child to come out of Wool’s.)
This fic essentially sprung out of a whim concerning Tom Riddle encountering another magical child before Hogwarts. Amy set about writing her own story for me.
Marble

1933

The Benson girl is not very pretty, Mrs. Cole reflects, poking her head out of the office to peer at her. She sits on a rickety chair in the dim hall, legs dangling above the floor. She has a head of downy straw blonde hair gathered into a bedraggled braid, and there are stains on her coat and a hole in her faded stockings. She studies the grain of the hardwood floor intently, dust motes dancing in the air around her head. She puffs her cheeks out and blows into the air, the hunches her shoulders when she feels someone watching her.

Little Amy Benson can be no older than five or six, but when she glances up at Mrs. Cole she feels a distinctive prickle on the back of her neck. She has felt it many times before, just not like this. The feeling of wrongness persists until the girl averts her gaze. She has dull blue eyes, as if they were painted on her long ago. Her entire face gives off the impression of a slightly battered babydoll. Her skin has a sallow tint to it and mouth is slightly too large for her face, even puckered in a familiar childish grimace.

“They’ve gone, then,” Miss Patrick says, coming round the corner. She folds her arms just under her chest and studies the Benson girl. “Shame, it is. She seems a sweet thing.”

“It can’t be helped,” Mrs. Cole shakes off any lingering unease in favor of a return to her usual briskness. “Show the girl to her room, why don’t you, while I finish up this report.” She steps back into the office, closing the door firmly behind her.

Miss Patrick senses nothing peculiar about the girl, whom she grasps firmly by her slightly clammy hand and leads up a flight of stairs and down a noisy corridor. Two older boys race past, ignoring her bark for them to stop running, and there is the faint wail of an infant. Miss Patrick pushes open a door at the end of the hall and ushers the girl inside the small, cramped room. “Aren’t you lucky,” she says with forced jubilance, “you’ll have your very own room…” She struggles to recall the child’s name beyond ‘Benson’.

“Emily,” she settles on with a quick smile of reassurance, setting the girl’s small case of things down on the plain cot. “We’ll send someone up with some bed sheets and a pillow in a bit. You just unpack your things like a good girl, alright?”

“Amy,” the girl says, and Miss Patrick pauses in the doorway. “My name is Amy.”

“Short for Amelia?” Miss Patrick tries to cover up her momentary embarrassment, although children’s names get mixed up all the time, and there’s already two Emily’s here, so she’ll just have to get used to it.

“No,” says Amy Benson, with a slightly affronted look. “Just Amy.”

“That’s a shame,” Miss Patrick titters. “Amelia would be such a pretty name, don’t you think? But Amy’s lovely as well. Now, go and get settled, dear. We’ll have dinner in a little while.” Amy, she thinks as she goes. It does seem to suit her. A little name for such a little girl. Amelia would be too proper for her. She seems rather the Amy sort.

Amy Benson stands in a small, empty room and stamps one foot, then the other, on the ground. She wants to flail and pummel something. There is too much rage for her small body to hold. She wants to go home. She wants a warm house and soft toys and something sweet to eat. Now she
throws her tantrum in silence, mouth opening and shutting like a fish, storming around the room, bumping into the cot and chair and desk. She clambers up onto the windowsill and slams her hands against the window. It shudders, then swings open.

Cold spring air rushes in, and Amy recoils. It has only just stopped raining outside. Mist pools in the narrow courtyard below. The smell of wet stone and leaves permeates.

Amy scrambles down from the desk, somewhat appeased, and then something rattles across the floor outside and rolls to a stop, lodged under her door. She drops down to her bony knees, ignoring the dull pain from the floor, and crawls forward to examine it. A scarlet marble glints in the waning late afternoon light, caught within the door frame. She prods at it with a finger, and it pops out and rolls into her waiting palm as if beckoned.

Her door clicks open and nearly clips her in the face. It could be a sudden draft, but Amy is doubtful. Her fist clenches shut around the marble. It is pretty. She could look at it for hours, the way it catches the light. It’s almost like a sweet. Want curls up in her chest like a cat. She thinks she’ll keep it. A gift from the big grey orphanage, just to her.

“That’s mine,” comes a thin, cold voice, and she sees the boy across the hall for the first time. His room is directly across from hers. He is pretty, she thinks, like a drawing from a book. The lines of his face are smooth and pale. His hair is dark and neatly parted. He holds himself very rigidly, like a miniature soldier or a wind-up toy. “That’s mine,” he repeats, sharply.

“It was under my door,” she says, pressing her fist against her chest. Her heart swells underneath it. She wants it all the more now, as if he is an extension of Wool’s solid stone walls, come to reclaim her prize. She deserves it. She has been so good today. She did not cry once, not in the hackney, not on the doorstep, not in the hall. She is still not crying; her eyes are dry. She blinks heavily as if to prove it.

“I dropped it,” says the cold grey boy, taking a brief step forward. He raises his chin ever higher; it was already at an imperious tilt. “Give it to me.”

Amy wrinkles her nose as if to refuse, but starts to relent. If she does not give it back he might tell Mrs. Cole or Miss Patrick. Or worse, the other children, that she is a greedy little snatcher of toys, and then no one will want to play. And she will be even more miserable than she already is. Her clenched fist relaxes slightly and she steps forward to give it to him. But she resents it all the same. She got her hopes up. It is such a pretty little thing. She just wants it, is all. She’s not quite sure why it matters so much. She just wanted something all her own.

She presses it bitterly into his impatiently outstretched palm, and the glass marble sizzles, pops, and melts into his hand. He yelps, she gapes, and drops of molten glass spatter across the floor and both their clothes. He wrenches his hand away from her, clutching it, and in between the pain and shock on his face she sees fury come waltzing in. She braces for a blow; he is not much bigger than her, but he seems the sort to make the most of what he’s got, which is likely a stinging hand. Instead she watches in awe as the bright pink purn on his white hand shrivels itself up into a much smaller mark, as if days have gone by in the span of seconds. “How did you do that?” he demands, and although his voice trembles with anger, she can see a newfound wariness in his eyes. He is thinking now. He is frightened of her, or almost there.

Amy has never frightened anyone before. She is proud that this severe boy whose hand she melted glass on was the first. She thinks he is probably used to the sensation.
“I just did,” she says simply, and then pouts. “But now the marble’s all gone.”

“You’re not supposed to be able to do that,” the boy says, as if the marble is now the least of his concerns. His voice takes on an unfamiliar, eager lilt. “You don’t know how. Neither do I. I never do, it just happens. What else can you do?”

Amy chews on her lower lip thoughtfully, then gives a lackadaisical shrug. “I dunno.”

He grabs her hand, and the burn scar rasps against her palm. “You didn’t burn yourself, just me,” he sounds almost as if he were praising her. “You’re good.” His grip tightens. “Not as good as me.”

Her door slams shut behind her, making her jump. He drops her hand. “What’s your name?”

“Tom Riddle,” he says quickly and as if he’s in a hurry to get past it, pushing it aside in the street. “Now yours.”

“Amy Benson,” Amy smiles, hoping to coax one out of him, curious what a smile might look like on a porcelain face.

Tom Riddle does not smile. “Follow me,” he says instead, turning on his heel, and heading for the stairs.

Amy draws back, not out of timidity but pragmatism. “Will they be angry if I go?”

“You won’t get in trouble with me,” he says, already clicking down the stairs. She thinks he is lying, at least a little, but her curiosity overrules her sense, and she follows him anyway.

He leads her down the winding staircase and through a back corridor behind what she thinks is the kitchen, from the smell. Then they come to a door, which he stands up on his tiptoes to unlatch, and pushes open. “You have to hold doors for girls,” she reminds him as he strides ahead.

He ignores her, and she steps out into the small garden. Most of the plants are shriveled and dead from the winter. Tom walks up to one of the garden boxes, and crouches down beside it. He whispers something for a few moments, and then pushes up his sleeve, laying his skinny arm down flat in the wet earth. A small snake noses its way up from the dirt and coils up his arm quite comfortably. Tom hisses something to it and then turns to her, gaze expectant.

“Say something.”

“Hello,” says Amy.

He scowls. “No. Talk to it. It’ll talk back.”

“Hello, Mr. Snake,” she tries again, and he exhales sharply through his nostrils.

“Like this.” He hisses one smooth syllable at the snake, who winds further up his arm and hisses gently in response. “It’s a she,” he adds, almost defensively.

Amy tries a hiss, but it sounds trite and shallow in comparison. The snake doesn’t so much as glance her way. Tom shrinks slightly in annoyance and disappointment, and lets the snake slither
back down his arm and into the dirt.

“You can’t do it,” he says. “But you can do some things.” He glances around wildly, and then his flat gaze settles on something. He curls his fingers at it once, then twice, and as if blown by the wind, a stick comes drifting through the air and into his outstretched hand.

“Take it from me,” he says.

Amy steps towards him.

“Stupid,” Tom snaps, “with your mind.”

“I’m not stupid!” Amy flushes cherry red, has half a mind to storm back inside and not speak to him again. He’s strange and queer, this Tom Riddle, whispering to snakes and summoning sticks and making his skin grow back over his burns. “You’re mean,” she adds heatedly.

He glowers, but then appears to restrain himself. “Sorry,” he says, “Now just do it.”

“You’re not sorry,” she mutters, but she stares at the stick, imagines it’s something pretty, imagines she wants it until she does, thinks about how angry and unsettled he’s made her and she reaches out her hand and-

The stick tugs itself feebly against his grip, then sags back in dismay.

“You’re not as strong as me,” Tom sounds pleased, as if he’s glad.

“I didn’t want it that much,” she retorts. He tosses the stick aside like it’s nothing, regards her with what could almost be a half-smile.

“But no one else can do even that much,” he says, more to himself than to her. “You’re different. Like me.”

“Different how?” she frowns.

“No one else can do what I do,” he says, a note of smugness creeping in. “I can make things come to me, and go away from me. I can make snakes listen to me. I can do lots of things no one else can.”

“Did you ever melt a marble?” Amy asks, and he frowns, then admits sullenly, “No. Not yet. I will, though.”

“I’m better than you at that,” she crows, and he scowls, and the stick flings itself back up from the ground at her.

It pauses a foot from her face and bends itself backwards, cracking neatly into two halves, which drop to the ground at her feet.

Tom Riddle flinches, and she sees fear go skittering across his face.

“D’you have any more marbles?” Amy asks innocently.

At dinner they sit across from one another at the end of the table, and on the floor beneath them a marble rolls back and forth between their feet in a mock tug of war, until Tom bends her spoon backwards as she eats, splattering soup across her face, and wins. Amy shrieks, and his glass of milk shatters, sending the room into shocked silence.
At the other end of the table, Mrs. Cole feels a bit sick. She cannot quite place the feeling, but the thought, *God, not another one*, does cross her mind. What ‘one’ is, she could not tell you. Only that as she stares down the length of the table to watch the Riddle boy crunch glass underfoot and the Benson girl wipe soup off her face, a marble comes rolling out across the floor.
Rabbit

Chapter Notes

Keeping this marked as ‘completed’ because I’m not sure how far I will take this and I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up in terms of length/time-span.

1935

Billy Stubbs’ rabbit is missing. Amy is searching for it with Mary Campbell and Helen Phillips in the garden when she slips and falls into a large puddle, soaking her lower half. Mary, who doesn’t like her, shrieks with laughter, but Helen, who does, gasps and helps her back up. Amy cringes as cold rain water and mud trickle down her legs. Her nose is running as well; she was bed-bound with a cold two days ago.

As she wipes at her nose with the back of her hand and wrings out water from her skirt, Miss Patrick takes notice. Since she came to Wool’s nearly two years ago, Miss Patrick has taken a tentative liking to her. She is not as nice to Amy as she is to little Bobby Faber, who everyone agrees is the prettiest toddler they’ve ever seen, with his big doe eyes and head of golden curls, but she is not as brusque as she could be, either.

“Amy, go inside and change before you catch your death out here,” she says, hurrying over. “We don’t want you hacking up a lung again.”

“It’s not that cold,” says Amy, although it is October, the sky glowering above them and the breeze ruffling dead leaves on the trees.

Miss Patrick waves a hand at her. “Go on. You’re positively soaked. And if you see Tom, tell him to come downstairs. He’s been cooped up in his room all morning.”

Mary snickers, and Amy casts a baleful stare her way before obediently trudging back indoors. Now that she’s been here for so long she doesn’t mind the grey walls and dusty floors as much. It’s still drafty and cold in her room and her cot is too hard and all her clothes are faded hand-me-downs, but the food isn’t so bad and she doesn’t mind her lessons and last week Tom got some new marbles.

She stomps up the stairs, straining to hear distant music from the gramophone in the parlor below. It fades away as she reaches the third floor, and she drips water down the hall before stopping in front of her door. She changes quickly in her room, bundling her wet skirt and stockings into the hamper. When she’s done she steps back into the hall, tugging at her jumper, and stares at Tom’s closed door.

They’re not supposed to have their doors shut during the day; Mrs. Cole only allows the older boys and girls to do that. Tom’s door always seems to have slipped shut ‘by accident’. Now she raps on it impatiently, leaning up on her tiptoes, shoes squeaking across the floor. “Tom,” she says. “You have to come out and help look. Miss Patrick said so.”

There is no response. She presses her ear against the solid oak of the door, and then jiggles the handle. None of their doors have locks on them, but Tom can lock his anyways. She’s not sure
how, and he won’t tell her. Tom hates sharing things. Amy doesn’t like to share either, but she usually will with him. They’re alike, after all. They have to stick together. “Tom,” she whines, rapping her knuckles on the door. “Come on. Billy’s really upset-,”

“I’m busy,” he finally replies, voice cold and sharp and slightly unsure.

Amy pauses. “Are you reading again? I thought Mrs. Cole made you send back your library books because they were overdue-,”

“Go away.”

Annoyed now, she probes at the door again, and feels it click open. Unsure if it was her or him that did it, she takes a stumbling step forward as the door swings open. Tom makes a surprised sound and scrambles backwards onto his bed. Amy stares at him, then at Billy’s rabbit, dead on the floor.

“It was an accident,” says Tom quickly, recovering enough to shoot her a placating, innocent look.

Amy recoils against the door, debating the merits of running downstairs to tell everyone Tom’s killed Charlie the Rabbit. But then Mrs. Cole might send him away. Tom is always worried about getting sent away. He says they have to be careful, because if Mrs. Cole finds out what they can do, she will have them both sent off to the asylum. Amy thinks the asylum is for lunatics, not people who melt marbles and bend spoons, but maybe it is also the place for rabbit killers.

“No it wasn’t,” she says instead. At least there isn’t any blood. “You were angry at Billy yesterday for pushing you around.”

Tom’s mask of feigned helplessness wavers. He is still angry, she thinks. Whatever he did to Charlie didn’t make him feel any better. “Billy’s an idiot. He didn’t even deserve a rabbit. It would have died anyways when he forgot to feed it.” His thin lips curl slightly in the shadow of a sneer.

“Charlie didn’t push you, Billy did,” Amy says steadily.

“I was just going to steal it,” says Tom defensively. “But I couldn’t hide it forever.”

“You should have stolen something else!” snaps Amy, stuck anew by the forlorn sight of the broken little body. “What’d Charlie ever do to you?”

“It’s just a rabbit!” Tom flushes crimson, a rare sight. She feels vaguely triumphant at having shamed him, even just a little. Billy is an idiot and a bully. But if Tom wanted to hurt him back he could have done it a different way.

“So?” Amy puts her hands on her hips like Miss Patrick does when she’s aggravated. “You’re just a boy. How’d you like it if someone came along and killed you because they were angry?”

“I wouldn’t let them.”

“That’s what you think.” She takes a few mincing steps towards the crime scene and then crouches down besides Charlie. He’s still warm. “Poor baby,” she says, stroking his soft fur with her fingers. “Poor darling.”

“Stop touching it.” This seems to disturb Tom, who stays where he is, back pressed against the wall. “It’s dead.”

“I know,” it’s her turn to snarl, “stupid.” He blanches and scowls, still refusing to come any closer. She pets Charlie gently, and then scoops him up, careful not to hold him against her clothes. She
doesn’t want everyone to see her covered in rabbit fur.

“What’re you doing?” Tom’s voice goes high and almost frightened.

“We have to hide it,” Amy explains patiently, as if she’s talking to a little baby. “We can put it in your wardrobe and then bury it tonight, before it starts to smell too much.” She knows dead things smell terrible because there was a dead rat in the pantry once, and Cook said the smell was bad enough to raise the dead.

“You’re helping me?” he relaxes minutely.

Amy narrows her eyes at him and then presses a kiss to Charlie’s head. “No,” she says, “I’m helping Charlie. You’re just in my way, is all. So you can help me bury him, or I’ll tell Mrs. Cole what you did.”

Shock registers in his eyes. “You wouldn’t dare,” he says slowly. “You won’t, Amy. You don’t want me to get in trouble, do you?”

“You’re already in trouble,” says Amy. “Charlie’s gonna haunt you if we don’t bury him. He’ll eat your fingers when you go to sleep at night.”

“He’s dead, he can’t eat anything!” Tom snaps. There is the distant sound of footfall on the stairs, and Amy looks at him meaningfully. He gets up from the bed and crosses quickly over to the wardrobe, yanking it open, and pulling out a ragged scarf. “Here.” Together they quickly wrap Charlie in it, like a little mummy, then tuck him in a box in the corner.

“Tonight,” says Amy, and doesn’t move until he nods jerkily. Then she slips out of his room and down the hall to pretend to search some more.

She knows Tom did something bad, but she doesn’t see much of a way to fix it. They can’t tell what happened or Tom will be sent away. They can’t bring Charlie back. And they can’t just keep him in Tom’s wardrobe until he turns into a little rabbit skeleton. All they can do is put him in the ground so he can feed the plants. She learned about that in school. Dead things help new things grow. Helen thought that was scary, but Amy found it comforting, almost.

She hopes when she’s dead something beautiful grows out of her.

She patiently waits until past midnight to clamber out of bed, slip on her shoes, and grab her dressing gown. Sometimes Mrs. Cole and the other women stay up late talking and drinking sherry, but she doesn’t hear any sound beyond pipes rattling in the walls. Bracing for the cold, she carefully leaves her room and softly steps into Tom’s. He’s sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at the wardrobe, which suddenly seems much more ominous in the dark.

He has a slightly queasy look on his face; she’s not sure if he’s dreading the task of burying Charlie in the middle of the night, or feeling some measure of guilt, however small, for having killed him in the first place. Maybe it was a bit of an accident. Maybe he only meant to hurt him. Amy is too practical and too young to spend much time fretting over it. Tom certainly didn’t.

“Get him out,” she tells Tom, whose brow furrows.

“You’re the one who put him in there,” he hisses.

“You’re the reason he’s wrapped up in a scarf,” Amy snipes back, and Tom looks as though he’d like to argue more- he enjoys arguing, although never with adults, and he only ever picks arguments he knows he can win.
It’s not very hard, since Tom is very clever. Even Mrs. Cole will attest to that. She says if he works hard enough, he could go to one of the very good preparatory schools, like Harrow or Dulwich College. Amy doesn’t think Tom cares so much, so long as it’s away from here. Amy doesn’t loathe Wool’s the way Tom does. It’s the only real home she’s ever known, and even if no one loves her, at least they take care of her. She thinks someday when she’s a grown woman she’ll be at least a little sad to leave it.

Now she watches nervously as Tom retrieves the small bundle, holding it against his chest with a slightly strained expression. She takes his hand in the dark, and he stiffens, but does not pull away. They’ve held hands before, mostly to try to do things like make all the lights go on and off. Amy suggested they try to fly once, but that didn’t work very well past the jumping up and down stage, which Tom said was silly.

She’ll show him, she thinks. One day she really will fly and he’ll be left on the ground, looking up at her.

Outside it is colder and darker and wetter. They can’t risk a light, so they stumble about blindly in the dark before Tom rubs his fingers together and a ignites a curious flame. He’s like a cigarette lighter, Amy thinks in thinly veiled amusement, although his flame keeps sputtering out. She’s witnessed him try to make many fires before, but the best he could ever manage was to ignite a small piece of leaves and twigs, which was then blamed on one of the older boys smoking.

Amy picks the lock on the small shed with a bobby pin, and retrieves the biggest shovel she can carry. They find a corner where the dirt seems softest, and she starts digging. It’s hard work, and she doesn’t want to go too quickly in case it makes too much noise or the shovel hits something. But after five or ten minutes, she’s exhausted, and she hands him the shovel. “Your turn.”

“I’m not digging,” Tom says haughtily. “This was your idea. We should just try to burn him.”

Amy rolls her eyes, something she recently learned from Betty Ormond, who is thirteen and very sophisticated. “Stop being such a little baby. Aren’t boys supposed to be good at this?”

Tom grabs the shovel and for a moment looks like he’s considering bludgeoning her with it. Amy cocks her head at him and he relents. He hands her Charlie and starts digging, albeit very bitterly. Lots of the other children are scared at Tom, or just think he’s strange. Even if he couldn’t do all sorts of wonderful and terrible things, Amy still doesn’t think he’d fit in. He’s too quiet and too proud and too fragile. He can pretend not to care all he likes, but the truth is, if he really didn’t care he wouldn’t have done something as stupid as killing Charlie because Billy was mean to him.

Amy is a bit better at fitting in, but she’s still never been scared of Tom. By now she knows him too well. It’s not that she’s confident he’d never hurt her, it’s that she thinks they are two of a kind, like he says, and when you are two of a kind, you don’t hurt each other. They’re like magnets stuck together. She learned about magnets a few months ago. It’s very hard to pry them apart, but that also means they belong together. If Tom was awful to her he’d have no one to do things like bend spoons and melt marbles and bury dead rabbits with.

Between the two of them, they manage to dig a small but definitive hole within the hour. Amy places Charlie inside it, and then makes a small cross out of twigs to lay atop him. They go to church every Sunday, all of them together with Miss Patrick supervising, usually. Mrs. Cole is not very devout. Amy likes church because of the stained glass windows and the singing and fancy hats and neat little handbags the women bring.

Tom scoffs under his breath.
“This is why Ruthie Lamb says you’re going to Hell,” Amy reminds him. Ruthie loves God more than anything because she thinks when she dies she’ll get to see her family again. They died in a fire. Amy does not think she will have anyone she knows waiting for her when she dies. Probably not even Tom, who will be in Hell, having a grand old time setting as many fires as he pleases. Maybe she will be there with him. She doesn’t know what God thinks of children who do what they can do.

She mumbles a hurried prayer for the questionable soul of a rabbit, and then starts shoveling dirt atop him. After a few moments Tom gives a long-suffering sigh and joins in. Both of their hands are filthy by the time they are done. Then they cover the grave with dead leaves, and look at each other under the gritty London night sky. “My hands hurt,” Amy complains. She will have calluses from all her shoveling, and she likes her hands soft, not rough and hard.

Tom blinks at her, and then picks a bit of leaf out of her hair. “I won’t do it again,” he says.

Do what, she thinks? Kill a rabbit? Bury it with her? Make her do most of the shoveling? She wants to believe him for not his sake but for hers. She got barely any sleep tonight and now she’ll feel guilty for ages whenever someone asks about Charlie. Tom won’t. He’s lucky like that. He won’t feel much of anything at all. But sometimes she forgets, because she thinks he does look almost sad now, a ghostly pale little boy in the dark.

“Good,” she says, and yawns. They shuffle back inside and up to bed, and never speak about Charlie again.
1936

Amy loves the ocean. Wool’s takes all the children old enough to swim to the seaside every summer for four days. They go to Cornwall because Mrs. Cole has family there who run a hotel, and they get cheap rooms. Everyone complains about the long train ride, which takes nearly all day, but Amy has never minded the train. At least it is something different and interesting, compared to yet another week of summer cooped up at Wool’s.

She is half-dozing in the train carriage, head lolling against the window, while Tom flicks through a newspaper he stole at the station. Amy is not sure whether he stole it because he is genuinely interested in current events, or simply because he could. Tom enjoys taking things that do not belong to him. Miss Patrick once said, when she thought none of the children were listening, that Tom Riddle would rather snatch a sweet from a baby than be handed one himself. Miss Patrick has never been fond of Tom, but Amy doesn’t think she was wrong to say it. It’s true.

To Tom, something means more, is more precious and valuable, if it was taken, rather than given. He’s never liked handouts. Amy thinks it’s silly of him. She would gladly take all the pity and pats on the head in the world for a gift or two. She likes receiving things almost as much as Tom likes taking them, which is why she is never very angry with him when he gives her something he stole. This is generally rare, since it involves consideration on Tom’s part, something he’s not terribly interested in, but she thinks he’s flattered by her reactions.

“Wake up,” Tom says, having apparently lost in interest in the paper. He swats her legs with it, and she makes a limp shooing motion at him without opening her eyes.

“M’sleeping.” There’s a moment’s silence, and she foolishly believes he may have given up.

Then the window she’s resting against abruptly slides down with a clatter, sending in a gust of wind that almost rips her bow from her newly bobbed hair.

“Tom,” Amy gasps, eyes flying open. She clutches at the bow, which was one of her few birthday gifts, and glowers at him. “You’re horrible.”

He lounges back in his seat, looking rather smug. She shoves the window back up, blocking out the wind rushing past the train, and sits back down in a huff. “Is anything interesting happening?” She nods at the discarded paper on the opposite seat. The only reason they have their own compartment is because Mrs. Cole has learned by now to let Tom sit either alone or with Amy if she doesn’t want a fight and/or tears.

“They’re still killing each other in Spain,” he says drolly, “if that’s interesting to you.”

“You would like the bloody stuff,” she pulls a childish face at him, because she is a child, nine years old, although Tom is older by three months and often acts as though it is three years.

“I want to go up to the cliffs,” Tom says, ignoring her expression. Last summer Amy divided her time between the waves and the tide pools, but Tom kept at her to go up to the cliffs with him. They’re not allowed up there; none of the children are. It’s too dangerous. But Tom thinks there is something there. He says he has a feeling. Amy isn’t sure whether it is a ploy or the truth, but it
must mean something to him, if he’s still talking about it a year later.

“If Mrs. Cole catches us, we’ll be in heaps of trouble,” Amy begins pointedly. “She’ll send us back to the hotel and I won’t get to do any swimming or find any shells or go up to the boardwalk, and it will be awful, Tom-,”

“I don’t care,” Tom says in exasperation, “about swimming and seashells. Why would you want to flop around in the water like a fish with everyone else?” He takes on a familiar tone with ‘everyone else’. Tom is continuously perplexed and irritated by her desire to be around the other orphans, as if he is all she should ever need.

“Because it’s fun,” Amy sighs. “We never get to do anything fun, and on our one holiday you want to sneak off and get in trouble.”

“I want to do something useful,” Tom snaps. “Not… run around on the beach throwing sand. I don’t know why you bother,” he draws the word out in an accusatory drawl, “no one likes you anymore than they do me.”

“Liar,” says Amy, stung. “Helen likes me just fine, and so does Maggie, and Doris, and Johnny-,”

Johnny is twelve and impossibly handsome in Amy’s rosy, girlish gaze, all wiry shoulders and soft hair and kind eyes. She feels slightly giddy whenever he so much looks her way, and cried for days when a rumor spread that he’d kissed Frances Toomes.

Tom’s look darkens in a familiar way. “Johnny thinks you’re a little idiot,” he sneers. “And you prove him right whenever you go skipping over to him-,”

Not to be rebuked, Amy draws herself up haughtily, presses her lips together in a vicious little smile she learned from Betty Ormond, and cuts him off neatly, “You’re just jealous because I might like him more than you.” It’s delivered so crisply and precisely that Tom is momentarily dumbstruck, and Amy settles back in an aura of well-deserved satisfaction.

He looks at her with such wounded fury that it’s as if she had slapped him across the face, and then he reaches over silently and pinches her, hard. Amy yelps, more so in shock than in pain, and recoils. Tom is bone white with outrage. “Don’t ever say that again,” his voice cracks slightly, and she laughs, loudly and meanly, just to salt the cut a little more.

He hauls off and smacks her, his hand buffeting her mouth, and she knocks her head back into the window pane. Amy is not frightened, mostly because it didn’t hurt very much; he’s a fine-boned, delicate little boy. Rather, she is infuriated at his nerve. She wipes at her stinging lips, makes a sound between a squeal of rage and a growl, balls one hand up into a fist, and plows it into his stomach.

He crumples as she tackles him off the seat, and they roll around on the floor, not quite yelling, but kicking and clawing and jabbing at each other, pulling at hair and digging in nails. First Amy is on top, and she gets off a sound slap across his face, which sends his head reeling the other way, and then he has hooked his fingers around her wrists and rolled them over, and settled his weight down on her legs in order to spit at her.

Their magic crackles around them like static in the air, and the pummeling becomes more like a series of electric shocks. Cracks slither up the glass window above them, and then with a sickly crunching noise it shatters, raining down glass on them, but miraculously drawing no blood. They scurry away from each other, into opposite corners, and lick at their respective wounds.
“You’re a bitch,” says Tom, wiping at a bloody smear on his chin from her nails. “A bitch.” He barely knows what it means, only that it’s all he can say after an outburst like that. Amy does not think they have fought that badly in years, and they didn’t break a window last time.

“And you’re a bastard,” she replies immediately, and they settle into a grim silence.

She gives him the cold shoulder for the first two days, leaving him to sit on the rocks and read or poke around by himself while she runs in and out of the waves with the other children, laughing and yelling. They don’t sit beside each other at dinner, and although she’s sure everyone’s noticed, no one says a word.

On the third day she’s tired of swimming so she just digs herself into the sand and lets the tide wash over to her, letting everything else wash away with the sound of the ocean. When she opens her eyes Tom is standing over her, ankle-deep in water. He drops something onto her chest. Amy plucks it up; it’s a seashell, almost pure white and gleaming in the sunshine. It’s the best one she’s ever seen.

“Did you find it or steal it?” she asks.

Tom doesn’t share her concern. “Now can we go to the cliffs?”

Amy groans, and then slowly extricates herself from the sand, seashell in hand. “Alright.”

They wait until Mrs. Cole is busy yelling at Doris for throwing sand in someone’s eyes and Miss Patrick has gone to help one of the smaller children change. Then they take off down the beach, blending in with the crowds of vacationers, heads bent before the stiff wind. They clamber up the hills and then through some long grass before making their way towards the top of the cliffs, which are mostly deserted, apart from a couple walking together a ways down. Ignoring a warning sign, Tom forges ahead, the sunlight glinting off his dark hair, and Amy hurries behind him, wincing when her bare feet step on a rock. “What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know,” he says, without turning around. “It’s close.”

He draws closer to the edge. The wind is very strong, and he doesn’t weigh all that much. “Don’t,” says Amy in warning. “You’ll slip.”

He ignores her, and then drops onto his hands and knees, scrabbling at the ground as if trying to find a lost piece of jewelry. “I can hear it,” he sounds almost distraught. “Can you?”

All Amy hears is the wind. She hesitates. “Let’s go back down.” There is a sudden sick, churning feeling in her stomach, despite the cloudless blue sky overhead and the seagulls wheeling in the distance. “I don’t like this, let’s go back down, Tom.”

“It’s stronger when you’re here,” he says, still searching through the grass, and then he pauses. “It stopped.”

“What stopped?” she takes a small step towards him, and feels a sudden looseness of soil underfoot. In alarm, she looks down, then shifts her feet. The dirt and grass give way, and she screams. Tom reaches for her, his fingers catching at her arm, before she plummets down, down, down, and when she looks up, she sees him falling after her.

Then everything is dark and cold and she hits the water limply. Amy later thinks that a fall that far should have killed her, water at the bottom of not, but the water isn’t hard as concrete when she hits it. Rather it almost seems to part to cushion her fall, and she sinks into it mutely, vision blurred. It is pitch black all around her, like the night sky without stars. She sinks further down until instinct
kicks in and she begins to thrash, propelling herself back up, even though she can’t see the surface. She could be upside down, she thinks in a panic, and she would have no idea.

But as her lungs start to burn she breaks through, and gasps, panting and kicking frantically. She’s fallen into an underground pool of some sort, or a lake. There is no more sky or sea or sand around her, just a massive cavern filled with a water, a rocky shore on the far end. She can barely make that out; the only real light is a distant pinprick of sunlight and the unnatural sheen of the water. “Tom?” she calls out hoarsely, and is greeted with silence.

She looks around, but there is no sign of him. “Tom?” she calls again, and tries to remember- he’d fallen after her, she knows he did, but-

Then she realizes, and takes a deep breath of air, before diving back down underwater. Squinting into the dark, she looks around frantically, and then kicks further down, her legs aching from the strain. Her desperation for a light of any kind is so great that sparks trail from her fingertips underwater as she dives even further down. She can’t hold her breath forever. It’s his own fault for never wanting to swim. She can’t die down here-

But then she catches a glimpse of pale skin, and she propels herself to where he is, floating head down. She’s not even sure if he’s alive. Amy grasps the back of his shirt, and then tries to pull him up with her, but she’s not strong enough. She only rises a few feet before having to let go and adjust her grip. Blackness throbs at the edge of her vision. He turns over in the water, and she sees his eyes are wide open.

She cuffs at his face, and he seems to register her for the first time. He starts to kick as well, grabbing at her hand, and together they rise up to the surface just in time. Amy sputters and coughs, then manages to float on her back so as not to use so much energy kicking. “What- where are we?” she finally manages to croak.

“I knew it was here,” says Tom, as if they didn’t almost just drown together. “I could hear it. Like someone calling for me.”

“You found it,” Amy gasps, “and now we have no way out, you knobhead.”

“Then we’ll make a way.” Tom starts slowly kicking his way towards the shore, and after a few moments she follows, incredulous.

Only when they’ve reached the shallows does he say, “I saw things down there. At the bottom.”

Amy collapses in a heap on the rocky, cold ground, shaking and shivering. “Like what?” she asks through her teeth.

“Dead people,” Tom does not sound as alarmed as he perhaps should. Amy is too exhausted to summon up much of a response. She rolls over, grunting in pain, and resolves to lay there until he fixes this.

It may have been only a few minutes or it may have been a hour, but she finds him shaking her all the same. “Get up,” he says, and when she doesn’t react fast enough, hauls her to her feet. For someone who plummeted hundreds of feet before nearly drowning in an underground cavern full of corpses, he is remarkably good spirits.

Amy leans on him as he leads her over to the wall. “My cut opened up,” he says, pointing at his chin. The scab she left on him a few days ago has broken open anew, and blood is trickling down onto his neck. She stares at him, until he wipes at the cut and then presses his hand to the wall.
There is the audible sound of stone shifting. “It wants more,” he says.

Amy smiles thinly and pointedly, plucks up a particularly sharp stone, and hands it to him. “Get cracking,” she says. “We don’t have all day.”

He frowns at her. “You want me to-,”

“Well, you’re not cutting me open,” Amy shoves him towards the wall. “It’s your fault we’re down here, isn’t it? And you’re already bleeding all over.” Then, indignantly, “What, did you think I was gonna volunteer? Come near me with that and I’ll thrash you, Tom Riddle, see if I don’t.”

It doesn’t take too long for him to smear enough blood on the rock wall that a door forms. They step through and find themselves on the cliff face, the sea slamming against the rocks below. Amy peers down into the surf. “Do you think we’ll die, if we jump?”

“We already fell all that way,” Tom points out. “If that didn’t kill us-,”

“What about the riptide?” That does give him pause, or enough pause for Amy to snatch up his hand and seem them both plummeting down into the sea.

They miss the rocks, and the tide that should by all rights smash them to bits against the cliff instead seems to surge around them and propel them into a nearby cove. Dennis Bishop is the one who finds them; yelling down at them from the hills that Mrs. Cole though they got dragged out to sea and drowned. They’ve been missing for two hours.

Now Tom is the one slumped on the ground, but at least his cut has stopped bleeding. Amy sits down next to him, waiting for the search party. “At least it won’t get infected, with all this salt water,” she says, patting his head with wry fondness. He mutters something foul but for once, doesn’t argue with her. Only then does she realize that she lost the shell he gave her. She thinks of it sinking down, down, down into the dark, before settling onto something white and rotting and waterlogged. She doesn't much want it back.

Chapter End Notes

There is a serious lack of canon info about the infamous cave, so creative liberties have been taken.
Stranger

1938

Tom is still staring in open horror at the burning wardrobe, but Amy is running her hands over the smooth, thick white envelope in her hands, savoring the scarlet wax seal and the elegant green script on the back; *Miss A. Benson, Wool’s Orphanage, 13 Shepherd Lane, Eden Park, London*. She is torn between wanting to tear it open and devouring the writing with her eager eyes. No one has ever written a letter to her before. She has never even gotten a card in the mail. No one has ever written her name like that. Miss A. Benson. She is only ever called Amy.

“Now,” says the stranger, not unpleasantly, once Tom has offered up the barest hint of apology for his collection of stolen trinkets. “I imagine you have questions.”

Amy scoots forward until she is on the very edge of Tom’s bed, eying the stranger curiously. He has long, unruly auburn hair and a rather impressive beard. His eyes are a blue that could be considered kindly if they were not so sharp. His nose looks as though someone broke it once.

“Yes,” she says, “Mister-,”

“Dumbledore,” he smiles at her, “Professor Dumbledore. I teach Transfiguration at Hogwarts, in addition to being the head of House Gryffindor.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” Amy corrects herself quickly, and ignores Tom’s rather betrayed look. They had ought to stay in this man’s good graces if he really is going to take them away from here to some school. “Do you mean- that is to say, that we’re witches?”

He inclines his head. “Indeed.”

“And that’s why we can- do the things that we do?”

“Certainly, Miss Benson. Although if what Mrs. Cole told me was true, the two of you have displayed rather advanced cases of accidental magic over the years. Perhaps,” his tone turns more thoughtful, “you have been amplifying one another’s abilities to an unprecedented degree. Any spell is that much stronger when cast with another witch or wizard, of course.”

“Spells?” Tom cuts in, still standing with his back against the wall, as if cornered. But his curiosity has overruled his wariness; Amy can see that from here. “We can do spells?”

“You will begin learning how to use spells and enchantments at Hogwarts, yes.” Dumbledore’s smile does not wave when he looks at Tom, but his eyes do darken to the violent blue of the ocean. He doesn’t trust Tom. Amy supposes he probably doesn’t trust her either, if she is Tom’s friend. Perhaps he just trusts her a little more because she’s not a thief. Not usually, anyways.

He clears his throat. “There, are, however, restrictions on when and where children such as yourself can perform magic. Once you have your wands you may only use them within the confines of Hogwarts. The Ministry of Magic strictly forbids magic in the presence of muggles, and underage wizards and witches are only permitted to use magic in a learning environment.” He pauses. “I will warn you that the consequences of breaking magical laws are just as severe as the consequences of breaking muggle ones, and the Ministry has ways of tracking underage magic.”

Amy wonders at that; are they already on some kind of list? Some of her magic has been accidental, certainly, but she was still trying to make things happen most of the time. Does it not count because she didn’t know? “How does someone become a witch?” she asks, frowning. Surely
it’s not a case of trying hard enough- Helen knows she can do strange things, but Helen couldn’t unlock a door or melt a marble no matter how hard she concentrated.

Tom is listening very intently now.

“I’m afraid there is no concise explanation for it,” Dumbledore says. “Some children inherit their magical abilities from their parents. Others develop them when their parents are muggles- non-magical, that is- and we are not sure why. It is speculated that the amount of intermarriage between witches and muggles has created-;”

“My father must have been a wizard, then,” Tom interrupts, and Dumbledore does not seem irritated, only turns to face him. “It couldn’t have been my mother. She wouldn’t have died if she was magic. Do you know any Riddles who attended Hogwarts?”

“Not off the top of my head, I’m afraid.”

Amy says nothing. Maybe Tom is right. Maybe his father was a wizard. She doesn’t think hers was. A wizard wouldn’t have met her mother. And she knows her mother certainly wasn’t. She breaks the seal on her letter and opens it, breathing in the crisp scent of the crinkly parchment. As she unfolds the letter, a supply list flutters down into her lap.

“You will both need to journey to Diagon Alley to purchase your school things,” says Dumbledore. “I would be happy to accompany you-;”

“We’ll manage on our own,” Tom says quickly, prying open his own letter. “If you can just tell us where to go. Sir,” he tacks on at the end, as if to appease him.

Dumbledore glances at Amy. “Miss Benson?” She can see Tom flush slightly at the insinuation that she might not agree with him. But he does have a point. They have always managed just fine on their own. She doesn’t dislike this strange man, this professor, but she doesn’t trust him anymore than he trusts the two of them. Better to do this on their own terms.

“We’ll be alright, sir,” she says sweetly, offering a small smile. “Tom’s good with directions.”

After a moment’s pause, Dumbledore produces a map of this place, Diagon Alley, and directions on how to go to and from there, seemingly out of thin air. He also gives them both a small pouch, weighted down with coins. “Hogwarts provides a stipend every year for children without access to magical money. Spend it wisely. It cannot be used in muggle shops,” he adds, likely at the hungry look on their faces. Neither of them has ever had any spending money of their own.

“I have also enclosed instructions on how to reach Platform 9 and ¾ on September 1st,” Dumbledore says, rising from his chair. “The train leaves at exactly eleven o’clock. Mrs. Cole has been informed that you both have been accepted into a prodigious school in Scotland. Do not dissuade her of that notion.” He picks up his hat, and bows his head briefly to both of them. “I look forward to seeing you both at the start of term feast. Until then.”

Amy does not dare say a word until she is certain he is gone. When his footsteps have faded down the stairs, she cannot contain herself any longer; a giddy smile breaks across her face, and she presses the letter to her chest, where her heart is thudding heavily. “We’re going,” she says breathlessly. “Did you hear him? We’re going. We get to leave.” She does not mention that her fear when Dumbledore first arrived was that he was going to take Tom and leave her. That it had all been some sort of fluke, that she would be discarded and abandoned while Tom went off on some splendid adventure.
“I told you we were different.” Tom is excited, she can tell, but mostly he is proud, gratified that his suspicions were correct all along, that they are special, different, better. Amy fears being left behind, but Tom is terrified of being normal. Common. Ordinary. That he really is a little nobody, an unwanted child of no significant origins who will grow up to live an insignificant, meaningless, quickly forgotten life.

“Do you really think your dad was a wizard?” she asks, and he stiffens.

“Of course,” he says, without even time to consider it. “He must have been. Didn’t you hear him? We’re advanced. I must have gotten it from my father, and you-,” he hesitates, and then goes on, smoothly, “you inherited it from your parents as well, you must have.”

“My mum was normal,” says Amy, but Tom waves it off like a fly.

“Your father, then. You’re not normal, Amy.” The emphasis he puts on normal is as if he were mentioning a deadly disease.

She lets it go. Does it really matter whether or not he thinks their parents were magical too? Amy has always preferred to focus on the present. “Let’s go get our things tomorrow,” she says, scanning the supply list once more. She snorts with laughter. “We have to buy black robes and a pointed hat. And gloves made of dragonhide! Oh- we can bring pets!”


It sounds like something out of a film. Amy laughs. “What do you suppose counts as dark forces?”

“We’ll just have to find out.” Tom folds his letter back up.

It is sleeting summer rain the next day when the cab drops them off outside disreputable little pub. They dash up to the door, Amy holding up her bag over their heads, and shuffle inside, glancing around at the dark, grimy interior, full of strange people doing strange things. Amy stares openly, but Tom takes her firmly by the elbow and marches to the back, where he pushes open a door leading out into a dingy little courtyard. An older woman with a brilliant magenta cloak and a feathered hat stands at stone wall, thin stick in hand. Her wand, Amy realizes. It still seems so absurd.

“Going shopping, loves?” she asks them kindly enough, and then taps at the wall with her wand. Amy flinches as it grinds itself open. It reminds her of the cave. She still dreams about that, sometimes, although she has never gone back to it. She thinks Tom has. This past summer he disappeared for nearly four hours while they were in Cornwall.

They follow after the woman into what might as well be Wonderland. Amy cranes her neck to get a glimpse of all the peculiar shopfronts and bizarrely dressed people hurrying in and out of them. A mother pulls along a whining toddler who wants to stomp in a puddle, and gaggle of teenage boys are clumped in front a window advertising what appears to be the latest in racing brooms, joking and laughing under the shop awning.

As much as she would like to window shop, the combination of the pouring rain and Tom’s insistence that they need to get their wands first sees them in front of Ollivander’s. It looks deserted to Amy, but Tom pushes open the door, and she cautiously steps inside after him, wiping rainwater off her face. The air in the shop is thick and dusty, and as far as the eye can see are hundreds and hundreds of boxes, some on ancient wooden shelves, others collecting dust on the ground.
Tom looks around, then steps up to the empty counter and rings the bell there. No one appears. “Hello? Mr… Ollivander?” Amy calls out uncertainly, her voice echoing strangely in the silent shop.

There’s the creaking of floorboards, and suddenly he appears, an old, wizened man with the most curious silvery grey eyes Amy has ever seen. He regards them both with a queer half-smile, and says in a rasping voice, “Who is going first?”

“Me,” says Tom without so much as a second thought, and Amy huffs but steps back, sitting on a rickety little chair in the corner as the old man comes around the counter to examine Tom. He flicks his own wand, a tape measure shoots off the counter and into the air, hovering around in order to properly measure not only Tom’s arms and fingers, but his legs and facial feature as well. Finally, after measuring the distance between his eyes, it retreats, and Ollivander steps away. He returns with just one box in hand.

“I am not always correct on the first attempt,” he says, “But I have a feeling… Thirteen and a half inches. Yew, on the inflexible side. Phoenix feather core. Quite uncommon, that. And yew- no matter. Go ahead, young man.”

Tom takes up the wand, and an altogether unfamiliar expression slides onto his face. Amy stares at him, not recognizing him for a split second, although she has long since memorized the shape and color of his eyes, the arc of his nose, the exact shade of his hair. He waves the wand in an elegant downward sweep, like a conductor, and a chill radiates through the shop and into her bones. Everything shudders all at once, as if it were a mini earthquake. Dust motes flurry in the air. The walls themselves seem to groan.

“This is it,” says Tom after a moment of silence.

Ollivander gives an almost shaky nod, although the expression on his face is one of amazement, not fear. “It would seem so. You’ll find it an able companion, Mr….”


“Hm,” says Ollivander. “Mr. Riddle. Yew is noted for its exceptional dueling ability- you’ll find very little difficulty when it comes to curses and defensive magic with a wand like this. Devoted, yew is. They say it often sprouts into a tree when buried with its owner. And phoenix feather- now, they produce truly spectacular magic. Quite enterprising a core, in fact. They sometimes act of their own accord. And very selective when it comes to their wielders. You should feel honored.”

Tom has already pocketed the wand, rejecting the case. He hastily pays for it, counting out the correct number of coins, and keeps his hands in his pockets after that. Ollivander looks at him for a moment longer, than waves Amy forward. “Your turn, my dear. Arms out, back straight, if you please.” After taking her measurements, he inspects her for a moment and then turns back to the shelves. “Let us see if I can manage an instant match again.”

He opens the box, and hands her the wand. “Ten and one sixth inches. Willow, and rather supple at that. A unicorn hair core. And a lovely decorated shaft.”

Amy traces the minuscule engravings with her fingers, then holds the wand aloft and waves it. Golden sparks cascade through the air. A series of chimes ring out, the bell at the door tolling brightly over and over again, and a warm feeling settles in her gut. The hair on the back of her neck prickles, and she can feel the shift in the air pressure. The room feels lighter, somehow. Ollivander claps his hands together. “Lovely. A more subdued reaction, but quite pretty, to be sure. And this is a more… delicate wand. Unicorn hair often has that effect. This wand will produce very consistent
magic, and will grow quite attached to you, Miss…”

“Amy Benson,” says Amy, unable to keep the smile off her face.

“Yes, you’ll find it a very loyal companion. Unicorn hair wands generally refuse to take on a second owner. As for your wand wood, willow is nearly as uncommon as yew. Many desire one, due to the appearance, but they are not so easily swayed. They seek out potential, not proven talent. As we say in my family, *He has who has the furthest to travel will go fastest with willow.* Or she, in this case. Very gifted when it comes to the healing arts, you’ll find.”

Amy lowers the wand, pays for it, and thanks him as they leave. Ollivander peers after them curiously as they step back out into the rain, which has eased up somewhat to a drizzle. “Isn’t that lucky,” says Amy, “we both got ours on the first try. I wonder how long it takes some people. I’d hate to have been in there for hours on end.”

“I’m not surprised,” says Tom, but he seems distracted, and she can tell it is all he can do to not take out his wand again.

“Remember, we’ll get in trouble now if we try to use them back at Wool’s,” she says, grabbing his arm for balance as she skips over a large puddle. Tom doesn’t shrug her off, but he does take his hands out of his pockets. “I know,” he replies, a bit defensively. “I’m not stupid enough to try it.”

“You are excited, though, aren’t you? To be going?” she presses. “It’s all you’ve ever wanted, to leave Wool’s.”

“Of course I am.” Tom reaches the door of Flourish and Blott’s, and holds it open for her. “I just want us to be properly prepared. Other people will have had their whole lives to get ready. We need to make a good impression.”

“Since when do you care what anyone thinks?” she teases, but steps into the shop ahead of him, smiling. She has a good feeling about all of this. She has a wand and a letter with her name on it and soon enough, a future, something she had never considered before. Things will be different now, she’s sure of it. What she does not consider, giddy with excitement and apprehension, is just how different.
1938

Tom hesitates ten or so yards from the barrier. Men in crisp suits and women in finely pressed coats brush past them, checking their watches and hurrying towards their trains. Amy squeaks in her almost-new leather shoes on the polished station floor, eyeing the nearest wall clock. She adjusts the satchel hanging around her chest. “We’ve got to go now,” she says firmly, when he still does not move. “It’s not going to open us for us. Let’s run it.”

He frowns as if pained. “This is ridiculous.” She suspects he’s slightly self-conscious about the possibility of humiliating themselves in a crowd full of thousands. But no one is paying two shabbily dressed children, loaded down with trunks and bags, the slightest bit of attention. They may as well be invisible.

Amy squares her shoulders and adjusts her hat, which falls smartly over her curls. Over the years her hair has darkened from corn-silk blonde to a mousy brown, but Helen said this hat, with its cheery blue felt, brings out her eyes. Amy is not pretty enough to be vain, but she knows her eyes are her sole charming feature. This morning when she looked in the mirror and buttoned up her coat, ignoring the small patch on one of the sleeves, she pretended for an instant she was someone important. Wanted. Someone who belonged.

That’s all there is to it, isn’t there? Pretending you belong, even when you don’t. She glances over at Tom, at his faded brown overcoat, too big in the shoulders for him, inherited from Johnny. She rummages in her pocket and briskly puts on her brown gloves, which truthfully were dyed by Miss Patrick after the white got stained a year ago. Clasping the handlebar of the trolley, she takes a determined stride forward.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a few bricks,” she throws over her shoulder at Tom, who pinions her with an irritated stare as she goes ahead. Then, like a shot, he breezes past her, and Amy quickens her pace to match him, and together they rush towards the brick wall- she cringes at the last second, bracing for the crash of metal on stone, but they pass through, and she finds herself on the other side, a packed platform of students teeming around her.

The Hogwarts Express seems to exhale steam, gleaming crimson-scarlet-rouge on the tracks. Amy has never seen such a beautiful train in her life. She wishes she could draw it; she only ever used to doodle for fun, but since Diagon Alley she has taken up sketching, and has a tattered book full of pages of scenes from Ollivander’s and Flourish and Blott’s and the Leaky Cauldron.

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“Told you we just had to run it,” she tells Tom smugly, but he is already moving through the crowd, dragging his trunk after him. Amy grabs hers as well, and lugs it over to the nearest conductor, who floats it onto the train with a flick of his wand. She watches in wonder until she realizes she’s lost Tom, but then he’s at her side again.

“I’ll take your bag,” he says, gallantly, but most likely so she can’t run off without him, knowing he has her things. Undeterred, Amy passes it over without a fuss. She rather likes knowing he will carry things for her. “Look at what that woman is wearing,” she says, gawking at a witch in a coat comprised of gold and scarlet scales, which shimmer in the morning sunlight. “D’you think it’s from a dragon?”
“If we don’t get a compartment now, we never will,” Tom tells her pointedly, lacking her appreciation for magical fashion. Casting one more amazed look around the platform and its crowds, Amy follows him into the nearest car. The corridor is full of rowdy students, some already in uniform, others not, of varying shapes and sizes. An older couple is unabashedly snogging in a doorway, and a little boy is desperately trying to get his pet toad back from two boys jeering and levitating it over his head.

Trying not to look nervous, or worse, new, Amy keeps her head down and her hackles raised as they fight through the crowd. It’s not so different from the orphanage, with people fighting and yelling and cursing and laughing. When Tom finds an empty compartment, he shoves open the sliding door, and steps aside to let her in first, then slams it shut behind them, rattling noisily in the frame. Amy bounces on the plush seats, far nicer than any she has ever sat on, and peers out the window.

Everywhere she looks, mothers and fathers are saying goodbye to their children, wiping at teary faces, embracing slouched frames, ruffling hair and adjusting ties and hats and bows. One little girl waves goodbye to her parents, who are visibly heartbroken, watching her scurry onto the train. The wife turns to the husband, shoulders heaving with emotion, and he wraps an arm around her. It unnerves Amy, who has never seen any real displays of affection between adults. She has never even been around a husband and wife. Mrs. Cole’s man died in the Great War.

Tom is not looking out the window. He is rooting through his bag, pulling out a few books, which he neatly stacks beside him on the seat. He also pulls out his wand, which he admires for a moment, and then at last he takes out a little tin of hard candy. “That’s Miss Patrick’s,” Amy identifies it immediately. “You stole it from the office while she was saying goodbye to me, didn’t you?”

His response is to pop one into his mouth, and then says through his very white teeth, which remain so no matter how poor his diet is, “She didn’t say goodbye to me, did she?”

Amy huffs, and then sticks out her hand. When he raises an eyebrow at her, she grits out, “Please, may I have one, Tom?” and he obliges.

Sucking noisily on it, Amy takes out her sketchbook, intent on capturing the platform before the train pulls away. But she only has a few precious minutes of drawing time, until the train whistles pierces through the noisy crowds, and the gears begin to shift into motion. The carriage sways slightly, and Amy sets down her pencil.

They’re going. They’re really going to leave London. They won’t be back until Christmas. A few weeks ago she was so excited she could have burst into confetti, but now it suddenly hits her. Tonight, she will not sleep in her bed at Wool’s, but somewhere entirely new and foreign. Tonight, she will be in a different world entirely, far away from grey London and Wool’s drafty halls. Tonight she may be a different person entirely.

It frightens her, a little, and she fights back the lump in her throat. She needs to be brave. Change is good. She was never going to stay at Wool’s forever. She’d had left one day, one way or another. At least she knows where she is going. She glances at Tom, who looks entirely at ease, reclining against the seat as he reads, pale face drawn in concentration.

He has been reading and rereading their textbooks non-stop since they got them, hungrily devouring as much information as possible. He’s told her all about Hogwarts, founded by four wizards over a thousand years ago, about the four houses and what they stand for, about the moving staircases and the talking paintings and the ghosts. But it all seems like some strange fairy tale, and she’s still not sure what to believe. How could it all be true?
She accidentally swallows the candy and coughs and splutters for a few moments. Tom barely looks up from his reading. With a sigh, Amy rests her head against the window, and very quickly dozes off, sinking into a deep sleep before they’ve barely even left the city. Nothing can lull her like a train or car, and she didn’t sleep much the night before, kept up with excitement and worries and an endless line of questions parading through her mind.

When she startles awake, it is much later in the day, and there is a vast countryside outside her window, not city streets and suburbs. “Wake up,” says Tom, who is arranging a vast spread of sweets and treats on the seats. Amy stares at him. How could he possibly have stolen that all? He shoots her an accusing look for suspecting him. “There’s a lady who goes around selling sweets,” he informs her, unwrapping some sort of cake.

“You haven’t got any money,” Amy rubs at her eyes.

“I told her we were poor orphans,” Tom smiles languidly, and tosses a wrapped chocolate at her. Amy exhales, then bursts into laughter as she unwraps it to reveal a frog, which promptly tries to hop away from her. She grabs it with both hands and swiftly bites off its wriggling, milk chocolate head. It’s delicious. All the candies are the best thing she’s ever tasted. She has a terribly under indulged sweet tooth, after all.

She curls up contentedly like a cat and nibbles on black licorice while she sketches a rough landscape of the northern countryside. The sun sinks lower and lower in the sky, bathing the compartment in swathes of golden light. People pass by their compartment, laughing and talking, but no one ever stops at their door.

At sundown, they both get up to change into their uniforms. Amy fidgets in the cramped lavatory, wrinkling her nose at how washed out the black makes her look. She toys with her hair, wishing it was a more dramatic, striking color, like red or black. She wishes she had the sort of immaculate ringlets all the girls have in the magazine advertisements.

She adjusts her wool stockings, itching at her legs, and then puffs out her cheeks in the small mirror. She wishes she had pinker lips. She chews on them for a few moments, then gives up. At least everyone will be wearing the same thing every day. Even if her collar should have been starched and her blouse and skirt under her robes ironed.

It it pitch black outside by the time the train begins to slow down. Feeling a new wave of apprehension, she hastily shoves her things back into her satchel, and turns anxiously to Tom, who does not seem nervous in the slightest now that they are really here. “Stay close to me,” he says, as if she is liable to get lost in the crowds at the station. Really. She’s not a little baby. Giving him a dirty look, she follows him out of the train and into the cold, blustery night.

All the older students seem to know just what to do, and are in no hurry to do it. Instead they huddle around in small clumps, chatting casually as if the wind and cold has little to no effect on them. One girl touches up her lipstick by the light of a lamppost, squinting into a compact mirror. A few boys push each other around as they wander up towards the village, which Amy can just make out the dull lights of.

“FIRST YEARS!” someone bellows, and she jumps about a foot in the air. Tom blinks in distaste.

“FIRST YEARS, LINE UP O’ER ‘ERE!” the man shouts again, and Amy becomes cognizant for the first time of just how many of them there are.

Over a hundred, certainly. She has no idea how many students were on the train, but it must have been hundreds, perhaps even a thousand. It’s magical, isn’t it? It could easily have been bigger on
the inside than it looked from the outside. She tries to think of how many children live at Wool’s. Sixty six, she thinks, was the last count. That always seemed so large before, but now it’s a minuscule amount. How large will the school be?

“Octavian Ogg,” the bellowing man introduces himself hoarsely as, when they all seemed to have gathered around. He has a shiny bald head that reminds her of an egg, bristly white eyebrows, and a reddened, leathery face. His long trench coat brushes the ground as he glowers at them all, as if expecting a volley of insults. “Keeper of the Keys an’ Grounds ‘ere at Hogwarts. Now, I’m tasked with bringin’ you lot,” this part is delivered with quite a bit of spittle, “to the castle. So I want QUIET,” he barks. “An’ form a line, fer Merlin’s sake.”

Muttering to himself, he leads the way not uphill towards the village, but down instead. Amy glances around at the other faces, but it’s hard to make out what anyone looks like in the dark. Tom’s shoulder brushes against her as they make their way down the rocky slope. “Where are we going?” she mutters to him. “You said it was on a cliff.”

“Down to the lake,” he replies, as if it should be obvious, and he’s proven right within a few minutes; they come to a halt at the edge of a vast lake, gleaming darkly in the moonlight. A fleet of wooden boats, capable of holding a few people each, line the shore. “Four to a boat,” Ogg barks, “an’ keep yer hands to yerselves,” he narrows his eyes at two boys in particular, who are snickering and whispering to one another.

Amy has never been in a boat of any size before, and she and Tom spend the next few minutes having a viciously quiet argument over who should hold the lantern. She splashes water at him, and he nearly capsizes the boat before shoving the lantern in her lap. “Splash me again and I’ll push you over,” he tells her as she holds it triumphantly.

“I don’t think Mr. Ogg would like that,” is Amy’s winning response. She looks around for oars, but there are none. Just as she starts to ask how they’re going to cross the lake, the boats all glide forward all at once, as if propelled by an invisible motor. Amy tenses, hoping they don’t go any faster than this, and when there is no sudden acceleration, relaxes, gripping the metal lantern with one hand and drifting her other hand through the dark, cold water.

“You’re not worried about the squid,” Tom comments with a certain glint in his eyes, and Amy, who had forgotten all about the squid, which he’d only mentioned from his reading once, immediately retracts said hand as if someone had set the water to boil.

“That’s probably just a myth,” she hisses at him, and he rolls his eyes, but then freezes. Amy looks around frantically, expecting to see a gargantuan monster rising out of the depths, before she realizes he’s looking up. She turns around as best she can without tipping them over, and is met with the sight of a towering castle overhead, its lights winking out across the expanse of the lake, casting a thousand glittering reflections, like dancing flames on the surface of the water.

An almost reverent hush falls over the first years. Amy’s breath seizes in her throat, awestruck, as she gazes up at it. She’s never seen anything so extraordinary in her entire life. It’s like a fairy tale come to life. It’s beautiful and foreboding all at once. She can’t look away from it. But at last she does manage to tear her gaze away, and when she looks at Tom, their eyes meet, and for once she knows they are thinking the exact same thing.
A personal head-canon of mine is that before the first British wizarding war, Hogwarts had a much larger influx of students coming in each year, as many families had not yet been wiped out. (It would certainly explain all the empty classrooms). That, and I imagine many people were fleeing to Britain from Europe with Grindelwald in his hey-day.
The crooked line of first years shuffles into the Great Hall, and Amy stands near the front, tilting her head back, dumbstruck, in order to peer up at the ceiling. Rather, the lack of one at all. Thousands of candles float in the air above them, under a velvety night sky that somehow seems all the clearer than it appeared minutes ago outdoors. She has never seen the stars this clear before. She tracks the outline of the Big Dipper with her eyes before she bumps into Tom, who is standing right in front of her.

But he does not whip around to glare at her; while Amy is mesmerized by the sky above them, drinking in its beauty, he is staring straight ahead of the procession, at the high table of professors and the simple wooden stool set in front of them. Professor Dumbledore holds a ragged old hat in hand, and a scroll of parchment in the other. The first years are a jittery, shifting mass, whispering and murmuring to one another, looking around the massive room at the four tables and sea of onlooking students staring back at them.

Amy finally looks back down when Dumbledore clears his throat, and the whispers and murmurs immediately stop. “And now,” he says, sounding utterly serious, “the Sorting Song.” A few of the first years near Amy look around, befuddled, just before the old witch’s hat he has set on the stool develops a mouth full of seams, and begins to sing. Loudly. And quite merrily. It echoes bouncily around the cavernous hall, and most of the students seem to take it very earnestly, although a few roll their eyes and look away.

She can’t really make out what it’s singing, exactly, since she is in a state of shock. Wands and broomsticks and ghosts seemed plausible. A singing hat seems absurd. No, it is absurd. Does this happen every year? It just… sings for everyone? How does it know what to sing? How does it even think? Tom certainly didn’t mention inanimate objects bursting into song from his reading. Maybe he didn’t believe it himself. Amy gapes openly, nose wrinkled, until the song dies away.

Professor Dumbledore and the table full of professors all burst into applause. The student body follows, albeit less enthusiastically. Then the man who must be the headmaster, from his seat at the head of the table, nods to Dumbledore, who promptly unfurls the very, very long scroll. “Let the sorting begin,” he says rather mildly, but the student body seems to come alive in an instant, whispering to each other furiously, craning to see.

Amy had assumed they would randomly put everyone in one house or another. Apparently not. Most of the line of first years seems aware of what is about to happen, and there is a collective stiffening as Dumbledore calls out the first name, “ABBOTT, MATTHEW!” Amy looks around, and then a boy comes walking quickly and nervously up around the line, and to the stool. He glances at Dumbledore, offers a timid smile, and clambers up onto the stool. The Hat is placed on his head, and sinks down to cover his eyes.

A few moments go by, and then, “HUFFLEPUFF!”, the Hat roars with unexpected ferocity, and one of the tables, festooned in black and yellow, bursts into cheers and applause. The Hat is removed from Matthew’s head, and he breaks into a relieved grin, hops down from the stool, and nearly runs over to the cheering table. His tie and crest suddenly flash butter yellow as he goes.
Is that it, then? They put on the Hat, and go where it says? Amy tugs at Tom’s robes, but Dumbledore is already calling up another student. This one, an Ainsley, goes to Ravenclaw, the table of blue and bronze. They cheer and stomp their feet just as loudly as Hufflepuff. It goes on like this for a few more, and Amy knows now that they are going in alphabetical order by surname. Which means Tom will have to wait quite some time, given how many first years there, and she-

“BENSON, AMY!” Dumbledore calls, and she flinches. She must be the fifth or sixth one called. Tom glances back at her as she freezes, and then Amy hardens her expression, and steps forward, unwilling to let him see her fear. She can do this. From the looks of it, all she has to do is sit there, although the last boy was up there for nearly two minutes. She walks up to Dumbledore and the Hat, and he smiles at her, before her vision goes dark, the Hat settling over her head.

“How practical,” the Hat says, voice not quite masculine or feminine, but deep and earthy all the same. “And always mindful of her duties- patient too, are you? That will serve you well, I think. But,” and now it almost sounds amused, “so stubborn. Uncompromising. And possessive. Oh, you don’t like it when others take what’s yours, do you? I have seen shades of you before, girl. You despise change. I know the sort well. But devoted- oh, yes, such devotion. Best not to spread yourself too thin. You hate to leave things undone. No, you like them buttoned up and tucked away. I see want in you, girl. Want for security, belonging. Very well. I’ll give you it. Better be HUFFLEPUFF,” it cries, and the Hat is whipped off her head.

Amy sits there in utter confusion, feeling as though she’d just been peeled apart like a cadaver, before the responding chorus of cheers and applause spurs her to get off the stool. She looks back to the waiting first years; Tom’s expression would be unreadable to most, but she sees it for what it is; rage in one eye, fear in the other. He doesn’t think he will follow her. Or perhaps he’s just angry that she could not follow after him, which has usually been the way of things.

She turns away and takes her seat at Hufflepuff, trying to recall what he told her about it. Hardworking. Loyal. Mundane. Weak. But the students crowded around her don’t seem like shrinking wallflowers; she is greeted with such passion it was as if she were a soldier returning from war. Strangers pat her on the back, squeeze her shoulders, shake her hand, and she finds herself besides the first Hufflepuff of their year, Matthew Abbott, who smiles politely at her before turning back to a girl who must be his older sister, for their looks are very similar. Amy swivels around in her seat to watch the rest of the Sorting, feeling somewhat overwhelmed. Did it read her mind, or her entire life? Did it go through her memories? Will it go through Tom’s? See what he’s done?

“BLACK, ALPHARD!” to Slytherin, and “BOSTWICK, EVELYN!” to Gryffindor and “CARVER, DOROTHY!” to Ravenclaw. “COUSLAND, JAMES!” to Gryffindor and “FAIR, JOSEPH!” to Hufflepuff and on and on it goes. “FLINT, ROLAND!” and “GREENGRASS, IRENE!” to Slytherin and “HAWKE, RICHARD!” and “HOWELL, BARBARA!” to Ravenclaw. She can’t keep track of them all; faces blend together as they scamper up and down from the dais, applause constantly ringing through the air, with the occasional hiss and boo from one table towards another.

“LANGLEY, JEAN!” and “LESTRANGE, REYNARD!” are both instantaneous sortings, the Hat barely touching their head before shrieking its commands. Jean marches proudly over to Gryffindor, while Reynard smirks and stalks over to Slytherin. “LONGBOTTOM, FRANCIS!” and “MACMILLAN, ROBERT!” both take much longer, before the Hat decides on Gryffindor and
Hufflepuff, respectively.

“MCGILL, SARAH!” seems disappointed with Ravenclaw, while “MISHRA, RUBINA!” looks visibly irked at the prospect of Hufflepuff. There are a long string of M surnames before they break free to the Ns and Os, then the Ps. “PARKINSON, ROSE!” saunters over to Slytherin with a shy smile and “PETTIGREW, DANIEL!” strides confidently over to Gryffindor. There is only one Q, “QUIGLEY, EDITH!” to Ravenclaw. Then the Rs begin, and Amy perks up, watching intently as Tom stays very still at the head of the line, waiting.

When Dumbledore calls out, “RIDDLE, TOM!” there is no trace of hesitation or disapproval on his bearded face. Tom is approaching before Dumbledore has even finished speaking. He sits down calmly on the stool, and while Amy looks on, closes his eyes even before the Hat is placed over his head. There is a silence, and she begins to count the seconds that tick by. On the twelfth the Hat exclaims, “SLYTHERIN!” and Tom rises to his feet and without any wayward looks or pauses, proceeds directly to the table. Amy’s heart sinks, although she had not held high hopes of him going to Hufflepuff as well.

Roughly fifteen minutes later, the sorting has concluded. Dumbledore takes away the stool and the Hat, and a hush settles over the hall once more as Headmaster Dippet stands to address them. “Upperclassmen, welcome back to another enlightening year of education. First years, we are pleased to have you among our ranks. I am sure you will make the most of your time here. Now, for some updates to the student bylaws,” he begins to list a rather lengthy number of changes, amendments, and general warnings, which all seem to either involve what not to bring into the school (carnivorous jewelry), do in the halls (vanish limbs), or where not to go (chiefly, the Forbidden Forest, which was sure to result in a most violent death for all trespassers).

When he finally ends his lecture, he raps neatly on his goblet with a spoon. “I declare the Welcoming Feast begun.” The empty tables come alive with a spread of food and drinks, and Amy recoils in alarm, before noting how almost everyone immediately begins to dig in, snatching up their plates and cups and grabbing dinner rolls and fruit and in general, making a mess of things. Everyone is spectacularly hungry after the long train ride, and as sated on candy as she was before, Amy is no different. After determining that nothing seems too revolting, she begins to fill her plate as well, pouring herself a glass of pumpkin juice, which tastes better than expected.

There is lively chatter all around her, but Amy keeps her head down and her mouth full, more concerned with eating her fill than joining in with the other talkative first years. She has no idea when this could all disappear, after all, and frankly, she’s never had such good food in her life. Wool’s is hardly feeding them gruel, but years of eating generally the same breakfast, lunch, and dinner have not done any wonders for her taste buds. She eats until she feels sick, and then sits back, mildly disgusted with herself. But no one else seems to have noticed.

She is tempted to join in with the conversation a few times, but ends up just listening, unsure of where she stands; a few of the first years seem to know each other, or at least one another’s families. But to her relief, one of them mentions their father nearly fainting upon being told their daughter was a witch, and she sits up a little straighter, as another chimes in with agreement. Good. It’s not just her.

Over time, the food on the table turns to dessert, and Amy resists the urge to pick up a slice of pie. She’s going to make herself sick. One girl across from her seems to have read her mind; their eyes meet, and she laughs. “I don’t think I can eat another bite,” the girl says; she has dark hair and a liberal dusting of freckles; her eyes are a pretty shade of hazel. “I’m Vera,” she has short arms, and has to nearly lean across the table to reach Amy, who shakes her hand neatly.
“Amy.”

“Were you expecting Hufflepuff, then?” Vera asks with a slight smile. “I owe my brother Simon three sickles- and he wanted to make a higher bet! He thought I would end up here. He’s in Gryffindor,” she casts a glance towards the table of scarlet and gold. “I bet on Ravenclaw, but here’s alright too. At least everyone’s nice.”

“They are,” says Amy; that seems obvious enough. “Are your whole family magical?”

Vera’s smile fades slightly. “No, my mother isn’t. Papa is, though. He’s a tailor. He does up people’s robes for work and balls and the like- even weddings. He did all our school uniforms, too,” she adjusts the collar of her blouse self-consciously; Amy sees the silver and golden embroidery on it now, looping in delicate flowers round and round, shimmering in the torchlight.

Someone loved Vera enough to do all that for her, to make her clothes look special, to make her feel good. For a few moments Amy’s chest aches, although she’s not sure why. “That’s darling,” she says instead. “He must be very good.”

“He is,” Vera beams, and then quiets, regarding Amy with some unknown consideration. She seems about to ask something, then thinks better of it. “I saw you on the train, when I went past your compartment,” she says instead. “You were drawing. And that boy you were with- Riddle, is that his name? Do you know each other?”

“We grew up together,” says Amy, unwilling to speak the word ‘orphan’ aloud, as if it were a curse hovering overhead. “And then we got our letters together.”

“Oh!” Vera’s eyes crinkle when she smiles. “That must have been fun. I wish I had someone my age like that- Simon’s a fifth year, and our little sister is only eight. You’re so lucky.”

Amy smiles back, only faking it a little. “I am.”

Chapter End Notes

I had always known Amy would wind up in Hufflepuff, but I had additional motivation to put her there by the fact that simply not many Hogwarts fics concerning ‘original characters’ involve Hufflepuff. Slytherin seems exceptionally popular, as is Gryffindor, and even Ravenclaw. I think people might feel that Hufflepuff makes for less drama and excitement, so I hope to turn that perception on it’s head a little with this fic- not all badgers are inherently sweet and docile. (I also think Hufflepuff and Slytherin have their share of similarities, which I am excited to explore as well).
The Hufflepuff common room is a perfect circle; it seemed small and homey when Amy first stepped into it, but as the rest of the first years file in, suddenly it seems more than capable of comfortably holding all of them. It is very dark; the only lights are the copper lamps and the cheery fire in the hearth. Faint moonlight filters in through the high round windows, which appear to be at ground level; they cast the shadow of long grass on the walls.

They’re in the basement of the school, which was obvious enough when they didn’t join the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw first years in climbing the massive grand staircase, but instead took the same windy route as the Slytherins, into the bowels of the castle. But at some point they broke off from them, and the Slytherins went even deeper into the dungeons. Amy is somewhat relieved; this seems plenty low enough.

There are plants everywhere; the low ceiling is draped with vines, the stone walls coated in ivy; every table and shelf has some sort of pot or vase on it. The air is warm and humid, like that of a greenhouse, not dry and dusty as one might expect from some castle basement. A fat old tabby is slumbering in a gently creaking rocking chair by the hearth. Someone has left a few books on a plump sofa, pages earmarked and worn.

“Well,” says one of the prefects, Louise, clapping her hands together and beaming at them all. Amy is not used to anyone in particular smiling at her like that. She’s not sure whether to feel flattered or unnerved. “Now that we’re all here, a few reminders. Girls dorms are to the left, boys to the right- don’t worry, your things are already there. I think it’s three to a room this year, right Davey?” she prods the drowsy boy beside her with an elbow. He startles out of his standing nap and nods.

“Lights are supposed to be out by eleven o’clock. Now, there’s a school wide curfew beginning at nine o’clock, which means if Pringle catches you out of bed past that, it’s detention. And likely a caning,” she adds, “so try not to be caught out, hm? Best to be back in here anyways- Peeves the Poltergeist has free roam of the school at night. Well, he does during the day too, but at least then there’s professors to stop him.”

“What’s a poltergeist?” someone wants to know.

“Oh, just a terribly unpleasant and malicious spirit of mischief and depravity,” Louise reassures them with a comforting smile. “Nothing to worry about once you learn a few handy spells! For now, best to just run away as fast as you can if he takes notice of you. Screaming for help won’t do much, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” someone whimpers in a very small voice, as they all shift around uneasily.

“Anyhow,” Louise carries on, “classes begin at eight o’clock in the morning, but breakfast begins at seven, so you’ll want to catch up on your sleep now! It’s been a long day,” she scans the crowd of exhausted, harried faces. “Well, if there aren’t any questions-,” several hands shoot into the air, which Louise politely ignores, “off to bed with you! Sleep tight and don’t let the pixies bite!”
She takes her fellow prefect by the arm and leads him off, leaving the first years to their fate. Amy glances around the room once more as the lamps automatically flicker out, one by one, and then follows after the other girls. Through the narrow, earthy corridor she finds her things in yet another perfectly round room. Somehow it reminds her of a beehive, although she thinks that is another geometric shape entirely. Vera is there, unpacking her things, along with another girl, who is sitting on the edge of her bed, working her long black hair into an simple plait.

“Hello,” says the girl, leaving her hair as is and standing up to extend her hand to Amy. “Ruby Mishra. Short for Rubina.” She has a faint accent that Amy cannot place at all.

“But don’t call her that,” Vera adds, “she gets awful cross.”

“I like Ruby better,” says Ruby, as Amy shakes her hand. Ruby wears her hair down to her waist. She has brown skin and amused eyes; from the look in her dark eyes, she appears to be smiling even when she is not. Amy doesn’t know the word for it. Impish? Good-humored? She’s quite tall. “What’s your name, again?”

“Amy Benson.”

“And I’m Vera Goldstein,” Vera tells Ruby. “I only told you my first.”

The three of them peer at one another curiously. “I hope we can be friends,” says Ruby. “I was supposed to go to the school in Madras, but I was born in England, so they wouldn’t take me. Father was horrified.”

Amy and Vera look at her blankly. She sighs. “India has three schools of magic. The one in Madras is the best, of course, but none of them would take me because I was born here. It was heartbreaking. The curriculum is much less rigorous here. And I couldn’t even manage Gryffindor like my cousin Sita. Mummy is bound to take that personally.”

“Hufflepuff is good too,” Vera says encouragingly, as she lays out her nightgown.

Amy can’t speak on the matter, and so shrugs.

Ruby doesn’t seem very convinced. “I suppose. I’ll have to stall my letter home as long as possible. I’ll tell them that Malini hurt her wing. Or something.” She flops back onto the bed, and resumes braiding her hair with increased vigor. “Are we friends, then? Please say so, I can’t bear the thought of wandering around here lost by myself tomorrow morning. Otherwise tell me now, so I can hate you both forever.” She looks between them, and then grins. “Just kidding you. Only a little, though. Oh, come on!”

“Yes?” says Vera, rather nervously, as if under interrogation.

“Alright,” says Amy. It’s not as if she’s full up on friends, exactly. Right now she has Tom, and she might not have him much longer, by the looks of things. Part of her is angry with him, for not being in her house, and angry with herself, for worrying about him being angry with her. And then part of her is just afraid. Not of him but of being alone. It makes her feel small and helpless and trapped.

“Good,” sighs Ruby in relief, and then none of them say much more about it, dead tired as they are. Amy feels peculiar, not about changing in front of them but about sharing a room with two strangers. At least at Wool’s she knew practically everyone and their entire life story. There wasn’t much else to talk about. This is strange and different. But her new bed is impossibly soft and downy, and the room smells faintly of pressed flowers and honey. She falls asleep almost instantly.
And then classes begin. They are late to nearly every class on their schedules for the first two days. The only one with any sense of how Hogwarts is laid out is Vera, whose brother Simon is decidedly unhelpful, waving his sister off to go talk to his friends when they try to flag him down. Amy tries to find Tom, but she only catches glimpses of him at meals, and the Slytherins travel in packs; he blends right in with the rest of them.

Fortunately, most of the professors are forgiving. Hufflepuff’s Head of House is Professor Beery, a bustling, somewhat shrunken, whiskery man in tweed who teaches Herbology. He’s prone to breaking into song mid-lesson, up to his elbows in dirt. That or quoting Shakespeare, who he swears was a wizard. Amy takes an immediate liking to him because he makes everyone jump up and down in place and shout good morning before they do any gardening, and she enjoys the horrified reactions from her classmates.

Professor Witherspoon teaches Charms; she’s an energetic woman with a head of unraveling auburn curls, gathered loosely atop her head; they spill forth frantically as she darts about the classroom, long skirt swishing this way and that. She’s young enough that some of the boys have immediate and obvious infatuations with her, and she does have a pleasant, melodic voice; she almost hums every other word, and the bangles on her wrist and the bells around her neck jingle as she moves. She says the bells are to warn her if a dread hag has escaped captivity in Germany and come after her; no one is sure if she’s serious or not.

Professor Merrythought is far older and far more serious; she teaches Defence Against the Dark Arts and rarely smiles, despite her taste for bright, optimistic colors. Her lined face rarely changes in expression unless someone impresses her in class, upon which she tends to jump to her feet with alarming spryness for a woman who must at least be in her sixties, and point and shout. She has a loud, commanding voice, like a drill sergeant, and everyone with any sense is at least a little terrified of her, especially the Ravenclaws, since she’s their Head of House. She assigns mountains of homework and marks it all in ink that shifts through the colors of the rainbow across the pages. Her ginger cat prowls the room during lessons, watching them all with great suspicion.

Professor O’Rinn instructs them in Astronomy late at night; he is grey-haired and speaks with an at-first undecipherable Irish brogue. He wears his grey hair neatly slicked back and gets around by use of a cane carved in what he swears are Celtic runes that will burn the flesh off of anyone else who touches it. When James Cousland trips over it by mistake at the end of their first class everyone watches in horror and anticipation, and then gape when nothing happens while O’Rinn cackles in amusement.

Professor Binns is dead, exceedingly dull, and teaches History of Magic. He doesn’t even have anything interesting to say about his own death.

Professor Slughorn is plump, polished, pink-faced, and effusive when it comes to praising students in Potions. Particularly the Slytherins. Especially the Slytherins. If he likes you enough, the older students say, you’re guaranteed high marks on all the bookwork so long as you can keep up in the practical. He makes chopping up lizard eyeballs sound like French cooking, and praises Amy loudly when she gets her first potion the right shade of blue, to the point where it catches her off guard and making her slop it all over the floor.

And Professor Dumbledore, of course, teaches Transfiguration, which seems suspiciously like advanced maths, while pretending not to be advanced maths. Amy has always detested maths, but imagines Tom is in heaven in this class, or as close to it as he will ever get. Dumbledore is a good teacher, exceedingly patient and with no tolerance for idle hands. He rarely reads from the textbook, instead scribbling equations on the board, in between testing their work himself. Everyone seems desperate to impress him mostly so he won’t be disappointed with them in front of
the class.

After her last class on Friday she goes looking for Tom. She has always felt more comfortable looking for him than she has with the idea of him looking for her. She’s worried it could take days to track him down; Wool’s seemed big when she was small, but it is a cramped closet compared to Hogwarts. As of right now she can barely remember how to get to her classes, dormitory, and the Great Hall, nevermind all the other locations. Finding lavatories when she needs them has been an absolute nightmare.

Fortunately, Tom has not made himself as scarce as she would at Wool’s. She finds him at the Slytherin Table, deep in conversation with a short boy with white blonde hair and pale eyes. Tom does not notice her approach at first, but the other boy does, and his expression folds itself up into a pinched look of distaste when he sees her Hufflepuff crest. He stops talking abruptly, and Tom quickly turns, sees Amy, and says nothing for a long moment. She wonders if he’s about to turn back around and ignore her when he leans over, mutters something to the blond boy, who frowns but nods, and gets up. Amy buries her hands in the pockets of her blazer as he comes over to her. “Let’s go for a walk,” she suggests lightly, as if this is not the longest they have ever gone without speaking to one another, and he inclines his head in agreement.

So they go a very, very long walk. They come out of the Great Hall and into the bustling antechamber, then down a hall and under an archway into a courtyard, then down several stone steps and into another courtyard, then through a wrought iron gate, and so it goes until they are out on the school grounds in the dismal late summer sunshine. Amy’s legs burn, which she supposes is good, since she’s certainly getting her exercise in running around this past week.

Tom doesn’t say anything until she purposefully knocks her shoulder against his, once, then twice, and then he grabs her by the arm. “Hufflepuff,” he snaps. “Of all the- you had to get Hufflepuff, did you? What is wrong with you? Were you trying to be difficult?” He hasn’t been this visibly upset with her in what seems like ages, and she much prefers it to cold silences and guarded stares. She’d rather he be angry with her than ignore her any day.

In spite of herself, she smiles in relief- at least he cares where she went at all, cares that they’re not going to be together anymore- and he scowls and gives her a little shake. Then her smile vanishes and she shoves him back. “Don’t do that! And it’s not my fault- you didn’t tell me about the Hat! And it’s not as if it let us pick! It didn’t exactly want my opinion,” she points out, wrinkling her nose at him. “It just told me all these strange things-,”

He’s not listening. “Well, it let me decide,” he retorts, cutting her off entirely. “I knew I wanted Slytherin, and it listened to me eventually-,”

Eventually? He wasn’t even up there for thirty whole seconds. “Liar,” she accuses, twisting the heels of her shoes into the ground. “You’re such a liar, Tom, it didn’t let you-,”

“It did!” he nearly shouts, surprising her, and they glare at each other for a few moments longer. “But it doesn’t matter now, does it? I’m in Slytherin, and you’re…” he trails off as if he can barely bring himself to say it.

“Hufflepuff,” she says coldly. “What’s wrong with Hufflepuff? You didn’t mention that when you went on and on about the school, that you hated it so much-,”

“I don’t hate it, I just didn’t expect you to be in it. You shouldn’t be there. You should be in Slytherin, with me.” He straightens slightly, shoulders up with pride. “The Hat made a mistake.”

“How would you know?” she scoffs.
“Because you’re like me,” he says, infuriated all over again. “I don’t know why you’re being like this. It was a mistake. You should have been in Slytherin with me.” She’s not sure if he’s reassuring her or himself. She doesn’t feel very comforted. Maybe it’s for his own peace of mind. After all, if she is truly like him, then there is nothing wrong with him, or if there is, at least he isn’t the only one.

Obviously they weren’t the only children running around melting marbles and bending spoons and trailing sparks from their fingers. But Amy very much doubts that Vera or Ruby ever killed a rabbit or found a cave full of corpses in a cliff face. Is this why he’s taken her being in a different house so personally? He was convinced they couldn’t be separated? She wonders at that. She has never had that sort of confidence in their similarities.

“Well, I’m not,” she says. “And it doesn’t matter now, like you said. I can’t ask for them to move me. And I like it.”

He exhales as if she’s said something mildly amusing, and mutters what sounds suspiciously like, “You would.”

He’s right. She would. She likes Hufflepuff. She likes her room and she likes Vera and Ruby and she likes sitting at the noisy, laughing table every night at dinner, and she likes all the plants in the common room, and she likes the yellow on her tie, it goes nicely with her eyes. She doesn’t feel lonely or like an outcast, as she sometimes did at Wool’s, and she doesn’t worry about getting into trouble over something Tom did or wants her to do with him. It’s refreshing.

But she does miss him, and she knows he can see it on her face. She takes his hand in her own, even if they’re too old to be holding hands like this. “We can still see each other,” she says. “It’s not as if we’re on opposite ends of the castle. And Hufflepuff and Slytherin have Potions together, and Defence-,”

“I know,” but he does not let go of her hand, wraps his fingers around her knuckles. “I know, it’s just- Slytherin is very different. From Hufflepuff. They have… different ideas,” he settles on.

She frowns. “Different ideas about what?”

“About muggles.” For a moment she looks at him blankly until she realizes he’s talking about people. Normal people, that is. Ordinary people, everyone else, who can’t do what they do. “It’s-have you told anyone? Where you’re from? About Wool’s?” He seems almost anxious about it. Amy lets go of his hand, a bit stung.

“I- no, not really. Why?”

“Good,” he says. “Tell everyone your parents are dead and you come from wizards.”

She snorts. “Why?”

“Why can’t you ever just do as you’re told?” he snaps, and then seems to regret it, or at least think twice, from the way she arches her eyebrows in disbelief at him. “Because you don’t want people to get the wrong impression about you. Especially since you’re in Hufflepuff. They have a reputation for taking anyone.”

“What’s wrong with anyone?” she demands incredulously, wheeling away from him to start down the slope towards the lake, which gleams midnight blue even in the light of day.

“Because anyone- you’re not anyone,” he says insistently, following after her. “You come from magic, just like me. Amy!”
She stops in her tracks and sighs, turning back around to look at him. The wind is buffeting his thin frame, and the expression on his face is deadly serious. “Listen to me,” he tells her. “I’m just looking out for you. You know that.”

Does she? Or is he looking out for himself, because if she starts going on about how she’s from muggles, grew up surrounded by muggles, and that so did he, it might get back to his spiffy new friends from Slytherin, who apparently don’t associate with ‘just anyone’. But… She can’t find it in herself to be spiteful, either. Tom deserves friends just as much as she does. Well, maybe not ‘just as much’, but he still deserves friends, at least a little.

“Fine,” she says. “Fine. I won’t say a word about Wool’s and muggles or- whatever it is you’re so worried about.” Then she pauses, and adds, reluctantly, “I promise.”

“Good.” He almost smiles, and closes the distance between them. Amy wants to be annoyed, but now that things seem mostly back to normal, she softens and smiles back. They walk down to the lake and try to spot the Giant Squid, but there’s no sign of him. Instead they go about gathering small, smooth stones, so they can take turns skipping them. He tells her all about Slytherin; he’s a good story-teller, he always has been, and he likes talking about his new house, his voice rising and falling in rhythm.

Their common room is under the lake and filled with watery, greenish light. He can hear the rush of the waves on the lake and the pipes dripping all night. Mermaids swim past their windows to gawk at them. The fireplace mantle is solid marble, and one of the prefects wears a silver serpent around her wrist, a metal creature that slithers up her arm and round her neck when she speaks. His roommates are Abraxas Malfoy and Alexander Nott. Abraxas’ owl is pure white and named Io. Alexander can trace his lineage back to the Norman invasion.

“It sounds beautiful,” says Amy, when he trails off at last. The sun is starting to set in the mountains around them. It casts strange new shadows on his face. She skips one last pebble, twice, thrice, four times before it falters. “Let’s find the bell tower tomorrow. I want to start drawing things.” It’s starting to get colder now, and she shivers suddenly, then wraps her arms around herself. “We should go back inside. It’ll be supper soon.” Tom gazes around the smooth waters of the lake once more, then nods, and they begin the long uphill trek back to the castle, shoulders brushing against each other as they go.

Chapter End Notes

I feel as though this chapter was the most exposition heavy of the past seven, but I felt the need to set things up now that will remain relevant throughout Amy’s years at Hogwarts, such as the professors and classes and her and Tom adjusting to their respective houses. Hopefully it didn’t get too off-track. I still intend for the focus of the fic to be regarding the relationship and shifting dynamics between Tom and Amy, but other characters will come on and off stage. This is also not going to be a play-by-play of all seven years; first year just happens to be deserving of a lot of attention, so I don’t want anyone to be thrown off when I begin to skip around time-wise again.
1938

At breakfast every day Amy slathers butter onto her toast and sits wedged between her roommates, talking to gingery Matthew Abbott, who is not nearly as shy as he first appeared, chatterbox Marge Baker, always-finds-something-funny Joe Fair, posh Bert Macmillan, and quiet-as-a-mouse Patsy Sampson. There are others, too, of course, but Amy is not so extroverted that she wants to flit between friend groups every day, so she always sits in the same place and butters her toast the same way and laughs the same way when something funny is said.

And she likes it; she’s not pretending just to fit in, which she was worried she’d have to do. For the most part, everyone genuinely is very pleasant. Hufflepuff does not necessarily lend itself to the argumentative or brusque; most of her housemates actively seek out conversations, and no one looks at her strangely, which is more than she can say after five years at Wool’s. Marge is a muggleborn as well, not that it matters— for all of Tom’s ‘worries’ no in Hufflepuff ever directly asks her about her blood, more interested in whether she’s going to see the first Quidditch match of the season and if she’s worried about their Charms essay.

Quidditch is something not even Tom is very familiar with, and Amy almost wishes Hufflepuff had Flying lessons with Slytherin, just so she could see his reaction to the notion of hopping on a broom and zooming away. He may have embraced everything else about the magical world with open arms, but she suspects even he has his limits. Amy, who has always wished to fly away, is much more susceptible to the idea, even if the idea of witches on brooms seems to go hand in hand with warty skin and taloned fingers.

“Up,” she says eagerly, when given the chance, and her worn school broom jumps into her outstretched hand immediately, to her delight and the envious looks of a few others. Learning how to hover takes a bit more patience, but by their second lesson she is one of the more confident flyers in the class, although she has to sit what equestrians would call ‘side-saddle’ due to her uniform skirt.

“They’ll give you trousers to wear if you try out for Quidditch next year,” Vera tells her afterwards, as they straggle up the grassy hill back to the castle. She gives Amy a look of delighted guilt; trousers, imagine that, could you? Amy is a little horrified and a little thrilled all at once. She’s always envied the boys for being able to run and climb without fear of their skirt hiking up or getting caught on something— how many times has Tom impatiently waited for her while she bemoaned a new tear in her stockings?

“Do they let girls try out?” she asks, glancing around at the boys, many of whom seem much more confident on brooms, all though all the muggle stories are about witches, not wizards.

“Hufflepuff does,” says Vera. “Simon says they can’t forbid anyone, but the Slytherin team almost never has girl players- and Gryffindor was all boys three years in a row until this year, he says. You know, the board of governors sometimes decides it’s unseemly and starts pressuring the headmaster to um- discourage witches from more masculine pursuits,” her voice goes high and breathy with unshed laughter.

Ruby snorts in an extremely unladylike fashion. “The top ranked Quidditch player in Madras State
is a woman—Kamala Kumar, seeker for the Vellore Velocities?” She frowns at their confused expressions. “Ack— I’m bringing my stats book back with me after the holidays. You don’t know what you’re missing! Here they make you stop a match after three days. Cowards.”

The first Quidditch match is Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw. Amy attends with Vera and Ruby, clutching Gryffindor pennants; Simon Goldstein is Gryffindor’s new keeper, and Sita Mishra, Ruby’s cousin, is the reserve seeker. To their collective disappointment, the match is short; Ravenclaw scores two goals over the course of thirty minutes, and Eleanor White, Ravenclaw’s seeker, comes away with the snitch. Amy doesn’t have binoculars and so can only really make out the goals, not much else, and the sky is too bright to squint at for long.

“Gryffindor’s been awful since Tim Weasley graduated,” Evie Bostwick grouses as they make their way down from the stands.

Amy doesn’t have much time to learn the ins and outs of Quidditch after that, since their amount of homework takes a dramatic uptick. She finds Charms and Herbology rather easy, once she gets the hang of her wandwork and avoiding all the potentially poisonous plants, Potions an enticing challenge, and Transfiguration torturous. Defence doesn’t necessarily come easy to her, but at least it’s interesting, and Astronomy she finds is a rather convenient time slot for perfecting the art of dozing off over her telescope.

But no one seems to be paying much attention in class during the last week of October, and Amy wonders at the constant chatter until she meets up with Tom for lunch on a Friday. “They’re celebrating Samhain early on Sunday,” he tells her, and when she frowns, clarifies, “All Hallow’s Eve. It’s Monday this year, but they’re doing a celebration the night before. The older students are allowed to go down to Hogsmeade and participate in the festival. The first and second years are having a bonfire in the clocktower courtyard. There’s going to be a big feast, too.”

Amy laughs at that; the whole thing seems rather silly, but some of the students seem to take it deadly seriously. She sees a few older girls crafting elaborate wooden masks in the common room, and more and more jack-o-lanterns seem to appear inside the castle by the day. The ghosts are far more animated than usual, and Peeves is in fine form, raining down moldy turnips on anyone who dares try to go up a certain stairwell.

She would have thought Tom would think the whole thing silly and rather spend the Sunday night studying; he certainly spends more time in the library over the course of a single week than she has the entire term; but to her surprise he is at the very front of the crowd of first and second years when Professor Witherspoon lights the bonfire. The massive pile of kindling and wood goes up with a rasping roar, and everyone draws back in collective delight. The flames seem ordinary red and orange at first, but soon mottle and change colors, turning blue, then green, then purple, as plumes of oddly sweet smelling smoke fill the darkening sky above them.

Someone is playing a fiddle, and a few girls link arms and dance around the fire, shrieking happily. A few prefects have volunteered to stay back to help distribute ‘soul cakes’, piping hot with apples or pears or plums, and Gladys Winston and Sarah McGill are singing a strange call and response song, faces flickering in the firelight. “Which heifer shall we kill? The little speckled heifer, the forequarter, we’ll put in the pot for you!”

Irene Greengrass joins in with them, in an uncharacteristic show of inter-house mingling; “I tasted the broth, I scalded my tongue, I ran to the well, and drank my fill! On my way back I met a witch cat!” Irene wheels so her skirt flares out, and points her wand at Geraldine Bulstrode, who rolls her eyes, but then calls out in a surprisingly sweet singing voice, “The cat began to grin, and I ran away—,”
“Oh, where did you run to?” Vera cries out from beside Amy, grinning widely, and Amy looks at her in wonder for a moment, sees the fire reflected in her hazel eyes.

“I RAN TO SCOTLAND!” the crowd screams back. There are a few beats of queer silence, and then Professor Witherspoon, still keeping careful watch on the bonfire, chants without turning away, “If you are going to give us anything, give it to us soon, or we’ll be away by the light of the moon.” At that everyone breaks into deafening cheers and applause, and Amy cheers with them, mindless of the fact that she knows none of this, only that she can feel the familiar electric sensation pickling on her skin, like she did in the wand shop. Everything just seems… stronger.

There is a faint crackling sound from the distance, and suddenly they all split off to run up to the ramparts. Amy pushes through the crowd and grabs Tom’s hand; he is still staring at the towering bonfire, not a blue so light it is almost an unholy white. “C’mon, let’s see,” she says, pulling at his arm, and after a moment he turns back to her and follows her up to the walls. There everyone stands on tiptoes and clambers practically atop one another to see the fireworks go off from the village, and all the fires burning in the hills.

A dragon made of sparks soars through the sky overhead with a frighteningly realistic growl, and in the distance Amy can just make out figures in the village. “What are they doing?” she asks Matthew Abbott, as Tom climbs up the stones to get a better look, face set in concentration. “Running between the fires,” Matthew says. “The ashes are supposed to be lucky if you get them on your clothes.”

“Amy, come here,” a pale hand is thrust in her face, and she unthinkingly grabs it, letting Tom haul her up to the perilous position beside him, clinging onto protruding stones in the ramparts. She keeps an iron grip on his forearm for balance, her fingers digging into his skin, but he doesn’t seem concerned, gazing out over the highlands below them, the wind ruffling his hair. It is ruffling hers too; she pushes a few locks out of her face and says hoarsely, “It’s so pretty.”

The last of the sunlight has vanished and the moon hangs low and heavy overhead. There is a sea of darkness laid out before them, with the only bright the points the winking fires, first red, then violet. There is more singing from the village, which has gone completely dark, even the lampposts extinguished, until one by one the houses brighten with torches from the fires, like constellations on the ground.

“You’d never see this in London,” Amy says breathlessly, loosening her grip on him a little, and is struck by the look he gives her then. It is almost fond, understanding, and she feels reassured, because despite the agreement to stay together, no matter what, she can’t help but feel more distant from him now, always surrounded as he is by that clique of Slytherin boys, ones from the ‘old families’, as Ruby says.

“Never,” he agrees, and then adds after a moment, “but you could, if there were more of us. It could be like this everywhere.”

“Sacrificing cows to banish evil?” she teases, but he doesn’t laugh, distracted by the fires once more.

A month later he tells her he is not returning to Wool’s for the Christmas holiday. Amy furrows her brow as she finishes her sketch of the stacks; they are sitting in a drafty corner of the library, the sky grey and grim outside the stained glass window, which makes the mahogany table turn a peculiar, sickly shade of green. “What do you mean, you’re not going?” she demands, then bites her lip in frustration when the tip of her pencil cracks. “You can’t just not come home.”

“Home?” he looks at with mirrored incredulity. “You think that’s home? Don’t be stupid. It’s
never been our home. They were glad to be rid of us.”

Of you, maybe, she thinks to herself, but doesn’t dare say it, not wanting a fight with him right now. “That’s not true. They’ve always been decent to us, even- even when we got into mischief,” she points out dutifully.

Truth be told, he has a point. She feels no fierce bond of family or even affection for Mrs. Cole or Miss Patrick or any of the workers at the orphanage. She doesn’t even miss it, exactly- not her little room or her hard bed or the leaky faucets- but she still feels bound to return. She has people she cares about there, like Helen and Doris and even little Bobby Faber. Besides, it feels somehow disingenuous to just shrug off the orphanage like an old coat she’s outgrown, as if it would be some denial of her roots. Why should she be ashamed? She’s not like him. She loves Hogwarts, how could she not, but that doesn’t mean she’s going to reject everything normal- everything muggle- in lieu of this new world.

“We’re allowed to stay here, if we like, with the professors, and that’s what we’re doing,” he says, returning to his book as if that settles it. As if he decides what she does anymore!

Amy huffs at him in disbelief. “I’m not. I’m taking the train back, Tom. What will- you care so much what people think, what will they say if you’re staying?”

“They’ll think that this is where I belong, far more than some- some prison like Wool’s,” he spits out at her, outraged at her refusal, and she narrows her eyes at him.

“It’s what you make it, isn’t it?” she snaps, gathering up her things.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he demands, looking alarmed at her willingness to exit this debate.

“It means you’re not going to bully or convince me into staying with you and moping around on Christmas, if that’s what you want,” she retorts, cheeks flushed red. “You know,” she adds viciously, “you can pretend you’re some perfect little Slytherin now, but we both know-,” then she cuts herself off, pressing her lips together at the look on his face.

“Know what?” he says in a deceptively quiet voice, and she shakes her head. “Forget it. Do what you like.”

She regrets it by the time she goes to bed that night, not because she’s come round to his logic but because she doesn’t want them to squabble like this before the break, and this will be the first time she misses his birthday, too. They have always stayed up until midnight together at Wool’s counting down the seconds to the new year, and every year she has been there to say, “Happy birthday, Tom, make a wish!” and make sure he does it, closes his eyes tightly and thinks of something he wants, before opening them again. She’s just not sure any of his wishes have ever come true.

So she passes him a note during Potions, and afterwards they find a deserted corridor to hash it out. “I’m going,” she says, “but I’ll be back on the first, you know, because classes start again on the second. So we can celebrate it then, right?”

“I don’t care about my birthday,” he says dismissively, but she frowns and prods at him. “Of course you do. We always do both our birthdays together, don’t we?” He has always managed to come up with a suitably clever gift for her, even at Wool’s, even if it wasn’t obtained in a strictly moral fashion. “I’m not going to forget yours,” she says, “alright?”
He does smile at that, and she smiles back, then grabs at his watch—she’s not sure where he got it, but it looks nearly new—to check the time. “I’ve got History of Magic in five minutes! But you’ll come see me off on the train, won’t you? Promise you will!” she threatens, and then takes off at a near run the instant he gives something resembling a nod.

And true to that, Tom does see her off, as snowflakes spiral down around them and she hops up onto the step of the compartment. “See you in two weeks,” she tells him, and almost asks if he’s not completely sure he wants to stay— he could still slip on the train with her, couldn’t he? But Tom just steps back as the whistle blows, and Amy sighs a little, then forces a bright smile. “Don’t spend all day in the library!” she commands him as the Hogwarts Express begins to slowly chug away. “Oh- you could go skating on the pond!”

She pulls a childish face at him, and sees him stifle a laugh, which is enough for her.

Much as she did on the way to Hogwarts, Amy sleeps most of the way back. Miss Patrick is there to meet her at the station, and only asks where Tom is after they are in the cab. When Amy tells her that he wanted to stay at school for the holidays, she can barely disguise her relief. Then she looks a bit embarrassed. “Oh, but it will be good to have you back,” she tells Amy, as the driver takes a corner a little too sharply. “I’m afraid we’re a right state, you see, with the new children- they’ve only been with us a week or so. You’re one of the older girls now, so you’ll have to help with the little ones a bit more, Amy-,”

“New children?” Amy asks. They do get a new orphan from time to time, but this—

Well, this is December of 1938, and the Kindertransport has begun. Kristallnacht had only the briefest of mentions in magical newspapers, and Amy does not have the money for a Daily Prophet subscription anyways. She knows very little of what is happening in Germany. But she knows enough when she returns to Wool’s, and sees the new faces there. There are eight of them, six from Germany and two from Austria, all Jewish. Only one or two can speak coherent English.

She is sharing a room with one of them, now. “Bianka,” the girl says; she is perhaps nine or ten. “Bianka Eisen.” That’s about all she can say, and “Dresden,” where she is from. Amy tries to ask her what happened to her parents, not understanding, but Bianka won’t or can’t talk about them, or much of anything, really. Mostly she sits on her bed and reads the same children’s chapter book, over and over again, sometimes aloud to herself.

The youngest of the Jewish children is Leo Kaufman, who is two or three. He wakes up at night sobbing and screaming for his mother, and the only one who can ever console him is his sister Sara, who he came over with. Amy gets up to get a drink of water once and finds them roaming the halls, Leo in his sister’s arms, as she paces up and down. She wants to say something, anything, really, but doesn’t know what. So she says nothing, and listens to the floorboards creak for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I don't really see how to write a HP fic set in the 1930s/1940s that does not at least reference the buildup and eventual war, so I will be trying my best to do my due diligence in terms of that, given how sensitive a subject it can be. I also don't necessarily want to write a WW2 historical fiction, so I'm going to try to balance between the reality of Amy's magical world and the muggle one. Kindertransport, in
case anyone was not aware, refers to the evacuation of Jewish children to England and other countries before the outbreak of the war.
“Quills down,” says Professor Merrythought, clapping her hands together briskly, and there is a
general sigh of relief as everyone stops writing. This is the very last exam of their first year, and
Amy is just as relieved as everyone else to be done with the Defence written. She doesn’t think she
messed up too badly, but she also hates multiple choice sections, so she tries not to think about,
leaning back in her hard chair instead and glancing around.

Tom sits diagonally and to the left of her, and from what she can see of his body language, doesn’t
appear worried in the slightest. She’s not surprised. Professor Merrythought says he’s a natural
when it comes to offensive magics, and she’s not one to praise readily. The truth is, Tom is most
every professor’s favorite pupil, from brisk Merrythought to effusive Witherspoon to jovial
Slughorn. His work is always exemplary, his marks are always top of the class, and he asks
interesting questions.

In fact, most everyone likes Tom in general, something that still surprises Amy. At Wool’s, the
only thing keeping him from being a complete and utter pariah had been her influence. She had
expected something similar here; that he’d be avoided, mistrusted. But it’s practically the opposite.
He’s one of the most popular Slytherins in his year, and even students from other houses seem to
like and admire him.

If anything, he’s blossomed at Hogwarts; she’s never heard him talk this much to other people in
her life. Other students gravitate to him, asking him for advice on assignments in the library, sitting
near him at lunch. When she walks around the castle with him after classes, at least two or three
people, usually other Slytherins, come over to say hello. Is it really him who’s changed, or just the
environment? Maybe he is right. He really does belong here, much more than anywhere else.

And she knows she should be happy for him. She is. She can be possessive, she knows, but she still
wants him to do well, wants him to be happy. That’s what friends want for each other, and they are
certainly more than just friends. He is the only person she has ever really considered her family,
regardless of blood. She knows him like the back of her hand, can read him better than anyone else
in her life. So if he is happy here, and people like him, and teachers constantly praise him, she is
glad. She should be glad.

But sometimes she sees the looks on Professor Dumbledore’s face, when Tom asks questions in
class, and it unnerves her. She can’t put a name to it. Recognition? But not of the pleasant kind. As
if he is seeing someone he knows, and does not like, or does not want to like. Maybe she’s reading
too much into it. It really isn’t her concern if he thinks Tom puts on an act. Tom does playact a bit,
at the perfect student, the concerned friend. He even playacts with her at times, and she him, they
both know it, to reassure one another, to make each other more comfortable.

“Papers up, please,” Merrythought says, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the growing
murmurs and whispers. “And quiet, ladies and gentlemen! The examination isn’t over until I have
everyone’s tests!” Amy hastily passes up her parchment, and then exhales, smiling breathlessly at
Marge when she turns round in her seat to smile at her and mouth ‘How was it?’

“Alright,” Amy whispers, then looking over at Vera, who seems a bit distressed, chewing on her
lower lip. In a back corner of the room Ruby is already fidgeting with her broken quill, which she accidentally snapped in half upon triumphantly finishing the essay portion with a flourish. Ruby has the most absurd cursive, big and loopy and elaborate, and is constantly being admonished over how difficult it is to read, but Amy quite likes it. It suits her; Ruby never does anything halfway.

Once Merrythought has everyone’s papers, she stacks them in a pristine pile atop her desk with a wave of her wand. “Thank you,” she says. “Now, a few reminders before you go- Mr. Avery, quiet, please! As I was saying, this marks the end of your examination period. You should receive your results by owl along with your supply list for the new school year in late July or early August. The train home departs at ten o’clock tomorrow morning, and your luggage should be packed by tonight, in order for the house elves to bring it down to the station. I wish you all a productive and pleasant summer holiday, and I shall see you all on September first. Dismissed.”

No sooner has she stopped talking then everyone has jumped up out of their sheets, pushing back chairs and making a beeline for the door. Amy joins the jostling crowd as they spill out into the hallway, and someone whoops, causing a surge of laughter and exclamations as everyone walks out into the afternoon sunshine.

“We’re done!” Ruby links arms with her happily, as Vera joins them as well, taking off her cardigan, the sun blazing overhead. “I can hardly believe it- question 35 was a real pain, don’t you think-”

“Oh, let’s not talk about it,” Vera moans. “I did horribly, I’m sure of it. Papa will be so disappointed- Defence is Simon’s best subject.”

“Well, you’re not Simon, are you?” Amy reasons. “Come on, Vera, you answered everything, didn’t you? You have to have gotten some points.”

“I should have studied more,” Vera frets, but lets it go as they walk out into the courtyard, where a fountain burbles merrily. Tom sits on the edge of it with Alexander Nott and Lyle Rosier, lounging like cats in the sun. Amy smiles in his direction, but he doesn’t notice her, explaining something to Nott, who is frowning. Rosier is watching a few older girls sitting in the shade, longingly.

“Rosier’s such a schmendrik,” Ruby pronounces, wrinkling her nose. Vera laughs at that. “That’s not how you say it, Ruby, it’s ch-men-drik, not shem-drik-,”

“Ah, but I was close, wasn’t I?” Ruby cackles and Amy laughs, waves them off as she walks over to Tom and his friends. If you can call them that. She’s never seen Alexander Nott so much as crack a smile, unless someone’s been injured in front of him. He frightens her a little, truth be told, although not as much as Reynard Lestrange, who most everyone agrees is truly sadistic. He got into a fistfight with a Gryffindor back in April and nearly split his head open on the stairs, laughing the whole while.

“Hello,” she says, and Nott’s lip curls slightly.

“Tom’s ball and chain is here,” Rosier tries at a joke, which falls flat when Tom’s dark-eyed gaze briefly darts over to him. “I mean- nothing,” he mutters, a bit nervously.

“D’you want to go for a walk after dinner?” she asks Tom.

“I’ve got plans tonight,” he says. She hates how he is, sometimes, around his housemates. Not quite cold, but almost… patronizing? She doesn’t know if that’s the word for it. He just acts differently, as if everyone’s watching him. Which, usually, they are, so maybe that’s the point. “I’ll see you on the train,” he reminds her, and she flushes, because she already knows that, it’s
“Well- alright then,” she nods amiably enough. “How did the exam go, d’you think?”

Tom does smile at that, the corners of his mouth quirking up into a thin curve. “Well, it was so easy even Rowle couldn’t have blown it.” Nott laughs harshly at that, and Rosier breaks into sniggers. Amy smiles a little herself; Henry Rowle has never been noted for his intelligence or his manners. Thick, is probably the word for it. Thick as an encyclopedia.

“What if you didn’t get a perfect score?” she teases. “Going to petition Merrythought? Like when Dumbledore marked you off one that one essay?”

His smiles vanishes as quickly as it appeared, and Nott and Rosier both shift uncomfortably, as if she’d just said something horrid. She’s embarrassed him in front of them, she realizes then, and he has them well trained never to make him look less than excellent, but she’s not on the leash, is she? And now he’s incensed. Still, he doesn’t redder or snap at her, only gives her a cool look. “Well, Dumbledore always has his favorites, and they’re always Gryffindors,” he says instead, entirely devoid of any emotion.

“Course,” says Amy. “Course he does, Tom. I’ll see you in the morning, then. Have a nice summer, Alexander, Lyle.” Neither of them say a word as she walks away. She tries to put it out of her head. They’re in different houses, run in different circles now. It’s always going to be a little awkward. That’s just the way things go.

She rejoins Vera and Ruby and the other Hufflepuffs, and goes down to lake to go wading for a while before they have to come back to the common room and pack. She already misses Hogwarts, and she hasn’t even left for the summer yet. Tom asked if they could stay over the holidays, because he had her wait outside for him while he asked Dippet himself, but the headmaster refused, of course.

It’s not as if all the professors stay here year-round, and Amy is unsettled by the idea of being here without any other students, anyways. That kind of solitude might not bother Tom, but it would her. What is Hogwarts without any students, anyways? Just an empty shell of an old castle, really.

So she’s not heartbroken at the thought of returning to Wool’s, even if it’s a good deal more crowded now. When she went home for Easter, there were four more Jewish children at Wool’s, three from Poland, one more from Austria. Mrs. Cole said they simply couldn’t afford to take any more in, that they were at maximum capacity. Amy wonders where the rest of them will go. To other orphanages and foster homes, she imagines, or out to farms in the countryside.

In their room, Vera plays music on the gramophone, waltzing around the room with her clothes as they pack, while Ruby plays the role of a strict French dance mistress, smacking her open palm with her wand. “More passion! Quickly now, Goldstein! Move those feet!”

Amy laughs and bounces up and down childishly on her bed, relishing its softness. She hopes they’re in the same room next year. Vera’s grey tabby Flossie lounges on her trunk, stretched out in a fading patch of dusky sunlight.

“I won’t be able to write you over the summer,” she tells them as they get ready for dinner. “The orphanage doesn’t allow owl mail, I don’t think.”

“I’ll be back to India anyways,” Ruby says. “Three of my cousins are getting married. It’s going to be a real spectacle, you know. I’ll try to take pictures.”
“It’s alright,” says Vera, then a little quieter, “My mother doesn’t really like owl mail much, anyways.”

“Your mother doesn’t like magic much, from the sound of it,” Ruby snorts, and then frowns when Vera freezes. “Oh, I didn’t mean- you know I didn’t mean it like that, Veri. Don’t be cross, please-”

“No,” Vera forces a small smile. “No, it’s fine. You’re right, she doesn’t. It makes her nervous. But that’s to be expected, I s’pose. Well. Miriam will be so pleased- she’s been really upset with both of us gone, and her the only one still home, you know.”

The final feast is enjoyable; Slytherin wins the House Cup, but Ravenclaw takes the Quidditch Cup, meaning half of the hall’s banners go midnight blue, the other half emerald green. Amy eats more than her fill, anticipating a summer of disappointing meals compared to this, and then sits back with a stomach ache and listens to everyone talk, trying to memorize the sound of people’s voices. The summer suddenly seems like an eternity stretched out in front of her. But she’s lucky in a way, she supposes. She’ll still have Tom.

So too does the train ride back seem to go quicker. She talks a little with Tom, but predictably falls asleep as soon as they’ve left the highlands, and when she wakes it is much later in the day, and she can see London’s smokestacks in the distance. Tom is not reading, but flipping through her sketchbook, which she left out on the seat. “You’re still a terribly rude boy, Tom Riddle,” she tells him sharply, grabbing at it, but he has paused on a drawing that makes her hesitate as well.

It is a profile of him from the side in the library, head bent over his work, a few locks of hair falling over his eyes. He needed a haircut when she drew it, she remembers. “You never draw yourself,” he says after a moment, closing the book abruptly. “Only other people and places.”

“I know what I look like,” Amy wonders while she feels so suddenly vulnerable, as if he saw something very private. For goodness sake, it was just a sketch of him. “I can’t learn anything by only paying attention to me.”

He stares at her for a second, and then hands her back her sketchbook. “I suppose not.”

The unspoken question, they both know, is what has she learned from a year of drawing him?

Chapter End Notes

Anyone familiar with history knows that there are some very big things on the horizon for September 1st, 1939, besides a return to Hogwarts. In terms of tone, I would say this is the last, or one of the last, truly ‘childish’ chapters, since Amy is going to be forced to grow up very quickly very soon.
1939

Amy is on her hands and knees looking for her missing shoe on the morning of September first. Squinting into the dusty dark beneath her bed, she finally notices her leather loafer wedged under the radiator. Groaning, she wriggles under the bed to get it, just as Bianka comes back into the room.

“Are you alright?” Her English has gotten much better, although her accent is still quite thick. Amy gives a muffled assent as she grabs the shoe and rolls back out. Luckily she’s not changing into her uniform until the train, because now she’s covered in dust bunnies. “Lost my shoe.” She holds it up for Bianka to see with a slight smile.

They’ve only really had the past two months of summer to get to know one another, but she likes the German girl well enough. Bianka didn’t ask any questions when an owl appeared at Amy’s window a month ago, carrying her supply list, and she hasn’t asked about Amy’s odd textbooks either.

Bianka smiles hesitantly back at her, then sits down on the bed, unfolding the newspaper in her hand. Her smile vanishes as she takes in the front page. Amy only notices out of the corner of her eye, as she puts on her shoe and adjusts her skirt. “Is something wrong, Bianka?”

She steps over to peer over her shoulder. GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN POLAND, WARSAW BOMBED, MANY REPORTED KILLED. OPERATIONS ON ENTIRE POLISH FRONT, HITLER TELLS ITALY, ‘WE’LL DO IT OURSELVES’, POLAND INVOKES TREATY.

“Oh,” says Amy. She quickly scans the article below. “Local authorities have been instructed to put the air-raid warning system into full operation… The King, at a meeting of the Privy Council today, signed an order ordering complete mobilisation of the Army and Air Force…,” she trails off at the look on Bianka’s face.

“Oh- don’t worry,” Amy says, forcing a smile. “It’s- we’re nowhere near Poland. They’re not… Everything will be fine, Bianka.”

Bianka does not smile back, only puts the paper down on her bedside table. Her hands are shaking in her lap.

“I’m sure they’d tell us more if there was anything to worry about,” Amy assures her, but the words sound hollow even to her.

“Amy,” comes Tom’s familiar sharp tone. She turns quickly, and Bianka shrinks into herself. He’s standing impatiently at the doorway with his suitcase in tow, shifting from one foot to another. “We’re really going to be late. Come on.”

“I- alright, I’m coming,” she says hastily. She casts one last glance at Bianka, who is staring at the floor. “See you in December, Bianka.” Bianka nods listlessly, and then Amy shrugs on her coat, grabs her hat and gloves, and takes up her suitcase, following Tom out of the room and down the hall and stairs.
“You’ve got lint in your hair,” Tom informs her as she runs her fingers through it self consciously.

“Thanks,” Amy mutters, shaking out her mussed bob before putting on her hat. Tom is already in his uniform, although not his robes. He straightens the knot of his tie before she bats his hands away and fixes it for him. “There. Perfect.” He gives her the barest hint of a smile before Mrs. Cole is upon them, urging them out the door- their cab is already waiting.

“Did you see the paper?” she asks him in a hushed tone once they’re on their way, the driver taking a hard turn that makes them jostle together.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s to be war, then.”

Amy stares at him. “You think-,”

“Obviously,” Tom brushes her off. “Parliament won’t stand for it.”

“But-,” Amy has grown up in the lingering aftermath of the Great War, the war to end all wars. That’s what everyone has always said. That there’d never be another. Of course, over the past few years, no one’s been saying that anymore, far from it, but still- Hitler and his Nazi party always seemed like such a foreign concept, a terrible thing happening far, far away.

“But we’ll be alright,” she says. “Won’t we? I mean, they’re not going to attack Britain.”

“We’ll be fine,” Tom seems a bit bemused. “Hogwarts’ not on any German’s map, is it? Neither is the rest of our world.”

“Tom,” she snaps, gesturing at the streets of London blurring outside the cab window. “This is our world!”

“You can tell yourself that, if you like,” he shrugs. “But they don’t want us anymore than we want them.”

Platform 9 and ¾ is as happily oblivious as it was the year before. Amy looks around at the smiling faces and laughing children, and Bianka’s blank, horrified expression lingers in her mind. She tries to push it aside. Tom is right, in a sense. She has nothing to fear at Hogwarts. But everyone else at Wool’s- well, they’ll be alright. They will. It’s not as if Hitler’s going to wash up in London harbor with all his men.

She talks about happier things on the train with Tom. They’re both glad to be second years, no longer the babies of the school, and it’s true, twelve somehow seems much older than eleven. Of course, Tom will be thirteen in December, and then she’ll never hear the end of it; she’s never met someone so eager to grow up as him. Amy doesn’t think she’ll mind being a ‘young lady’ rather than a little girl, but part of her is wistful for her younger days. Things seemed much simpler.

“I think I’m going to try out for Quidditch this season,” she tells him, as she shades in an outline of the green fields they are passing by. “Second years make the team sometimes, Matthew says.”

“Matthew who?” he asks, looking up from his book.

“Abbott,” she smiles. “He’s really nice.”

Tom gives her a look that suggests he is inclined to disagree. “You’re going to try out,” he says doubtfully.

“What?” Amy folds her arms across her chest. “You don’t think I could do it? I’m a good flyer,
“Any halfway decent witch is a good flyer,” he returns to his reading, although she can tell he is still listening.

“So what’s the matter, then?” she huffs. “I could fly circles around you, Tom Riddle. Easy.”

“You’re a small girl,” he says as if it should be obvious. “You’re not worried about going out there and getting pummeled out of the sky?”

“Oh, and you, the big strong man,” she retorts fiercely, narrowing her eyes at him. Someone certainly has a superiority complex now that he’s got two inches in height on her, she thinks critically. “Don’t be so old-fashioned. Loads of girls play.” Alright, that might be a slight exaggeration. But some do! And she’s going to be one of them.

“No girls in Slytherin play,” he mutters.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not in Slytherin, isn’t it?” she mocks. “Mind you, even if I was, I’d still try out. They couldn’t stop me.”

“I think you just like being stubborn,” he comments, turning a page lazily.

“I think you just like being negative,” she snaps back. “Honestly, Tom. It’s almost a new decade, you know. Things are changing.”

“Oh, I know they are,” he says drolly.

There’s a commotion in the train corridor as they approach Hogsmeade. Amy has just come back from changing when she stumbles upon a crowd in the corridor. “Back to your compartments, everyone,” a prefect is snapping in exasperation. “No need to stand out here and speculate- come on, get moving!”

She elbows her way through the murmuring crowd and back into the compartment she and Tom share. He has a freshly acquired edition of the Daily Prophet in his hands. “You know, it updates in real time with the news,” he says, as he scans the front page, where images and faces are blurring at a rapid pace, entire new typed paragraphs appearing, like a film.

“What’s happened?” she asks, suddenly nervous.

“Grindelwald’s struck Florence.”

Grindelwald, much like Hitler, has been a frightening snippet here and there for Amy, nothing more. She doesn’t keep up with magical news, not really. The revelation that were dark sorcerers and enchantresses seemed par for the course. But the idea that this could be national news, on the same level as a muggle war-

**VESPUCCI TWINS MURDERED BY GRINDELWALD’S DARK FORCES**, the Prophet’s headlines blaze. **INSTALLS GIOTTO ACCURSIO, WANTED BY THE BRITISH, ITALIAN, AND FRENCH MAGICAL MINISTRIES FOR MULTIPLE COUNTS OF MURDER, TORTURE, AND BLACKMAIL, IN HIS STEAD. FLORENCE QUAILS UNDER SHADOW OF DARK MAGIC, BODIES IN STREETS**-

The headlines repeat themselves on loop indefinitely.

“Magical Italy is eating itself alive from the inside out,” says Tom. “All the European magical
governments are already on edge, what with Germany’s invasions. They’re worried about potential breaches, you see. Wizards interfering in the war, or muggles somehow discovering us. And now Grindelwald practically exposes magical Florence in one night, topples the Vespuccis, who’ve had total control of the magical districts of the city since the 1300s. Controversial, both of them.”

The faces of the dead flash across the front page; a man and woman, hanging upside down as though levitating. “Fausta Vespucci’s muggle lover slain alongside her, Amy reads the caption slowly. “Fulvio Vespucci’s sons found dead, wife missing- This is horrible,” she breaks off in disgust.

Tom shrugs, folding the paper up neatly. “It’s war. And they’re winning.”

“Someone will stop him,” Amy says, trying to reassure herself more than him. “They have to.”

“Grindelwald doesn’t need an army or tanks or planes to get to England,” Tom looks as though he might say more, but the train is already slowing down. They file out into the corridor, just as they did the year before, and Amy looks around for familiar faces as everyone exits the train. But she only catches a glimpse of Joe Fair talking to some friend from Gryffindor, and Abraxas Malfoy walking with Alphard Black.

They are on their way to the carriages when they pass by a group of older boys, grouped under a street lamp, it’s shadows spilling around them. “-muggle loving whore got what she deserved,” the oldest of them is saying, newspaper in hand. Another, younger boy chuckles as he shrugs on his robes, then catches sight of Tom. Amy vaguely recognizes him. He is a year above them, she thinks.

“Riddle,” he nods as they walk past, and Amy physically cringes.

“Mulciber,” Tom replies evenly, nodding in return. Mulciber’s gaze slides over Amy, and she quickly looks away. She can feel his smile on the back of her neck.

“I don’t like him,” she tells Tom as they approach a carriage. “He- did you see how he was laughing?”

“His family’s incredibly wealthy,” says Tom. “He’s got a great uncle in the Wizengamot, and his father’s a famous cursebreaker. His mother’s a Black.”

“What does that matter?” Amy mutters. “He seems horrid. You’re not friends with him, are you?” They reach the nearest carriage, and she promptly slips on the step up to it. Tom catches her by the elbows.

“Watch your step,” he says curtly, helping her up in front of him. She holds the door open for him as he climbs in after her, then shuts it.

“It’s not so simple as not being friends or being friends with people,” Tom says, while Amy is distracted by the thought that the carriage, which isn’t pulled by anything, seems to be rattling forward of its own accord. “It’s not like Hufflepuff.”

“You don’t even know what Hufflepuff is like,” she says, resting her forehead against the cold glass of the small window.

“I don’t,” he allows. “But I know what you’re like.”

She doesn’t often think about him knowing her, only her knowing him. But she supposes it goes both ways. They both see sides of each other that they’d prefer to keep hidden. Tom hardly has a
monopoly on that. It’s both comforting and disconcerting. What does he say about her, to his friends? Does he mention her at all? Is she the example of a Hufflepuff to him, as he is the standard for Slytherin to her? That would make them both incredibly biased, but who isn’t? She burrows into her robes and watches his pale face in the dark, as he looks back at her steadily.

“We’re going to have a good year,” she tells him, like a promise. “No matter what.”

“When is that not the plan?” he arches an eyebrow at her, and in spite of all her swirling worries, she laughs.

Chapter End Notes

The headlines about Poland that Amy reads are from actual British newspapers at the time. This chapter was intended to cover more ground, but I decided to split it in half. After all, we’re about to deal with everyone’s favorite sport.
Amy spends a terribly long time getting ready for Quidditch tryouts, mostly, she will admit, due to the trousers. She tucks them dutifully into her boots, and tugs her borrowed jersey down as far as it will go, trying to pretend it is a dress, but she still looks odd in the mirror. She stares at her legs and hips, trying to will her vision to get used to it.

At the very least, she consoles herself, there really isn’t much to see. Miss Patrick says she’s a late bloomer, which is probably considered a good thing because she hasn’t had a major growth spurt yet, and thus doesn’t require a whole new wardrobe. Not that she will ever get one; it will be hand-me-downs from the older girls, what little they can spare.

When she finally turns to go, steeling herself and picking up her school broom, she almost walks right into Patsy Sampson, who she is surprised to see trying out. She didn’t even know Patsy liked Quidditch. She always seemed so… unassuming. Patsy is even smaller than Amy, and skin and bones, with a head of carotty curls and almost elfin ears. She ducks her head awkwardly upon making eye contact with Amy, who smiles.

“The trousers are strange, right?”

“My brother let me borrow his to practice over the summer,” Patsy squeaks, and then brushes past her.

Outside it is a nippy but sunny late September afternoon. The Hufflepuff team and the new prospects are grouped around in a haphazard huddle, chatting and stretching out. Two boys are flying laps around the pitch. Three weeks ago, Britain declared war on Germany. The Daily Prophet seems more concerned with the ongoing battle between Grindelwald’s forces and the Italian Ministry of Magic in Florence.

Amy stands with a few of the hopeful second years trying out, which includes Matthew Abbott, Joe Fair, and Patsy. “I’m going for keeper for sure,” Matthew says, straddling his broom. “Ralph Hickman’s a fifth year, and if I can make reserve, I’ll be first string in three years.”

“Keepers don’t see any action,” grouses Joe. “You’d be better off trying for beater.”

As the two of them squabble, Amy glances over at Patsy, who reddens but says softly, “I’m going out for seeker, like my father.”

“Chaser for me, I think,” says Amy; she’s read up on the different positions, and it just seems like the most fun, if she’s being honest.

A sharp blast of the whistle distracts her. “Alright, shut up and gather round!” the captain, a blustery blonde boy the name of Diggory, demands. “We haven’t got all day- Ravenclaw gets the pitch at three o’clock, need I remind you-,” There are a few good-natured boos and hisses. “But it doesn’t matter, because we’re going to flatten them this year,” he continues heartily. One of the two older girls on the team claps in appreciation. “Thank you, Luce.”

“Anyways, let’s start the scrimmage; Hickman, get in the left goal, Abbott in the right. Carter, Fair, over with me for target practice; I’m not dragging anyone down to the infirmary for a bloody tryout. Eddie, show Sampson the ropes with the snitch, have her catch and release with you for now. Everyone trying out for chaser, divide into two teams- Lucy, go on, set up the quaffle-,”
Lucille Wilson keeps a firm hold on the scarlet ball as she hovers in the air. “First come first serve,” she tells the underclassmen, and then launches it up into the air; it soars faster than gravity would seem to dictate. Amy kicks off, and after a split second of hesitation, shoots after it, a bespectacled boy from the opposing scrimmage team doing similarly.

She’s flown before, of course, but never like this, and for an instant she’s frozen with terror, clinging onto her broom for dear life as she rockets up into the air, but then it passes and- she’s flying, she really is, and it’s better than anything she’s ever experienced, it’s like- she doesn’t know what it’s like, but suddenly she’s hundreds of feet off the ground, and the quaffle is just above her.

The other boy is just a few feet below, a grasping hand already outstretched. Amy reaches out and snags it first, tucking it under her arm, and is breathless with excitement for a moment until she realizes he is going to try to steal it from her. “BENSON, GET A MOVE ON!” someone bellows, and Amy locks her legs around the broom and twirls away, the ground shifting in a green blur far below her, wind pummeling at her face, but her grip on the quaffle firm.

She nearly makes it to the goal posts, too, before another boy who she didn’t see coming manages to knock the quaffle loose and steal it away, and then she is forced to whip around in midair, her steering still clunky until she realizes that if she flattens herself and stops fighting the broom, she can-

And then she isn’t really thinking at all anymore, because she’s flying, it’s incredible, it’s like something out of a dream, because how can this be real? Her stomach works itself up into joyful knots and unravels just as easily. Sweat beads slick across her brow and the back of her neck but she doesn’t mind. If she liked, she could just fly away. Fly back to London, fly to Cornwall to see the sea, fly to Ireland, fly across the Channel to France, fly to America– She could go anywhere, see anything. It makes her want to cry, almost, not because she’s going to do any of that, but because she could. But there’s still the game to consider, and the quaffle continuously slipping into and out of her grasp.

In the end, Diggory’s whistle blasts again, and she’s back on the ground, slightly wobbly and dizzy, but grinning like a madman. “Good game up there,” Matthew tells her, with that serious look boys get when they really mean a compliment, as if they are a little surprised at themselves. “I saw you- you’re a natural dodger.”

Amy flushes bright pink in delight, but doesn’t have much time to say anything, since Diggory launches into another spiel about what they could improve on, and how the tryout results will be posted in the common room tomorrow night. “Good work, everyone,” he ends on, and makes them all lock arms and shout something about the might of badgers before they leave. Amy heads back to the locker room with Patsy and the other girls, suddenly aware of how every muscle in her body seems to be aching, even ones she didn’t know existed.

She decides to take a shower, and is changing back into her regular clothes when she catches snippets of an argument from just outside. She pauses with only one sock on, and listens, straining her ears to hear. Eddie Ryan, whose Christian name is Edna but who despises it, is having a furious row with a boy who must be her beau. Amy knows it’s rude to eavesdrop, but she can hardly walk out of the locker room with the two of them shouting at each other, knowing she’s heard everything.

“I don’t care,” Eddie is saying, “I don’t care, if you go, I’m going.”

“It’s not much of a choice,” he snaps, and Amy realizes this is not a mundane squabble, because they are lashing one another with their words, the way she and Tom sometimes do, when you want to hurt someone so badly that you pause for heated emphasis and let the syllables sting your lips.
“But you want to!”

“Of course I want to, what kind of bloke wouldn’t fight for his country-,”

“It’s not your war-,”

“Parliament says it is, Eddie! I’m on the bloody list, aren’t I? I’m eighteen next month, and if you think I’m going to hide out like some coward-,”

“You want to get yourself killed?” she demands shrilly, and not in an amusing, girlish way, but in the shrill crackling of someone nearly a woman, like glass or fine china being crushed underfoot, or even worse, that dreadful kind of radio static that seems to never end. “Don’t be stupid, Jim-,”

“I’m being practical! You think the Ministry is going to hand out memory charms to every lad up for conscription so we can dodge the draft? You think they even care, so long as their Sacred Twenty Eight aren’t called up?” This last bit is spat out with particular bile, and though Amy does not know who the Sacred Twenty Eight are, she imagines some sort of rotted, bloating carcass, glistening wetly in the sunlight.

There is a long, horrible silence, and then Eddie says, ‘Fine. You’re so bloody determined- I’m going too. I’ll join the Women’s Auxiliary.”

“Eddie, you can’t;” he sounds almost frightened. No, he is frightened. His voice goes up slightly, wavers. “Don’t be foolish, come on-,”

“I will, I’m of age, you can’t stop me,” she retorts, although it is more of a choked hiss, as if she were fighting to break free of something. “Or the Nursing Service-they’ll take any girl with two working hands and legs. My mother’s a muggle, they’ve got my records. I’ll go.”

“You’re trying to punish me-,” he starts in, furiously, woundedly, and they begin yelling again, before it peters off into silence. Amy waits, and waits, but there’s no more sounds of conversation. Finally, she finishes dressing and cautiously walks out, looking around. Eddie and her Jim have migrated a short distance away, under the towering wooden stands. He has his head in his hands; he is crying, both of them facing away from her, and she has her arms wrapped around him tightly, her chin resting on his back as he shudders.

Amy walks back to the castle, unsettled. If the war is still going on in five years, she thinks, Tom will be turning eighteen, and up for conscription. He’s from a muggle background. Wool’s has records for him, he must be registered with the government somewhere. And they could conscript women, she thinks, not to fight, of course, but to do other things, serve as nurses and mechanics. If he was called up, would she follow him? She thinks she would, but not just because of him or even the war itself but because the thought of being made to wait and wait for years seems too awful to consider.

But she forces herself to think of other, calmer things. The war is not going to last five years. There’s no sense in worrying about something like that.

In the warmth and humidity of the Hufflepuff common room, she regales Ruby and Vera with the events of the tryouts, and does not realize how ravenously hungry she is until Vera pokes fun at her snarling stomach. They hurry down for early supper, then, spilling into the Great Hall with a crowd of Ravenclaws, fresh from their own tryouts and smelling of grass and mud. Amy feels the soreness in her arms when she ladles soup into her bowl, and rubs at her shoulders and the crooks of her elbows while Ruby passes around pictures from the Madras weddings, one Christian, one
“My mother has a hope chest for me,” says Vera thoughtfully, around a mouthful of bread. “But she’s going to start dividing it between me and Miriam, we haven’t got money to start up another.”

“How horrible,” says Ruby, eyes alight with indignation. “You’ll simply have to get married straight out of school, it’s the only thing for it- yes, it is-,” she hits Vera with her napkin as Vera cringes away, giggling. Amy laughs with them, although her mind is still fluttering with thoughts of Quidditch, and she sleeps restlessly that night, dreaming she is flying once more, only this time she really does fly away, until she reaches the sea, where a perilous storm is raging, and the waves crash grey against the cliffs. She can feel the spray on her face, until she wakes and realizes her eyes had simply been watering in her sleep.

The next evening, she pretends to do homework on one of the plump sofas in the common room, but really waits like a dog by the door for the team to be posted. Finally, after the sky has gone to burnt umber and the brass lamps have all flickered on, one by one, and the plants on the ceiling have stopped singing, Diggory emerges with the list in hand, marching over to the board, and pinning it there with an enthusiastic jab of a tack. Amy springs off the sofa, books and parchment scattering, and she is not the only one-

A small crowd swarms around the board, and she is incensed and at the back, unable to see, until Matthew makes space for her in front of him, and she worms in place to see- CHASERS, FIRST RESERVE- AMY BENSON. She jolts with happiness, and backs up into Matthew, who has made reserve keeper, not that anyone else wanted the position, but who congratulates her soundly all the same. Were she another boy, she thinks he would have wrapped an arm round her shoulders or hit her giddily, but instead he smiles and gives her a nod of recognition.

She wants to celebrate, of course, but Vera and Ruby are both away; Ruby to the greenhouses to make up a test she missed last week, and Vera to the owlery with her brother, to mail off letters home. Amy is friends with Matthew and Joe and even little Patsy, who did make reserve seeker, after all, but not yet enough to gather round with them and flatter each other. Instead she pulls on her wrinkled blazer and sets off to find Tom, not because she thinks he will flatter her much, but so she can rub her success in his face.

She finds him, of course, in the library, which is due to close in an hour, and thus seems all the more cold. He usually sits in the same spot, always by a window, and there she finds him, bent over a leathery book. With a swish and flick she levitates it five, no, ten feet above his head, and slams her palms down on the table, hard enough that they smart happily. “First reserve,” she informs him, with unusual relish.

Tom wordlessly snarls at her, and his book comes sinking back down to him; he barely has to flick his wand at all. He excels in Charms but is rather lazy with them, always doing the bare minimum, because he says the class is dull. “I was reading that,” he tells her coldly, but she knows he is not truly upset, because there is a particular gleam in his dark eyes. He has gotten something he wanted, and she does not think it is the news of her having made the Quidditch team reserves.

Amy sits down across from him. “What is it?”

“A book of old school records,” he flips through a few pages, and then turns it around so she can read it, a finger resting on one name in particular. MARVOLO GAUNT- SLYTHERIN, ATTEN. 1886-1893. It is one name in a long list of many former Slytherins. Amy has never met any Gaunts before, but she recognizes the Marvolo. Tom has never liked his middle name much more than his first name, but at least it is something interesting. Amy’s middle name is Cora. She did not find out until she saw a form listing it when she was nine, and she has never thought much of it.
“Is he related to you?” she asks, slowly. “Is he related to the Riddles?”

Tom’s lips press together, and then he says, “I think he’s my grandfather.”

“Oh,” she says, not seeing the allure of it- everyone has a grandfather. She supposes he is thrilled to have evidence, however mild, that one of his relatives attended Hogwarts, had magic. She doubts one would find any Bensons in the records book. “That’s good, then. You always said-,” she hesitates, “well, you didn’t want to be the first in your family.”

“Of course I wasn’t,” he takes the book away, closes it almost reverently. “I can’t have been.” He smiles at her, and she thinks this is the happiest she has seen him since they set foot in Hogwarts again on September first.

“Then I’m happy for you,” Amy shoots him a meaningful look, and he stares, then says as if on cue, “Congratulations on making reserve. I knew you could do it.”

“Liar,” she says. “Now you’ll have to come to all my games, and cheer for Hufflepuff. See how Malfoy likes that,” her mouth twists up into a self-satisfied smirk.

“I’ll watch for you, not your house;” he scoffs, but they both leave the library unreasonably proud of themselves.
“You know I hate surprises,” Amy says, eyes shut so tight she is seeing little specks of stars. She digs her fingers into Tom’s shoulders as she plods after him, relying (hoping) he is actually guiding her. “You’ve always known I hate surprises. You’ve never given me one good surprise, not once. Always bad. It’s always something bad. In fact-,”

“Please be quiet,” says Tom, although his tone is more of a demand than a request. “It’s difficult to surprise someone who’s babbling like a hysterical.”

“Vera thinks men invented hysteria so they could shut women up in asylums,” Amy tells him, still closing her eyes. “You know what? I think I agree with her. It sounds like something men would do.”

“Vera’s raging Electra complex doesn’t bode well for her and any men,” Tom mutters. Amy has no idea what an Electra complex is, or how Tom would know whether Vera, who he’s spoken to perhaps once in the past two years, has one, so instead she pinches the back of his neck, or where she thinks his neck is. He flinches and then reaches back and grabs both her hands too tightly, yanking her stumbling form in front of him. “Fine. We’ll do it this way.”

“It’s my birthday, you beast,” Amy grouses, as he puts his hands on her shoulders, steering her around what she thinks is a corner. “I was expecting cake. My thirteenth birthday! That’s the second most special, after ten, and you’re manhandling me down some forbidden corridor like- I don’t know what like, but it doesn’t feel very special.”

“If you don’t give me my surprise soon, I’m going to open my eyes so I can hit you properly,” she threatens, and then her feet hit what must be the beginning of stairs, and she squawks, almost tripping. Tom rights her, and before she can open her eyes, claps a hand over them. “There’s sixteen steps. Winding. Please don’t make me carry you, you’re heavy.”

Sh elbows him in the stomach in retaliation, and beams blindly when he wheezes slightly. “Sorry! Can’t see, you know.” She gingerly picks her way up the stairs ahead of him, until they reach what must be the top. She can hear distant sounds. Voices? Are they outside a classroom? “It’s not a party, is it?” she groans. “Please don’t tell me you planned a party, it will just be us and a bunch of Slytherins, I don’t want to see Nott on my birthday-,”

“I didn’t plan a party,” he sneers, “that’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever- anyway, be quiet. I mean it. You can’t talk at all, because we’re not supposed to be here.”

She yanks at his arm. “So you’re landing us both in detention for my birthday? Splendid.” But she presses her lips together as she brushes past her to push something open- a door? It creaks slightly, and the sounds are louder. Lots of voices, echoing, but… below them? They step through the door and she reaches out and brushes what feels like a bannister or railing. The voices must be below them. Are they on a landing of some kind? A balcony? Looking out a window?

He removes his hand from her eyes and she blinks, adjusting to the light and the dust motes
dancing around them. They’re in the upper gallery of a long, narrow room, almost like a chapel. She’s never been in here before. Below them, dozens of upperclassmen mill about, surrounding a long, vertical wooden stage that covers the entire floor length. There are high windows up above them, streaming in spring sunshine. In their balcony space, the only company is a stack of old chairs and desks.

“What is this?” asks Amy, already smiling, because she can tell they’re not supposed to be here, and that she’s going to like whatever’s happening here.

“The dueling gallery,” says Tom, just a bit smugly, seeing her delight. “Merrythought’s started up Dueling Club again. She told me about this, if I ever wanted to come and watch. They don’t allow anyone below third year, but…,” he trails off with a small, satisfied shrug.

“Teacher’s pet,” Amy accuses in a whispered hiss. “You think you’ve got them all wrapped around your finger, don’t you?” But her smile broadens to a grin. “You brought me up here to see? Oh,” she forgets to keep her voice down and embraces him enthusiastically, throwing them both off balance. He nearly staggers and falls, but grabs onto a chair at the last moment, shaking her off.

“Quiet,” he mouths, and Amy restrains herself, instead smoothing down her dress. It is borrowed from Ruby, who thinks everyone should have something really nice to wear on their birthday, particularly when one’s birthday is on a Friday this year and classes ended for the day at two. Amy even put on nail varnish last night, although you can barely tell. Her shoes are still old and scuffed, but she doesn’t care.

Ruby’s dress has a baby blue blouse and a dark blue skirt, a matching bow at the collar and pearly buttons. There’s even a belt with a metal buckle round the waist. Straight from the catalogues. She feels pretty, brand new in a way she never has before. Thirteen seems so old. Practically grown up. She’s grown two inches since the summer and she started her ‘monthly friend’ over the winter break. Or being ‘indisposed’. Whatever they call it. She thinks they ought to have called it something a bit earlier, because she thought she was dying until Doris explained.

The point remains, Tom is a boy and a bit stupid because of it, no matter what he says, and thirteen is a very big deal. She’s not a little girl anymore, officially. She plays with the bow at her collar as she peers down at the lower gallery with Tom. This is likely just as much a gift for himself as it is for her, but she’s still touched that he thought to bring her, include her. It would be like him to secret something like this away for himself, but he shared it instead. She’s never seen a real duel before, only people jinxing and hexing each other in the halls, and once at the last quidditch game between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, when there was a fight in the stands.

Eventually they quiet down as Professor Merrythought clambers atop the stage, lifting her robes, and claps her hands together. “Right, then. This will be the Spring Exhibition, as you all know- so a welcome for June and Michael, please!” A boy in a Gryffindor tie and a girl Amy recognizes as a Slytherin- she’s seen her at Tom’s table before, take up opposite ends of the stage, with Merrythought in the middle. They both appear to be at least sixth years, if not seventh years.

“All we’ll duel for wands,” Merrythought declares, and looks between the two of them, both straight-faced. June is wearing trousers, something most of the boys seem very aware of, and most of the girls seem very envious of. Michael shrugs off his blazer and rolls up his shirt sleeves, exposing pale forearms. He has a birthmark on one wrist, Amy can tell from above. June pulls her hair back, away from her face. She has beautiful hair, Amy thinks, rich auburn.

There’s a general buzz of approval from Michael’s end; he seems popular. She catches something- “...not going to be much of a duel,” one boy is snickering, reaching up to slap Michael’s shiny black shoes. He glances down and smirks. June adjusts her stance at the other end, frame loose and
limber. She rolls her shoulders like a prize fighter about to enter the ring.

“Merrythought pushed for coed dueling when she first started teaching here,” Tom murmurs to her. “She says it’s only sensible, with what goes on in the real world.”

“So I could duel you,” Amy turns to raise her eyebrows at him. He rolls his eyes. “Badly.”

Merrythought has stepped off the stage, and Michael and June bow to one another.

“Avis,” says Michael quite casually, and a flurry of small sparrows explode from the end of his wand, rising up in the air in a triangular formation. Amy gasps in amazement, and Tom leans forward with interest, legs brushing hers. The sparrows hover for a moment, chirping, and then descend upon June.

“Gravitas Penna!” she ducks to avoid them, and then they go floating helplessly out of the way wings beating ineffectively, as if gravity has been stripped away.

Michael advances on her, the sunlight shining on his blonde hair. “Flipendo,” he flicks his wand and she scrambles backwards. “Locomotor.” The spell misses her by inches; Amy can see the way it ruffles her hair.

“Petrificus Totalus!” June rejoins, and he shields against it at the last second, his “Protego!” wavering in the air before dissipating.

“Rictumsempra!” he doubles over with howls of laughter, just unnatural enough to set Amy’s hair on edge, but recovers quickly, as June tries to force him back a few paces. “Vox Dementis!” Now she shields against his spell, and Michael reddens. Amy suspects this duel has not been as short as he had predicted.

“Everte Statum!” June gives a pained yelp and is knocked backwards, landing hard on the stage, the wind knocked out of her. The audience of students gasps.

“C’mon, go easy on the girl-,” a boy calls out, and that spurs June up onto her feet; she rolls neatly out of the way of his next hex, and her “Relashio!” makes him momentarily drop his wand, although he manages to catch it before it hits the floor.

“Obscuro!” She rips the blindfold off just in time.

“Silencio!” He dodges as it shoots overhead.

“Incarcerous!” Ropes conjured out of thin air snag her by the wrists, dragging her down to the floor. June struggles valiantly to keep a hold on her wand, arms shaking with effort. Michael preens for the onlooking crowd of his mates and approaches triumphantly. “Come on, let’s have a graceful surrender, Junie. Yield.”

“Not- a chance- in hell-,” she snaps, straining to break free.

Amy glances down at Merrythought, who remains where she is, expression unreadable. Tom is tense with anticipation beside her.

“To be honest,” Michael is right in front of her now, smiling down with a patronizing tilt of his head, “You don’t have much of a chance, well, anywhere. Make this easy, alright? I really don’t want to hurt a girl. Even a Slytherin. Not very chivalrous, you know.”

June glares at him, still struggling to get up, then sags in defeat, her arms reddened from the ropes.
“Alright.” She hangs her head in apparent embarrassment. Her grip on her wand loosens.

“You yield,” says Michael eagerly, as if expecting her to repeat after him. He crouches down to take her wand, almost gallantly.

Moron, Amy thinks.

“Yes, I- Descendo!” June jabs her wand at him, and the wood of the stage crunches underneath as his body weight slams through it. She has quite literally descended him. Her ropes dissipate, and she stands up, rubbing at her arms, and kicking his wand away from him. “You yield,” she smiles, with a flash of white teeth. He gapes up at her, too breathless to say anything. Around them, the gallery explodes into cheers and shouts. Amy claps and whistles raucously from above, elbowing Tom in amazement as he claps politely as well.

“Did you see that- did you see that-,”

“Cardinal rule of dueling,” Merrythought has come back up on stage to help Michael out of the crater. “It’s not over until someone is wandless, unconscious, or dead.” She smiles grimly. “And underestimating one’s opponent can mean handing your victory to them. You would have beaten her had you been a little more patient, Michael.” He still seems a bit dazed.

June has hopped off the stage and into the arms of her friends. One boy in particular, a Ravenclaw, scoops her up and spins her round. “Twenty points to Slytherin for a rather cunning win, and ten to Gryffindor for a somewhat inspired use of Incarcerous- using the stage as a counter weight was a good idea, Michael, if a bit haphazardly done.”

“Did you see that?” Amy is still prodding at Tom.

“No, I went blind ten minutes ago,” he finally says, and then she hugs him again.

“That was brilliant!”

“You act as if just I just won the twenty points, not June Carmody,” he mutters, but one arm loops round her back.

“It was a very good surprise,” Amy tells him, and he smiles back at her after a moment, realizing how genuinely thrilled she is, as if they just came out a cinema or a theater, not that she’s ever been to the latter.

They hurry down from the alcove before someone spots them, and once they’re safely away Amy already has her wand out. “Avis!” Nothing. “Avis!” she tries again, then sighs.

“Avis,” says Tom, leaning against a window, and a singular blackbird emerges from the end of his yew wand. Amy draws back in surprise, then sucks in a breath when the bird lands on her shoulder, small talons digging into the fabric and skin.

“Not quite a sparrow squadron,” she tells Tom with a small, appreciative smile. He moves his wand again to end the spell, but she suddenly grabs the bird and lets it go out the window, watching it swoop away.

“It’s a conjuration, they never live long,” Tom observes from behind her.

Amy squints after it into the late afternoon sky. “That’s alright. At least it will have a nice day.”

The talons have brought up scratches on her palms. She rubs them together as she turns back to
him. “You still owe me cake.”

The house elves make her wash the blood off her hands first, but even Tom admits the pound cake from the kitchens is very good.

Chapter End Notes

I was debating whether to skip directly on to third year, but I thought a nice mellow birthday chapter would be a good contrast to the rest of 1940, which is anything but mellow.
1940

The windows in the dining room of Wool’s, looking out into the cramped garden, are painted black now. The front windows all have heavy curtains that Mrs. Cole has the older children help her close just before sunset each night. Even if Amy could look out into London at night, all she would see was darkness, with the occasional dim glow of a shielded street light. There’s been four auto accidents on their street since July.

Some nights they test the air raid sirens, and Amy counts under her breath, quilt pulled up over her head, until the awful sound finally dies away. It usually sets most of the little ones crying, and then she might be woken up to help console a sniffling toddler. Mrs. Cole says they’re not evacuating until it’s ‘absolutely necessary’, even with the threat of German bombs literally hanging over their heads. It’s not exactly an easy thing to find places in the countryside for seventy something orphans.

Amy is counting down the days until September first with much more urgency than usual. The Germans have France now, and they’ve been bombing the RAF stations. It’s only a matter of time until London is hit, really hit. She doesn’t know what a bomb sounds like, but she doesn’t think her wand is going to do much to help her then, even if she were allowed to use magic outside of school.

At breakfast, there is the usual cacophony. The younger ones don’t really have a sense of what is going on, and the older ones don’t want to talk about it, much. The grownups keep on a stiff upper lip and dismiss any concerns with a tight smile. Things are fine. Everything will be fine. They’re perfectly safe. It’s going to be alright. The war is nothing to worry about. Never mind that Miss Patrick took them all down to the nearest Underground station last week, to test how quickly they could all get there from the orphanage.

That was in the middle of a sunny July day. Amy thinks about the winter, and the cold nights, and how hard and slow it will be to rouse everyone, get their shoes on, and run the four city blocks to the relative safety of the Underground, while the sirens wail and planes roar overhead. There’s two babies, and eight children under the age of five. They’ll never make it in time, her more cynical side says. They might as well all hunker down in the basement and pray the building doesn’t come down on them.

Her more optimistic side says that she’d rather die out in the open air than down in some dark hole.

“D’you want some orange juice?” Bianka asks, and Amy looks up from the soggy eggs on her plate that she’d been picking at her. She misses house elf cooking. Her favorite elf is named Dotty, and she makes the absolute best bacon Amy has ever eaten. There’s no bacon here. They’re on strict rationing. Lucky to even have eggs and milk and juice, this week, as Mrs. Cole keeps reminding them.

“I’m fine, thanks,” Amy prods at her eggs some more, than glances across the table at Tom, who is waiting impatiently for Miss Patrick to finish cleaning up the mess Bobby Faber has just made of his porridge.
His fingers are beating out a silent pattern on the stained and yellowed tablecloth. Every year she thinks he looks more and more out of place at Wool’s; his shirt is too small for him in the sleeves, showing too much of his pale wrists, and his trousers are short on him as well. Amy is wearing a baggy, fraying jumper over her dress, borrowed from Betty Ormond. It’s drafty today, and the room is unnaturally dark, with the windows permanently blacked out.

“Yes, Tom?” Miss Patrick finally sighs, straightening up, rag in hand.

“Amy and I are going to get our school things today,” he says automatically. “We need money for the train.” He pauses. “Unless you want to pay for a cab.”

“Again?” she mutters, and then massages her brow. “Alright. Go up to the office and wait for me. And get your coats; it’s supposed to rain later.”

“You’re going?” Bianka asks Amy, as she jumps up from her seat, plate and empty glass in hand. Amy smiles down at her, trying to look casual about it. “Yes, but we’ll be back by tonight. Just got to get some books and things. You know.”

Tom has already slipped away from the table, leaving his dirty dishes behind. Amy groans, leans over, and stacks them atop her own. She hurries into the kitchen to deposit them in the large industrial sink, and then walks quickly back out, almost reaching the hall when-

“Amy, come back and help clear the table!” Miss Patrick calls.

She tenses, swings back around, and marches over to the table again. The boys have scattered, of course, leaving her and a few of the oldest girls to clear everything away. It really is absurd, she thinks angrily to herself. Tom’s never been asked to help clear the table in his entire life. The boys are rarely asked to set it, either. She knows she’s being a bit silly, that this is how things are for—well, for nearly all the world, but after two years at Hogwarts-

Well, the first time they learned about witches being ministers of magic and aurors and cursebreakers and potioners and healers, she was a tad shocked, to say the least. The girls at Wool’s do not have a wealth of options. Mrs. Cole took her and Doris and a few others aside at the start of the summer to impress on them the fact that very soon dirty boys will want to do dirty things with them, things they should absolutely not allow, unless they want to end up pregnant and out on the street someday. Like Doris’ mother, who all the girls whisper had her at fourteen.

She’s ‘gotten ideas’ as Miss Patrick would say, which is a very dangerous thing. Girls like her aren’t supposed to get ideas about anything. They’re supposed to do as they’re told and hopefully not wind up in some slum in the East End with a husband who beats them. And it’s not as though the boys have it much better, especially not with the draft. Four of the oldest boys are already off to training. The unspoken truth is that they’re not all likely to come back.

She stands in the hall with Tom as Miss Patrick entrusts the money to him, then gives them both a fretful look. “Do try to be home early,” she tells them. “It’s not safe to be out late. God forbid you two be caught out there when-,” she cuts herself off, shaking her head. “Tom, you will keep track of the time, won’t you?”

Amy huffs quietly.

“Of course, Miss Patrick,” says Tom, with a faint, faux-tolerant smile.

“And look after Amy.”
Amy stares indignantly at that; look after- they’re the same bloody age! What’s Tom supposed to do, hold her hand and make sure she looks both ways before crossing the street. But she knows she’d never be allowed to go get her things alone if Tom weren’t here. It’s not fair, but that’s just the way of it.

“Of course, Miss Patrick,” Tom repeats himself, casting a brief bemused look at Amy. “I always do.”

“Twit,” she mouths at him, when Miss Patrick isn’t looking. He ignores her.

“Be careful,” Miss Patrick presses on them one last time, then hurries off to deal with some fight going on downstairs.

“Come on,” says Tom, leading the way to the front door. Amy is still fuming. She can tell he’s amused from the arc of his shoulders, as he represses some comment, and then can’t help himself: “Maybe you’d better walk in front, so I can keep better track of you.”

“Don’t start,” she snaps, shoving at him. “Don’t you dare-,”

“I’m just doing as I was told,” he says innocently, holding the door for her. “No need to work yourself up over it.”

“You are insufferable sometimes,” she hisses at him as she slips past him and out into the damp, grey morning. “Really, you are.”

Although she is glad he’s in a better mood; he’s been withdrawn and sullen all week, and if he’s smirking and goading at her, it generally means he’s come out of whatever brooding state he was in before. He’s probably just relieved to be away from the orphanage; even his pace has quickened, his hands in his coat pockets.

“You could stand to be a bit more grateful,” he observes lightly as they start off down the sidewalk. “Haven’t I kept you in one piece, all these years?”

“How can I ever repay you?” she mutters with no small amount of sarcasm. “Saint Tom.”

Outside the Leaky Cauldron, Amy shifts guiltily from foot foot as Tom shoots her a disbelieving look. “You didn’t bring your wand?”

“You weren’t thinking about it,” she reasons, flushing. “I just keep it in my desk all summer-,”

“What if someone came in and took it?” he demands. “What kind of witch just leaves her wand lying around-,”

“Oh, shut up,” she says irritably, as the bricks move, revealing the entrance to Diagon Alley. “I’m not going to go around all day carrying it when I’m not allowed to use it-,”

He shakes his head, muttering something as he steps through the passage.

“Let’s split up,” says Amy. “We’re not taking the same electives anyhow.” Arithmancy and Study of Ancient Runes for him and Care of Magical Creatures and Divination for her. He’s made his feelings on her choices quite clear. You don’t see her bullying him about taking Study of Ancient Runes, do you?

Tom gives her a mildly suspicious look, as if he expects her to disappear into the crowds and never return.
“We’ll meet back at Florean’s,” she decides, mouth watering at the thought. She’s got exactly enough spare change for one ice cream, and this will be her only one of the summer. Best to make it count. “Alright?” she presses, when he doesn’t immediately reply.

“Fine,” he says dismissively, and checks his (still likely stolen) watch. “We’ll meet at eleven. Try not to be late.”

Amy wrinkles her nose at him, and turns on her heel, heading for the nearest apothecary. After acquiring what she needs for Care from Slug and Jigger’s, she ducks into Obscurus Books, and lose track of time wandering around the stacks, looking for the books she needs for Divination, and continuously getting sidetracked by other titles. She never had much in the way of reading material as a child, and while she’s still not one to sit in the library for hours on end devouring tome after tome, like Tom, she doesn’t turn her nose up at reading either.

Then, against her better judgment, she sidles into Quality Quidditch Supplies to look at the new line of racing brooms, despite the fact that she’ll never be able to afford one of her own. Then she spies a copy of *Quidditch International*, and spends a good ten minutes reading a very shocking article about how the famous beater, Jarek Kosmatka, has been arrested by the Polish Ministry of Magic for launching an aerial broom attack on a train on the way to Auschwitz and freeing fifty three Jews, Catholics, and political prisoners.

Kosmatka’s arrest picture snarls defiantly at the camera, while the rest of the Polish team looks on in the background.

“My father says Kosmatka’s a hero,” Amy jumps and looks up to see Patsy, who has a bottle of broom polish in one hand. She nods awkwardly at the magazine. “He might be banned for life from Quidditch for attacking muggles, but…” She trails off.

“Well, he’s still a Pole,” says Amy, closing the magazine. “Even if the Nazis only have… you know, muggle Poland. I don’t think anyone could really blame him for wanting to fight back.”

“Did you hear about the French wizard who turned into a wolf and started going around Paris at night, fighting for the Resistance?” Patsy adjusts her grip on her worn leather satchel. “The Ministry wants to put a travel ban on all British wizards and witches, to keep anyone from going over to fight illegally.”

“They can do that?” Amy frowns.

Patsy shrugs. “They can do anything if it’s in the name of magical secrecy. That’s what my father says, anyways.” Someone calls her name, her mother, likely, and she gives Amy a little wave, then scurries off, purchases in hand. Amy watches her go, then reluctantly puts back the magazine. She’s already lost track of time, and she still needs to get a few things from Flourish and Blott’s.

Once she has her quills, ink, and some fresh parchment, she makes her way down the street and around the corner to the ice cream parlor, which is still bustling with customers, even with the poor weather. But Tom is nowhere to be seen. Amy goes inside the shop to check the time. Five past eleven. It’s not like him to be late. She waits around for another few minutes, growing increasingly uncomfortable. Where could he be?

Finally, she gives up. He must have gotten sidetracked somewhere. At least she’ll have this to hold over his head for the rest of the day. Perfect, punctual Tom, ten minutes late to meet her. What a hypocrite. She does a quick loop of the main streets, peering into several shops, with no sign of him. She even goes into Gringotts, just in case he was drawn in by the glittering jewels and gold, and undeterred by the glowering goblins. No such luck.
Increasingly desperate, she makes several sharp turns, and then comes down a crumbling set of stone steps, the shop fronts around her changing, the crowds dissipating. After a few minutes, she realizes she’s wandered into Knockturn Alley, and stops. She’s never been down here before, but she’s not so oblivious as to not know that this is the seedy section of the shopping district. A few cloaked men on a street corner are staring at her.

Resisting the urge to dash back the way she came, she squares her shoulders and keeps walking. She catches sight of a familiar head of dark hair emerging from a shop. “Tom!” she calls out in relief, and rushes over, until he turns, and it’s not Tom at all. Virgil Mulciber stares at her for a moment, then smiles. Amy decides immediately she’d rather he never smile anywhere in her general direction again.

“Look who it is,” he says, grin broadening. “Tom’s little Hufflepuff friend.” He is tall for fourteen, with sloping shoulders and a thick neck. “Lost, are you?”

“No,” lies Amy. “Just- just looking for Tom. Have you seen him… around?” She takes half a step backwards.

Mulciber looks at her for a moment, and then nods. “Saw him a little while ago. I’ll take you to him.”

Amy glances around, as several witches walk by, robes whispering over the cobblestones. “Alright,” she says, very reluctantly. She doesn’t really have many other options. He leads her down the lane and around a corner, then through a narrow alleyway, and the sinking sensation of dread goes.

She looks at his hands, not his face. One is casually in his pocket, the other- the other has his wand, a little hard voice in her head tells her. You stupid little girl. The other has his wand, and if you think they haven’t found a way around the Trace in Knockturn, you’re a fool. Where are you? Amy looks around, and sees nothing but unfamiliar stone walls. Shit, she thinks, vulgarly. Shit. He got her to come along of her own accord, meek as a little lamb.

“You haven’t really seen Tom,” she says flatly, coming to a full stop. “Have you?”

Mulciber stops in front of her as well. “I suppose not,” he sounds disappointed that she’s seen through the ruse. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He starts to turn around, and she loosens her grip on her shopping bags, so she can drop them and run.

“Mulciber,” someone calls out in greeting, and they both freeze. Amy glances behind her, as Tom comes quickly down the steps. “Having a good summer?”

Mulciber looks at Amy, who smiles forcefully at him. “Spectacular,” he says, and then his gaze returns to Tom, wary.

“You found Amy,” says Tom, too amiably. “I’ve been looking everywhere for her. She’s awful with directions, you know.”

“I really, really am not,” Amy walks over to him, and grabs his wrist, giving it a sharp, meaningful squeeze in warning. He does not take his eyes off Mulciber, who seems about to say something, then thinks better of it. Amy hasn’t the slightest idea what Tom has over him, because it’s certainly not brute strength, but she isn’t complaining.

“She should be more careful,” Mulciber settles on. “Not a nice place to get lost, Knockturn.” And then he is very quickly walking away.
Amy lets out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “No wand,” says Tom, “wanders into Knockturn, decides to take a stroll with Mulciber- you’re really on a roll today, aren’t you?” He’s furious, she can tell, angrier than he has been in ages.

“It’s not my fault you’re friends with- I don’t even know what he is,” Amy snaps, as they start back the way she’d came. “He only knows who I am because of you.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” says Tom. “You’re not special. He thinks Hufflepuffs are easy prey. Especially stupid little girls wandering around Knockturn asking for directions. You were about to make his holiday, you know. No professors to jump in, no one to hear the screaming- bet he had loads of new curses to try out, or worse-,”

“I wasn’t asking for bloody directions, I was looking for you! You were late! You didn’t show up, what was I supposed to do? You would have gone looking for me.”

“You think so?” he asks with a note of mockery, and Amy’s hands curl up into fists at her sides. “If I wasn’t friendly with him, you think he would have just walked away? You’re an ignorant child.”

“And you’re an arrogant, self-serving little boy,” she sneers, enraged, because how dare he speak to her like that, as if they didn’t come from the exact same starting place, “cuddling up to some sick gang of purebloods, hoping they all forget about your muggle last name.”

He whirls on her so fast that she jumps back, eyes wide, and she can tell for a split second that they’re both wondering if he might hit her. He doesn’t. His face is very pale, except for spots of color on his high cheekbones. “I didn’t mean it,” she says hoarsely. “Not really. Tom, I was just angry-,” He’s already walking away, and his legs are longer than hers, so it’s a struggle to keep up.

“I didn’t mean it,” she repeats. “I don’t- no one important cares, really, I’ve got a muggle name too, loads of people do, it’s not- you’ve got more magical family than me, anyways, it’s not as though-,” she’s embarrassed for both of them, and stops talking. They make their way out of Knockturn in silence, and all the way to Florean’s without a word between them.

Tom sits down at an empty table outside. Amy goes in, places her order, and doesn’t feel very hungry when presented with her ice cream cone. She returns to him, and slumps into the chair beside him. They look very ridiculous, her there, licking her cone and looking equal parts miserable and resentful, and him hunched over some worn book he must have bought in Knockturn. Finally, she looks down at it, and catches a glimpse of the cover. *A History of Salazar Slytherin, with annotations by Phineas Black.*

They’re back at Wool’s that afternoon well before sundown.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case anyone was wondering if this fic was going to be more lighthearted and fuzzy than the tags would suggest.
Siren

1940

Hufflepuff wins their match against Ravenclaw the day before Amy is due to return home for Christmas. She scores two goals on Ravenclaw’s notoriously difficult keeper, Norman Friar, and catches snowflakes on her tongue after she’s landed, shaking with adrenaline. Matthew wraps one arm around Patsy’s shivering shoulders and the other round Amy’s waist, and haphazardly spins them in a circle until they all fall over in the snow.

The Ravenclaw team is much more dignified in their defeat, lined up to shake hands as they pull off their goggles and dust frost off their jerseys. Amy smiles, cheeks aching from the cold, the entire way to the locker rooms, and after she’s showered and bundled herself up in her scarf and coat, she walks out into the gathering dusk to be greeted by Vera and Ruby.

“Brilliant,” pronounces Ruby, “the way you kept shaking off Carter and Bell? You flew circles around them.”

“She was using the wind to propel her,” Vera corrects with a grin, “Bell kept fighting against it.”

Amy is too jubilant to be modest, and slips and slides in the snow with them on the way back up to the castle. “I love playing in the winter,” she says. “Everyone hates it, but I don’t mind the cold, so long as it’s not raining. It’s so beautiful up there when it’s snowing.” Spring has always been her favorite season, but she so rarely saw snow in London before coming to Hogwarts. It’s so mesmerizing you can forget about the biting cold and lashing wind.

“You’re still going home?” Ruby questions as they finally enter the warmth of the indoors, pulling off her hat.

“Of course,” says Amy, stubbornly, as her and Vera exchange a worried look.

“I know it must be lonely here around Christmas,” says Vera, “but don’t you think- isn’t Tom staying? It’s not like you’ll be all by yourself.”

“Marge Baker’s staying too,” Ruby adds brightly. “Her parents forbid her to come home. Said she’d be much safer here than in a muggle neighborhood in Battersea.”

“Tom and I are fighting again,” Amy says shortly, not mentioning that the primary reason they are fighting this time is because he could not cajole, threaten, or persuade her into staying for the winter break. They usually bicker this time of year, but now it is different, with the Blitz. “Besides,” she adds with more than touch of defensiveness, “you’re both leaving.”

“No one’s conducting air raids on Madras,” Ruby rolls her eyes.

“And York’s much safer than London right now,” Vera reminds her.

“I’ll be fine,” says Amy. “They haven’t had consecutive nights of bombings since November. I’m not going to stay here and be miserable. I always go back for Christmas, it’s not going to be any different this year.”

What she can’t, or won’t say, is that she is not just returning out of a curious sense of loyalty to the orphanage and adherence to tradition. It is mostly the shame. The shame that while the rest of them have been sleeping in Underground shelters on and off since September, she has been here.
Coddled, protected, tucked neatly away from all the chaos and uncertainty of muggle life. Tom can pretend all he likes that he didn’t exist before Hogwarts, that he sprung up out of the ground fully formed, but she won’t. She can’t.

A little bit of luck is all that’s different between her and Bianka Eisen, for example. Just a nasty little twist of fate, and she might not have had magic. Might not have ended up at Wool’s. Might have been born somewhere else, where there’s been much worse done to innocent people. Might have been Jewish, might have been a refugee or a prisoner or a corpse in some ditch by the side of the road in Poland or Austria or Russia or France.

So she has to go back. Has to remind herself of how fortunate she really is, has to face the harsh reality. It probably is stupid, as everyone keeps saying, but she’s hardly the only muggleborn at Wool’s going home to that, risking it all just to see their families again. And she doesn’t have a family, not really, she never has, but she’s never been alone, either.

Besides, it will only be two short weeks. She’ll be back January 5th. It will go by like a flash.

At breakfast on Sunday she slips Tom’s birthday gift to at the Slytherin Table, ignoring the look Malfoy is shooting her. He’ll have to get used to her coming over here at some point, before his eyebrows disappear into his rigid hairline. It’s just shortbread biscuits. She baked them in the kitchens with Dotty. He pretends not to like shortbread, but whenever she has any, he always manages to snag one from her.

Tom takes the dented tin, and fixes her with a baleful stare.

“Cheer up,” says Amy. “You’ll hardly notice I’m gone.” He says nothing, lips pressed together. “Happy Christmas,” she adds, sharply. “Don’t let your face get stuck like that, you’ll scare off all the girls.”

“You’re going to miss your train,” he sneers, “if you stand here prattling away any longer.”

“Don’t be such a prick.” And then she is stalking off, bright red with anger. He doesn’t have to be so unpleasant about it, even if he thinks she’s being an idiot. He’s done plenty of idiotic things himself, like willfully eating dinner every night with Lyle Rosier and Edmund Avery.

At Wool’s the mood is forcefully cheery. The shriveled little Christmas tree in the parlor is brightened up with looping rounds of tinsel and battered ornaments, and the wreath on the front door is resolutely green against the bitter cold. The house is as drafty and grey as ever, but the little ones are running around shrieking about Father Christmas like any other year, and there is the promise of a ham for Christmas dinner.

Amy sits up late with the other older children now that she is thirteen, and they play Hunt the Thimble and Mother, May I, on Christmas Eve, after everyone else has been sent to bed. There is a smidge of mistletoe hanging in the kitchen doorway, and when they’re tired of childish games they switch to more adult ones, going in pairs to kiss under it. Amy adopts the world-weary ‘must we?’ expression of Helen and Doris, while Mary is quite delighted when Dennis drags her under it. Johnny kisses her a bit longer that is acceptable for mistletoe, and Amy is no longer a lovestruck little girl and more bemused than flattered when his hands play with the hem of her blouse. She breaks it off before he can introduce any tongue into the equation, and rolls her eyes at the catcalls, picking at a hole in her stockings.

“Bet I was the best you ever had, Benson,” says Johnny, all sixteen year old bluster. “Not like those little schoolboys you’re used to.”
“Let’s just say you lowered the bar another notch,” Amy retorts, but smiles so he knows she’s only kidding, because she does feel a bit bad. He’ll be done with schooling this year, and then it will be the war for him. And his eyes are still kind, but they probably won’t be for much longer.

On Christmas Day they all get their customary sole gift after church, a cheap doll or ball of some sort for everyone under ten, and clothes for everyone over ten. Amy runs her fingers along the smooth leather of her new shoes, finally, since her old loafers have nearly gone to pieces and are far too tight, sprouting blisters on her toes weekly. Bianka has a new red scarf, which she promptly puts on, even though they’re indoors.

They all listen to the radio shows and sing carols and Amy appreciates it more now than she ever did before, because she understands now, that they’re just trying to give them a little bright spot of joy every dreary year. That this is as good as it will ever get, for most of them. Safe and warm and perhaps not delighted, but happy enough, because this is all they know. One day they will be working class adults with bills to pay and children of their own to look after, and they’ll look back on this as- ‘well, it could have been far worse.’

Maybe if Tom came back for Christmas, he might understand, she thinks. Might realize what she has, that muggles or not, Wool’s has been decent to them, even kind at times. Might realize that sometimes no parents, no family, no history is better than the alternative. Better a blank slate than one cracked clean in half. And it is in some ways a relief to be free of Hogwart’s and the constant string of tragedies and horror stories in the Prophet, all coming out of Grindelwald’s tormented Europe, beset by Nazis on one side and dark wizards on the other.

They are eating supper four days after Christmas when the sirens go off. Amy knows it is not a drill because of the look on Mrs. Cole’s face. Cook comes out of the kitchen, ripping off her apron, and Miss Patrick goes white as a sheet. Everyone freezes, forks and knives hovering in the air, mid-sip of milk or tea, as if hoping against hope that the siren will suddenly cut off, end, that it has all been some false alarm.

Amy looks to the blacked out windows, and then across the table, Felix Landau from Austria drops his knife, and the silence breaks in a dull roar of clattering cutlery, benches and chairs and tables being pushed back, and cries and shrieks. “Line up by the door,” Mrs. Cole barks. “Quickly now, forget about coats, come on.”

They have maybe five minutes, Amy thinks, before the second siren announcing that the planes are overhead. She rushes to her place in line, coming up at the rear in between Bianka and Sara Kaufman, and then they are rushing out and into the cold night. It is queerly silent aside from the sirens wailing. Searchlights dart across the sky, and quiet crowds of people walk briskly, some at a near run, in the direction of the Underground.

Come on, Amy keeps thinking, come on, just hold off a few minutes, come on, we have to make it-the line of frightened children breaks, and becomes a terrified clump instead. Mrs. Cole and Miss Patrick and a few other adults are all carrying the babies and toddlers. “Amy, here, hold him,” Betty deposits four year old Frank in her arms, and she stumbles under the weight of him. His chubby arms lock round her neck, and her new shoes are hurting her feet. She trips over a loose stone and breaks into a jog, beginning to pant from the cold in her lungs.

If she wasn’t here, she thinks, there might not be anyone to carry Frank, and he’s so small, he can hardly run at all-

“Sara?” The entrance to the Underground is barely visible up ahead, but Bianka has halted, staring at Sara, who has also stopped, a hand over her mouth in horror. “Was ist los mit dir?”

“We don’t have time for this,” says Amy, “come on, we have to keep moving-,” she grabs Bianka’s hand and pulls her forward, but Sara darts past them to inspect the crowd of children running down the steps, ushered by Mrs. Cole and Miss Patrick.

“Er is nicht da!” Sara exclaims, and then repeats herself in English, “He’s not there, I thought he was at the front of the line- he’s not-,”

The second siren begins to wail. Frank sobs into Amy’s neck.

“Shit,” snarls Amy, and shoves Frank into Bianka’s arms. “Sara, are you sure?”

“He always waits for me on the steps,” she says, “always- he’s not here, he must be back at the orphanage- his box, he must have gone to get his box-,”

Amy vaguely remembers seeing little Leo Kaufman entranced by his present, a tin jack-in-the-box that pops up to the tune of ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’, painted with nursery rhymes on the sides. A stupid little toy, but the sort of thing a four year old would treasure. “Get inside,” she says, as a passing searchlight momentarily blinds all of them. “I’ll get him.”

Her hand closes around her wand, tucked in the pocket of her dress.

“We’ll tell Mrs. Cole,” says Bianka, shaking her head, “you can’t-,”

But she is already running across the street, pulling out her wand, legs pumping as she heads for the corner. She can make it. She’s fast. She’s been playing Quidditch for over a year now, her legs and arms are hard muscle, she can make it. Distantly, there is the roar of an explosion. Somewhere, an engine whines. The sky is too light. She rounds the corner, dodging past a family running full tilt for the shelter, and ducks her head down, presses onward.

It’s legal to use magic if one is in mortal danger. She repeats that to herself like a mantra, wondering how well a shield charm will hold up against rubble, if she can levitate bricks away-She sees Wool’s in the distance, and then several streets away, something hits. There is a tremor in the ground that rattles up her entire skeleton, it seems. She keeps running. She thinks she glimpses the distant shadow of a plane in the sky above, but maybe she’s just imagining things.

She pushes through the wrought iron gates, swaying in the stiff wind, clatters up the front walk and bursts into the building. “LEO!” she screams. “Where are you?”

She ducks into the parlor. Plaster dust rains down from the ceiling from another bomb, streets away. Are they getting closer? “Leo!” She runs into the dining room, then freezes, and drops down to her hands and knees, checking under the long tables. “Leo, come out, we have to go!”

Why does she care? He’s not her brother, he’s not her concern, but she’s the only one with a wand, the only one who could do anything to stop this, or even try-

She jumps back up, swaying on her feet, and as the lights flicker, she sees him in the doorway, face streaked with tears, clutching his stupid box. “Where’s Sara?” he whimpers, and Amy pounces, grabbing him and practically throwing him over her shoulder, glad for the first time that she is not some skinny, dainty thing, glad that for all her lack of height, she has an unappealing athlete’s build. She tears out of the building as a bomb hits four houses down, luckily not in the direction they are headed. She nearly drops her wand, but keeps a hold of it with sweaty fingers, too panicked to think about how she can barely breathe and the sky is growing more and more orange by the minute. Something is burning nearby, and the smoke stings at her eyes.
She keeps running, and time blurs. The buildings and streets and sirens melt away and she is only conscious of her own moving body and Leo’s weight like chains around her neck and then she is falling, thrown off her feet by something, but she lands on her hands and knees and struggles back up even as her skin splits open, and dust coats her hair and face, and Leo does not let go and-

“You’re alright,” someone says, half dragging her down the Underground steps. “You’ll be safe now, you’re alright-,” Leo is taken away from her, and someone wraps a blanket around her shoulders, and she adjusts to the dim lighting of the platform, where hundreds of people stand or sit huddled on the ground, murmuring to one another. The ceiling shakes, but no one so much as flinches.

“Stupid, stupid girl,” Miss Patrick presses a kiss to her forehead, the most physically affectionate she has ever been, and Sara is holding her brother and sobbing. “Why on Earth would you go back out there- Amy, how could you?”

Amy opens her mouth but no words come out but a low moan of terror, finally released. There is gravel stuck in her palms and knees and her dress is ripped and there is dust and ashes inside her mouth. She sink down onto her haunches and rocks back and forth, and Miss Patrick tries to get her to let go of the ‘stick’ in her hand but gives up.

Amy remains like that for what seems like hours but is likely only minutes, and when she can think straight, wipes at her eyes with her knuckles. Her new shoes are ruined. That is what she is crying about, she realizes. Her new shoes. Not Leo or the bombs or the orange sky or the burning buildings. Her new shoes. They’re ruined. She only had them four days and now they’re ruined. She didn’t even use her bloody wand.

The bombs fall until well past midnight, and then are replaced by the sounds of fire trucks racing by overhead. London has not burned like this since 1666. Amy keeps burning inside her skin until the sun comes up over a blackened and smoke-shrouded city.
1941

Hogsmeade is littered with Ministry wanted posters and notices, all gleaming glossy in the bright May sunshine. Amy has seen most of them before, but it’s difficult to let her gaze slide over them when the pictures on them move and change. That still startles her. She somehow finds it easier to accept the moving, talking paintings, rather than the animated photographs. It just seems far more unnatural.

THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS ARE WANTED BY THE BRITISH MINISTRY OF MAGIC, IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE EUROPEAN CONSORTIUM OF MAGICAL LAW. THEY ARE SUSPECTED OF BEING FOREIGN AGENTS WITH THE INTENT OF DISSEMINATING GRINDELWALD’S MESSAGE ACROSS THE UNITED KINGDOM AND SUBVERTING BOTH MAGICAL AND MUGGLE GOVERNMENTS. IF SIGHTED, IMMEDIATELY CONTACT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC. DO NOT APPROACH.

She scans the flickering faces, mostly men, but some women too, some in sweeping robes and pointed hats, others in modern muggle attire, some smirking and preening for the camera, others darting away from the shot. Some of the pictures are taken on crowded streets, others are professional portraits, and a few are just rough sketches. A few of them are old and wizened, but the majority of them are young men and women in their twenties, with the defiant, reckless stares of young rebels and militants. One boy doesn’t look much older than seventeen or eighteen.

Some of the posters have obviously been torn away. Sometimes out of anger: it’s not uncommon for the average Hogwarts student to have lost a distant relative or family friend to Grindelwald’s ever growing army, but sometimes out of admiration. It’s not just limited to the Slytherins. Amy knows a few Hufflepuffs who agree with his philosophy of ‘no more hiding’, even if they don’t like his admittedly brutal methods. She’s not sure what she thinks. Grindelwald needs to be stopped, she knows that, but- almost 400 dead in Wales from the Luftwaffe, and thousands ‘euthanized’ at Hadamar.

But for now it’s a warm May afternoon, the sun is shining, and classes and homework have finally started to wind down in preparation for their coming exams. Amy is already dreading the examination period, since she has two more tests to take this year, even if she has enjoyed Care of Magical Creatures, and tolerated Divination. By far her best classes are Charms, Herbology, and Potions. She’s always enjoyed Slughorn’s somewhat baffled praise, that a no-name Hufflepuff witch could outbrew some of his Slytherin favorites.

She sits outside the Three Broomsticks with Ruby and Vera, drinking cold pumpkin juice, and watching the crowds go by in between looking at Ruby’s hoard of fashion magazines. One day, Amy thinks, she will have real pearls and patent leather handbags and satin hats and fur coats. She’ll wear real panty hose and silk dressing gowns and grow her hair out in perfectly coiffed ringlets. She wishes her hair were a lush dark brown or golden blonde, not the mousy shade it currently is. She wishes she could pluck her eyebrows. She wishes she didn’t have freckles on her arms and legs. She wishes she had high cheekbones and rosebud lips. But now she slumps unladylike in her seat and bows her head over the dramatic advertisements and urges to buy war bonds.
“I wish I had a cigarette,” Ruby sighs, nodding in the direction of an older couple standing on the corner, sharing one.

“That seems horribly unsanitary,” Vera notes, wrinkling her nose. “Papa says they’re practically poison.”

“Please, everyone’s been smoking for forever,” Ruby laughs. “Oh, but Father would kill me if he ever saw me with one. Too English for his precious daughter. Nevermind that Arjan’s been out with some English rose every weekend since he took the job with Gringotts-,”

“No,” Vera sounds both delighted and scandalized.

“Yes, and he’s an awful liar, so when Mummy finds out she’s going to slaughter him. He’s supposed to come home soon and marry a Krishna.”

“Is Patsy out on a date?” Amy interrupts them both, and then jerks her head across the street, where Patsy is deep in conversation outside Honeyduke’s with Teddy O’Neill of Gryffindor. For once she does not appear flustered or self-conscious, even though he towers over her. In contrast, the usually boisterous Teddy seems quite withdrawn, playing with his shirt sleeves as they talk.

“Maybe! Good for her,” says Ruby, nodding in approval. “Teddy’s a gentleman.”

“It’s nice to see her enjoying herself,” Vera comments. “She’s always so… you know, shy, and worried about people gossiping about her, what with her father-,”

“Her father?” Amy frowns. “Who’s her father?”

Ruby chokes on her sip of pumpkin juice. “You don’t know?”

“Of course she doesn’t,” Vera flushed, “Amy’s not a gossip.”

“I’d like to be!” Amy says indignantly. “Come on, you have to tell me now-,”

“Her father’s in Azkaban,” Vera explains with a slight grimace. “He’s been there for years. Patsy lives with her aunt and uncle.”

“He’s in prison?” Amy stares at her. “But she’s mentioned him to me, she talks about him-,”

“They’re allowed to write and visit, I’d imagine,” Ruby sets down her glass. “Though why anyone would want to set foot on that island, I don’t know-,”

“It’s her father,” Vera snaps, “of course she still loves him, even if he’s-”

“What did he do?” Amy asks. “Is he some kind of a thief, or-,”

“He killed 3 muggles,” Ruby says flatly. “That’s what Joe Fair told me.”

“He- what?” Amy tries to connect mousy little Patsy with her mental image of a killer.

“Her mother was hit by a car full of drunk muggles, years ago,” Vera says. “It was all over the Prophet. They just left her in the middle of the road. Patsy’s father went after them, and then he turned himself into the Ministry. He’s been in prison ever since.”

“I heard the mother was expecting,” says Ruby, then flinches away from Vera’s pinch. “That’s what I heard! It is horrible, isn’t it? Can you imagine? A witch being killed like that?”
“That’s awful,” says Amy, glancing once again at Patsy, who has now gone into the shop with Teddy.

“He was only sentenced to 12 years,” says Vera. “But I don’t think they’ll let him out anytime soon, not with the war going on. They’re paranoid about people going to fight for Grindelwald.”

“They should be,” Ruby scoffs. “The more they try to clamp down, the more it will push people to his side. He’s very popular in Russia, from what I’ve heard.”

Amy is struggling to find something to change the subject too when she hears the shouts. A crowd of excitable students has gathered nearby, presumably around a fistfight. She clammers up on her chair to get a better look, and then gapes. “Vera, Simon’s fighting someone.”

“What?” Vera jumps up, and rushes in that direction, Ruby and Amy on her heels. They push their way through the giddy, jeering crowd, just in time to see Simon Goldstein lay another boy out flat.

“Simon, stop it!” one girl is shrieking, while another of his Gryffindor friends tries to pull him away. Simon shakes him off, then gets both fists up in time for the other boy to stagger back to his feet and charge him. Wands completely forgotten, they grapple on the cobblestones, shouting and swearing at each other, until Mr. Ogg forces his way through the gleeful audience.

With a sharp jab of his wand, the two are blasted away from each other, dazed. ‘Fightin’ like muggles, are we?’ he sneers. “Goldstein, Flint, on yer feet- stop snivelin’, get up- You want to beat each other so bad, we’ll see ‘ow you like the dungeons- wait ‘til the Headmaster ‘ears ‘bout this, it’ll be a canin’ you won’t forget, mark my words, you little ingrates- SHUT IT, GOLDSTEIN, I DON’T WANT TO ‘EAR IT. Get movin’.”

The crowd quickly breaks apart, no one wanting to provoke his ire, and Vera watches helplessly as the two are marched off by the scruff of the neck. “I told him to just ignore Flint!” she exclaims. “He’s such an idiot- he’ll be in detention until the end of the year-.”

“What were they fighting about?” Amy casts a dirty look at Rose Parkinson, who won’t stop giggling about the whole thing.

“Roland found out he means to enlist after he graduates and he started saying things,” Vera’s gaze drifts down to the ground. “You know. About us being Jewish muggle lovers.”

“Roland’s an imbecile,” says Ruby, taking her hand reassuringly. “No one takes him seriously.”

“He is,” says Amy, quickly. “Dippet won’t be too hard on Simon, don’t worry about it.” Privately, she thinks that after the caning they’re both going to get, Vera’s brother will be lucky if he can sit down in a week. They walk around for a little while more, trying to take Vera’s mind off it, and pass the Hog’s Head on their way back up to the castle, just as Tom comes out with Nott, Malfoy, and Burke. For a few moments Amy wonders if he’s going to ignore her, but he manages a charming smile in her general direction, and then quick as a flash is back to listening to something Nott is passionately going on about.

“Have you two made up, then?” Vera asks, and Amy tenses.

This past year has probably been one of the most contentious for both her and Tom. She doesn’t think he knows about what happened over the Christmas break yet, and if she has her way he never will, but he still probably holds it against her. He think she’s being pig headed to insist on pretending she still has some stake in the muggle world, and she thinks he’s being a social-climbing prat for trying to leave it all behind him.
“I don’t know,” she mutters. “I think so? You know what he’s like. It’s hard to tell with him.”

Ruby makes an incredulous noise that suggests they do not, in fact, know what Tom is like. She supposes she’s responsible for that. Truth be told, she keeps him away from her friends as much as he tries to separate her from his. Neither of them want their social circles mixing, because neither of them want to peel off the bandage and reveal the ugly wound underneath. Amy doesn’t think she’s afraid, but she is worried. She’s worried that if she pushes too hard or he pulls too hard, the often tenuous bond between them will snap in half, and they will be strangers again, or worse.

“Well, you know what they say about boys and girls,” Ruby hums under her breath. “Can’t be friends after a certain age.”

“That’s rubbish,” Amy rolls her eyes. “We’ve known each other for eight years.”

“I don’t know how you stand being around him, he’s so handsome,” Vera says with a nervous giggle as they watch the Slytherins turn around the corner. “I would be tongue-tied left and right.”

Amy frowns at that; on some level, she supposes she does know Tom is handsome, is aware of his looks. But on another level, maybe she’s just used to being around him so often that it doesn’t affect. He’s certainly made her nervous before, but not because of what he looks like, mostly when he won’t let on what he’s thinking. That’s what makes her nervous. She doesn’t want things to change, especially not that they’ve settled into this new routine at Hogwarts.

“I prefer blondes, if we’re discussing skinny Brits,” Ruby says snidely, and then they all burst into relieved laughter, glad to be off the topic. Amy doesn’t really want to consider Tom’s looks or her looks or the question of crushes and who likes who. It’s fun to giggle about, of course, but thinking about her and boys or Tom and girls indicates that some sort of shift might be on the horizon. It’s so silly. She just wants things to be how they are now, always. Of course she’d like the wars to end and everyone to be safe, but-

May seems to end very quickly, and then she practically lives in the Hufflepuff common room, inhaling copious amounts of honeyed tea and biscuits or whatever people smuggle in from the kitchens, curled up in the same arm chair with Vera’s cat in her lap and her textbooks in hand. She barely sees anyone until she’s done with all her exams, and then is so tired that she falls asleep under a tree by the lake, her sketchbook across her grass stained knees.

She wakes up to the sound of rifling pages, and cracks open one furious eye, then the other, against both the blinding late spring sunlight and Tom, who as usual, cannot resist taking things that do not belong to him. “Too much of a bother to wake me up, was it?” she grunts, throwing a handful of grass at him, which does not do much to deter him from flipping through her sketches.

“You looked peaceful,” he says. “Usually, you talk in your sleep.”

“I do not!” She pushes herself up off the ground with a groan, reaching for her book, but whatever amiable mask he had on has disappeared.

“What is this?” he demands, shoving a certain page in her face. Amy blinks blearily and bats it away, then realizes what it is. In between a sketch of the Underground station and one of Bianka and Sara playing hopscotch on the street, she has illustrated a graphic view of that night when the bombs were falling. She’s not present in it, of course, but there are the spotlights in the dark, gritty sky, and the jagged edges of ruined buildings and rubble in the street, and it’s all too evident that she didn’t copy this from a newspaper photograph.

“London,” she says stubbornly. “You wouldn’t know, would you, you weren’t there-,”
He throws the book at her, an uncommon display of physical temper from him, and Amy catches it, then digs her fingers into the earth. “Don’t be so childish,” she says, half-mockingly. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Shut up,” he says, any posh inflection he’s picked up from his housemates over the years replaced with the working class, grubby accent they were both raised with. “Shut up. You never should have been there.”

“Then it’s my own fault, isn’t it?” she retorts sarcastically. “Alright. None of your concern-,”

“The next time you almost get yourself killed trying to spite me,” he begins furiously, and she pushes him, hard, her high ground well and truly lost.

“Not everything is about you, you self centered– It was about me!” she yells. “It was about me, and what I want, and what I wanted was to go home and not get blown up! I shouldn’t have to plan my bloody life around them bombing London! I shouldn’t have to hide here like-,”

“Like an orphan?” He’s grabbed hold of her arms so she can’t hit him, which she can tell she’s about to, from the heat in her face. “So you could pretend you had a home to go back to, is that it, like your housemates, all nice and cozy with Mummy and Daddy? Is that what they think? That little Amy wasn’t dumped at some grey hovel because no one wanted her-,”

Amy wrenches her arms away, and instead of hauling off and slapping him until he can’t see straight, or hexing him blind, jumps to her feet, holding her sketchbook to her chest. She stares down at him, emotions rippling across her face, feels her mouth contort, and then swallows the bile down. Instead she says nothing at all, because it’s the cruelest thing she can think to do. She turns her back on him and walks away, waiting for him to stalk off as well.

“Amy!” For once in her life, he’s following her, and not the other way around. “Amy-,” he catches up with her quickly. “I- I’m sorry,” he says swiftly, almost formally, as if she’s some professor he mouthed off to. “I didn’t mean it like that. Of course I didn’t. I was just upset. You know I didn’t mean it, don’t you?” He takes her arm, which she immediately removes from his grasp. “Amy, come on now-,”

Still she says nothing, brimming with a sick sense of pride. Good. Let him grovel for once, and embarrass himself, and feel sorry, if he even does. She has her doubts. He’s not sorry he said it, he likely believes it, he’s just sorry that he pushed her too far and is now being given the cold shoulder. He’s never sorry. And she accepted that long ago, but there are still consequences. He doesn’t get to get away with murder just because he can’t be bothered to feel much about it. She stares straight ahead and raises her chin haughtily, keeps walking until he gives up trying to cajole her into softening, and doesn’t say a word to him.

Not even three days later when they’re on the train back to London has she yet relented. He’s infuriated, she can tell, but he doesn’t dare start in on her again, lest he makes things even worse for himself, so instead he’s forced to sit there, practically twitching with outrage every so often, as she stretches out her legs and sketches the landscapes outdoors, smiling faintly to herself whenever he happens to glance at her, just to let it sink in a little more.

Chapter End Notes

How the turn tables...
Amy successfully keeps up the cold-shoulder act until the end of their first week back at Wool’s, upon which Tom gets her out of dishes duty in the kitchen by convincing a snake in the gardens to slither across Mary Campbell’s lap while she is reading. The ensuing shrieking fit that follows brings nearly every adult in hearing distance running, and most of the children as well. Amy has never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, and so discards her stained apron and practically bolts out of the kitchen and back upstairs.

She is presently joined by a rather expectant Tom, who finds her hiding on the landing, suppressing giggles as Dennis Bishop dashes outside with a rugby bat to try to execute the offending serpent. She doesn’t think he’ll be very successful, and Tom doesn’t seem very concerned.

“Alright,” Amy says, once she’s regained her breath and composed herself. “I forgive you, is that what you wanted? I think you just got tired of having no one to talk to,” she accuses.

“The snakes don’t generally make the most interesting conversation,” he says, leaning against the bannister. He has just begun another growth spurt, to her dismay, and now has at least four inches over her in height. She dislikes this very much, as it implies that they won’t be on even footing for much longer. It’s difficult to put the fear of God in someone whose shoulder is even with your head.

“They probably think the same of you,” she scoffs, but smiles. “D’you think Cook will make Mary do the dishes to help her calm down?”

“I think Mary’s an idiot.”

“You think everyone’s an idiot,” she sighs. “Except me.”

“I didn’t say that,” he says with a lofty edge.

“Fine, I’m a bit less of an idiot than the average person, is that it?”

That does provoke a thin smile from him, and they take advantage of her newfound freedom by holing up in his room to play chess. Tom is very good at chess, unsurprisingly, and Amy is rather terrible, but she’s at least not as bad as she is at wizard chess.

She sits cross-legged on his bed, watching dust motes dance in the air by his open window, and listening to the traffic outside. The Blitz is well and truly over, although there is still the occasional drill, and it feels almost peaceful to Amy once again, despite the ongoing war efforts.

Tom has just won their second match when there is a rap at the door, and they both look up, startled, as Mrs. Cole steps into the room. “Really,” she says sharply, seeing them, “this door shouldn’t be closed when the two of you are in here, Tom. You know the rules.”

Amy flushes. “We were just playing chess.”

“You’re not children anymore,” she continues in a reproving tone. “Amy, come downstairs and help set the table. Tom, there’s some weeding out back that Billy and Peter need help with.”
Amy would rather help set the table then scrub filthy pots and pans any day, and does so quite contentedly until Mary, who has by now recovered from her scare, says just loudly enough to be overhead by Doris and Helen, who are putting down a tablecloth nearby, “You think you’re so clever, sneaking off to go snog Tom Riddle while the rest of us do chores, don’t you?”

“I didn’t sneak off anywhere, you stupid bint,” Amy lies easily, refusing to rise to the obvious bait as she puts down yet another cracked plate. “Don’t throw a hissy fit just because a little garden snake scared you.” Mary can’t know it was Tom’s doing. She’s probably just looking for someone to go off on.

“Please,” Mary scoffs, glancing pointedly at Doris and Helen, who are pretending not to listen. “Everyone knows what you two get up to, always skulking off together. I don’t care what fancy school you go to. He’s still a freak and you’re a little slag, just like-,”

“AMY!” Miss Patrick yelps, coming into the dining room just as Amy whirls around and throw a handful of forks and knives in Mary’s direction. They clatter to the floor as she jumps back with a screech. “What has gotten into you? Pick those up! Now! And go wash them!” Mary kicks a few under the table as Amy crouches down to pick them up, and Amy resolves to make sure some of her clothes go missing during laundry day next week, and end up in a puddle or out on the street.

Tom is washing his hands in the kitchen when she stomps in, dumping the cutlery in the sink. “What happened?”

“None of your business,” Amy says, waiting impatiently for him to finish up. “Good lord, how much water are you going to use?” she demands. “I’ve got to wash these.”

“Did you drop them?” He sounds vaguely amused.

“In a sense, yes! Now hurry up!” She knows it’s not his fault, but she’s too busy visualizing gouging Mary’s eyes out with one of the forks in her hands. It shouldn’t have gotten under her skin this much, but it has. Do people really think that? They can’t. Tom and her are friends. Everyone knows that. No one really thinks they’re- It’s not as if-

He narrows his eyes at her and scoops up a handful of lukewarm water to splash down the front of her blouse as he leaves. “Tom, you absolute shit!” Amy hisses and throws a dirty dish rag at him as he goes, muttering something about girls and madness. She’s in a foul mood for the rest of the night, until she’s brushed her teeth and washed her face and changed for bed. Bianka regards her steadily from her side of the room.

“Mary is just jealous,” she finally says, “of you.”

“Dunno why,” Amy kicks off her slippers moodily. “Haven’t got anything for her to be jealous of.” That’s a lie, of course, but Bianka can’t know that.

“Mary’s smart but she didn’t get to go away to school somewhere nice,” Bianka says slowly. Her German accent is still thick, but she speaks much better English than she did a few years ago. “She told Helen you might get to go to university.”

“I’m not going to university,” Amy says immediately, and somewhat guiltily. “That’s- they wouldn’t let someone like me into a university.”

“But girls can go now,” Bianka frowns.

“If you’re rich and your father’s enlightened, maybe,” Amy says peevishly, pulling back her bed covers. “Which- anyways, once I’m done with school I’ll be working somewhere.” She’s not sure
where, but she can’t picture herself suddenly returning to ordinary- muggle- life after seven years at Hogwarts. She’ll be an adult witch. She can’t just forget all about that.

“Mary’s not going to university either, but it’s not my fault,” she says, although she still feels bad. “That’s just the way it goes. She’ll get over it.” She’ll find work as a nurse, or a teacher, or a secretary, or she’ll get married and have babies like everyone else. Amy would be doing the exact same thing if she wasn’t magic. Why should she feel sorry for Mary? Mary’s awful. She doesn’t deserve to go to university. So what if she’s very clever?

“You don’t think Tom and I are strange, do you?” she blurts out as she pulls the covers up around her, and reaches over to turn off the bedside lamp.

Bianka hesitates. “Strange how?”

“I mean- the way we act with each other.”

There is a long silence, and Amy almost wonders if Bianka has ignored her, rolled over, and gone straight to sleep. Then she says, very softly, “Sometimes you act as if you’re the only two people in the world. That’s all.” Neither of them says anything else after that.

On the train that September Amy reads Roosevelt’s Labor Day address to the Americans about weapons manufacturing in a muggle paper, and reads about a massacre of rebels in a Lithuanian village controlled by Grindelwald’s forces. She does not feel much like sketching, and instead eats the sweets Tom purchased with ‘borrowed’ money from one of his friends. She doubts they’ll be collecting interest. “Professor Merrythought said she might be able to tutor me privately this year,” he says. “She thinks I could be a natural at mind magic.”

“What’s mind magic?” Amy rolls up the newspaper in her lap and tosses it aside. “Hypnotism?”

“Guarding against magic that targets your willpower and thoughts,” he says, as if it should be obvious. “You know. The Imperius Curse and the like.” At her blank stare, he exhales. “You didn’t read ahead in the textbook? We’ll be covering the Unforgivables this year.”

“I’ve heard about the Killing Curse,” Amy says defensively, but feels slightly uneasy just saying it aloud. There is dark magic, of course, hexes and jinxes and curses and enchantments and potions designed to erode and corrupt, but magic that’s sole purpose is to kill as efficiently and instantaneously as possible seems different. Purely malevolent in a way that a nasty hex is not.

“The Killing Curse isn’t the most dangerous of the three,” says Tom. “Imperio is.”

Amy stiffens a little at him just speaking the incantation aloud. “You shouldn’t say that. Someone might overhear-,”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he rolls his eyes. “There’s no rules against discussing them.” There is an odd look on his face, and Amy is familiar with nearly all his looks. This is different. She cannot place it, but it almost reminds her of how he looked when he made her help him search for that cave-

“No, do you know why it’s the most dangerous?” he presses.

“Why?” asks Amy, unable to look away from him, feeling almost as though she were a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. His hair and eyes are so very dark and glossy in the sunlight. She feels whatever the opposite of reassured is.

“Because the Killing Curse will end you, and the Cruciatius Curse will make you wish you were dead, but the Imperius Curse will make you do things you’d never thought you could do. Things you’d never want to do, or at least never admit you’d want to do. It’s the only piece of magic that
removes all inhibitions from anyone. All limits. Can you imagine?’”

“No,” says Amy, drawing herself up in very properly scandalized form, as if he just told a dirty joke, although she can. She thinks maybe it is like when she stands at the very top of the staircase at Wool’s, and a tiny part of her brain wonders what it would be like to fling herself- or someone else- down it. She’d never do it. But everyone wonders about things like that sometimes, when they’re bored or tired or upset or just imagining things.

“So it forces you to do things you don’t want to. How’s it any different from someone threatening to kill you unless you do something terrible for them?”

“Because,” says Tom patiently, “it will make you think you want to do it. It might even let you enjoy it. It’s the opposite of a threat. It’s permission.”

“It’s not permission if you don’t have a choice,” she says, and she’d like to say more, but there’s a knock on their compartment door. It tentatively slides open, and Rosier stands there, looking between the two of them cautiously, which irks Amy all the more.

“Yes?” asks Tom, as though he’s a teacher talking to a nervous student. He always takes that sort of faux-patient tone with Rosier, who often stumbles over his words in Tom’s presence, as if frightened of phrasing something the wrong way and being mocked for it.

“Slughorn’s on the train. He wants a word with you,” Rosier says. “He’s with a few others.”

Tom looks as though he’s been expecting this, although Amy has no idea how he’d know such a thing in advance. “See you at the station, then,” she mutters, as he stands up briskly, straightening his tie and adjusting his worn blazer.

He makes a noise of assent as he goes, without so much as a glance back at her. Amy waits until he’s closed the door behind him and Rosier, and then throws an empty carton of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans at it. It bounces off the frosted glass and falls to the floor. “A natural at mind magic,” she murmurs mockingly. “Can you imagine, Amy? God.” It helps her to feel a little less disturbed.
1941

Amy throws herself into Quidditch with wild abandon, similar to the way Tom has thrown himself into Slughorn’s little club of polished and coiffed purebloods, with a few abnormally talented halfbloods and muggleborns for good measure. Amy is not abnormally talented, although she gets top marks on her latest Herbology project, coaxing life up from the wet soil and sewing up the tears in her gardening gloves.

She is skilled in Potions, but not to an alarming degree. But she knows Slughorn finds her quaint and charming, because Tom takes her to one of his dinners once, where Amy makes painful small talk with Irene Greengrass and Leila Shafiq. Next year will be OWLs, which she is trying not to think about, so she thinks about Quidditch instead. She goes over diagrams and flies through different techniques that Matthew has earmarked in his copies of Quidditch Quarterly. Matthew smiles a lot, but he smiles most when they are in the air together.

Amy knows she is not much prettier at fourteen than she was at eleven, just a bit taller, with a leaner face and softer curves. Except for her arms and legs, which are all wiry muscle, usually disguised under her uniform. She has bulky shoulders, she thinks, from years of catching and throwing the quaffle. She wishes her waist came to a narrow point and she wishes she looked more delicate in skirts and she wishes she did not have quite so many freckles, but adolescence has made her hair thicker and curlier, and darker, and if she squints at herself in the mirror, she’s charmed by what she sees, in the tentative manner of a gawky fourteen year old.

She’s letting her hair grow out. Some of the girls wear glossy victory rolls, but the purebloods disdain that muggle fashion. Girls like Geraldine Bulstrode comb their hair out until it gleams in the torchlight and wear it down to their waist, or in spindly, witchy braids, looped around pale ears. Amy doesn’t quite wish she was pure of blood and fair of face, but she’s increasingly aware of how odd she and Tom look when they stand beside each other. Like a gleaming violin fit for the orchestra and a farmer’s grimy foot-stomping fiddle.

She wishes he were uglier, rougher, blunter, short and stocky with cauliflower ears and swollen knuckles or hair that refused to lie flat. She has a steady, throbbing fear of being discarded, and part of her wants to abandon him first. Only Tom is not easy to abandon, and she’s not hard-hearted enough to push him away.

Matthew and her sit on the stands, drinking hot chocolate and going over Diggory’s notes for them and Warren Keane. Warren is late, as usual. Amy slurps her hot chocolate, then flushes when Matthew starts laughing at her. “It’s all over your mouth,” he snickers, and as she scrubs at it with her gloved hands, he leans over so their shoulders knock together and kisses her. Matthew isn’t ugly, but he’s not handsome either. He’s a decent, ordinary looking boy, who would probably look good in a suit, same as most men.

Amy kisses him back, having decided that she’ll take affection where she can get it, and finds it about as enjoyable as eating caramel or lying down in the sun. “I don’t want to go out,” she says, when they’re done. Matthew has tilted his head back so he can down the last of his hot chocolate. His Adam’s apple is bobbing thoughtfully in the late autumn sunshine. She likes the way it glints off his auburn hair. It’d be prettier on a girl, but he carries it well. “I don’t really have time for a
boyfriend.” Most couples perplex her. Besides, what would she tell Tom? She can only imagine how that would go. She’s not so much afraid of him being jealous; that’s a fact, not a theory, but she doesn’t think it’d be fair to drag Matthew into the middle of it.

Amy does not think Tom wants to ‘go out’ with her or kiss her or sling his arm around her shoulders or give her a bloody promise ring and exchange sweet nothings, but she doesn't think he wants to bear witness to her doing any of that with someone else, either. She’s trying to decide how she’d feel if he did any of that with Irene or Rose. Enraged, probably. It’d be one of thing if he’d shacked up with someone nice. But then, if he was with someone nice, she’d feel guilty about the whole thing. Tom should not be with someone nice. They would not stay nice for very long.

“That’s fine,” says Matthew, a note of relief in his voice. He was worried she was going to get attached, take things too seriously, think he was head over heels for her just because he kissed the chocolate off her mouth. Amy is now rather embittered over the whole thing- he could have at least pretended to be distraught, because every plain Jane does want to feel as though she could be Helen of Troy once in a while, launching a thousand ships into battle.

Matthew Abbott is too peaceable.

Then Warren finally arrives, huffing and puffing from sprinting down to the pitch, and they get on their brooms and fly away.

In late November, Witherspoon finds Grindelwald’s mark carved into one of the spare desks. There’s a brief smattering of nervous laughter as she stares down at it. Then she rounds on the class as a whole and the snickers immediately cease.

“Funny, is it?” she barks, and her furious gaze roves over the upturned faces. “Who did this? Surely you don’t mind taking credit, if you’re so willing to share this with the class.” All literature related to Grindelwald or the question of magical supremacy is strictly forbidden in the castle. Not so much because the Ministry disagrees with the notion, Ruby has pointed out, but because this is wartime, and dissent will not be tolerated from either side- pro or anti-Grindelwald. Mother knows best, as Alexander Nott would mockingly put it, when none of the professors are within earshot.

Tom has told her that poor Alex, horrible as he can be, had a mother. She died birthing him. They have that in common, at least. Amy has never wanted a mother. They seem like exceedingly fragile creatures, liable to wither away or vanish into the night at any moment. She has often wished for a father, which seems to be a sturdier, albeit harder and nastier breed. She thinks a father would have been nice, when she was small, even if he drank a lot or beat her. He could have put her up on his broad shoulders or sat her on his lap by the fire and let her listen to his voice echo in his strong chest.

No one is willing to own up to it. Amy peers curiously at Tom, whose feathers are ruffled by her suspicion; he mouths something sneering at her, and she looks away, chastened. “Well?” Witherspoon snaps, and finally, Ned Avery raises his hand, beet red with righteous outrage.

“I did it,” he says. “You do what you like, ma’am.”

Avery has always had bit of a flair for martyrdom, willing down to lay down his life for the noble cause of securing wizardkind’s future. Christ, thinks Amy, what a moron. They all brace themselves for a deafening roar from Witherspoon, or a sharp order out of the room and off to the headmaster’s office, but instead she slaps him clean across the face. Corporal punishment isn’t out of the norm- there’s canings a-plenty in the dungeons, and hard labor in the kitchens or potion storerooms, if that’s not enough to cow you, but-
Well, a slap is rather personal. A slap is something your mother might do if you called her a dirty word, or got out of line with your father. A slap is also very mundane, even underwhelming. Ned Avery seems more shocked than hurt; he stumbles back, a hand at his cheek. Witherspoon keeps her hand raised, wand useless at her side, then turns and walks out of the class herself, leaving the rest of them in a startled huddle.

“That blood traitor hag even hits like a muggle,” Charles Burke finally concludes. No one really laughs.

Two days later, Amy hears from Marge who heard from Jimmy Cousland that Witherspoon lost a younger brother in the auror’s department to Grindelwald this past summer.

The marked desk disappears, never to be seen again.

Quidditch winds down for the winter. Amy doesn’t kiss Matthew again. Tom, who has been fairly distant for most of the semester, sets about to hunt her down two weeks before the winter break. She assumes it is to finally convince her to not go home for Christmas. She is very wrong. Tom hoists himself up into the windowsill overlooking the clocktower courtyard beside her, and deposits an embossed letter in her lap.

“I’ve been invited to the Parkinson’s New Year Gala,” he says.

“Bully for you,” grouses Amy, still put out that he stood her up for lunch last week to go skulk off into the dungeons with Malfoy instead. “Moving up in the world, are we?”

“I need a date,” he is displaying an impressive amount of patience.

Amy looks from the invitation to him and back again. “I should think Irene would love to,” she says tartly.

“Irene’s going with Burke,” he says. “And I wasn’t going to ask her, anyhow.”

“Ooh, I’m charmed.” He is blocking her view of the courtyard. She was trying to sketch the first snow of the year.

“We both know you’ll say yes,” Tom says evenly. “You’ve never been to a dance before.”

“Neither have you,” she scoffs. “And if you’re so sure, why’re you here? Decided to do me the pleasure of telling me beforehand?”

“Obviously, you won’t be taking the train home if you’re coming with me.”

“Obviously,” she mutters. She runs the pads of her fingers over the velvety green ink. “I didn’t think they let in my sort.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says. “It’s a charity fundraiser.”

“And you’re the charitable invite.” It sounded funnier in her head. His cold stare says otherwise.

“Don’t sulk,” says Amy. “You’re the one determined to be a self-made man, slinking around Slug Club. Why are you taking me? I’m not going to do any wonders for your image.”

“Because if I didn’t, they’d ask after you,” he says concisely and frigidly. “Make jokes. You think I don’t ever have to field questions about it? Why I’m associating with a Hufflepuff-.”

“I’m honored, Your Highness,” she imitates a falsetto, then mimes hitting him with her
sketchbook. “The best defense is a good offense? The war production offices would love to have you, Riddle!”

“You don’t want to show them up,” he looks down at her, “just a little? You’re too humble, Amy. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not the one who’s ashamed,” she says fiercely, and then hands him back the invitation. “I’ll have to borrow a dress. And shoes. Unless you know any fairy godmothers.”

“I can get you shoes,” he says. “As for the dress- ask that Mishra girl, why don’t you?”

“Her name is Ruby,” Amy closes up her sketchbook, and shoves her pencils back into her satchel. “This had better be worth my Christmas.” But she can’t pretend she’s not a little intrigued to see how the other half lives. Not even the other half. The top echelon of magical society. She somewhat doubts that they live in thatched witch’s cottages in the woods, or in some drafty old castle on a cliff.

The Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor the following day, and the States plunge into the war full-throttle.

Ruby bestows on her a pale lavender rayon number with beaded cap sleeves and a vaguely art deco geometric design in silver round the waist. Vera helps them take it in along the chest and skirt, so she’s not tripping over herself and falling out of it. “You’ll want to wear your hair up,” Ruby decides, lifting it so it frames Amy’s face. “And lipstick- leave your eyes alone. This brings out the blue.”

She does not quite recognize the girl in the mirror, who is equal parts shy wallflower and blushing English rose. Amy pinches her cheeks so they hold the color longer, and tries on three different shades of Vera’s burgeoning lipstick collection before deciding on a neutral shade of pink. The skirt swishes pleasingly when she walks on her tiptoes.

Tom has managed to call in some favor and secure fairly new robes for himself. They are a grey just a shade shy of black, with silver detailing around the collar and sleeves. It somewhat matches her dress. He did bring her shoes, as he promised. She’s not used to heels, but she gets them on after an initial struggle, bracing herself using his shoulder blades, which seem sharp enough to split her hands open.

Then they look at each other. Amy thinks they should take a picture, but she is somehow afraid that would ruin it. He is looking at her as though trying to readjust his vision. She is looking at him with open admiration. It’s only part of the Yule spirit, she tells herself, to give in and stroke his ego, just this once.

“You look nice,” she says.

“You look different,” he says.

The portkey is an appropriately themed evergreen wreath. The needles bite into her fingers as she clutches it and everything twists in a sickening, churning fashion. The Parkinson estate is blindingly white, the snow enchanted and charmed to an unnatural state of glistening, crystalline perfection. The line of carriages out front, some led by horses with wings, is a bit ostentatious, Amy thinks. They avoid the receiving line entirely, walk briskly through the cavernous foyer, and then into the ballroom, doors open wide.

Chapter End Notes
This is one of the few chapters where the next one will directly pick up where this left off.
1941

The vaulted ceiling of the ballroom is enchanted with a sea of floating chandeliers. Amy doesn’t quite see the point in it, since chandeliers are designed to hang from the ceiling via metal chains, and these are simply hovering about, but she can understand the aesthetic appeal. She wishes she’d brought her sketchbook, but somehow she doubts Tom would have been pleased to find her huddled in a corner, scratching away, getting pencil shavings and graphite smears all over her dress.

Still, she’s so distracted and overwhelmed by it all that she nearly trips into other guests twice before Tom rights her course and steers them both into a secluded corner. Tom does not seem terribly impressed with the chandeliers or the live band playing some sort of waltz Amy has never heard before or the enchanted snow and ice drifting down around them and gathering on the floor and walls. It’s not cold to the touch, only a little cool. It makes Amy uncomfortable.

Rather, Tom seems to be evaluating the entire scenario the way a general might a battlefield. “I see Abraxas and his sisters,” he comments after a moment. “And Nott’s with his father and uncles in that corner. I’ll be busy most of the night. I need to make an impression. Some of them are on the board of governors, they’ll see our OWL results.”

“I don’t think anyone’s going to to recruit a fifteen year old to their firm or bureau,” Amy says in bemusement.

Tom is barely listening. “Try to blend in,” he suggests, as if he’s just brought her to her first day of finishing school in Paris, where she’ll have to mask her poorer relations and lack of inbreeding. “Leila liked you well enough at that Slug dinner- she’s over by the refreshments.” He hesitates, eyes narrowing as he gazes at someone she can’t pick out. “With Alphard Black. He’s not fond of me.”

“I can’t imagine why,” says Amy with a sardonic edge, “you’re a barrel of laughs most days-,”

“Try to win him over,” Tom cuts her off. “He’s a bit… rebellious for a Black. He’ll like you.”

“That’s me, the Hufflepuff,” she shrugs out of his iron grip. “A friend to all outcasts, I am. It’s a party, Tom. And your birthday. Try to have some fun, will you?”

“Don’t do anything rash,” he tells her severely. It is occurs to her that perhaps he is almost nervous about tonight. She feels a brief well of sympathy.

“I would never,” Amy lies with her best benign smile, and squeezes his hand affectionately. Magical snow and chandeliers and crush of wealthy snobs aside, it’s not every day one gets to go to a ball, and she is grateful to him for that. She can understand the appeal of forgetting for a few hours, of just drinking it all in, pretending you belong and that all is right with this perfectly opulent world.

Amy vaguely knows both Alphard and Leila, but only vaguely. Alphard has an extremely unpleasant older sister, Walburga, who thankfully is nowhere to be seen. The Black line are all tall, dark-haired, and bear the same Roman noses and intimidating stares. Alphard’s hair is long, even
for a foppish pureblood boy, and slicked back, but a few strands are already escaping. Leila is small in size but commanding in tone, a constellation of glittering stars across the midnight black scarf her hair is gathered under.

She smiles when she sees Amy approaching, Alphard does not. She presses a drink into Amy’s hands; it is alarmingly warm and bubbling away in the goblet. “This is…”

“No idea,” says Leila, “but it’s not alcohol and it tastes a bit like raspberry lemonade, only you know, not cold.”

Amy takes a small sip. It’s not bad. Alphard is still staring her down. Leila lays a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t mind him. He’s in another feud with dear sissy.”

“Yes, let’s go around sharing family secrets,” Alphard mutters. “How is your uncle Hamid, by the way? Still wanted in three different countries?”

Leila pinches him, still smiling.

“Your turn,” Alphard says to Amy. “Though I’ve heard your only real family is Riddle.” It’s cruel, and unexpected, and Amy is nowhere near talented enough of an actress to avoid recoiling, blood rush turning her cheeks bright red. To his credit, Alphard seems to half-regret the words as soon as he says them, hesitating and almost guiltily glancing down.

Leila glares at him. “Excuse his poor manners,” she says tightly. “He needs a good hexing, which I will happily give him as soon as we’re on the train back to Hogwarts.”

“Tom worries very much about what other people think,” says Amy, her flush fading. She squares her shoulders and stares back at Alphard. “But I don’t. And I’m not here as his spy, if that’s what you’re worried about.” She takes a bold sip of her drink, then sets it down on the nearest table. “I’d like to dance.”

It is a bit of a bait, but rebel or not, Alphard Black is too well brought up to not begrudgingly escort her out onto the floor. Leila follows, having snagged some boy seemingly out of thin air. Amy has never danced with a boy before like this, but he keeps a chaste grip on her waist, and she is able to reach his shoulders without straining her arms out of their sockets, to her relief.

“I apologize for my discourteous behavior,” he finally says. “It was terribly rude of me to embarrass you like that in front of Leila.”

“I wasn’t embarrassed,” says Amy, which is only half a lie. “Besides, I don’t think Leila cares as much about all that.” She’s treading lightly here.

“Neither do I,” says Alphard. “Even if my tone suggested otherwise. I don’t dislike Riddle because he’s not one of the Sacred Twenty Eight. I dislike him because he’s a conniving, deceitful, vindictive little…” He trails off at the amused look on her face, then flushes a bit himself.

“What did he do?” Amy asks innocently.

“Nothing I can prove,” Alphard snaps, then pauses. “But I suppose you know him better than me. You should still keep your guard up around him.” He seems to consider his words very carefully. “He… has a way of getting in your head.” Something about his phrasing is slightly off, but Amy can’t put her finger on it. Of course she knows Tom can be persuasive and manipulative. She’s watched him get better and better at over the years.

“I don’t think Tom has any interest in getting in my head,” she laughs it off, and then considers
him. “But you don’t despise halfbloods or muggleborns. Otherwise you would have just ignored
me from the start.”

“Call it a difference of opinion with the rest of my family,” says Alphard. “Walburga is… very
strident in her support of Grindelwald’s tactics. She’d never dare say so at school, of course. Our
mother’s afraid she’ll run away to France or Germany one of these days to join up with the cause.”

“As opposed to getting married to a nice boy,” Amy says dryly, and to her surprise, Alphard laughs
at that.

“And that. I can’t say I think much of her maternal instincts.”

They talk a little bit about his demanding family, his bothersome baby brother, Cygnus, and his
friendship with Leila, who is the year above them.

“She took me under her wing,” says Alphard. “I suppose she could tell I was… floundering a bit
first year.”

Amy has noticed that he has never fallen in with Tom’s group, and wonders again what Tom did.
Or perhaps it’s just a general distaste for that clique. She can’t really say she blames him. But it
must be difficult for him all the same, she thinks. Slytherin, like Hufflepuff, thrives on close bonds
between its members. Not belonging is everyone’s worst fear. And feeling like an outsider every
day…

The dance comes to an end, and she talks with Alphard, who now insists she call him Al, and she
spends the next two hours sitting with them in a corner, snickering around her drink at their
commentary on the guests, decorations, and outfits. Leila is ridiculously harsh and ridiculously
funny as she tears gowns and robes and hats apart, and Al seems to know every dirty secret about
nearly every pureblood clan, including his own. The Blacks appear to have several branches.

Eventually Leila’s sisters, Fatima and Nadia, come over with their dates, and Al is eventually
dragged off by Walburga, who gives Amy a nasty look as she sweeps away. No one else asks Amy
to dance, but she doesn’t mind her; her feet are hurting something awful, and the ballroom is hot,
even with the enchanted ice and snow. Finally, Tom makes an appearance, complimenting the
Shafiq sisters on their dress robes and gold jewelry before he leads Amy away.

“Please don’t tell me we’re going to dance,” she groans tiredly, her throat hoarse from all the
talking and laughter, but he’s making for one of the set of doors leading out onto the long balcony
instead. There are a few other guests on the far end of the balcony, and one couple who’s ducked
behind a potted Christmas tree, no doubt to feel each other up, but it is far quieter and colder than
the ballroom. Amy leans against the icy wrought iron railing to cool off, noting that her hair is
coming down from its forcibly elegant knot. She pulls out the comb holding it, and lets it spill
down around her shoulders. It’s not as if they’ll be here much longer.

Tom seems similarly tired, no doubt from the past three hours of politicking. His eyes are heavily
lidded and half closed, but then they open as he stares up at the night sky above them. “I hope you
weren’t too put out,” he comments. “But I would say things went well, all else considered. Mrs.
Parkinson found me rather charming. I overheard her telling Cordelia Rosier-,”

You did something awful to him, didn’t you?”

Tom stares at her. “Apparently sending you over there wasn’t a complete loss. I thought you might
ignore me entirely.”
“Oh, he quite likes me,” she huffs. “You, on the other hand- well, best to write that one off. You’ve clearly earned a permanent spot on his list-,”

“I saw you dancing with him,” Tom sounds altogether too casual. “I don’t remember telling you to do that.”

“Well, you don’t tell me to wake up and go to class every day, and yet somehow I manage,” Amy snorts. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” says Tom mildly. “I saw something he didn’t want me to see.”

“Fine, what did he do?” she insists, infuriated that he’s being so coy with her.

“Well, it really wouldn’t be worth much if I went around telling people, would it?”

“So you’re blackmailing him. Lovely.” Her head throbs, and she massages her aching scalp.

“I am not,” Tom retorts, sounding a bit miffed. “He just knows that I know. Sometimes that’s enough. In fact, I’d rather he didn’t know that I know, but I haven’t gotten to that point yet.”

“Point with what?” she squints at him. “Spying?”

He shrugs. “In a sense.”

Amy looks at him for a few moments, and then it occurs to her. “Jesus,” she says. “Did you- you didn’t use mind magic on him, did you? Is that it?”

“Inadvertently,” says Tom. “It couldn’t be helped. He was like a half open door, with all this sound and light spilling out- how could I ignore it?”

“I thought Merrythought was teaching you to shield yourself, not- break into other people!” she hisses.

“They go hand in hand, Amy,” he rolls his eyes as if she’s being rather dramatic about the whole thing. “What would you have me do? Only learn half of it?”

“You had no right to do that to him.”

“It was an accident.”

“Nothing you do is ever an accident,” she snaps. “Don’t condescend to me, Tom Riddle. You knew exactly what you were doing.”

“If you calm down, maybe I will tell you what I saw.” He’s holding it over her head like a little boy teasing a dog with a treat.

“I don’t want to know,” she turns away in disgust. “Really.”

“He hated me even before that,” says Tom. “He’s so desperate to escape his own name he can’t even imagine someone else wanting it. He’s ignorant and spoiled. A coddled little brat. He has no idea how fortunate he is, how easy his life could be if he wasn’t so intent on throwing it back in everyone’s face-,”

“Not everyone wants an easy life,” Amy gives him a push, not that there’s far to go. He backs into the railing, and brings her with him by the elbow. “Let go of me.”
“You don’t mean that.”

“Take a look in me and find out, then,” she scowls, then immediately regrets it—what if he takes her up on the offer? What if he already has, and she didn’t realize?

His lazy half-smile vanishes. “I would never do that to you.” His grip on her loosens slightly. “I already know everything.”

“You don’t,” she says with more calm than she feels. Her flush has returned for altogether different reasons. She’s still angry with him, but she’s also standing almost pressed up against him on a balcony on New Year’s Eve, and the countdown is beginning inside.

“TEN-,”

“Really?” asks Tom. “Tell me, then. What don’t I know, Amy?”

“NINE-,”

“Sometimes I really do hate you,” she says.

“EIGHT-,”

“You brought me to a bloody ball and couldn’t be bothered to say half a word to me all night,” Amy goes on crossly.

“SEVEN-,”

“You didn’t even dance with me—not that I want to now, mind you, these shoes are too small-,”

“SIX-,”

“Which you would know if you ever bothered to listen to me instead of being so stuck up your own arse that I’m surprise you can even get up in the morning-,”

“FIVE-,”

“You send me off to do your bidding like some crony—which, I ought to be charging you money for this, if you’re just going to pinch it off Malfoy anyways-,”

“FOUR-,”

“And then you give me some twisted little confession about how you read someone’s mind on a whim-,”

“THREE-,”

“And now you expect me to what? Congratulate you on a job well done?”

“TWO-,”

“Well,” Amy snarls, “congratulations, Tom. Well done, and happy birthday, you selfish, stupid bastard!”

“ONE!”

He kisses her. She thinks there may have been fireworks set off overhead or the band may have
started up again indoors or people might be toasting to 1942, but he’s kissed her. She thought it might be like kissing a brother, but she doesn’t have a brother, and it doesn’t feel wrong, to her alarm.

She had always thought it would feel sick, or wrong, or perverse in some way, but it doesn’t. Not that he’s very good at it, she thinks, and she thinks he may have just done it to shut her up, but she’s not about to let this be another moment of triumph for him, so she sets about showing him how to properly snog her into breathless silence.

They pull apart, or really, he abruptly steps back. His face is moon pale, and his pupils are dilated to an alarming degree. “I don’t know why I did that,” he says, and Amy really does believe him for the first time in a long while.

“What don’t I know, Tom?” she smiles, and shows far too much of her crooked teeth.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it only took about 18 chapters of dubious morals to arrive at this point? I don't necessarily consider this fic a 'romance', so if anyone's worried that this is about to go off the rails into la-la land where there's a lot of hand-waving away of bad decisions and heartfelt confessions of feelings- don't!
Steady

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1942

They don’t speak about the kiss until three perilous, wintry weeks later, when they’re walking through a drafty corridor on the way to dinner. Amy stumbles over her laces one time too many, and drops down to one knee to retie them, scowling down at the cold stone floor. When she stands back up Tom is far too close to her, and before she can step back or brush past him, their mouths awkwardly collide. It still doesn’t feel wrong; on the contrary it feels alarmingly right, and she doesn’t even mind when she backs into a frigid windowpane.

This time he puts his hands on her waist, and she squeezes his shoulders when she wants him to speed up; they completely blow past ‘innocent peck’ until there’s the the sound of distant chatter around the corner. They both silently and furiously break apart; she straightens her cardigan and smooths back her hair, and he shoves his hands in his pockets and adopts a forced casual gait as they walk down the remainder of the corridor. Amy feels as though her mouth is red or swollen as some sinister omen of what they’ve been up to, but of course it’s really not.

No one looks at her suspiciously when she sits down at the Hufflepuff table, although Patsy asks her if she’s feeling quite alright, since she looks ‘a bit pale’. Her ears are ringing queerly, and it takes Vera two tries to get her attention in order for Amy to pass her the platter of Shepherd’s Pie. She resists the urge to glancefurtively over at the Slytherin table, where Tom is likely calmly eating his meal and sipping his pumpkin juice as if nothing has happened. Feeling queerly determined to not be the fretful, needy girl, she forces herself into the dreadful discussion surrounding their upcoming History of Magic test instead.

She lags behind the usual group after dinner, hoping no one takes notice, but of course Ruby pauses at the top of the stairwell leading down to the basement. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I want to pop in the library before it closes for the night,” Amy lies, she hopes convincingly; Ruby is very discerning; “I still haven’t read up on harmonious toadstools for Herbology…” True to form, any talk of gardening scares Ruby off, she grimaces and disappears down the stairs with the rest of the chattering crowd. Amy stays where she is, conveniently close to the path the Slytherins must take to reach the dungeons, and waits.

Fortunately for her, Tom is not in a pack himself; his only company is Burke, who he immediately dismisses upon sighting her. Burke wanders off like a forlorn, lost puppy, head bowed, and Amy follows Tom across the vast, echoing antechamber and into the hall of tapestries instead. There the sound is much more muffled, and they both wait to make sure no one has followed before rounding on one another.

“Listen,” says Tom, in what he likely believes to be a reassuring tone. “You won’t have to wait very long. Next year, I think, if I’m made prefect- when I’m made prefect,” he corrects himself, “then we can do proper introductions to the right people, get them used to the idea of you- the idea of us- if you’re more friendly with Irene and Rose, it’ll give off a much better impression-,”

“What are you talking about?” Amy blurts out in complete confusion.

Tom stares at her, and then looks as though he might laugh. “Going steady, of course. I know
you’ll be upset, but you must see why I can’t start bringing you around them just yet- It’s too sudden, people will talk, and you’ve not done yourself any favors with the regular company you keep- the Mishras aren’t well established in Britain yet, the Goldsteins are tailors, for Merlin’s sake, Sampson’s father is in prison, Baker is practically muggle, she’s so afraid of her own wand-,”

“I don’t want to go steady with you,” Amy says incredulously. “What- you think-,”

“You don’t want to,” he repeats just as incredulously. “Amy, don’t be willfully obtuse. I’m not saying it can’t happen, just that we’ll have to be quiet about it until next year, at the very least. It’s not as if I planned it-,”

“No one plans kissing someone in the middle of being lectured, Tom,” she snipes.

He rolls his eyes. “That’s very much besides the point. Once I’ve really got a leg up- a position- then it will be a much better time to make it public knowledge.”

“Dear lord,” says Amy flatly, “more image control?” She’s not sure whether to laugh hysterically or fly into a rage and jinx him. In the span of an hour he’s managed to go from snogging her breathless in an empty corridor to rationalizing and spinning the entire thing as some sort of bonus for himself, as if everyone will fall over themselves to petition Dippet to announce him as Head Boy two years early because selfless, noble Tom Riddle has gone the extra step and is- Merlin forbid- going steady with a mild-mannered Hufflepuff.

“It’s not just that,” says Tom, albeit more guardedly. “But you have to realize that this can’t be- I can’t afford to lose everything- everything I’ve worked for these past few years, just because-,”

She kisses him again, hard and willful, and he stops talking, one hand tangling in her hair. This time she backs him into a tapestry, which shudders in disgust at the adolescent display before it, at least until Tom calls it off, reluctantly, she might add, detaching himself from her, although he keeps his long fingers in her hair, strumming at her scalp. Amy smiles a bit wickedly, she feels, and then takes a slight step back from him, angling her chin up almost tauntingly.

“I don’t want to go steady,” she repeats herself. “Is that what you thought? That I’d be begging you to take me out to Hogsmeade and buy me pretty little trinkets from the shops with stolen galleons? That I’d be throwing myself at you left and right, crying my eyes out when you don’t take me to one of Slughorn’s stupid dinners?” Her teasing tone chills. “I meant what I said that night. What makes you think I want to go steady with anyone- least of all you?”

Tom truly blanches, if that’s possible for someone as fair-skinned as him, and then pulls her hair, hard, but beyond the dull stab of pain in her head she finds it more amusing than anything else, yanking away from him, and half-turning away. “Maybe your little games work on those halfwits you play Quidditch with,” he says sharply, “but they’re not going to get far with me. Don’t kid yourself. You wanted that kiss-,”

“It was alright,” she examines her blunted nails. “As far as kisses go.”

He catches her by the shoulder, and she’s both delighted and slightly unnerved by the look in his eyes. “Because you know so much about that.”

“More than you,” she mutters.

“What?” he all but hisses. “Who? With- with who?” She makes to saunter away, but his fingers clamp down hard around her wrist. “Who did you-,”

“You’re so easy to rile up,” she snorts, then, careful to think of nothing but their own kiss moments
ago, just in case he’s trying to take a look in her head, adds innocently, “I was only kidding you. You’re no fun, Tom.”

She has to give him this bitter dose of medicine now, just to set the record straight once and for all; they’ve always done things together, and while she may have been content to let him say when and where and what they do before, this—things they do to each other, with their mouths and hands—this is her domain now, and she’s going to set the tone of it, not him. She’s not going to have him smugly carrying on as if she ought to be honored that he considers her worthy of affections.

And she’s certainly not going to have him holding her locked away as some dirty little secret. If anything, it ought to go both ways. They hide each other. They hide this together, because neither wants to answer the questions it raises, both from their peers and from themselves. Amy knows part of her must be ashamed, even if it feels good. Part of her must be ashamed, because Tom is partially right. Maybe she should want them to be normal and go steady and go on dates and let her be his girl and have everyone know it, disapproving or not.

But she doesn’t want that. She wants what they’ve always had, only now she wants a little more from him, and he from her. She doesn’t see why things should have to change, why either of them should want them to change. She doesn’t want to be sweet little Amy Benson, Tom Riddle’s demure girlfriend. She wants to be Amy. Amy who doesn’t need anyone, certainly not any boy, to tell her who she is and how she ought to behave and who she ought to be seen with. Just Amy, who she’s always been, and if she wants to kiss him when no one is watching, then it seems to her that it’s her right.

His jaw is twitching. Amy settles in to wait, averting her gaze.

“Then what do you want?” he finally asks.

“I want us to stay the same,” she says tartly. “I don’t want to be your girl. I don’t want to be some—some trophy or accessory. We’re friends. Best friends, right? So we can do things like this,” she reaches out and gently brushes her fingers alongside his cheek, and he recoils, but not necessarily from disgust, “but we do it like this. When we’re alone. It’s not an act this way.”

This way she knows for certain, is what she doesn’t say. This way she knows he’s being genuine with her, because if they’re publicly a couple, she’ll never, ever know, and it will all get so muddled she won’t know which way is up and which is down, he’ll make it into something else, something hollow and shiny. She lets her hand fall away, and watches him swallow. She knows her face is bright pink, despite her attempts at what—persuasion? They both know she’s not going to talk him into anything he doesn’t already want, no more than he could talk her into it.

“All right,” he says after a long, tremulous silence. “Fine. Your way, then. But you’re— you’re not to do it with anyone else.”

“Neither are you,” she retorts indigantly.

He curls his lip at her as if she’s being stupid to even presume he might. “I know how Abbott looks at you. I’m not blind.” His tone implies, however, that he’d quite like to enact some Biblical blinding himself.


“Good,” he says a bit hoarsely.
“You’re not to start demanding things, either,” she tacks on belatedly. “I mean it, Tom. I don’t want you lurking around trying to shoo me into some empty classroom whenever you’ve got the urge-,”

“Amy,” he snaps, and he sounds almost embarrassed.

“It has to be equal,” she insists stubbornly. “Or you won’t have me at all. I’m serious. And don’t you dare tell any of your disgusting little friends, or I swear to Morgana I’ll hex you so badly you won’t be able to see straight.”

“Why would I tell anyone?” he exhales in exasperation. “You think I want people going around-,”

“Saying that you have a heart,” she mocks, and then side-steps his hands. “What? It’s true. Tom Riddle,” she imitates breathlessly, “all weak-kneed for some Hufflepuff no-name-,”

She darts away at his second attempt, smirking, and leads him on a brief chase down the long hall, snickering. A spell connects with her legs, and she stumbles forward long enough for him to catch up with her. Amy is still laughing, shaking with giddy amusement and excited nerves, when he kisses her again, insistent and forceful, and they go tripping onto a bench, where her legs tangle with his briefly until she locks her arms around his neck.

They do not hold hands on the hurried walk back to their respective common rooms, but she can see the look on his face out of the corner of his eye, and her triumphant smile doesn’t waver. In the weeks that follow, they go nearly two months without a single argument, too busy ducking under stairwells and into unlocked rooms, and although some part of Amy suspects that this is infatuation-based-denial on both of their parts, a larger, childishly infatuated and smug part of her doesn’t care. Doesn’t she deserve something good? Doesn’t she deserve to pretend the rest of it doesn’t matter, that he’s still entirely her Tom? Besides, she tells herself, when he’s with her, he’s not with the Slug Club or Malfoy or Nott or Mulciber. Surely that has to count for something.

Chapter End Notes

Hormones are a hell of a drug? Denial’s not just a river in Egypt? We’ll be back to the regularly scheduled drama and muggle/magical conflict next chapter, don’t worry.
1942

“It’s so gaudy,” Amy is shaking with mirth in the rickety little chair at Tom’s desk while he adjusts his prefect pin. There’s no mirror, so he’s squinting at his reflection in the dusty window pane instead. His chair is far too small for him at this point, having been made for a child, not a tall young man, and it can barely hold her, either. Her legs spill over the back of it in a horribly unladylike position as she slouches her spine against the desk. She’s wearing her singular pair of trousers because they’re cleaning today, and skirts aren’t very practical for mopping floors.

He turns back to face her, and takes in her languid position with mild disdain. “You’re going to break that chair rocking it back and forth like that.”

“Oh dear me, are you going to take points?” she snickers helplessly, waving a hand at him. “Ten points from Hufflepuff for shameless behavior, Benson! That’ll be a detention. Can you give detentions? Ooh, you could set people writing lines so you could mock their handwriting, like you do mine!”

“Your handwriting is horrific,” Tom takes the bait without much fuss. “It’s no wonder you got points off on all your essay questions on exams.”

She lays a hand on her heart while lolling her head back so her hair brushes the top of the desk, dusting across his scattered books and papers. “What a terrible thing to say.”

He leans around her to pick up the letters from Hogwarts once more, and doesn’t so much as blink when she grabs him by the collar in order to kiss him while he does so. Tom uses that as an excuse to hook an arm around her waist and bodily haul her off the chair, before he pauses. “Are you reading my letter?” Amy tuts, but there’s a sly smile playing on her lips until he glances at her, then opens his hand to reveal a second pin.

“Funny,” he says dryly, as she bursts into a peal of laughter. “You’ve gotten slightly better at lying, I’ll give you that-,”

“Spare me,” she snatches her own gaudy prefect’s pin from him. “I had you fooled! And do try to mind your manners, Tom, or I’ll have to dock a few points before the school year’s even begun-,”

There’s a hesitant knock on the partially open door, and they both spring back from each other as if stung; Amy drops her pin in the process, and scrambles to pick it up and shove it into her pocket as she turns to face the visitor. Bianka stands in the doorway, glancing between the two of them warily. “Weren’t you supposed to be washing the windows?” Tom demands archly of her, raising an eyebrow.

“And you ought to be helping trim the hedgerow- leave off her,” Amy snaps at him, feeling peevishly protective of Bianka, who really sees far more of Tom than she’d like due to having Amy for a roommate.

“Dennis is doing it,” he says smoothly, while Bianka shifts from leg to leg uncomfortably and clears her throat.
“More like you threatened Dennis into it-,”

“I’m sorry, Amy, I hadn’t realized how fond you were of-,”

“Amy, Mrs Cole wants your help polishing the furniture before she has to get ready for the dinner tonight!” Bianka bursts out in one long stream of words, and they both stop bickering. To Amy’s surprise, Bianka’s eyes look red-rimmed. She hopes Tom didn’t intimidate her that badly. He can be a bit imposing, certainly, but- Bianka has already hurried off.

She shoots him a glare and makes to go after her, but he catches her by the hand. “Meet me after dinner.” She shakes off his grip. “You promised,” he reminds her as she leaves his room, glancing up and down the hall to make sure no one sees her coming or going. “Don’t forget.”

Amy knows she’s risking a tongue-lashing to delay any longer, but she peeks into her and Bianka’s room all the same. Bianka is sitting on her knees on the bed, staring at the wall. “Are you alright?” Amy asks softly, letting the door shut behind her.

“Yes,” says Bianka. “I just want to be alone. I don’t feel very well.”

“Did something happen? Was Mary teasing you again?” A German accent, even if the speaker was Jewish, was often not pleasantly met around Wool’s. Or the neighborhood, for that matter.

“No,” says Bianka shortly, although her voice seems to waver slightly, “I just- I had a letter from a family friend. About my mother.”

Bianka’s parents ran a bakery in Dresden. Her mother used to sing to her while she brushed her hair. Her father would fall asleep in his chair by the window and forget to come to supper. The house smelled like flour. They had a fat orange cat Bianka called Moritz. That is all Amy knows about them. “Is she-,”

“She was transferred from a factory to a camp,” says Bianka shrilly. “That’s all. It’s nothing.”

It is not nothing, Amy knows. “Bianka…”

“They won’t transfer her again from this camp. No one leaves,” is all she says, before her shoulders break and the sobs come. Amy moves towards her, puts a hand on her arm, but Bianka shakes her off. “Leave me alone! Go do your chores.”

So she does. Helping Ruth and Lois to polish the downstairs furniture takes the better part of an hour, and by the time they’re done Cook is putting supper on, and Mrs. Cole and Miss Patrick are hurrying out the door for their dinner, some charity event they attend every year, hoping to secure more funding for the orphanage. Amy picks at her food, noting Bianka’s empty seat at the table, and avoids Tom’s pressing gaze. Afterwards she helps clean up, and then Cook is leaving as well, and the orphanage is temporarily unmanned, aside from a few of the very eldest girls who are ‘in charge’ for the evening until Cole and Patrick return.

Amy doesn’t want to meet Tom tonight, but she doesn’t want to go back to her room, either, so she finds him on the stairwell, mere minutes after everyone else has gone up to get ready for bed. “This is a bad idea,” she says, not for the first time. “We should wait.”

He ignores her. “This is the best time to do it, while they’re busy with the nursery.” She can tell how eager he is by the way he takes the stairs down to the main floor two at a time. Amy curses his long legs and hurries after him, looking around. Most of the lights have been turned off, and all is quiet down here. Quiet and dark. She shivers involuntarily, despite the fact that it’s summertime. Wool’s always manages to stay drafty anyways.
“You don’t even know if you’re going to find anything.”

“They have to have some records.” He lowers his voice even more as they turn the corner, skulking down the hallway, avoiding the floorboards that creak.

“Did you ever hear the saying about letting sleeping dogs lie?”

“You don’t let a dog lie when it’s chewing on something that belongs to you,” he hisses back at her, and they come to a stop in front of the locked office door. “Go on.”

“Do it yourself,” she mutters.

“Fine,” he says through his teeth, “give me the bobby pin and I will.”

Amy wrinkles her nose at him and then crouches down, sliding the pin into the lock. “You’d break it. You always try to force the locks, you’re too impatient.” More like too frustrated he couldn’t risk using magic on it, she thought darkly. “That’s why your potions are off sometimes, you try to accelerate the brewing.”

“My potions are not-,” he cuts himself off as the lock clicks and Amy cautiously pulls open the door. “Stay here.” He slips past her into the darkened office, pulling his wand. “Lumos.” Everyone with half a brain knows a simple wand lighting or extinguishing isn’t going to set off the Trace on underage magic- if that was the case the Ministry would be filing new cases day and night. Amy hovers in the doorway, scanning the end of the hallway, listening to hear if anyone is coming down the stairs. She can hear him opening drawers, ruffling through papers. There must be hundreds of birth certificates and forms and papers in the office, and who knows how old some of them are. Seconds turn into minutes, and she fidgets in place, before finally poking her head into the room.

“Did you find anything? Try searching alphabetically.”

“’What do you think I’m doing?’ he snaps back, before she shushes him.

If they caught down here, she doesn’t even want to think about how bad it’s going to look. The office is strictly off limits, and despite their, ahem, ‘troubled youth’, she and Tom both might as well be model orphans. Wool’s has little patience for children over the age of twelve or so intent on causing trouble, and no one wants to be shipped off to some sort of military school or detention centre, especially not the boys, some of whom are already on thin ice, with fathers or brothers in prison.

There’s the patter of footsteps up above, and Amy shoots Tom another impatient look, but he’s still crouched on the floor, poring over scattered papers. If someone comes down here, she decides, he’s on his own. She’s not getting written up for this. There’s a brief nose from inside the office, and then she glances back to see Tom shoving two drawers shut, mouthing something to himself. She steps out of the way as he slips back out of the room, firmly shutting the door behind him, empty-handed.

“You didn’t find anything?” Amy will admit to sounding slightly triumphant. It’s spiteful of her, but part of her (a large part) doesn’t want him to know, can’t stand his insistence on digging up the past, on somehow proving- to himself, to her- that he’s… She doesn’t know what. As pure of blood as his little friends? That he’s somehow worthy? Worthier than the rest of them? That someday it’ll all be vindicated because everyone will know little pauper Tom Riddle is descended from some important bloodline or dynasty?

Amy will never understand the wizarding obsession with heritage. As if they all don’t come from the same place in the end. What should it matter who has what surname, whose relatives went to
Hogwarts, and whose didn’t? Their professors (well, most of their professors) teach that magic isn’t determined by blood. Regardless of how the Ministry operates, or what Grindelwald claims. She can even understand, in a sense, disliking muggles. But surely wizards realize they would have died out- magic would have gone extinct- years ago if they had only married their own.

“I wasn’t going to risk them noticing anything was gone.” They climb the stairs quickly, and the sound of running bath water and the chatter of children grows louder. “Mare oh pay.”

“Mare oh what?” her brow furrows. It sounds like some sort of exotic musical instrument.

“Merope,” he says, that familiarly odd look in his dark eyes. That look always makes the hair on the back of her neck stand up, even when it’s not directed at her. She hates when he shuts himself off like that. “My mother. That was her name.”

“Merope Riddle?” It’s a far cry from Tom, she’ll give it that. With a name like Merope, no wonder. Amy would name her child something common too, if she’d been saddled with that. “You said you thought you were related to the Gaunts. Is Riddle your mother’s maiden name, then?”

Plenty of orphans here were born to unwed mothers, unrecognized by their father’s folk. Amy could have been in that office with him, trying to determine the origins of ‘Benson’. She doesn’t want to. It shouldn’t matter. She is who she is. Where she comes from doesn’t change that. No one brought her up- she brought herself up, they all have.

He looks at her briefly, then smiles for a moment, and nods. “I just wanted to know her name. I’ve always known my father’s.”

Chapter End Notes

Someone's telling tall tales.
Tom takes to the role of prefect as if he was born for it, to Amy’s bemusement. She had rather expected him to dread the whole thing once the shiny allure of the gold badge wore off. True, prefects have certain privileges- a luxurious bathroom all their own, exemption from the regular curfew, the implicit trust of nearly all the professors, and the right to deduct and award house points at will. But in reality it’s all a bit exhausting; doling out directions to befuddled first years, breaking up fights, patrolling the cold halls until midnight, keeping the peace in the common room—

Evie Bostwick, one of the Gryffindor prefects, swears Amy and Matthew have it easy because Hufflepuffs are the least likely to wind up in detention or on the wrong side of a professor; they’re inoffensive and mild-mannered by nature. Six weeks into the school year, Amy can confirm that a bolder lie has never been told. Hufflepuffs bicker with each other, break the dress code, and skirt around after curfew just as much as any other house. The only difference is that they’re as a whole rather less likely to get nasty about it when confronted, although a few of the more avidly self-righteous sorts will come up with all sorts of excuses as to why they don’t deserve the detention.

As a whole, Amy enjoys the fancy bubble baths, even if the singing stained glass mermaid in the window is a bit obnoxious, and doesn’t mind a bit of vindictive point distribution here and there; memorably, she deducts fifteen points from Slytherin when she overhears Lestrange referring to a terrified third year as a mudblood not ten minutes into the train ride to Hogwarts. The rest of it she could really live without. She’s never considered herself a very authoritative person, and suspects Beery chose her as prefect because of her success in his class, not out of any genuinely fair method of selection.

That said, she’s not about to hand in her badge or call for a general election. The idea of Tom being a prefect and her not, is admittedly a disturbing one. She’s loathe to call it insecurity, but she’d rather not feel as though he has one more advantage over her. Still, Amy’s surprised by how much he seems to genuinely enjoy it. She suspects a greater part of him is very much in favor with the chastening mannerisms of it all. Tom Riddle, prefect. Scolding lower years for running through the halls and shouting on the train, taking points for uniform violations and foul language, rewarding whoever’s done the most favors for him this week.

She doesn’t have much room to talk, of course. It was her idea to miss a weekly prefect’s meeting with the Head Boy and Girl in order to snog in one of the towers. It’s not as if Tom’s the first student to abuse the position, nor will he be the last. She’s hardly a rule stickler herself. But there is one glaring flaw in his outstanding performance; Tom is horrible about patrolling. In fact, he misses his assigned routes regularly. No fuss is ever raised over it, because it’s Tom, and Geraldine Bulstrode is more than willing to cover for him, twitterpated as she is over him, but Amy becomes increasingly aware of it as the weeks go on. The Hufflepuff and Slytherin patrols should intersect on the main stairwell at ten o’clock in the evening. Tom is seldom there. If he’s not on patrol, where is he? She doubts he’d blow it off just to lounge around in the common room holding court.

And she can hardly skip her own patrolling with Matthew in order to hunt him down, so she enlists the help of Vera and Ruby instead. Vera dutifully begins taking a very extended detour on her way back to the common room, and reports that Tom does in fact set off with Geraldine for his patrol, so he’s not just abandoning it entirely. Ruby rather enjoys ‘just missing’ being caught by prefects.
while out after curfew, and says that Geraldine’s alone by the time she reaches the third floor. The question then remains as to what Tom is doing by then. Is he meeting up with other Slytherins? Is he setting off somewhere by himself? Where is he going alone?

“You don’t think he’s stepping out on you?” Ruby questions with mock horror as Amy gets ready for her patrol. It’s not that she told them months ago about her and him, it’s that it’s not really something easily hidden from one’s roommates. Vera thinks the whole thing is incredibly romantic— the star-crossed lovers, separated by house and social circles. Ruby delights in needling Amy over it whenever another girl so much as glances in his direction.

Amy throws a hairbrush at her in response, flushed not because she genuinely thinks that, but because he’s been very distant since school started up again and because she does suspect he’s hiding something from her. As laughable as it is, part of her even feels a bit guilty. She’d be incensed if she ever found out he’d been having ‘friends’ follow her, and here she is, having done the exact same thing. Of course, she can frame it better in her mind because Vera and Ruby genuinely like her and weren’t doing it out of some perverse sense of obligation, but still. She’s hardly some little angel. She’s becoming increasingly worried that it’s not a matter of him rubbing off on her or her ‘encouraging’ him to clean up his act-

It might just be a matter of them deserving each other, and that’s what really frightens her. She’s never denied her own flaws, but she’s never seen them as being identical to Tom’s either. But how many spots of trouble has she helped him out with over the years? How many times has she made excuses and covered for him? How many times has she justified it all to herself? She’s never reassured herself that he was a good person, but she’s never truly believed he might be a horrible one, either. Tom’s not horrible. He’s just the way he is, and-

And maybe the way he is, is very much like the way she is, too, deep down. At night sometimes she thinks that nice, normal little girls would not have helped a pale boy with large dark eyes bury a dead rabbit, or watched him wipe blood on the jagged rock wall of a cave with nothing more than irritation. Sometimes she thinks that lying to herself about Tom is really lying to herself about her. How can she rationalize the company he keeps? By telling herself that he doesn’t really think like them, that it’s all for the sake of his image, that he’s just doing what’s necessary to even out the odds, secure a good future?

What does that future look like, anyways? Because she’s still seeing Grindelwald’s future every day in the papers. Over six hundred recognized as officially dead. Hundreds more wizards and muggles alike are missing. She can hear about the latest massacre of Jews one day, and a necromancer operating in the same city the next. The Corpse Queen of Kiev, they’re calling her. Tom doesn’t support Grindelwald, doesn’t condone the wholesale slaughter of innocents, she tells herself fiercely, often. He just despises the Ministry, despises the idea of some hypocritical league of bureaucrats trying to control them. So does she. What has the Ministry ever done for her? Would they have cared if she died during the Blitz? Of course not. Tom wants to change that. That’s why he’s so intent on securing a good position, that’s why it matters, that’s why-

“Maybe you should just ask him about it,” Vera suggests as Amy stands up, pulling on her black cardigan. “It could be something really simple-,”

“Nothing’s ever simple with that one,” Ruby says wisely, but the look in her eyes as she glances at Amy is very serious. “Don’t do anything rash, Ames. I mean it.”

“So dramatic,” Amy huffs, even as the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. “I’ll be back later. Don’t wait up.”

She and Matthew generally spend their routes discussing quidditch, homework, or the house
gossip. Matthew is one of those endearing boys who wouldn’t be caught dead sounding like a ‘girl’ repeating rumors and laughing at people behind their backs- in public. On their loops of the school, he’s all ears. She’s still debating not leaving at all until they’re climbing the grand staircase. Geraldine walks past them, alone.

Amy jogs up the last few steps to reach the second floor landing with Matthew before the stairs shift, then turns to him with an apologetic expression. “I have to use the ladies’ room. Go ahead, I’ll catch up.” He has to be somewhere on this floor. He has to be. But the second floor is just empty classrooms and supply closets- well, that and the bathroom. She darts into the girls’ lavatory just to cover her tracks, catching a glimpse of her harried expression in the cracked mirror. Her cheeks are apple red and her hair is escaping its clip. She moves forward to fix it when she hears footsteps close by.

Worried it might be another prefect, and not in the mood for a conversation, Amy quickly retreats into a stall. She hasn’t even gotten the door locked and shut when whoever it is enters the room. She pauses, listening intently, then freezes, one hand in place on the door, as a pair of men’s shoes pass her by. She’s about to barge out of the stall, wand in hand, to demand what this idiot is doing lurking around the women’s lavatory, when she hears the telltale hisses of Parseltongue. She’s only aware of one student at this school who can talk to snakes. Tom told her he’d inherited it.

There’s a sudden grinding sound, and the floor itself trembles slightly. Amy remains frozen in place. What is she doing? She’s never reacted like this before. She should burst out there, demand answers- but her hands shake as she fumbles with the door, and when she opens it Tom is gone, the bathroom is completely empty, and the faucets are all dripping steadily. There’s an odd, almost musty smell in the air, but damp at the same time. Amy looks around in a mixture of panic and bafflement. “Tom?” her voice trembles a bit, to her disgust. Could she possibly have imagined it? No, he was here. She heard him. She walks the length of the room, shoes squeaking across the tiled floor, but there’s no sign of him. It’s as if he’d vanished into thin air. Could he have found some sort of secret passage? She runs her hands along all the walls, stretching up on her tiptoes, crouching low, knocks on all the sinks. Nothing.

Is she going mad? He was here. He came in. She heard him. Unless there’s another parselmouth running around the school, it had to have been him. But why in the world would he have come in here in the first place? If there is some sort of secret passageway, how would he have discovered it? And how did he get in? More importantly, how does he get out? She feels slightly weak at the knees, but more importantly, she feels like the biggest fool to walk the earth. She really is a stupid little moron. Did she honestly think that just because they spend their free time snogging one another he was suddenly going to come clean with her?

The bathroom suddenly seems far too small and cold. She walks out into the hallway, burying her hands into her pockets. There has to be some sort of explanation. There has to. If it was really something big, whether it was grand or awful, he would have told her. He wouldn’t have been able to resist gloating or bragging about it, he would have told her. She knows Tom, knows what makes him tick. He would have told her, of course he would have, he trusts her- he has always trusted her, only her, that’s how it’s been for years and years now-

She doesn’t catch up with Matthew, and she doesn’t go back to the dorm. She spends the rest of the evening roaming the school, almost hoping to catch him somewhere else, to prove she’d made it all up in her head. She doesn’t find him, because deep down she knows she already has.

Chapter End Notes
The honeymoon period is over, and the paranoia has set in on both sides.
1942

In the gruesomely quaint murder mysteries Amy used to read, the clever, attractive heroine, when faced with a potentially grim and sinister plot, usually relied on her wits, fashion sense, and powers of deduction to uncover evidence, charm witnesses, and piece together the identity of the villain, who was generally either someone unassuming and dull, such as the butler, or horribly obvious, such as the one-eyed marquis with suspicious facial hair.

When presented with a real life mystery, and not an exciting or intriguing one such as ‘what will this potion do if I hurl it at Mulciber’ or ‘how do the house elves do all our laundry in the course of one night without boatloads of detergent’, Amy finds that she is not the heroine. Rather, she is the obstinate, unwitting dullard who buries their head in the sand for a week and pretends she never saw anything at all. After all, in the novels one’s childhood best friend is seldom the heartless bastard responsible for all the mayhem.

And in this case, there hasn’t been any mayhem. Wherever Tom is going, and whatever he’s doing there, it doesn’t seem to have any effect on the rest of the school. The only disturbance of note is Mister Ogg’s missing hens; the usual fox-repelling wards seem to have deteriorated. She can hardly prove Tom is doing anything awful, if he’s doing anything at all. And part of her doesn’t want, of course. Just because someone is capable of something doesn’t mean they’re going to do it. It’s not as if Tom spends his precious free time going around kicking puppies and pushing first years down flights of stairs. He’s not some roaming marauder intent on turning the school into complete anarchy.

A bad word about Tom Riddle is hard to come by, these days. He’s still the darling of most of the professors, and no one in Slytherin will hear a word against him. Even her other classmates are generally amiable towards him, whether they be Gryffindors or Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs. Ruby and Vera might think him reserved and a bit cold and pretentious, but generally harmless. To their peers, Tom is ambitious and serious and a teacher’s pet, but not temperamental or impulsive or violent. Spiteful and vindictive if you get on his bad side, certainly, but that’s true of many Slytherins, and many fifteen going on sixteen year olds in general. A well-hidden mean streak is hardly unique.

But of course, they don’t know him. Amy had always regarded an outsider’s view of Tom with a bit of bemusement, a bit of bitterness, and a pinch of smug pride. She really knew him, the real him, she’d always assured herself confidently. Around her, he didn’t have to wear the mask. He was genuine with her, even if that genuineness belied some gaping cracks and voids in his polite, amiable demeanor, she’d told herself. The rest of them- oblivious and sheltered and painfully naive- they didn’t know, couldn’t know, because they weren’t like her and him. They’d grown up with families and homes all their own, be they loving or loathsome. They had histories, relations, a place in the world. Her and Tom had nothing. They were nothing. They came from nothing, they would have been nothing if not for their spark, their magic. And that made them special.

Special. She certainly feels special now. The only person privileged to this side of him. The side of him that is secretive and paranoid and grasping, always grasping. What more do you want, she wants to shout at him the first time she sees him after that close call in the girls bathroom, across the vast Great Hall. What more could you possibly have? You’re a prefect, you have top marks,
you’re handsome, all the boys want to be your best mate, all the girls want to be on your arm, you’re clever, you’re ambitious, you’re not afraid of anything- what else could the world possibly give you? If you had to start from the lowest rung, at the very least they made you a damn good climber.

More. That’s what Tom wants. What he’s always wanted, she can admit it now. More more more. He wants everything the world has to offer and then a little extra that no one else can have. He wants the highest exam scores and the most praise and the most prestigious honors and the adoring attention and the most flattering compliments. He wants to be seen and appreciated and sought after, he wants the best seat at the table, not just a seat at said table. He wants everyone to stand up when he enters a room and not take so much as a bite out of their meals before he does. He wants something better than Tom Riddle, penniless orphan, unloved child, star student. He wants whatever he can get, whatever he can take.

And she understands. She does. Because they would not be close, her and him, if part of her did not want much the same. She wants fur coats and real pearls and to have her hair done properly, in a salon, not a quick chop in a cramped bathroom and rough fingers tugging at her scalp. She wants clothes that fit, not hand-me-downs, she wants brand new dresses and skirts and blouses with the tags still on them, she wants leather shoes so shiny she can see her reflection, she wants to smear lipstick on her mouth and rouge on her cheeks and she wants boys to give her a second glance when she walks by them in a rustle of silk and satin. She wants more than what she’s got too.

She wants a mother to fuss over her and a father to chide her and little brothers and sisters to irk her. She wants to sit down across a table from someone she’s related to, someone with her blood, her eyes, her hair, her smile, her nose, her ears, she wants to go to sleep in her own room, her own bed, to wake up in some pleasant little neighborhood or on some quiet country lane. She wants doting grandparents and funny aunts and uncles, she wants a horde of cousins and trips to the seashore and packed lunches and to fall asleep in the back of a new black car with her head lolling on someone who loves hers’ shoulder. She wants to smell baked bread and fresh flowers and go shopping and go dancing and go to university and have men take her seriously even when she’s not wearing a pointed hat and carrying a wand.

She doesn’t want any more bloody wars or soldiers or drills or sirens or rations or planes flying low overhead, she wants a job she enjoys and someday she wants to get married and have children who will know her for what she is, their mother, and she’d never leave them, never, and their father would be there and he wouldn’t drink or beat them and they’d be a disgustingly happy family, the kind you only read about in novels or see in the cinema, and she wants pictures of herself, she doesn’t have any, she doesn’t know what she looked like when she was ten or five or two months, and she never will. And she wants to get old and plump and see grey come in her light brown hair and laugh lines around her eyes and her skin sag and then drop dead in her sleep at a reasonably old age and be done with life and say she wrung what she could from it.

So she might not want exactly what he wants, but she does want. And want and want. And right now what she damn well wants is to never have followed him, never have seen any of that, she wants to pretend everything is fine and swell and him not to suspect anything, and she wants to fly off and never land back on the ground. In the air, none of this is a concern. It seems silly and trite. But she can’t stay up there forever. Her first quidditch match of the season ends in a rousing defeat of Gryffindor, which ordinarily would have thrilled her, given David Wood’s blowhard bragging about their new line-up being ‘unstoppable’, when their beaters can barely stop a bludger.

Tom doesn’t come to all her games, but he will usually appear without fail for the first and last. She’s used the homework excuse these past few days to keep her distance, but she could wring Patsy Samson’s neck, friend or not, when she tugs on Amy’s sleeve outside the locker rooms and
nods her head in the direction of Tom, who is waiting nearby, leaning against a wooden flag-pole, a bouquet of her favorites, marigolds, in hand. She knows he hardly spent the morning traversing the highlands picking them- conjuring a bouquet is hardly difficult for someone as advanced in Transfiguration as he is. But it still tugs at her, uneasy and nervous and angry as she is.

“You shouldn’t have,” it comes across more cross than she meant, and she hopes he takes it for post-game exhaustion after over two hours in the air, but she takes them from him anyways, pulling at her frayed jumper and shoving them in her deep skirt pocket. Matthew and Joe Fair are looking at her curiously. Tom rolls back his shoulders slightly in some predictably masculine attempt at dominance, and both boys glance away. This would ordinarily induce some sort of snide comment or eye roll from Amy but instead she just starts walking, slightly ahead of him.

Tom easily keeps pace with her. “You’re very quiet,” he notes, with an air of bemused surprise. She doesn’t think he outright suspects anything, but if she keeps up this sudden quiet and mousy act the gears are going to start turning, she tells herself sharply.

Come on now, Benson. Buck up. You should be an expert at lying to him by now. But if he looks, an insistent voice screams high and shrill in her inner ear, if he has a look inside your head, he’ll see-

“Amy?” He takes her arm, not ungently, and she blinks and jerks away, thoughts racing.

“We agreed on no gifts,” she retorts, hoping he mistakes her aloofness for genuine irritation. “What are they all supposed to think, when you come over with flowers like we’re off to the races-;”

“I don’t believe they do much thinking at all,” he shrugs, the corner of his mouth twitching upward as he glances over to see if she smiles and shakes her head good-naturedly at his joke. Seeing her distress, the hint of a smirk vanishes. “What’s wrong with you? You’ve been out of sorts all week. I can have Malfoy brew you a pick-me-up-,”

Amy grimaces. “As if I’d ever ingest something Malfoy prepared- I’d keel over dead after one sip.”

“He knows he’d be soon to follow,” Tom smiles as if he’s just made an excellent joke. Her stomach twists. “Let’s go for a walk,” he suggests lightly, and she can’t think of a good enough excuse not to. It’s a Saturday, she usually likes to spend time with him after her games so she can vent about who messed up what play, and if she storms off in a faux-huff his hackles will really be raised.

They walk down by the lake, ambling along in tense silence. “I’m just tired,” she says, rubbing at her sore arms. “That’s all. I never sleep well the night before a match.”

The trees along the lake shore are turning vibrant scarlet and russet and gold. They sit down together underneath one, and he puts his arms around her. Even when they’re alone and- well-doing things people do when they’re alone and attracted to one another- he rarely is as openly affectionate as this, and she stiffens one moment, relaxes back against him the next. He’s sturdier than he appears at first glance, and his arms lock around her rib cage, one hand splayed on the flat of her stomach. It would feel more risque if she wasn’t wearing multiple layers to ward off the autumn chill. Instead she plays distractedly with his long fingers, listening to his breath mingle with her tangled hair.

“You know you can tell me,” he says, “if something really is wrong. I won’t-,” he pauses, and then phrases it carefully, “overreact. Really.”

“Convincing,” she mutters. “But I’m just tired and a bit moody. That’s it.”
“Amy, moody? I thought Hufflepuffs were above such things.” His chin is ghosting along the top of her scalp, his voice drifting down her neck. Sometimes it still breaks and she mocks him terribly for it, but for the first time it occurs to her that he doesn’t sound like a boy anymore, creaky and thin and high. He’ll be sixteen in two months. He sounds like a man. Tom has never registered as a man for her anymore than she thinks she’s been a woman for him. They’ve always been children, perpetually young and squabbling over childish things.

“We all have our weak points.” She stops fidgeting with his fingers. “You know you can tell me anything, too.”

“Is that so,” he says. “You don’t seem to like what I have to say, half the time.”

“Maybe it’s how you say it,” she suggests, and hating herself a bit for it, wriggles around to kiss him.

Her hair is full of leaves when they’re done and she’s left a dark mark on his lower neck. He adjusts his collar to cover it on their long walk back indoors. “I’m going to be busy tonight,” he says, his arm tightly coiled around her waist up until the school gates, soon to close, come into view. “I’ll see you tomorrow at breakfast- we can go into Hogsmeade, if you like.” He pauses. “I promise Rosier won’t come along this time.”

“You know how I hate lapdogs,” she extricates herself from his shadow as they pass through the massive wrought iron gates, and waves goodbye over her shoulder, as if her mood dissipated when his mouth met hers. He could have told her, then. Whatever he’s up to. If he really trusted her, really saw her as- as an equal, a confidante, he would have told her. He didn’t. He’s had his chance. She feels sick to her stomach all over again.

This time, she waits for him. In the very last stall, Amy draws her hard knees up under her chin and shuts her eyes, listening intently. Waits and waits and waits some more, until she hears his footfall. Waits again, and mouths along the Parseltongue. She’s been listening to him speak to snakes since she was six years old. She’ll never carry on a conversation with an adder, but she knows what it ought to sound like, in any case, and this is just one word. Open? It has to be some variation of that.

The floor grinds, the sinks drip steadily, he’s gone. She counts to ten and opens the door, steps out onto the damp tiles, shoes squeaking. Looks at the girl in the cracked mirror in front of her, then inspects the sinks, one by one. It has to be around here. Something. Some sign. There has to be some kind of- her fingers graze over something as she gropes around, squinting in the dusky light. There’s a tiny snake carved into the side of one of the leaky faucets. She rubs it, hunches her shoulders, hisses.

A split second of doubt, and then the dark hole opens up beneath her feet.

Amy hesitates. The last time she went someplace dark for his sake, she fell. This time- she crouches down, dangles her stockinged legs over the edge, kicks her feet about, feels something curve beneath them. A slide of sorts? She inches forward, then, worried the hole might close over her, lets go, and shoots down. And down and down and down and down and down-

Cold, musty air rushes at her face and up her nose and mouth and ears, her palms are scraped open as she frantically feels for something to grab, and then she lands in a heap on the ground, wand in hand. Coughs, rolls over, scrambles to her feet, winces as something drips down from the cavernous ceiling above her. She has to be under the school, maybe even under the lake. Far under the lake. This isn’t the dungeons. She can barely see anything at all. “Lumos,” she lights her wand, and takes a step forward, then another.
Up ahead, she hears something move. Slow and rasping. Big. Amy freezes, her breath catching in her throat. “Lumos maxima-,” her wand flares with golden light, which bathes Tom’s pale face quite nicely. She screams, and then his spell hits her and any and all sound curdles and dies in her throat like an untuned instrument. The light from her wand sputters and fades.

“Close your eyes,” says Tom. “It’ll be alright.”

Like hell, she thinks, drops her temporarily useless wand, and punches him the way Simon Goldstein once taught her, driving her fist home into his stomach. He doubles over, winded, and she grabs for his wand, before he slams his weight into her, knocking them both to the wet, hard floor.

They go skidding and slipping, her screaming wordlessly, him breathless and trying to get a grip on his wand, and then there’s that sound again, larger and stronger, and he’s saying, “Amy, close your eyes, now, do it, Amy, close your eyes-,” His fingers pry at her face, and she snaps at them, then rakes her nails down the underside of his neck.

He grunts with frustration as she pins one of his arms under her, and then slams his other elbow hard into the side of her head. She recoils, dazed, he slips away from her, and red light bathes her face, illuminating something- something- dark and glistening and rippling, approaching. His stunner catches her in the face. Her hair is wet, she thinks, the instant before she loses consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

So we got a little dark here.
Heir

1942

Amy wakes up to find Vera’s face hovering over her. She blanches in alarm and sits up too quickly, head swimming, as Vera yelps, “She’s awake- Ruby-,” and there’s the sound of rapid footfall and the scraping of furniture. The white linen curtains around the cot she’s lying on rustle, and Ruby appears at Vera’s side, beaming in relief, revealing her very white teeth.

“She’s awake! Ruby-”

The last time Amy was in the infirmary was after a nasty bludger hit the year before. The offending beater in question showed up to class for the rest of the week with a varying series of cuts, bruises, and magical afflictions. Amy did not bother to ask Tom whether he’d done the dirty work himself or sourced it out to his eager group of friends. Now all she can think of is the massive chamber under the school containing something big, and deadly, and Tom-

Amy shoves back the crisp sheets, revealing her somewhat worse for the wear jumper and skirt. Her legs are bruised and scraped, as are her hands, her hair is a matted, tangled mess, and she has dirt and grime under her fingernails. Her head aches dully. “What are you doing- lie back down!” Vera snaps with sudden ferocity, taking her firmly by the shoulders as Amy struggles to jump up.

“Stop it!” she shakes her off, staggering to her feet and trying to push past Ruby, who is two inches taller than her and poses somewhat more of a physical deterrent. “I’ve got to- I need to- where’s-,”

“Get back in that bed before I cast a leg-locker on you,” Ruby narrows her eyes at her, and Amy has a moment of panic, not because of the threat but because she’s just realized she has no idea where her wand is. She dropped it- she lost it- what if it’s still down there? And how did she get up here? She whirls around, scrambling across the bed, ignoring her friends’ complaints, “My wand, where the bloody hell is my wand-,”

“Right here,” Tom pushes back the curtains in front of her, and Amy freezes. He’s holding a glass of water in one hand, her wand in the other. With a disarmingly calm smile, he sets both down on the bedside table. Amy recoils as if he’d just offered her a severed head, and scrambles away from him, back into the rumpled pillows.

“She’s a little disoriented,” Vera says reprovingly, grabbing her hand. “Just lie down, Amy. You need your rest- you had a really awful fall.”

“I…” She did have a really awful fall, but somehow she doubts they’re all talking about the same thing. Tom must have brought her here, she realizes. He came up with some story, placed his bets on the nurse buying it without any real probing, and… took her to the infirmary? But she… He… He could have killed you down there, with none the wiser, she tells herself savagely. You could be rotting in some puddle of mold right now. Or digesting in the stomach of whatever that thing was. The only reason you’re alive and up here, in an infirmary bed, in one piece and talking, the only reason you’re here to tell the tale, is because he knows you’re not going to tell it.

And why shouldn’t she? She could start screaming bloody murder and throwing around accusations right now. He didn’t tamper with her memory. She could yell for the headmaster and
tell them all exactly how to get down there, to find... whatever it is, and he’d be expelled by dawn. He must realize how much of a liability she is, how much of a threat she poses to him. So he must be very confident she’s not going to say a word, either because he trusts her implicitly- or because he’s already worked out some way to work around that-

“Amy, you’re scaring us,” Ruby waves a hand in front of her face. “You haven’t got amnesia, have you? Who am I? How old are you? What’s today’s date? Can you count to ten-,”

“That is quite enough!” The school nurse has finally made an appearance, glowering in their general direction. “Miss Benson is recovering from a concussion, and just because I’ve mended the injury does not mean she does not need her rest! Out, this instant! It’s nearly curfew! Miss Mishra, Miss Goldstein, Mr. Riddle- on your way, all of you! Good lord! You’re waking my other patients!”

Ruby and Vera retreat somewhat guiltily, still casting worried glances her way, Vera mouthing ‘be back soon’, but Tom lingers patiently until they’ve gone, then sidles up to the nurse while she feels Amy’s head, and has her follow the light of her wand with her eyes, murmuring and wheedling and promising until she snaps, “Merlin’s beard- alright, Mr. Riddle, yes, you may have just five more minutes with her. But I want you gone after that, am I clear?”

“Crystal,” says Tom contritely, taking a seat by Amy’s side, and when she bustles off Amy immediately goes for her wand. His hand whips out, snatching her wrist, and she draws back against the wrought-iron headboard.

“Let go of me before I forget about the wand, take this glass, an’ bash your head in with it,” Amy sets her jaw and enunciates, spittle flying.

“I don’t want you doing anything rash,” Tom hisses back, before letting go of her arm. He leans back in his chair, regarding her critically, although his hand reaches up to feel at her bruised scalp. “You’ve got blood in your hair.” She swats it away and takes an angry, choking sip of her water.

“Do I? I wonder how that got there,” she snarls as she swallows. “Oh, that’s right- some wanker named Tom stunned me-,”

“For Circe’s sake, keep your voice down!” he retorts furiously, glancing around the quiet room. “And for that matter- you should be thanking me, you ungrateful little-,”

“Manners, mind your manners, Tom,” she cuts in with a mocking note-

“I saved your life,” he overrules her near-hysteria, crouching forward so their gazes meet, his pale fingers digging into the dark legs of his trousers. He still smells like it, she realizes. The place down underneath them. Like the damp and the dark and the cold and the death- it smelled like death, she knows that now, like the cave- he smells like dead things, things that have been dead for years and years now, far longer than either of them have been alive. “I saved your life,” he repeats himself. “You owe me that. You followed me-,”

“As if you never keep tabs on me,” she snorts indignantly. “Having Rosier and Avery report back to you, your own little secret police, I’m shocked you haven’t got them in uniform yet-,”

“Don’t try to confuse the issue,” Tom sneers. “You followed me, spied on me- and for all your trouble, nearly got yourself killed trying to prove whatever it was-,”

“Prove that you’d been lying to me,” she bursts out, “that you’ve been lying to me for God knows how long, hiding things from me- what are you doing down there, what is that thing-,”
“Nothing for you to concern yourself with-,” he rises in one swift movement to his feet, and yanks the curtains closed again, “-and nothing you ought to be blabbering on about in the bloody infirmary!”

“Then I suppose you should have just left me down there,” she snipes, “it must be so difficult, truly, bothering to do the right thing once in a blue moon-;”

“Don’t make me regret it,” he cuts in coldly, and for once Amy stops talking. The reality of it all sinks back in. Why is she sitting her bickering with him like they’re children? This isn’t some stupid game. She could have died. He stunned her because whatever it was that was down there, it was going to kill her if she kept going. But not him. He wasn’t afraid of it. How? How is it that he wasn’t afraid of it? What made him so special?

“You didn’t tell me to stop or turn back,” she says very quietly, “you told me to close my eyes. Why?”

“Be quiet,” he doesn’t quite meet her gaze. “Just- enough, Amy, we’ll talk about it later-;”

“Why did it matter if I saw what it was?” she presses. “Your eyes were open. I saw you. So why did I need to close mine?”

He glances back at her with an almost pained look and she puts a hand on her wand- they’ve never drawn wands on each other before, never used magic on one another since they came to Hogwarts, not until tonight, but now that he’s broken that cardinal rule all bets are off, as far as she’s concerned. She might not be half the duelist he is, but she’s willing to wager he doesn’t want to test that theory in the middle of the infirmary, either.

But before either of them can make any sudden moves there’s the sound of robes sweeping across the floor and the low rumble of a familiar voice, and both of them go quite pale at the sight of Professor Dumbledore, who smiles that same old kindly smile which never quite meets his keen blue eyes. Tom is rigid, and Amy busies herself with taking another few gulps of water, trying to play off the fact that there is obviously no shortage of hostility between the two of them. She doesn’t dislike Dumbledore, not like Tom, who loathes the man with a ferocity that she’s always found amusing, assuming it was because he couldn’t stand the fact that Dumbledore never flattered him or fell into the usual patterns teachers, even the very clever ones, had with Tom.

Now she has a different sense of things. Tom stands with an innocent enough, “Good evening, sir,” but he’s gripping the back of the chair so hard his knuckles are white. Amy just gapes; she supposes she’s lucky that her looking a bit dazed and panicked is to be expected, given Tom’s cover story- wait, what is Tom’s cover story? That she fell? From where? Does he expect anyone to believe she simply tripped down a few steps and knocked her head?

“Good evening, Tom,” Dumbledore replies pleasantly, then looks at Amy. “I understand you took a rather hard fall today, Miss Benson, and not out on the pitch. Admirable chasing, I must say- as disheartened as I was to see Gryffindor lose.”

“Thank you, sir,” Amy says, trying not to look at Tom, who is staring at her intently, his brown eyes boring into the side of her head.

“It wasn’t my intention to pay you a visit,” he continues, and Amy has no idea if the man is lying or not, and what’s more, Tom seems just as perplexed, “but I was dropping off some phoenix tears for Madam Amell this evening-;” he produces a tiny, glittering vial, which both Amy and Tom track with hungry eyes, “and found myself, as muggles might say, in the neighborhood.”
“It’s very considerate of you,” says Tom, recovering some of his usual poise, “but the nurse says Amy ought to be alright- she just needs some rest and quiet.” He looks at her meaningfully, and Amy is torn between giving a jerky nod just to end this entire conversation and glaring at him. She compromises with a silent grimace, hoping Dumbledore chalks it up to a bad headache.

“I’m pleased to see you so invested in a dear friend’s welfare, Tom,” Dumbledore continues on, entirely unfazed, “but I do believe your patrol started-,” he checks a gleaming pocket watch, eleven minutes ago, on the dot. “I’m sure Miss Bulstrode will understand your tardiness, but best not to keep her waiting, yes?”

Amy almost smirks at that, despite it all. Frightened and confused and angry as she is, there’s never been anyone as able to gracefully elude Tom’s usual snares as Dumbledore. Tom looks as though he were just cuffed around the head; he reddens, seems about to say something, then gives a stiff, reluctant nod. “Of course.” He looks at her, and any aura of satisfaction or entertainment immediately dissipates. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Amy. Try to get some rest.” The emphasis he puts on ‘rest’ is not lost on her.

She smiles waveringly back at him, and then Tom’s gone, slipping past Dumbledore and stalking in the direction of the exit, hands in his pockets, head bowed. He walks like that whenever he’s perturbed by something. She imagines he won’t get much sleep tonight, worrying himself sick over what she might say or what Dumbledore might coax out of her. Good. He had his chance- multiple chances, really- to make sure she never said a word about it, and there’s something sick and sad and a little funny about Tom being tripped up by his own rare display of compassion. Or arrogance. She’ll never be sure, she knows that now.

“I really am fine, Professor,” she says as soon as he’s gone- Amy’s never seen much point in pretending that Dumbledore trusts Tom. He’s wise not to. Tom certainly isn’t deserving of anyone’s trust, least of all her own. Or her loyalty, so she’s not sure why she hasn’t blurted out everything she knows yet. Maybe it’s the Hufflepuff in her. True to the very end, even when it’s her neck on the line.

“I should hope so,” Dumbledore replies mildly, still studying her like an intriguing equation on the board in class. “Any healer worth their salt should be able to mend a simple concussion, although I will second Madam Amell’s insistence that you spend some time off your feet. Many of us older witches and wizards complain that the youth uses magic as an excuse to barely move a muscle. I’ve always found you a rather strident exception to that rule, Miss Benson.”

“I like to be active, sir,” Amy mutters, shivering a little under his gaze. How can someone sound so congenial but look so intensely? It’s like he’s searching her for something, some sign.

“A very admirable trait,” he says. “I will have to speak with Mister Pringle regarding the girls’ lavatory on the second floor, however.”

Amy just barely keeps herself from flinching or stiffening, her expression placid, still.

“I’m told it was a leaking sink that did you in,” he continues, without a second look. “Slippery floors have felled many a talented witch and wizard, petty as it might sound. Why, one of my schoolmates broke several ribs after tumbling in a puddle of Liquid Luck that we were brewing in Potions one afternoon- rather ironic, I must say, given the potion’s purpose-,”

Amy nearly bows with relief as he goes on. He doesn’t know. Surely he wouldn’t be wasting time in here rambling on about his school days if he knew. He may suspect Tom lied about what happened to her, and that she’s lying to protect him, but he doesn’t know what or where or when. And why is she so relieved? She feels something like disgust with herself. She should say
something. She might not know what Tom’s up to, but it’s clearly dangerous, for other people, if not for him. She’s a prefect. More than that, she’s a sensible person with some semblance of morals, and she ought to report him just because of that, if for no other reason-

But the words won’t come. She panics whenever she thinks about opening her mouth. Her tongue seems to rebel at the thought. It’s not just about getting Tom, Mr. Perfect, Student of the Year, Every Year, in trouble. It’s- saying it aloud means it’s real. Means it’s serious, means- well, there’s no going back after that. No return to whatever they’ve had before. If she turns him in now, even if she has no proof of any actual wrong-doing beyond trespassing in a likely forbidden location, if she betrays him like this- She knows, she does, deep down, that any-

He won’t be very fond of her after that, to put it mildly. And nor she of him. And friendship and other warm and fuzzy feelings aside, practicality and pragmatism dictate that- well, she does share a ‘home’ with him. It’s not as if they’re ‘just’ schoolmates. Al Black was right when he said, however cruelly, that Tom Riddle was the only family she had in the world. He was. He still is. It’s always been the two of them, and he may have stretched the chain between them to its limits- but if she breaks it in half right now, the consequences won’t be pretty or easily forgotten, for either of them.

Dumbledore finishes his fond recollection, and looks down at her expectantly. Amy forces a humoring smile, and then yawns, not entirely forced. She really, truly is exhausted. She’ll sleep on it. That has to help. She’ll get some rest, like everyone keeps saying, and in the morning- in the morning she’ll decide whatever it is she’s going to do. “Sorry, sir,” she says quickly, covering her mouth. “I’m really knackered, what with the match today, and my head still does hurt a bit-,”

“Perfectly understandable,” he smiles at her again. “You should sleep. I find it has a refreshing way of clearing the mind, unlike any potion or charm. Pleasant dreams.”

She can’t help but feel as though this were some sort of test that she’s failed. But her plump pillow is calling to her, and infirmary cot or not, with the lamps dimmed and her own tiredness, she falls asleep very quickly, thankful that she’s never been one for insomnia. Her sleep is deep and dreamless until the early hours of the morning, wherein she finds herself in the cave once more, only the corpses at the bottom of the glassy black pool are far more familiar than they were the last time. When she glimpses Vera floating near the bottom and the dark green of Ruby’s dress, she opens her mouth to scream in a torrent of bubbles.

And wakes up in the same old cot, the infirmary silent and still and shuttered all around her. Amy wastes no time in putting on her shoes, tiptoeing over to the front desk, and signing herself out. Dumbledore was right. Her head feels much better, but she’s no less conflicted. This should be easy. The right path could not be any more clear. It might as well be paved. But her feet don’t take her to the Headmaster’s office, nor the common room, or even the kitchens to try to get some food in her snarling stomach. Instead she wanders outside into the quiet autumn morning, and Tom finds herself sitting on the edge of one of the courtyard fountains, an hour later, the sun much higher in the sky, and her choices no less muddled.

“I found the Chamber through Slytherin,” he says after a few moments of sitting beside her in perfectly agonizing silence. “I’m descended from him.”

Amy can’t help but shoot him an incredulous stare at that, but he soldiers on as if this all sounds completely normal and expected and not in the least deranged. “I traced my lineage back in the library. Salazar Slytherin was the ancestor of the Gaunt family. His heirs. That’s why I can speak Parseltongue. I get it from him.”

“Marvolo Gaunt was your grandfather,” Amy remembers well enough. She sometimes suspects
Tom believes that most of what he says just floats over her head, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. She might not a prodigy, but she’s far from dimwitted, and she’s never let herself, or anyone else, think that for an instant. But now she pauses. “Your mother was Merope Riddle, but you never-- your father wasn’t in the records you found back in second year, was he?”

He says nothing, and that alone says something.

“Oh,” says Amy, lips pursed, and then it washes over her like a wave at the seashore. “You wanted me to think it was your mother who was the muggle, always,” she murmurs. “But that was a lie, wasn’t it, Tom? It was your father. Or both of them. Neither went to Hogwarts. She- she was Merope Gaunt, wasn’t she? Not Riddle.”

“No,” says Tom, but his tone says otherwise. “No, that’s not true-,”

“The only wizard you can prove you’re related to,” Amy reflects with a bitter little smile, “is Marvolo Gaunt.”

“I’m his heir,” his voice rings out into the quiet of the courtyard. A few birds take flight, startled and chirping. “You don’t understand.”

“You’re no one’s heir,” says Amy. She feels terribly sad, somehow. For him. It’s not pity, but it’s the closest she’s ever gotten to it. “Because you’re practically muggleborn-,” she thought he might hit her, or raise his wand again, but instead he grabs her hands, and now she’s more frightened for him than her, at the look on his face. For a few precarious moments the handsome, composed young man is gone, and the terrifyingly desperate little boy remains.

“I’m no mudblood,” he says it like a solemn vow, a prayer, “I am Slytherin’s heir, and I proved it to myself and anyone who would question my bloodline when I opened his Chamber and woke his serpent.”

She tears her hands away. “That was a snake-,”

“That was a basilisk,” Tom says, “the King of all serpents. Salazar hatched him a thousand years ago, and put him to sleep. He’s been like that ever since, waiting, until I woke him up. He was meant to be a final deterrent, you see, to the plague of muggles Salazar felt were infesting his school, learning his magic-,”

“The school doesn’t belong to purebloods,” Amy snaps, springing up and away from him. “Or they’d never have let either of us through the bloody gates, Tom-,”

“It belongs to the worthy,” he retorts furiously. “And that is exactly what I am, what we are-,”

“According to who? Some dead madman who made a monster and left it hidden under the lake?”

“He’s not a monster,” Tom says. “He’s a tool. Waiting to be put to use.”

“And what would that be?” she all but snarls, and then answers her own question with the echoes of his voice, ringing in her ears. Close your eyes. Amy, just close your eyes, and it will be alright. Well, it’s not alright. It’s not anywhere close to alright.

“So you did a little digging,” she says, voice shrill and shaky, to her dismay, “and decided that the most logical route would be to carry out the last wishes of your fanatical ancestor and start purging your classmates? Excepting the worthy ones, of course.” Her eyes burn and sting. “Like you and me. The impure ones who are special, is that it? Who deserve more because you decided we do and because you can speak to snakes? We’re not like other mudbloods, oh no, because we were
lucky enough to be raised in an orphanage and not ‘tainted’ by a normal bloody life in a happy, disgusting, whole muggle family!”

“I had to see if I could do it,” he says after a moment. “You have to understand- I had to see, I had to test myself, and I was right, I am- I belong, I belong here more than most people, this is where I was always meant to be, it’s not luck, it’s not chance, I was always going to-,”

“No,” Amy is cold and hoarse now. “No. You can lie to yourself all you like, but this is not fate. This is not what destiny or whatever you want to call it, is. This is a choice. And the very least you could do is be a man and own up to it. You chose. You always choose, and if you’re going to choose to go this way-,” she shakes her head.

“Amy,” he steps towards her. “It doesn’t have to be like this, I wanted to tell you, I did, but I knew-”

“Knew I wouldn’t approve?” she lets out a choked, hysterical laugh. “You were bloody right on that count, Tom! I don’t approve. I don’t agree. I don’t live in whatever fantasy you concocted to comfort yourself- I don’t want to! And the second- I swear, so help me Merlin, you- if you let that thing loose on the school I’d better be the first thing on the menu, because I will drag you before Dippet and Dumbledore myself, see if I don’t.”

He stops. So does she. They stand barely four feet from one another. The courtyard is deserted, but it won’t be for long. “Come on,” Amy growls. “Come on then. Bloody commit to it, at least. Won’t get your own hands dirty, will you? Come on, Tom. You know you’ll win this one.” Her wand is in her hand, trembling. “Let’s have it out. Mummy would be proud, wouldn’t she?”

His wand moves, and so does hers, and the brief explosion of light sends any remaining birds wheeling and screeching into the sky far above them.

Chapter End Notes

As always, Tom couldn't help a little monologuing. And in the words of Amy's own internal (heavily summarized) monologue: ‘Ya done fucked up.’
1943

The year of 1942 and the autumn semester grind to a slow, uncomfortable halt, like a train pulling
into station. Amy gets off the ground and dusts herself off. Whatever curse Tom cast- she assumes
it was a curse- was not the Killing Curse. She knows because the Killing Curse emits green light,
and she knows it emits green light because a photographer managed to get a picture of one of
Grindelwald’s lieutenants executing the last rebels in magical Stalingrad into the Daily Prophet. In
what was described as a ‘rare treat’ for readers, it was printed in full color.

Whatever spell he cast, it collided with her shield and shattered into motes of glassy light. Amy is
not a duelist. She enjoys watching duels the way many people enjoy watching Quidditch without
playing it. Herbology and Potions have always been her best classes, but Charms is a close third.
She doesn’t need to be an expert at defensive magic to manage a decent shield charm, which has
served her well enough over the past year or two. Tom does not try for a second spell; by the time
her glimmering shield has dissolved, he’s long gone.

So she settles in and waits for him to make his choice. It ends up being quite a long wait, because
nothing seems to happen. Seems becomes ‘has’. Nothing has happened. Not a few days after her
‘accident’, which has Joe and Matthew teasing her back in the Common Room- what kind of witch
slips and falls in a puddle of water and knocks her head?-, not a week, not a few weeks, not a
month. Autumn fades into blustery winter, she stays up at night worrying over every little sound,
expecting to have to defend her housemates from a massive snake, and as far as she can tell, Tom…
goes about his business as usual, keeps his head down, and does not unleash the basilisk on the
school.

She’s no longer in such a state of paranoia by the time the Christmas holiday comes along, but that
doesn’t mean they’ve reconciled, either. Amy is not sure it’s possible to ‘reconcile’ after the things
he told her. They live in two entirely different worlds. They have for years now, she was just too
stubborn and foolish to admit it. She wanted to believe that they hadn’t grown so far apart, she
wanted to believe that none of this was permanent, that he would somehow come back to her, but-
he was never hers to begin with. He was never anyone’s but his own.

They go nearly two months without saying so much as a word to one another. Judging by her short
temper, odd behavior, and general aura of upset, Ruby and Vera assume they’ve ‘broken it off’.
Amy does not dissuade them of the notion. What is she going to say? Explain, ‘Well, really we’re
having a bit of a tiff over the fact that he was honestly considering murdering you all in your sleep
with his new pet, who, just so you’re aware, lives underneath the school on a diet of stolen
chickens and missing pets?’

She’s carrying her luggage into the antechamber to get in line with everyone else going home for
the holidays when he corners her near the dungeon stairwell. It would perhaps be more
intimidating were he not wearing a coat and scarf. Amy long ago came to the conclusion that it’s
very difficult to exude menace while dressed for winter weather in the highlands. “What,” she
snaps, by way of greeting, her levitation charm wavering and her battered suitcase sinking down
towards the ground.

“I’m not staying for Christmas,” he says, hands in his pockets. “I’m going back to Wool’s. With
you.” She does not miss the slight hesitation before ‘with you’. Is this his idea of an apology? Offering to voluntarily leave Hogwarts for the first time in five years?

“Dumbledore went round with the list of everyone leaving two weeks ago,” Amy says primly instead of hexing him, which is what she’d like to do. “You can’t just decide last minute-,”

“Slughorn added my name last night, it’s settled,” he retorts. “It’s settled,” he repeats himself a moment later, looking at her meaningfully. “My… my project. I’m finished with it, I swear.”

Amy exhales slightly, then stares at him with an incredulous, grim little half-smile. “Is that it? You wanted to let me know that I can sleep easy now? How kind.”

“I was never trying to hurt you.”

“That’s not the point, and you know it,” she flicks her wand again, and her suitcase floats back up into the air. “It’s too late, Tom. Alright? Do you understand now? You- you don’t get to just brush this one off. What- your beliefs-,”

“They’re not my beliefs,” he interjects, “I wasn’t- I wanted to know where I come from, and I do, now I know, I was trying to understand his perspective-,”

“Yes, well, it stops being a ‘perspective’ and a ‘philosophy’ when people’s lives are on the line!” she hisses under her breath. Tom looks increasingly discomfited. Maybe he thought she’d be so relieved and grateful that she’d fling herself back into his arms, as if they just had a nasty little fight and said some things they now regret, and not as if he- As if he lied to her for months and woke some monster up in order to ‘test’-

“We can talk about it on the train,” he murmurs, as if she’s just being a bit dramatic and they’ll have this sorted in a few hours’ time.

“No,” says Amy coldly. “We won’t.” She brushes past him, and he grabs her gloved hand.

“Amy, there’s no need-,”

“No, there isn’t, is there?” she whirls back around, infuriated. “Because I’m not going back to Wool’s, Tom.”

He looks as close to dumbfounded as she’s ever seen him. “What are you-,”

“Vera’s invited me to stay with her family over the break, and I accepted,” she cuts him off. “So we won’t be seeing much of each other at all. It’s for the best.”

He is quite pale, before his eyebrows knit together. “You can’t just run away from me for the rest of the school year, Amy, don’t be childish-,”

“Childish?” she all but yells, earning several alarmed looks from a group of passing first years, “Prefect business, move along,” she snaps at them, before looking back at Tom. “Childish? Really, of all the paternalistic, pigheaded, willfully ignorant- I am not the one who’s acted like a child here! If you think I’m avoiding you, then you should consider, Tom, why that might be- why I’m not dying to be in your presence and absolutely heartbroken that we won’t be spending bloody Christmas together!”

“Yes, childish,” he snaps, “because instead of discussing it like adults-,”

“I can’t have a discussion with you! I can barely bloody look at you!” Her suitcase clatters to the
floor with a loud bang. Now that they’ve got more than a few heads turning to look at them.

“Lover’s quarrel,” someone walking by mutters, and there’s some scattered snickers and whispers.

They both flush crimson, but not in embarrassment.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Amy says, struggling to compose herself before Cringle, or worse, Dumbledore, comes over to investigate. “You’ve made that perfectly clear. That’s what you want. An argument, so you can spin it around and make it out as though I’m some silly little girl overreacting and being too sensitive or misunderstanding you- I understand just fine. We have nothing left to say to each other.”

“You don’t mean that,” he looks as though she’d just slapped him across the face. “You can’t mean that, Amy, listen-,”

“Amy!” Vera is waving her down from her spot in line up ahead, her younger sister Miriam huddled at her side. “Come on, we don’t want to be late for the train!”

“You’re not the only one allowed to make plans,” she tells him scathingly, and marches off, adjusting her faded blue hat.

Vera lives with her mother and father and her little sister in a cramped flat above Ezra Goldstein’s tailor shop. Simon used to live here as well, but now he is fighting in Tunisia and his letters are far sparser. Chanukah was weeks ago, but the Goldsteins set up a little tree in their sitting room ‘just to be festive’, Vera’s extremely chatty younger sister, Miriam, informs her. It is decorated with paper chains and a sprinkling of tinsel. Amy shares a bed with Vera, listening to Miriam talk to herself in her sleep, and occasionally the quiet footfall of Mr. Goldstein going down to work in his shop. Vera gave her fair warning beforehand that her parents’ relationship was ‘tense’, but Amy had assumed it was in the ordinary realm of bickering husbands and wives, full of nagging and chiding and snappish comments and sarcastic remarks about money or the children or the dirty dishes in the sink.

This is different. Mrs. Goldstein barely acknowledges her husband other than when she’s serving him a meal, and Mr. Goldstein reserves his small smiles and the occasional chuckle for his daughters alone. Amy has sat through far more awkward and unpleasant situations, growing up in Wool’s, and is not particularly perturbed by it- at least no one’s getting beaten- but she is curious. On Christmas Eve she sits up late with Vera, and dares to ask, “What did he do?”, too tired to put it more politely.

Vera hesitates, then says, closing her eyes as she tells it, as if she can’t bear to watch Amy’s face, “He didn’t tell her he was a wizard until after Simon started showing signs of magic. He hid it from her for years. His wand, his work, everything. She— I think Papa thought it would be easier that way, to wait, that she’d… I don’t know. She’ll never forgive him from hiding it from her for so long, and she’ll never forgive him for sending us away to school. She hates it. Hogwarts. The wands. The Ministry. All of it.”

“But she loves you,” Amy says, mystified. She’s detected no coldness or loathing from Mrs. Goldstein towards her daughter, witches that they are.

“Course she does,” Vera says sleepily, “we’re her children. You don’t get to choose whether you love your children.”

Sometimes you do, Amy thinks. Sometimes you do choose whether or not to love them, and when you don’t-
She falls sleep before she can properly complete the thought. Christmas comes and goes with little fanfare in this household, which is almost refreshing for Amy, after the events of last year and the year before. Around this time last year, she was kissing Tom on a balcony on New Year’s Eve. Around this time the year before that, she was huddled in the Underground while sirens wailed and planes roared overhead, leaving devastation in their wake. The Goldstein flat and York is almost sleepy in comparison to any of that.

She tries not to think about Tom, celebrating his birthday alone at Wool’s, in a room far too small for a sixteen year old boy, across the hall from Bianka and an empty bed. She refuses to feel guilty, but it gnaws at her insides all the same. How can she forgive him? She can’t, she won’t, she wasn’t. He didn’t do it, but he would’ve, he could’ve, by some stroke of luck or coincidence or just enough self doubt, he confessed it to her, let her see that side of him, and they can’t just close the curtains now and pretend it never happened. There’s no going back. She can never be with him now. He ruined it.

But she is so, so angry. With him for ruining it and with herself for wishing she was still oblivious. That’s horrible. It’s horrible of her to wish for something like that. She’s always told herself that she’s not going to be anyone’s puppet, dancing on their strings. Least of all some priggish little boy’s with an inferiority complex and no heart. Why in Merlin’s name would she ever wish for things to go back to the way they were?

He lied to her. He manipulated her. God, he could have killed her and she would have let him, all for what? Some scraps of affection, some well-timed compliments, a sweet word here and there? Some stupid flowers and the feeling that she mattered, that she was important, special, that someone would do anything for her, be anything- It was all a load of rubbish. She wants to tell herself that none of it was real, that he’s never really cared about her at all, that she was always just some useful tool or toy to him, something to be possessive of and played with but ultimately discarded and forgotten when he outgrew her.

But it doesn’t feel that way. If he never cared, why try to spare her feelings in the first place? Why not kill her before she became too much of a liability? Why would he have told her any of it, about being Slytherin’s heir, about the basilisk, about how he felt- horrific or not, he could have just ignored her, or lied to her- why would he tell her?

Because he felt guilty and he wanted you to absolve him somehow, because he was never completely convinced it was right, that it was what he was meant to do, so he told you, the hopeful part of her whispers. He knew you’d drag him back from the edge, kicking and screaming. Don’t be a little fool, the pragmatic part of her retorts. He thought he had you wrapped around his finger, that’s why he told you, it was a test to see what you’d tolerate, how far he could take you with him, and now he knows, now he’ll be a better liar, not a better person. You think it was you? No, it was Dumbledore. Dumbledore got suspicious and he thought better of it, decided it wasn’t worth the risk.

So she wants to be right and she wants to be wrong and none of it makes any damn sense. Mostly she wishes she could completely exorcise him from her life, but that’s just not possible. Tom is always going to be there. They are two weeds that sprouted from the same shabby patch of dirt, a crack in the concrete. They wrapped around each other in order to survive, and there is no untangling them now. She can be as self-righteous and haughty and defiant as she likes.

He’s not going anywhere, and they both know it. Trying to cut him out would be like trying to cut out part of herself. She’s seen the heart of him, and that’s why she’s so frightened, that why she’s so angry. Because it’s not just a hollow chest. There is something there, it’s not all lies and cold calculation, she’s seen it, she’s seen him happy and sad and amused and annoyed and infuriated
and rebellious and defeated.

For the first time in all her life, she falls asleep well before midnight on New Year’s Eve.

“It’s normal to be a bit depressed after a break-up,” Vera consoles her on the train ride back to Hogwarts. “You’ve just got to keep busy, you know?”

“If I were you,” Ruby advises, “I’d really go for the throat- go out with Matthew in a few weeks, why don’t you? Really make him squirm,” she arches a dark eyebrow. “You can’t have him thinking you’re completely distraught, you know- Riddle’s got enough ego as it is.”

“We were never really together in the first place,” Amy brushes them both off irritably, and the conversation turns back to the latest gossip and who did what over break and whether or not Professor Witherspoon is really going to take a leave of absence to go fight Grindelwald’s army in Italy.

There’s another prefect meeting on the train shortly before they pull into Hogsmeade, and afterwards Amy doesn’t quite make it down the corridor and into the next car before Tom is at her elbow, insistently pulling her into an empty compartment. She’s too worn down to put up much of a fuss, and instead she sits down by the window and watches the last of the sunlight fade between the black trees and grey snow.

“I wanted to apologize,” he takes the seat across from her. “Properly.” His gaze is thin and pale and earnest, somehow. “You’re right. It was wrong of me to- to mislead you like that, to keep you in the dark. We agreed that things weren’t going to change between us, and I didn’t abide by that. I lied to you because I thought it would be better than losing you. You know I put the basilisk back to sleep.”

“I gathered,” she says, without looking away from the window. “The lack of gruesome deaths was very telling.”

“I don’t have to go down Salazar’s path,” he reaches out and his fingertips graze her knee. She moves to brush them away but catches at his cold fingers instead. “I can be my own man. I know that now. Pureblood and halfbloods and muggleborn- it’s all just distraction, I’ve realized. Designed to keep us tearing each other apart when we should be united.”

Amy glances at him carefully, mindful of being lured into the spider’s web again.

“There should be no muggleborns,” Tom tells her, “because no child should grow up the way we did. Blind and in the dark, not knowing their true potential. Their power. You wouldn’t let a herd of sheep raise a lion, would you? The Ministry’s failed us. All of us. They let us die in muggle wars, suffer in muggle institutions- and for what? The Statute? Some document drawn up by dead fools?”

“So you’ve decided to follow Grindelwald instead,” Amy says, without any real venom, just quiet, exhausted dismay. “The greater good. Where we slaughter them all and rule over what’s left, only this time we let the mudbloods live if they promise not to ask for too much.”

“No,” he says. “Grindelwald’s just as short-sighted as all the rest. He’ll be dead soon enough. He’s made enemies in every corner of our world. He’s toppled a few systems- he’ll never destroy them all. They’ll spring right back up after he’s gone. He’s made himself a martyr for nothing. He didn’t go about it the right way.”

“What’s the right way?”
“From the inside out,” says Tom with a small little smile of pride. “From the bottom up. That is the only way. The only hope of changing things.”

“The only hope of killing muggles and getting away with it, you mean.”

“You think they’re like us,” he’s not irritated, not bemused, just knowing in a pervasive sort of way. “You think all that separates you and them is a wand and a little bit of luck. You’re wrong. Look at what they do to each other. What they’d do to us, if they had the chance. The Ministry—any magical government could stop it. All of it, in an instant, and you know it, Amy. The massacres and the death camps and the looting and the bombings and the purges and the ghettos. They could stop all of it, they could end any battle, any war, any atrocity, whenever they liked, and they never will. Never. They’re content enough to let them kill each other. To let them kill us.”

“It’s not for you to decide,” she says. “It’s not for you to decide how we should—”

“No, it’s for whoever they hand-select next for Minister, whatever incompetent, quill-clenching, beleaguered cowards they decide are fit to lead us. That’s who should decide?”

“What a campaign speech,” she stands up. “You’ll be selling out theaters in no time.”

“You agree,” he says with a vicious little edge to his voice, as she turns her back on him. “You do. I know you. I know how you think, and you’ve been thinking the same thing, all along. That roommate of yours at Wool’s—her parents? They didn’t have to die. None of them had to die. But they will. They will and they’ll kill more and more of whoever they decide isn’t fit to live in the next war, and the one after that, and sooner or later it will be us. How many breaches just these past few months alone? How many muggles has Grindelwald killed? They’ll find us eventually.”

“Her name is Bianka,” Amy grips onto the door too tightly as the train grinds to a halt. “You’d know if you ever bothered to think of her as something other than another piece in your stupid little game, Tom.” She looks back at him too quickly, and her vision blurs. “This?” she prods at his faintly heaving chest.

“It’s done. I’m deciding for us. You should be used to that sort of thing, right? Knowing what’s best for everyone? This is it. I don’t want to see you anymore unless I have to. I don’t want to speak to you anymore if it’s not about Wool’s or what the bloody homework was in Potions. I don’t want you to touch me, and I don’t want to touch you. I don’t want to know what you’re thinking. You do what you like, alright? With your rich, horrid friends and your stupid Slug Club and your snakes and your ideas. Leave me out of it.”

She wrenches open the compartment door and steps into the flood of students flowing out into the cold winter night, realizes too late that she left her gloves with him, and shoves her hands up under her armpits instead, gritting her teeth against the bitter wind.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm sure this break-up will be handled in a mature and compassionate fashion by both parties, right? ...Right?
1943

They’ve run out of places to sit, so Amy finds herself standing, back against the wood-paneled wall instead. Bianka is by her side, picking at a loose thread on her skirt. Even with most of the windows open, it’s noticeably stuffy and warm inside the parlor of Wool’s, and those gathered are shifting around uncomfortably, waiting for this to be gotten over with. Mrs Cole has only gathered the oldest children after breakfast- everyone over the age of eleven or twelve. There’s about twenty five of them. Too old to really be treated as little children anymore, but too young to enlist or go to work in the factories, either.

Amy’s been home for the summer for less than a week. She carefully keeps her gaze trained on Mrs Cole’s weathered face, and away from Tom’s profile in the corner of her eye. He’s managed to snag himself a seat in one of the few armchairs, either through swiftness or sheer intimidation. He’s in the middle of another growth spurt, taller than most of the oldest boys, and the most handsome of the lot. He sits the same way he did as a boy of eleven, ramrod straight and hands resting casually on his sharp knees.

“As many of you know, three weeks ago there was an air raid on Grimsby, in Lincolnshire. The bombs the Germans dropped were delayed devices.” She pauses. “Does anyone know what that means?”

Mary Campbell raises her hand immediately. Helen, standing near an ancient, dust-encrusted lamp, catches Amy’s eyes and rolls her own.

“Yes, Mary.”

“They didn’t immediately explode when they hit the ground.”

“Correct.” Mrs Cole sighs wearily. “The majority of the bombs exploded after the all-clear had been sounded, and people were returning to their homes. The authorities are still searching for bodies. Four months ago there was the disaster at Bethnal Green, on the Central line. I’m sure I don’t need to tell any of you that the majority of those killed that night in the stampede were women and young children. We were all very fortunate to survive the worst of the Blitz two years ago. But the war is not over. We have taken every precaution available to protect you children here, in this city.”

Bianka has stopped playing with the loose thread. Amy squeezes her arm briefly, without looking away from Mrs Cole, who straightens and says soberly, “We will be evacuating the orphanage until further notice, beginning next week.”

There’s an immediate surge of noise- cries and exclamations and curses and complaints.

“Evacuate us where?” Billy Stubbs demands. “I’m not leaving-,”

“You can’t just dump us off-,”

“I want to stay, we’ve always been alright here-,”
“For how long? Just the summer?”

“Enough!” Mrs Cole shouts over them all, and silence immediately follows, aside from a few grumbles and mutters. “Yes, you are all being evacuated. Not at all once, mind you, but you will be separated into groups. Your train tickets and destinations are already being arranged. You have no idea how difficult it’s been to find places for everyone.”

“We’re not staying together?” Ruthie Lamb asks with wide-eyed horror, clutching Doris’ hand. “You can’t separate us-,”

“I can and I will, Ruth, if it means you’re all out of the city and safe,” Mrs Cole interrupts her firmly. “Yes, before any of you ask, siblings will be kept together. Miss Patrick and I have tried our best to find as many charitable households and schools as possible that would be willing to take orphans in for the foreseeable future.”

“I’m not going to no approved school, ma’am!”

“No one is going to an approved school, Jim,” Mrs Cole says through her teeth. “Understand that this is going to be a very difficult time for all of us. But our first priority is making sure everyone is evacuated properly and safely. We will be posting your assignments outside the office. You older children will be expected to know when, where, and who you will be traveling with.”

As soon as she’s done speaking, the din grows again, people pushing and shoving to talk to her, or breaking off into huddles to grouse or gossip. Amy stands perfectly still for a moment, then abruptly walks out into the hall, Bianka not far behind. Her gut is churning. This isn’t a complete shock, of course- children have been evacuated from London since the very first bombs dropped, but those were children with families and relatives to stay with. She rather feels as though they were all being set adrift in the ocean with no guarantee of rescue.

London is home. Not on the intrinsic level of Hogwarts, not home in the way the Hufflepuff common room and the Great Hall and the quidditch pitch and the Black Lake have always been, but a mundane, familiar, comfortable home all the same. Even when she was certain they were about to be blown to bits by bombers, it’s always been home. Bianka catches up to her by the time she reaches the stairwell.

“They’re sending us away.” She sounds worried, she always sounds worried. This time, Amy does not say ‘we’ll be alright’ or ‘there’s nothing to worry about’. She’s sick of telling herself that, nevermind other people. Nothing has ever just been ‘alright’ in her life, no matter how much she’s wanted it to be true. She finished out her fifth year with the constant, lingering sensation of being observed. She can’t prove Tom kept careful tabs on her, she can’t prove he’s even cared at all since their ‘split’, but she knows without a doubt he has. He was the perfect gentleman the entire spring semester, speaking quietly and calmly to her in Potions whenever they had to work together on a brew, keeping his fair distance in public places like the Great Hall and the library, attending quidditch games and politely clapping for Slytherin and never Hufflepuff.

Naturally, he’s obviously been up to something. The phrase ‘you attract more flies with honey than with vinegar’ comes to mind. Perhaps he’s decided that he’s better off biding his time and trying to slowly but surely reel her back in than he is by throwing a fit and simmering with violent jealousy. Although she’s hardly done anything to stoke it; she was too busy studying for her dreaded OWLs to bother with much of a social life. She’d like to think she did well enough on them even without having Tom there to proofread practice essays or drill her on Transfiguration formulas.
Or maybe, she often thinks, she’s being ridiculously self-absorbed, and he just doesn’t care at all. Maybe she did wound his pride enough that he doesn’t want anything to do with her. No more than she wants to do with him. That might be for the best. They can both rationalize it to themselves years from now as something that was a long time coming. In time, she’ll forget all the ways he made her feel, and by the time they’ve graduated and truly gone their separate ways, it will all be a distant childhood memory. Most people don’t spend the rest of their lives amongst their old playmates, after all.

“Where do you think we’ll go?” Bianka seems a bit unnerved by her silence, but is obviously too anxious to give up just yet.

Amy stops once they’ve reached the landing, then says truthfully, “I really don’t care, so long as we’re not with Mary Campbell or Tom Riddle.”

As luck would have it, they’re not with Mary Campbell. As luck would not have it-

BENSON, AMY C.
BISHOP, DENNIS E.
EISEN, BIANKA S.
RIDDLE, TOM M.

TO DARTMOOR, DEVONSHIRE. DEP. JULY 9.

“Shit,” Amy says, peering up at the list over Bianka’s shoulder, loudly enough that the younger girl jumps and several heads swivel her way.

She debates approaching Mrs Cole over it and pleading her case, but someone not wanting to be around Tom is hardly unique at Wool’s, and now doesn’t quite seem like the time. What would she even say? What can she say, without breaking the Statute and getting carted off by the Ministry? ‘Tom and I’ve had a very nasty row, so while we’ve been inseparable all these years, I’d really rather you send me somewhere else?’

The orphanage is chaotic for the next week; there’s more younger children than older, and the ones too young to travel alone are being assigned workers to go with them and make sure no one misses a train or gets lost, and the infants and toddlers are being picked up by foster families, and everyone is being given labels to pin to their coats and luggage, and rooms are being cleared out, and Amy doesn’t have much time to dwell on it when she’s busy helping wrangle the little ones and check under beds and in wardrobes for missing shoes or hats.

Bianka pores over the supply list they’ve been given every day, clutching it like a lifeline, arranging and rearranging her suitcase. “Knickers, petticoat, stockings, handkerchiefs, slip, blouse, cardigan, comb, boots, towel, soap, toothbrush- what about our gas masks?”

Amy holds them both up, dropping one into Bianka’s case, one into her own. “If we end up sleeping in someone’s barn, we might need them.”

Bianka doesn’t find the joke very funny, turning over her identity card in her hand. “The billeting officer will know I’m not a citizen, won’t he? Mrs Cole will have told them? What if they-,” she hesitates, biting her lip, then continues, “What if they hear my accent, and they don’t let me-,”

“They’re not going to make you stay in London because you’ve got an accent,” Amy says, laughing, but it dies off quickly at the look on Bianka’s face. “Bee, of course they know. They’ll know you’re a refugee- your accent isn’t even that bad, you’ve been here for years now-,”
“But what if the family or the school doesn’t want to take me-;”

“If they won’t, then I’m not going without you,” Amy tells her, grabbing her hands. “Alright? If they don’t let you on a train, I’m not getting on. If they try to put you on a different train, I’m going too.”

Bianka’s mouth trembles, and then she nods, letting go. “Alright.”

It’s a deceptively sunny Friday afternoon at the station. Amy feels odd being at King’s Cross with a destination in mind that is not Hogwarts, and feels a strange sort of shudder as they walk past the entrance to Platform 9 and ¾ without so much as a backward glance. She sees it in Tom as well; his shoulders tense slightly, then relax. “Come on then, let’s keep up the pace,” Miss Patrick is saying briskly to them and the several other groups of orphans all departing today, all to different destinations in Devonshire.

Amy glances over at Helen and Doris, who are in another group with Mary and Ruthie. Ruthie looks to be on the verge of tears, while Mary seems almost excited to be out of the city. This from the girl who’d sneered at Amy over breakfast the day before, “Well, you’ll fit in with the countryside, won’t you? Where is that school of yours again? Inverness? Herd a lot of sheep?” Amy had waited until she got up to help clear a spill, then dumped as much salt as possible into her soup.

Oly two months, she reminds herself. Two months and she’ll be back at Hogwarts. It’s not even the countryside she’s dreading; it’s the fact that she’ll be in cramped conditions, with Tom, who she’s been working so hard to avoid these past seven months. She wouldn’t put it past him to somehow ensure they were being evacuated together, either, although she knows she’s probably being a bit paranoid there. He could hardly have predicted this. She hopes, anyways.

Finally they come to a halt on a packed station full of regular commuters, aid workers, mostly young women, and children. Amy has only ever seen this many children when getting on and off the Hogwarts express. But there are no black robes or pointed hats here; no hooting owls or hissing cats, just a sea of faces, some distraught, others smiling and laughing. Miss Patrick goes around inspecting everyone’s labels, as if they were all being mailed off like packages, and makes Doris fix her hair.

“Very well,” she finally says, looking a bit upset herself, clasping her hands in front of her. “We all know what stations we’re getting off at? Tom, you’re the oldest boy, so I expect you to look after Amy, Dennis, and Bianka, isn’t that right?”

“He’s only five months older than me,” Dennis mutters, as Tom says smoothly, “Of course, Miss Patrick.”

“The billeting officer will be there to receive you, of course, and then you’ll go to the village hall- Helen, do pay attention! They’ll inspect your cards, and then you’ll be assigned to a host family. But you must be on your very best behavior, is that clear, or they’ll send you back on the next train,” she threatens. “And for God’s sake, keep clean! You want to go to good people, don’t you? They don’t want grubby, ill-behaved children. Or sickly ones, so try to muffle that cough of yours, Dennis. Stand up straight, shoulders back, everyone. Smile! Good. Remember, you should be...”

“Seen and not heard,” they chorus, with varying degrees of sarcasm.

The train’s whistle sounds, and then they’re being ushered off in different directions. Amy takes Bianka’s sleeves as people begin to jostle around them, Miss Patrick waving and calling goodbyes and assurances no one can hear, and they make their way onto the right car. Someone knocks into
her as she reaches the door, and she stumbles. “Watch it,” Tom is telling the offending child coldly, and steadies her with a hand at her waist.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Amy says through her teeth, brushing past him and dragging a startled Bianka along with her.

They all file into the same somewhat shabby compartment in standard class, and Amy takes up her customary seat by the window. Tom sits directly across from her, to her annoyance, but without looking at her, immediately takes out a book. She hopes he’s not stupid (or uncaring) enough to be reading a blatantly magical text in full view of two muggles, but she doesn’t go out of her way to check, either. Bianka and Dennis are both shifting around uncomfortably, either because they’re not used to train rides, or because the tension between the other two is so palpable that it can be felt like a cold snap.

“I heard the little ones get to go to nursery schools at all the old grand estates,” Dennis says as the train lurches into motion. “What’s that like, d’you reckon? Some lord and his family runnin’ after a bunch of little tots? Changin’ nappies?”

“They’ll have servants for that sort of thing,” Bianka sighs.

“Yeah,” he snorts. “Us.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to finish this,” Tom cuts in, looking up from his book, and Dennis opens his mouth to argue, then thinks better of it.

Amy leans back against the stiff seat, and debates the merits of trying to take an afternoon nap with him mere feet away, methodically turning a page every other minute.

Chapter End Notes

Throughout this fic I have tried to be be fairly accurate (or at least not blatantly wrong) in regards to British history during WW2. However, the reality is that for plot purposes some things have been tweaked. Many London children were evacuated at the start of the war in 1940, brought back after several months, evacuated again when the Blitz began, brought back after the nightly/early morning raids had tapered off, and then evacuated a final time in 1944 due to the new threat of V2 rockets. So while it's possible that Amy and her peers could have been evacuated in 1943, most likely they would have spent the majority of the war sheltering in Underground stations. The events referenced in this chapter did occur. There was an air raid in Grimsby using 'butterfly bombs', and there was a crowd crush that took place at Bethnal Green, killing many civilians trying to rush down into the tube station.

While the Blitz that most people are familiar with had concluded well before 1943, people were not safe from the threat of more air raids, either. On the day Amy departs from London, July 9th, 1943, an attack on a town called East Grinstead killed over a hundred people, many of them children who had been in the cinema watching a film when the sirens started. The 'approved schools' briefly mentioned were essentially boarding schools for children/adolescents (mainly boys) either sent there due to committing some kind of criminal offence, or because their parents were unable to control their behavior. Corporal punishment (such as canings) and manual labor were prime features. Small children being evacuated from London were often sent to
nursery schools or group homes being held at aristocratic or wealthy estates, which for orphans raised at a rundown institution like Wool's, might be seen as a marked improvement.

If you read through that entire history lesson/clarification, congratulations!
1943

Twelve of them get off the train at South Brent. The train station is nearly deserted compared to the bustle of King’s Cross, and the quiet echoes of their shoes on the waxed floors is almost unnerving. It reminds Amy of when they first came to Hogwarts; the quiet in the halls at night. She’d never experienced that before. Some of the others look a bit startled at the lack of background noise, no distant sounds of traffic or vendors on the street selling food and newspapers. The billeting officer waiting for them is a sour-faced but soft-spoken man named Hawkins. He inspects all of their papers carefully, as if expecting some sort of subterfuge, before leading them out of the quiet station and out into the dusty village.

“How many people live here, sir?” Doris is asking politely. Amy doesn’t know whether to be relieved that Helen and Doris, who she counts as friends, will be in the same village, or railing at divine injustice of Mary being there as well. Who knows in which households they’ll all end up. Some families might only be willing to take in one orphan. She’d rather not be the lone outsider in an otherwise normal home, so she’s hoping she and Bianka or she and Helen and Doris stay together. With any lucky, they’ll separate them all by sex anyways.

“2,500,” Hawkins replies gruffly. “Counting the ones gone off to fight.”

Amy realizes then that the only people they’ve passed on the winding lane have been women, and children. There must be a genuine dearth of men, especially young men.

“2,500?” Dennis is flabbergasted, glancing around at the small brick houses and faded shopfronts.

“That’s the populace of the village, the hamlets, and all the farms in the area,” Hawkins amends. “It’ll be a quiet stay for you.” He narrows his eyes slightly, as if to remind them to keep it that way. “These people are hard-working, decent folks. No funny business. They’re doing the charitable thing, taking you lot in. Not knowing who your people are or where you come from.”

Bianka ducks her head and flattens her shoulders, as if to melt into the cobblestones underfoot.

“We’ll be on our best behavior,” Mary is quick to reassure him, with a lofty tone that implies ‘some of us, anyways’ and a sharp glance at Amy and Tom.

The village hall is a neat, slightly musty building across the street from the post office. There’s a small crowd of perhaps two dozen villagers, mostly older women and a few men, waiting for them. Someone is drinking tea, and Amy’s stomach growls. The meager sandwiches they ate on the train seem like ages ago. She’s certain she’s still not adjusted to not just being able to pop down to the kitchens and order whatever she likes from the house elves. They always give extra large portions to the Hufflepuffs, as much as they protest liking all the houses equally.

They’re shepherded to the front of the folding chairs, as if on display, which she supposes they are. Hawkins has them all stand in a horizontal line, shoulder to shoulder. “Right,” he says, once everyone is quiet. “Let’s keep this fair, so we’ll go in alphabetical order.” He’s reading off a crumpled list of paper. She assumes he’s about to start rattling off their names, but a few moments later it becomes clear that the hosts are the ones getting the pick, not them. She was silly to even
consider such a thing.

The biggest, strongest boys are the first to be scooped up. The stocky Balfes take Grant and Conrad, the freckled Colmans take Sherman. The somewhat ragged Foyes snatch up Rufus. Then it gets a bit tense, hushed arguments breaking out over who is more deserving. Hawkins looks on, chewing on his lower lip, while the remaining children fidget and squirm. The severe Goodes end up getting Mary, and elderly Harris sisters take Ruthie. Visibly pregnant Mrs Jennings picks Helen, and plump and dowdy Mrs Kirby takes Doris. The remaining four: Tom, Dennis, Amy, and Bianka, are all shuffled over to a late arrival: the Morgans, who insist they need the most help around their dairy farm.

“The boys can help me an’ Peter with our work, and the girls will be good for the missus to have round the house,” Mr. Morgan says flatly, and Amy surmises that he’s either well-respected or generally feared in the community, because no one raises much of a fuss. Will Morgan is a rangy, leathery-skinned man with a bad leg and a hooded gaze. His wife, Laura, is a small but sturdy woman with a nervous habit of running her hands down her skirt. Their son accompanied them into town; a sun-tanned blonde boy of perhaps sixteen or seventeen named Peter.

The Morgans live in a small hamlet on the far outskirts of the village. The four of them ride back in the bed of the truck; it’s a bumpy, stomach-churning ride, and too chaotic to make much conversation. Amy is more focused on not being flung into Tom’s lap when the truck rattles over two potholes in a row. He’d likely enjoy that a little too much. She was hoping he’d be picked straight off the bat, but has to admit that one look at Tom does not bring up images of back-breaking physical labor. He’s tall and handsome, to be sure, but he is a bit of a coiffed, bookish pretty boy, with pomade in his hair and no fat on him, but not much muscle either.

Maybe if he’d went out for Quidditch, she thinks with a bitter irony.

“I’m not that short, am I?” Dennis is pressing Bianka, evidently self-conscious at being one of the last to get picked, like this is a playground game. “I look sixteen, yeah? C’mon, be honest.”

“Dennis?” Amy grits out as they pull up outside a ramshackle stone farmhouse.

“What?”

“Keep your mouth shut,” she suggests, as they all clamber out of the truck bed. Tom offers her his hand with patient gallantry, which she knocks aside without so much as a sideways glance. They’re free labor on a dairy farm, not on their bloody honeymoon. They don’t know these people, or this place. And after all he’s put her through, she thinks she’s got a right to be a bit slow to trust.

The four of them follow the Morgans inside, where they find themselves standing in front of a cold wood stove, regarding their hosts. Mr. Morgan looks them over critically. “What’re you all called, again?”

“Tom,” says Tom, with his best smile, “and this is Amy, Dennis, and Bianka. Thank you for hosting us.”

“You all speak English?” Mr. Morgan is not won over by Tom’s easy charisma. Normally, this might amuse Amy. Right now, she rather wishes he were more susceptible to it.

There’s a series of quick nods.

“Good,” he says. “I expect hard work an’ no nonsense, that clear? Make trouble, I’ll put you on the next train that comes through here. Steal from us, you’ll wish you never stepped off the bloody
train. You’ll get up when I say so, sleep when I say so. Do as you’re told, we’ll get along just fine. Girls will have the spare bedroom, boys will have the attic.” He glances at Amy and Bianka. “You know how to cook?”

“Yes,” says Amy. It’s only half a lie; she’s certainly helped chop vegetables and stir sauces and boil water for years now.

“You’ll help my wife with the meals,” Morgan tells them. “And do all the cleaning round the house, an’ the washing. Don’t think you’ll be slacking off, either. You do as you’re told around here. None of this lip you girls today like to give.”

Wonderful, Amy thinks, what are the chances he’s still upset they let women vote now? Mrs. Morgan certainly doesn’t seem the type to give ‘lip’, and from the expectant, smug little grin on Peter’s face, he’s been looking forward to this lecture all day. Maybe they think they’re all city prisses who’ve been too busy getting bombed to do a hard day’s work.

“Yes sir,” she murmurs, and Bianka nods quickly.

Appeased, Morgan jerks his head towards the small kitchen. “Get to it, then.” As they scurry in that direction, he barks at the boys to break the luggage upstairs, and the rest of the evening passes in tense silence. The Morgans aren’t openly hostile, but it’s certainly not the idyllic, welcoming picture painted by all the posters put out by the war offices, either. Amy keeps her head down and her hands busy, and is relieved that Bianka does the same.

After they’re done eating, they help Mrs. Morgan with the dishes, while the boys are taken out to check on the cows. Amy’s hands are bright red and chapped by the time they’re done. It’s not as if she’s never helped with chores before, but even at Wool’s there were plenty of people to share the workload with. Afterwards she watches Tom and Dennis climb up into the attic from the doorway of the guest bedroom, then turns back to Bianka to decide what to do about the bed. There’s just one, with a pull-out cot underneath. “We’ll just have to alternate every night,” Amy says, as much as she wants to claim the softer mattress permanently. “It’s only fair.”

The room is cold and drafty, the blankets itchy, and the unfamiliar creaks and rattles of pipes in the walls and floors settling keeps Amy up half the night, tossing and turning on the rock-hard cot. Just two months, she tells herself, not for the last time. You can make it two months. Not even; she and Tom will have to leave a week early, take a train into London, and stay over at the Leaky Cauldron before heading off to Hogwarts. It can’t be nearly as unpleasant as this.

It’s still dark out when their bedroom groans open, and Mrs. Morgan quietly but firmly shakes them both awake. “We’ve got to put the kettle on and start on breakfast for the boys,” she tells them, and while Amy is dead on her feet, she also has no energy to argue or sulk. She and Bianka dress silently and stiffly, then plod downstairs. Shortly thereafter, the men go out to milk and feed. Amy’s mouth is watering at the smell of the eggs cooking, but they can’t sit down to eat until they come back inside.

When Morgan returns with Peter and the boys, Dennis has a hand clapped to one ear, his mouth crumpled in a silent, painful grimace. “Did you knock your head, Dennis?” Bianka asks shyly, as they all sit down.

“Knocked over a bucket, s’what he did,” Peter answers for him, too eagerly. “Da gave him a good clouting for it.”

When Dennis finally lets go of the side of his head to eat his breakfast, his right hand is sticky with dried blood. Amy gapes; she’s seen plenty of children get smacked and spanked for various
offenses, but never hit that hard, and for so little reason—until Mr. Morgan barks, “I asked you to pass the butter, girl,” and she quickly hands it to him, averting her eyes. He doesn’t know how lucky it was that it was Dennis and not Tom. As far as she knows, no one’s ever hit Tom. He’s not someone who things ‘happen’ to. She doesn’t know how he’d react if anyone ever tried to lay so much as a finger on him. She suspects they’d lose it.

By the end of their third day, several things have become clear. The first is that Morgan won’t hesitate to dole out a good beating to the boys if provoked or infuriated, but he won’t lay a hand on the girls, leaving that up to Mrs Morgan. The second is that Mrs Morgan, worn down and chastened by twenty years of marriage to a domineering bastard, is far less generous with the rod, and while she’s not exactly warm and maternal towards Amy and Bianka, doesn’t seem to have much ill will towards them, either. The third is that they only have two breaks during the day; in the morning between ten o’clock and noon, and in the afternoon between three o’clock and supper time. The fourth is that the Morgans have already lost one son to the war; Freddy’s plane went down over northern France two months ago, and as a result they’re inclined to tolerate quite a bit from the remaining child, Peter.

The fifth is that Peter Morgan is perhaps even more of a bastard than his father. This becomes clear enough the first time he purposefully trips Dennis, the easier of the two targets, going down the stairs, and crystal clear when he comes into the kitchen to ostensibly get a drink of water, and feels up Bianka while she’s scrubbing down the sink. Amy looks up from her ironing work when Bianka gasps sharply, and sees Peter pressing her up against the counter, murmuring something he likely thinks is saucy in her ear.

Bianka is scarlet red and trembling. He either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. She supposes he’s having the best week of his pathetic life, with two strange girls in the house. “Oi,” says Amy quickly. “Leave her be, why don’t you?” She hardly expects him to listen to her, but she’d rather distract him, at the very least.

Peter lets go of her and turns to Amy with an innocent look as Bianka cringes away. “Dunno what you’re on about. Mind your own business before you burn my mother’s blouse.” When she does not immediately hasten to obey, he takes a threatening stride forward. “Stupid bitch. What, wish it was you, do you? But you’re nothing to look at.” His lip curls, and he’s about to say more, until he hears his mother coming down the stairs with another load of laundry. Then he’s gone out the back door.

“You alright?” Amy asks Bianka in a forcefully casual tone as Mrs Morgan dumps out the laundry to sort it.

“Fine,” replies Bianka too quickly, snatching back up her rag. “I’m fine.”

Later, when they’ve got a moment alone, Amy pulls her into their room, and tells her, “Anytime he comes near you, and none of us are around, you’ve just got to scream like you’re being murdered. Someone will come running, and he’ll have to leave you alone then.”

“They’ll punish me-,”

“Better a slap than whatever he’s got planned,” Amy says shakily, wondering if their door locks. Maybe she's overreacting. This is what growing boys do when they're bored and isolated, people might say. Come on now, he's a good lad, just a little wild. “Alright?”

They’re not children anymore. When she catches her reflection in the small mirror in the room, an unfamiliar young woman stares impassively back at her, her mousy brown hair bobbed around her round chin, stocky shoulders set and wiry arms crossed under her chest. She looks durable and
weary and faded with time. As if she's about to step back into the peeling wallpaper and disappear. Bianka is a striking, pixie-like scrap of dark curls and slim curves beside her. Amy feels like the wicked stepsister in some fairy tale. Advising the princess on how to avoid the vile beast roaming the castle.

But she has a beast of her own, tucked away, and while Amy is not foolish enough to try to sic Tom on Peter the way a villain in an adventure film might shriek ‘release the hounds’... She’s not going to discredit the potential, either. Tom doesn’t necessarily need a wand to be dangerous. She knows that well enough by now, but with every passing day, passing hit or shove or shout from Morgan to clumsy, short Dennis, or passing leer and comment from Morgan’s bellend of a son to a steadily shrinking Bianka, she feels herself starting to eat all her passionate words about muggles and wizards being one and the same. They’re not. If they were all wizards, she’d have snatched up her wand and set the house ablaze by now, then hopped on the broom she sweeps with and flown far, far away.

Chapter End Notes

Country living certainly isn't all it's cracked up to be.
Unless

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1943

Amy spends her free time, what precious little of it she has with all the chores and work to be done, up on Brent Hill, sketching. It’s a very long walk from the farmhouse, but she can see most of the village from the summit of the hill, and she likes to sit among the ruins. Supposedly there used to be a chapel here, then a windmill. Now there are just loose stones and the weathered remains of walls. Sometimes Doris and Helen and Bianka go up with her, other times she goes up alone. Once she had to hide behind a low wall because Peter and some friends were walking around the bottom of the hill, talking and smoking.

She knows Tom goes up there as well, but she does her level best to avoid coming to the hill at the same time as him. Merlin knows what he’s doing? Reading? Looking for desolate caves to practice dark magic in? Collecting things? She knows he still does that, at least. Some things are stolen, other things he finds. She wonders what he’s done with her gloves, but at this point she can hardly demand them back. It’d be far too uncomfortable. Best to keep her head down, in all regards.

Three weeks have gone by, and while things are hardly any better, they’re not much worse either. It’s a level of miserable just tolerable enough to endure. And to think she’d ever found life at Wool’s grueling in the slightest. The orphanage seems like the bloody Ritz in comparison, bombs or not. Amy thinks of it as living continuously in wet socks. Insufferable and irritating and generally a horrible experience, but it’s not as if they’re being tortured with thumb screws or forced to walk on hot coals. For the most part, everyone adjusts.

Tom withdraws into himself, not out of any particular intimidation or fear, Amy thinks dryly, but likely because he’s on the verge of snapping and cursing them all at any moment, and he really doesn’t want to end up in prison. Dennis becomes far less clumsy, but develops a horrible case of shaking hands whenever Mr. Morgan barks at him to do something. Bianka makes herself as small as possible, particularly when Peter is in the room. Amy pretends she is a slab of stone. Immovable and uninteresting, useless to try to topple or pummel.

The others are far more fortunate. The Goodes are humorless but decent people, and Mary seems to fit right in with their no-nonsense, severe household. Ruthie is adored by the Harris sisters, who cluck over her like a pair of old hens, hemming her clothes and giving her new ribbons for her hair. Helen gets on well with good-natured Mrs Jennings and is excited for the baby to arrive. Doris is constantly followed around by Mrs Kirby’s horde of small, perpetually messy children.

Amy is just beginning to think they might get through without any major incidents. She should have taken that for a warning, of course. When has anything ever gone without incident for her? Her entire life has been one major incident after another. Many people could say that, of course, what with the two wars and the magical school and the orphanage, but she’s beginning to think she’s just cursed. She seems to attract trouble. Or perhaps it’s just a side effect of having spent her formative years around Tom Riddle. She caught something from him, and now wherever she goes, it’s like the goddamn plagues of Egypt. Locusts raining down from the sky and rivers of blood.

She and Bianka are climbing up Brent’s Hill when it all goes to shite. Amy smells the cigarette smoke, glances at Bianka, who’s gone the color of milk, and realizes it’s far too late to struggle back down the peak. In the realm of positives, luckily, Peter is alone. In the realm of negatives,
they’re a long, long ways from the village and up here no one is going to come running for anyone’s shouting or yelling. Amy stops, and Bianka stops with her, the long grass licking at their skirts. Peter makes no sign of putting out his cigarette, and instead says, “Been looking for you. Always slipping away. S’not very nice, is it? I just wanted to talk.”

He is looking at Bianka. Amy might as well have been an afterthought. This is not comforting in the least.

“I’m sorry,” says Bianka, not sounding very sorry, but sounding very frightened instead. “I didn’t mean to.” She wraps her arms around herself and takes a small step back. “I’m really sorry, Peter.”

“Right,” he stubs out his cigarette on the low, crumbling wall beside him. “You can make it up to me. Come on.”

Amy grabs her hand. Peter seems to notice her for the first time. “Fuck off, then.” Bianka does not move, and his expression darkens. “I said, come on, if you know what’s good for you. You can braid hair with this cow later.”

Bianka jerks away from her, and Amy stiffens. “Bianka, don’t-,” But instead of obediently approaching Peter, Bianka bends down instead, plucking something up from the ground. She straightens back up, and adjusts her stance slightly.

Peter scowls. “What are you-,” The rock hits him square in the forehead, and he stumbles back with a shout of pain. It wasn’t much bigger than a pebble, but blood is already welling up. Amy gapes as Bianka grasps a second rock in her palm. Peter is rubbing furiously at the blood trickling down his brow, momentarily shocked, before blind rage enters his eyes. “You stupid little ki-,” The second rock hits him in the square of the chest, and he flinches back again.

Amy drops to one knee and starts collecting rocks herself.

“You’re dead,” Peter is half-snarling, half-weeping from pain, as blood drips down between his eyes and he rubs at his chest. “You’re both dead, do you hear me-,”

Amy’s first attempt nails him in the shoulder, and he shouts again, then charges forward. Bianka’s third rock is the biggest yet; it slams into one of his thighs, staggering him. Amy’s second catches him in the side of the head as he stumbles, then catches himself on his hands and knees in the grass. “Stop it!” His voice cracks as Bianka takes a few steps forward, several more rocks in hand. “Alright, stop it, I- I’m sorry!”

“No,” says Bianka, dropping all the rocks in front of him. A small cloud of dust rises up. “You’re not. You fuck off,” she enunciates carefully, “and if you don’t, I’ll hit you until you don’t get up again.”

They make it to the bottom of the hill, slipping and sliding, before Amy exchanges a look with Bianka, and they both take off running. When they’re far away enough to determine that Peter doesn’t seem to have given chase, they slow down into a shaky walk. Bianka lets out a tremulous giggle, and Amy’s stoic expression cracks into a series of snickers and snorts. They’re hanging onto each other by the time the fit has passed, and only then does Bianka say, in a small, wondering voice, “He’s not going to stop, is he?”

“No,” Amy agrees shortly. “Not before, and especially not now that we humiliated him. It doesn’t matter that no one saw. He’s afraid we’ll gossip about it, and all his mates will find out that two little girls stoned him up on Brent’s Hill and he started crying and squealing like a pig to slaughter.”
Bianka wipes her sweaty palms on her skirt. “I thought so.”

They sink into an uneasy silence. Amy wants to embrace her and tell her that she’ll fix everything, just let her nip home to fetch her wand, and they’ll sort this right out- she’ll charm Peter’s tongue to the top of his mouth, she’ll send him sprawling with a hex, she’ll brew up a potion in the Morgans’ cellar and drop him dead as a door-nail. But she can’t. She can’t do any of that. The Trace works so well for a reason, and it works especially well when an underage witch is surrounded by muggles. The Ministry would be here within hours, and they wouldn’t care much to hear about how he really was a perverted little bastard and had it coming. They just put two more people to trial a few months ago for hunting Nazis on Guernsey.

They’re on the outskirts of the village when Amy recognizes Ruthie coming out of a phone booth and looking distraught. At the sight of them, she rushes over, wringing her hands. “Miss Mabel’s had a bad fall- I just had to ring for the doctor. Miss Frances is sure she’s broken her ankle, she is. It’s awful- they’re such sweet ladies.”

Bianka looks suitably dismayed. Amy practically beams. “That is awful,” she tells a perplexed Ruthie, “really awful, Ruthie, listen- with Miss Mabel laid up, you’ll absolutely need an extra pair of hands, won’t you? They run the apothecary, don’t they?”

“Well, I-,”

“Brilliant,” Amy claps her hands together, and winces when her blisters rub against each other. “Just the thing for it- Bianka will have to stay with you and help, won’t she? It’s hardly fair for some big strong farmers to have four extra workers, and those poor old women only one. No, Ruthie, don’t thank me, it’s settled. Bianka will go home with you. I’ll bring her things round tomorrow. I’m sure the Morgans won’t mind.”

“Thank you,” Bianka tells her, as Ruthie leads her away. “I mean it, Amy. Are you sure-,”

“It’ll be fine,” Amy lies through her teeth. “I’ll handle him. Don’t come round the farm, you hear me?”

The Morgans, of course, mind very much, by the time she arrives home late for supper and sweating, and there’s a good deal of shouting and table banging from Mr. Morgan, who’s understandably not pleased that she packed off Bianka to the Harris household without so much as a ‘may I’. But he’s also tired from a long day’s work in the fields, and in the end she goes without supper and is sent out to sweep out some stalls before the last of the daylight’s gone.

Amy rather prefers the dark and smelly barn to the tense kitchen, and sweeps away, wishing it were her school broom in her hands, wishing she could fly, if only for a few minutes. She imagines the expression on their faces, if they saw her go swooping past the moon, cackling like some witch out of a children’s story. Peter would probably piss himself. She’s gotten through three stalls and is struggling to move some bales of hay out of the way when she goes sprawling across the dirty floor.

She didn’t even hear Peter come in, but she supposes he had the advantage, having grown up here. Her back hurts; his fingernails dug into the back of her blouse when he shoved her. Amy starts to scramble back up onto her feet, but a booted foot slams into her stomach, and while she’s taken her fair share of bludger hits, Christ almighty does it still hurt. She rolls over, gasping and panting, and he says, almost petulantly, “Don’t even think about shouting for my da. I’ll break your fucking ribs, you stupid little slag. See how funny things are then.”

Amy doesn’t bother shouting, and she doesn’t bother pleading. He’s going to beat her as badly and
as viciously as he can without leaving any marks on her face, and pat himself on the back for a job well done, restoring his wounded pride. Maybe he even convinced himself that Bianka really did like him, that she was just being shy, playing coy with him, and ugly, unappealing, unrepentant Amy poisoned her against him. She doesn’t really care. He’s bigger than her and he’s stronger than her, but she’s got one hundred and thirty four pounds of muscle on her and she grew up in a fucking orphanage. She’s seen dogs a lot meaner than the likes of him.

She throws herself against his legs, sending him toppling, and they both hit the floor. Amy grabs a handful of straw and smashes it into his face, scratching at his eyes and mouth, and rolls away when he bucks her off, thankful her hair is sensibly short enough that he can’t grab it. His mouth is moving, but she can’t hear any of it over the rushing in her ears. She snatches up the broom and rams him in the gut with it; he staggers back, winded, and she cracks him across the legs, then dodges out of the way as he comes swinging at her. She’s much lighter on her feet than him and thankful for years of Quidditch drills when she ducks under the first blow, then the second, but the third cracks her across the face, and the world tilts with her when she falls. He doesn’t wait for her to get the chance to reorient herself this time; he lunges after her and plants his weight heavy on her legs as she thrashes beneath him.

One of her clawing fingers catches hims in the mouth, splitting at his lip, and he hits her again. She reels, and her head cracks against the floor. There is magic crackling in her veins and she can feel the pressure shift, knows that if she were twelve or thirteen it would not be enough, it would be spilling out of her, but she is too well trained and it subsides. He punches her again, and she knows one of her eyes is going to be swollen shut in the morning. There is a lot of blood in her mouth, and when he leans over her, she grabs at his hair and spits at him. He recoils, cursing, while her other hand gropes for a nearby empty bucket to swing at him.

Just as her fingers tighten around the handle, a beam of light catches them, and they both freeze. It’s Morgan, Amy thinks in relief, and Peter scrambles off her, already stammering excuses, but it’s not his father, they both realize within moments. It’s Tom. Amy does not know why he’s out here; he was supposed to be helping move some boxes up into the attic with Dennis before bed, nor does she care. He’s holding an old oil lantern and in the latent dusk light he looks strange and terrible, like a shifting statue, both still and flickering at the same time.

Peter is oddly silent, which confuses Amy. He has always given Tom a much wider berth than Dennis, aside from the odd snide comment about city prisses or fancy schools, but Peter has never expressed any particular fear of him, either. But now he is very quiet, not sneering or threatening or dismissing, and as she gets to her feet, she realizes he is crying. Big, fat tears are leaking out of his eyes and stuttering down his red face. He is staring not at Tom, but at the lantern light, as if it were something else entirely, or someone else. He looks like a repentant sinner in a church mural, weeping with passion.

“You loved your brother,” says Tom, very softly. “But you were happy when he left, weren’t you? Perfect Freddy. Your parents loved him more, and you knew it. He was clever. He was going to go to university once they had the money saved up, and become a doctor. And you were going to stay here, and mind the farm. That’s all you were fit for. You were so glad when he went. Finally. Finally they’d have to remember they had two sons, not one. That you still mattered. You were important. You could make them proud. Your father wouldn’t have to hit you anymore if you could just make him proud. I see. Your mother was crying when Freddy’s train left and your father was almost kind, wasn’t he? For once. You were sat in the back of the car, so relieved. I can see all of it, Peter.”

Peter has begun to tremble, lips moving as though he is trying to form words but cannot. Amy thinks he looks as though he were going to have a seizure. He is not here with them at all. Tom
took his mind and put it somewhere else, in the past. In a memory. She understands now. She’d dismissed the legilimency as crass mind-reading. Useful for finding out dirty secrets and embarrassing urges and not much else. It’s something else entirely. It’s not that he can take a quick peek into someone else’s head. It’s that he can saunter through the front door and open all the windows and rifle through the drawers. He can sit down and listen to the radio, if he likes. He can make himself entirely at home inside someone else’s mind. Even change up the decor a little. She wipes at the blood on her mouth, as Peter begins to sob in earnest, sinking to his knees.

“And then they told you he wasn’t coming back,” Tom says, so softly and gently, as though reading a bedtime story to a little child, “and that night Da got so drunk and angry he near put you through a window. And you knew then, it didn’t matter at all. Freddy could die a hundred times over, and you would still never be enough for either of them. Your mum prays to his photo at night. She sleeps in his bedroom sometimes. Smell his clothes. She would rather it have been you.”

“No,” whispers Peter, “no, no-,”

“Yes,” says Tom, setting down the lantern. “She would. They both would.”

“Get out,” mumbles Peter. “Get out, get out, you’re not supposed- I can feel you, get out-,”

Amy slowly inches around him, as he scrambles away from the light, as though it were burning him from the inside out, and hides his head in his hands like a toddler. “Get out. Make it stop. I don’t want to see it. Get out of me, get out, I can FEEL YOU-,”

“Sometimes you dream about him,” says Tom, fervently, like a pastor reaching his real mark in his sermon. “Flying over the farm. He crashes in the field and when you run to the plane there’s no one there. There’s never anyone there. It’s just you.”

“Stop it,” Peter sobs. “Please, please, I don’t want to be here, I want to come back-,”

Amy reaches the lantern and Tom, and kicks it over with her foot, then brings the heel of her work boot down on it. Glass shatters and the light sputters out, leaving them all in the dark. She thinks she hears Peter gasp in relief, as though he’d just surfaced from underwater. He does not move, though, stays where he is, peering at Tom as though he’d never seen him before, horrified. “You stay away from me.”

“You stay away from her,” says Tom evenly, “or that will seem like a daydream. You so much as look at her, and I’ll take you so far back you won’t know up from down or left from right. They’ll pack you off to the madhouse, and you can spend the rest of your worthless little life tied to a bed staring at the ceiling. Would you like that?”

Peter makes a sound like a whimper, but shakes his head all the same.

“I thought so,” says Tom, smiling coldly. He takes Amy’s hand as though it were the most natural thing, and they walk out of the barn together. Peter does not follow.

Outside it is a little lighter. Amy does not think she can go back into that house right now, and they walk down the road a little instead.

“Dennis turned out to be surprisingly useful,” Tom says to her, casually, as if they’d just returned from a little evening stroll. “Dropped some boxes down the stairs. On purpose. Let me slip out the back door while Morgan was working himself up to a stroke.” He touches her face gently. “I could hear his thoughts all the way from there.”

She leans into his cold fingers for a moment, if only because her skin feels as though it were
throbbing and on fire and this helps, and then pulls back. “You didn’t have to go that far.”

“Oh, am I due for another lecture? I’m so pleased,” he remarks snidely. “I was beginning to worry you’d run out of things to scold me over.”

“Shut up,” she snaps. “You could have frightened him off weeks ago. Instead you waited, and bided your time, and then once it actually mattered to you-,”

“My sincerest apologies, Amy, for having some care for your well-being, which is more than you can say-,”

“I was defending a friend because it was the right thing to do, not because it benefited me,” she retorts. “Something you’d know nothing about, would you, Tom?”

“Please,” he says. “Spare me the morality theatrics, Amy. It makes you feel good about yourself to have these little pet projects. Things you can protect. Get yourself all riled up about.”

“It makes me feel good about myself to be a decent human being? You’ve well and truly cracked the code to empathy, congratulations!” she snarls back.

“You enjoyed that,” he says, and she thinks for a terrible moment, he looked, and she feels naked, and then Tom takes her hands in his, and says, “I didn’t need to look inside your mind to know you did. It’s more than that. You enjoyed it, because it was right. He deserved it. You would have done the same, if you could have-,”

“You don’t know that at all,” she rips her hands away, but she cannot look away. His entire face lit up with understanding. With something like joy. This is the closest he will ever get, she thinks, to feeling a real, mutual connection. True pleasure and euphoria. Right now, in the aftermath of ravaging some stupid muggle’s mind. Because he knows some part of her took some satisfaction from it. That it wasn’t just him. That he wasn’t alone in it. Because he could share it with her.

Amy doesn’t know whether to feel honored or horrified. She’ll settle for both.

“I wanted to kill him,” says Tom, a hesitant, self-conscious confession, the same way he might say, ‘I wanted to kiss you’ or ‘I wanted us to be together.’

“You couldn’t have,” says Amy. “You could only get away with this because it was wandless and nonverbal- you didn’t even use an incantation. I read about it, last year. That’s the most advanced level of legilimency. The Trace won’t track it because it wasn’t just one sole act of magic. It was multiple at once.”

He nearly beams, and she knows she should leave it at that. Walk away. Stop this nonsense. Enough. She rationalizes it to herself that it’s not abnormal to feel gratitude. To be thankful. To feel relief. What he did tonight was horrible, yes. She wouldn’t wish it on her worst enemy, ordinarily. But it’s not as if either of them had a wide array of spells to choose from. There were no alternatives. “I’m glad you didn’t kill him,” she says instead, and knows her eyes are telling him, ‘I’m glad you came after me.’

“I missed you.” His thumb brushes over the dried blood at the corner of his lips.

Amy smiles dryly against it. “I know.”

“Friends?” he asks, too innocently. “Have I redeemed myself enough?”

“Not in the least,” she exhales. “I meant what I said. We can’t go back. I won’t.”
“But you won’t leave, either.” His arms come around her and there is a queer sickle moon in the sky tonight and she listens to the crickets chirping and the last of the birdcalls, and thinks if any Hufflepuff was ever allowed an exemption in not going back on their word, she’d have to at least qualify.

She locks her arms around his neck with a measure of grim acceptance, and says very quietly into his ear. “Not yet.” It’s a long, silent walk to the hill, and the moon is much higher by the time they reach it. They put their backs against the stones and watch the constellations they’ve spent years identifying at Hogwarts. She hums a little under her breast and feels at her swelling eye and her aching bruises and turns the other cheek, literally, into his chest. He keeps his hand on the back of her neck, fingers drumming at the top of her spine.

“Tom?” she asks when they are both half-asleep in the cool moonlight.

He murmurs an assent.

“Will you teach me something?”

She can hear his faint smile. “Legilimency?”

“No. The other kind.”

He’s silent for a moment, and then asks wryly, “With the right incentives, maybe.”

“Hm. I’ll figure something out,” she sighs, and with a sheepish little twist, leans up and kisses him.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t call it a comeback. (Or, we had to graduate to the friends to lovers to frenemies-with-benefits stage at some point, folks).
Amy is halfway down the stairs when she remembers something. She stops, heaving down her suitcase with a clatter. Tom turns back around with a glare. “We’re going to be late,” he hisses after her as she scrambles back upstairs. It’s four days before school begins, and they’re on the verge of freedom; they’re taking the train back to London today, getting beds at the Leaky Cauldron for the next few days, doing their harried shopping last minute, and then they’re gone.

Amy really isn’t sure what they’re going to do next summer, when they’ll both be of age in the magical world, but still considered children in the muggle world, but anything has got to be better than another day on this bloody farm. She never wants to look at a cow again, unless it’s dead on her plate. But she can’t leave without doing this first. Amy bursts back into the room she and Bianka once shared, throws open the wardrobe, and rummages around in the bottom of it, under some extra quilts and blankets. Finally her fingers close around what she was looking for, and she yanks the poppet out, shoves it under her baggy jumper, and hurries across the hall. Less than a minute later she’s hurrying back downstairs, brushing off her skirt, and picking her suitcase back up.

Morgan is going to drive them into town, although Amy wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d elected to make them walk. Mrs Morgan, Peter, and Dennis are standing by the door, waiting to see them off. Well, Mrs Morgan looks genuinely disappointed to see them go; whether because she’s losing the help around the house or because Amy’s quiet obedience grew on her is up for debate. Dennis, heavily freckled from weeks in the sun, nods to Amy, and even gives Tom a slight grin. Amy doesn’t think- hopes- Dennis doesn’t suspect anything supernatural of either of them, but she does think he believes Tom did something to Peter to warrant this sudden change in behavior.

Peter stands stiff and silent, meek as a lamb, avoiding eye contact with both of them, his gaze firmly trained on the floor. Amy feels a stab of satisfaction, despite knowing that it’s wrong. She shouldn’t take pleasure from the sight of a terrified muggle. Tom did break the law, even if he’ll never face any repercussions for it. However bad of a person Peter is or was, whatever her own feelings on the matter, she willingly stood by while someone’s mind- their memories, their fears, their every horrible secret and impulse- was violated and exposed. She should feel horrified and guilty. She should have found a brick, and bashed his skull in to put him out of his misery, rather than sit and watch someone go through that.

Well, maybe not that guilty.

“You’ve been so generous,” Tom is telling Mrs Morgan so sweetly, in that voice of his especially designated for older women, that earnest, boyish pitch. “We really can’t thank you enough for your hospitality.”

“I’ll never forget what you did for us,” Amy gushes, but she knows her eyes are hard and cold. “Thank you so much.”

“Just doing what’s right,” Mr. Morgan says gruffly, and she barely resists the urge to roll her eyes and spit on his boots. Instead she gives Dennis a one-armed embrace. “Goodbye for now, Den.” He really is a sweet boy. She wishes there was something better waiting for him than the trenches.
“Bye,” Dennis scuffs his shoe along the floor. “Have fun writing papers at that school of yours. Or reading poetry. Or whatever people do-,”

“Peter,” Tom claps him on the shoulder in an almost fraternal gesture, and Peter lets out a sound just shy of a whimper and nearly cringes away. Amy almost does feel bad that his parents don’t even seem to notice his discomfort, his fear, no more than they did Bianka’s or Dennis’ or her’s. “Best of luck to you.”

Amy does exhale in amusement at that. Peter nods shakily, mumbling some reply, and she leans up on her tiptoes to hug him as well, only her fingernails dig red crescents into the back of his suntanned neck. “Don’t forget to sweep under the bed,” she whispers to him, then releases him and smiles knowingly. There’s a flash of anger across his face, that he could be so easily cowed by a short, stocky girl with mousy hair and watery blue eyes and dirt under her nails, but it was drowned out by the fear.

This is what it means to be a witch, she thinks for the first time. This must be it. He’s furious at the thought of someone like her having any power over him, but he’s also frightened. Very frightened, the way a child is of the dark or a strange sound in the woods or something brushing against their legs while swimming. He doesn’t know what she’s capable of, he just knows she makes him feel small, and weak, and vulnerable. And she enjoys it. She really does.

The ride back to the train station is just as quiet as the ride from it seven weeks ago. Morgan does not get out of the truck to see them off, but he presses something into Tom’s hand through the open window, before rumbling away. “Two shillings,” Tom shows her, glinting in the pale palm of his hand. He puts it in his pocket. “I’ll exchange it at Gringotts.”

“And then we’ll really be minted,” Amy mutters, but is distracted by a familiar face as they make their way into the quiet station. “Bee?” Bianka is waiting on a nearby bench; at the sight of them she jumps up and comes over. “What’re you going here?”

“Saying goodbye,” Bianka smiles; she looks better, healthier, almost, with an easiness to her step that Amy has seldom seen before. “I wanted to say thank you. The Harrises have been good to me. And… I haven’t had trouble from Peter.”

“You won’t,” says Amy confidently, but she embraces Bianka all the same. “But please be careful, alright? I- I don’t know when we’ll see each other again, but we will, I’m sure.”

“Of course,” Bianka draws back, adjusting her favorite red scarf. “Be safe. Wherever you go.”

Sometimes Amy really does wonder how much her roommate suspects. Surely she must sense something. Bianka’s not stupid, far from it. But she has never voiced a single question, accusation, or suspicion to either Amy nor Tom. Maybe she just doesn’t care, so long as she’s left out of it. Maybe she does care, but enough to never ask. All the same, there’s a strange swell of gratitude in her throat. “I will. Give Ruthie and Doris and the others my best, won’t you?”

Their train is right on time, and once secluded in a compartment Amy takes off her hat and coat, groaning, but Tom is somewhat less interested in relaxing. His hands settle on her hips and pull her flush against him, and she grabs one of his wandering hands, playfully pinning it with her own against the cool window pane as the countryside starts to rattle by. “Someone’s impatient.”

“Don’t tell me you weren’t tired of having to climb a bloody mountain peak to have some privacy,” he says in her ear, before she wriggles around to properly kiss him. This, too, she ought to feel more guilty about. She can cough it to herself all she likes- oh, they’re not together, she’s not approving of him, she’s still betrayed and upset by him, but it doesn’t make much of a difference
when they’re alone, does it? Amy tries to think of it as a vice. Some people drink. Some people smoke. Some people gamble. She does terribly nice things with Tom. Sometimes just after he’s done terribly not-so-nice things.

“Wait,” he says, at one point, as she’s cursing the finicky buttons of his shirt, and he’s got one hand up her blouse.

“What?” Amy snaps in exasperation, more than she meant to, and then laughs at the mildly annoyed grimace he gives her.

“I have to know,” he says, “what did you go back upstairs for?”

“Nosy as always,” she scolds, even as she shudders from his hand.

“Call it a healthy intellectual curiosity.”

She wrinkles her nose at him, then admits, “A poppet, to put under his bed.”

“A poppet?” he echoes her dubiously.

She chuckles again. “You know, one of those little root dollies. I made it with twigs and corn shafts and some cloth scraps. And I put a twine noose round its little neck.”

Tom stares at her for a moment, dark eyes unreadable, and then does something that almost scares her; he laughs. Loudly and genuinely. She’s seldom been able to get that much of a reaction from him to, well, anything. He laughs himself breathless, until he’s almost red in the face. “Of all the quaint, silly- you left him with a poppet?”

“I don’t need legilimency to scare off an imbecile,” she says tartly, “some of us are proper resourceful, you know- And besides, they can be spooky! They used to burn witches for doing that sort of thing, leaving poppets for people!”

“Terrifying,” he smirks, “truly horrific-,”

She kisses him mostly so she doesn’t have to listen to his mockery any longer.

Amy’s summary of the four days in Diagon Alley would be best described as a learning experience: she learns what the cheapest items on the Leaky Cauldron’s menu are, she learns how to haggle for an extra discount on her textbooks, she learns that when Tom wants to shoplift something he waits for the shopkeep to be distracted by a crowd coming through the doors, she learns about the latest muggle and magical news- the Germans have occupied Denmark, Grindelwald’s forces have cleaved a path into Spain- and she learns how to clear her mind during late evenings in the Leaky Cauldron’s dining room, huddled in a corner with Tom, struggling to regulate her breathing and focus on her spoon in her teacup, gently circling and circling.

“Ready?” he asks, on the third night, when she’s able to drown out the background noise to a dull buzz in the back of her head, and she gives a quick nod.

Then she feels him, as if someone had lain a wet towel on her hair. A trickling sensation almost, probing at the edges, and then suddenly she’s not focused on her tea at all, no, she’s lying on the floor of the barn, eye swelling shut and blood on her tongue. He withdraws and she comes back to herself with a shiver and a gasp, upsetting her teacup and cursing.

“You were afraid,” Tom says, sounding more bemused than reproving. “When you’re afraid you panic. When you panic your mind starts racing, and the last time you were that afraid-,”
“Yes, I get it,” Amy cuts him off sharply. “No fear. I understand.”

But she doesn’t, not really. How is she supposed to shut down all her emotions like that? Fear seems a very honest reaction to the thought of someone invading her mind. She’s not a statue, not heartless. Not like him, she thinks guiltily, or what she thinks he’s like. But Tom isn’t heartless. It would be easier if he were. She’s never considered him entirely cold or emotionless. He does care. It’s just how and when he chooses to express that care that’s the issue. She just wishes he could care more like her. Wishes he could understand the way she does, feel the way she does. Guilt has never been a problem for Tom. You’d think she would have accepted that by now. She’s known it since they buried that rabbit together.

She’s reminded of this when they reach King’s Cross. Tom hasn’t forgotten what she told him, and she hasn’t had a change of heart. They separate as soon as they’re through the barrier, prefect’s badges gleaming on both of their chests. Tom makes a beeline for Abraxas, while she spots Patsy and her boyfriend. They look genuinely, innocently besotted, tenderly holding hands and rubbing knuckles together, laughing and smiling in the same way.

For a moment she tries to picture herself and Tom entering a room arm in arm, chatting amiably, the envy of every other couple. Then she decides to stop being delusional. Maybe if she had accepted his offer last year, but she’d feel even worse now if she’d done that. It would have been a lie for both of them. A pretty, palatable one, but a lie nonetheless. And she can excuse many things, but not that.

So they don’t take the train together, or the carriage up to school, and there will be no more walks or eating lunch together or studying in the library up until curfew. She will not see him in the stands at her quidditch games, they will not loiter around in Hogsmeade together, they won’t pass notes in class or compare marks on essays. He will not crush her at chess every time and she will not try and fail yet again to coax him onto the back of her broom. They won’t walk each other back to their common rooms and they will not argue over the latest gossip or what’s in the papers.

Amy knows all of this, but picks at it in her mind, like an itching scab, all the same. It would be one thing if it were only a matter of attraction. Hell, plenty of people are married to someone they can’t stand. That’s hardly unique. The problem really is, she thinks, that part of her still likes him. Not because he’s handsome or flatters her or even just because they’ve always been together, but because Tom can often be very pleasant to be around. Because she does miss him. She’s unwilling to think about what that might mean, because Amy Benson is a practical, reasonable girl and she certainly does not let herself get twisted up over a boy, regardless of who he is or what he’s done.

That’s not the only thing that feels different. Hogwarts feels different; there’s a palpable tension in the air, like static. Amy is shocked to have to break up two separate fights at Hogsmeade Station, and once they’re all seated in the Great Hall for the welcoming feast, the flurry of whispers and muttering does not die down until the Sorting itself begins. She’s not the only one to notice it; Ruby, after showing off her new victory rolls, frowns and Lean over to mutter to her and Vera, “Has someone terribly important died? What’s going on?”

“Everyone’s frightened,” Vera murmurs back, glancing around warily as a first year is sorted into Slytherin, to polite applause. “What magical governments are left in Europe to fight Grindelwald?” She tacks off on her fingers. “Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece? The French, German, Italian, Scandinavian governments—they’re all underground or in exile. The Prophet says he’ll have Spain by next summer. What happens when they cross the channel, come over here?”

“He’s too afraid of Dumbledore, surely,” Ruby says, although she exchanges an uneasy look with
Amy. “And it’s hardly as if he’s got them all under his heel- there’s all those resistance groups, aren’t there? I heard the International Congregation of Warlocks, they’ve tried to assassinate him twice now-,”

“Well, it’s obviously not working,” Bert Macmillan cuts in, having been eavesdropping as usual. “Mark my words,” he gestures with a spoon, as the Sorting begins to draw to a close, “The Ministry’s been patting themselves on the back for keeping us well out of it, right? No involvement in the Grindelwald Problem or the Hitler Problem,” he mimes giving a speech, “but now they’ve dug one hell of a shit-hole, haven’t they? There’ll be no left to help us when it’s our turn.”

“The Germans and their allies are losing,” Amy says flatly, because she has to believe it, after four years of war, has to believe there is some light at the end of the very long tunnel. “They’ve arrested Mussolini, haven’t they? And we’re bombing their cities now.”

“The muggles might be, but Grindelwald isn’t.”

But looking around the Great Hall, Amy realizes, as the food appears and everyone eagerly digs in, that it’s not just the question of fear. Yes, many people are afraid. Many other people are excited. That’s what it is. The clash of terror and joy. For some of them, their families, their friends, this is cause for celebration. Grindelwald, their hero sorceror, come to liberate them all from an oppressive existence hidden from muggles, obeying their laws, protecting their people. For some of them, this is exhilarating, not horrifying. They can hardly wait.

As disturbing as the social unrest and impending sense of despair might be, she still has to do things like go to class and meet with her Head of House. She was able to drop Astronomy, History of Magic, and Divination, to her relief, and she’s keeping on Care of Magical Creatures more out of fondness for the animals than anything else, but that still leaves her with six classes and boatloads of homework, even without the specter of exams at the end of this year.

Professor Beery is as cheery and whiskery as ever, nursing his pipe, which smoke reeks of cinnamon and honeyed cloves, as he studies Amy’s schedule. His office is directly across from the greenhouses, a sunny, stuffy, ground floor room all wood-paneled and packed to the brim with plants. Amy swats away a prying tendril from an ivy clinging to the back of her hair, and leans down to pet his enormously tubby cat, Barclay, who is nosing about at her ankles.

“Well,” says Beery, looking up at her with a characteristically bright smile, revealing rather yellowed teeth. “This all seems to be in good order, Miss Benson. Now, last year when we spoke before your OWLs, you’d mentioned an interest in pursuing a career in potions or herbology? You did quite well on your OWLs- an Exceeds Expectations in both DADA and Potions is nothing to scoff at, young lady! And near perfect marks in Herbology- of course-,” he takes a moment to preen, stroking his beard, before he goes on, “and just shy of an Outstanding in Care of Magical Creatures. Now, admittedly your other results…”

“I knew History of Magic wasn’t going to end well by the time I got to the essay, sir,” Amy admits, as he frowns at her Poor in that, her rather lackluster Acceptable in Astronomy, and her cringe-inducing Dreadful in Divination.

“Well, no sense crying over spilled butter beer,” he continues jovially. “You still ought to be very proud. Now, I never like to nag my students, but as you are one of my favorites, I will clue you in,” he leans forward confidentially across his cluttered desk, nearly upsetting a precarious stack of parchment. “Madam Amell has decided to offer an apprenticeship in the Infirmary this year, and I happen to believe you would be a prime candidate for it.”

“Healing, sir?” Amy hadn’t really considered it. Healing itself has always seemed especially
strange, to her. Dragon Pox and sparking warts and people turning themselves pink or blue and having to be set to rights. It’s like something out of a children’s story, even by magical standards. “I hadn’t really thought…” She remembers once a female doctor, not a man, came to Wool’s to perform their annual check-ups. The little girls had all gaped and stared at her, with her pristine white coat and her shiny leather case and the trousers she wore under her smart blue blouse.

“I am very prepared to make a recommendation,” Beery says encouragingly. “Consider it? It seems like it would suit you very well, Miss Benson. Let me know later this week, hm?”

She leaves his office with a new potted plant for her dorm and a biscuit in hand. She’s crossing through the antechamber, nibbling on it, when she stops to push through the growing crowd of students, all watching Professor Dumbledore lead a loudly arguing group of strange witches and wizards, all in dark green with red feathers in their hats, up the grand staircase.

“Who’re they?” she asks Marge Baker, who confides in her delightedly, “The Italians. Minister Fortunato and his cabinet. Joe says they’re here to ask Dippet to send Dumbledore and some other professors over to fight Grindelwald.”

Amy arches an eyebrow, shoving the rest of the biscuit into her mouth. “Interesting,” she mutters around it, and continues on her way.

By the end of the week, Dumbledore remains, although Professor Witherspoon is apparently planning on taking a leave of absence to go fight, to most of her student’s collective dismay. Amy returns to Professor Beery to tell him that yes, she will take Madam Amell up on that apprenticeship offer, so long as she can work it around quidditch practices. Matthew’s made captain this year, and by all rights is going to drive them into an early grave, the way he keeps going on about core strengthening and running laps around the lake every morning.

Truthfully, she barely sees Tom for most of September, and when they do seek each other out, it’s very quick sojourns at the dark ends of library stacks or in empty classrooms. Barely enough time to get his tie off, never mind make much conversation. She tells herself it’s likely for the best. He has his world, she has hers. She just hopes he’s too busy with prefect patrols and Slug Club and all his classes- he hasn’t dropped anything, as far as she knows, and she has no idea how he isn’t drowning under the weight of all that homework every night- to get up to anything too… not-good. They occasionally still practice emptying her mind of all thoughts and emotions, but she's not making much progress.

And so sixth year seems to be, by all accounts, peaceful enough, despite the increasingly grim news in the Prophet and the occasional death announcement that sends children weeping from the Great Hall, clutching letters from home or abroad, until, of course, someone has to go and ruin it. By that, Amy means Irene. Irene Greengrass has to go and ruin it, because she’d have been perfectly happy to carry on like this, organizing potions stocks in the hospital wing and getting bludgeoned at quidditch practice and even looking forward to Samhain-

“We’re doing this because we love you,” Vera assures her, as she, Ruby, and Patsy attempt to create a makeshift human chain to keep Amy from striding into the Great Hall. Amy is hungry, tired and sweaty, even after her shower, and mostly just wants to drink her soup and do her Transfiguration homework in peace. “You deserve some warning-,”

“You deserve one free curse,” Ruby advises, and Patsy blanches, then adds sheepishly, “They’ve been broken up for ages, it’s not as if-,”

“What?” Amy demands, throwing up her hands. “What are you all nattering on about? For Morgana’s sake, I just want to eat-,”
“Tom’s started seeing someone!” Vera blurts out, reddening as if it were somehow all her fault.
“We didn’t know how to tell you, but now they’re having lunch together, and everyone’s going to
know soon enough, and Leila Shafiq told Ruby, to tell you, so it wouldn’t be a nasty shock-,”

“He’s a free man, I don’t care what he does,” Amy says coldly, finally pushing past them, already
convinced of the absurdity of this- oh well, who cares, Tom can do as he pleases, she’s made that
perfectly clear-

But then she’s inside, and she sees them, and of course, of bloody course, it is perfect, blonde,
willowy and elegant Irene Greengrass, with her hair gleaming in the torchlight and and swan-like
neck and her high cheekbones and perfectly plucked eyebrows- Irene, who doesn’t stride or even
strut, who floats into rooms with a tinkling laugh and a coy look. Beautiful, clever, purebred Irene,
and Amy knows exactly why he picked her, watching him take her hand across the table, because
they look right together, they fit, perfectly, like puzzle pieces slotting together.

But none of that stops the sudden cymbal clash of rage that reverberates in her gut and echoes up
her spine and pounds its way into her head. Amy isn’t like him. She’s not jealous, not controlling,
ot possessive, she doesn’t see people as tools or trophies, doesn’t hoard them to herself, she’s
certainly not the sort to get angry over something like this, it’s clearly just for appearances, for
show, because Irene’s family is outrageously well off and her father sits with the Wizengamot, but-

Irene smiles, genuinely and sweetly, at something he’s said, and Amy stalks over to the Hufflepuff
table, slides into her usual seat, grabs the bowl of soup that materializes before her, and as she
begins liberally adding pepper to it, contemplates murder for the first time in her life, or at least
maiming. There’s a snarling animal coiled up in her chest, kicking and scratching furiously. She’s
never felt like this before in her life. Tom getting attention from girls is hardly something new. But
never- he’s never paid it any mind, and though she has no claim on him obviously her heart doesn’t
agree with her head.

And it’s truly the most repulsive thing she’s ever experienced. This is so stupid, so silly. She’s not
jealous. She cannot be jealous. As if he’s some great prize! As if she’d want to be sitting there,
gazing at him adoringly like some buffoon! This is ridiculous, this is-

“Amy, what’re you doing to that soup?” Matthew laughs, sitting down across from her, still flushed
and hair slick from practice, and Amy glances up at him sharply, ears ringing, takes in his broad
shoulders and auburn waves and strong jawline with the beginnings of stubble, and puts down the
pepper.

“Nothing,” she says innocently, picking up her spoon, and fights back the triumphant smile that
creeps across her face as she takes her first sip of it. Matthew, completely unaware of this sudden
change, is pouring himself a cup of pumpkin juice. When he looks back up, their eyes meet and in
spite of his wry smile, he blushes slightly.

And suddenly she’s got the most brilliant idea.

Chapter End Notes

"In folk magic and witchcraft, a poppet (also known as poppit, moppet, mommet and
pippy) is a doll made to represent a person, for casting spells on that person or to aid
that person through magic. They are occasionally found lodged in chimneys. ... Poppet
is also a chiefly British term of endearment or diminutive referring to a young woman
or girl, much like the words "dear" or "sweetie."" - Wikipedia

Jealousy is not a good look on anyone, as it turns out. I've also managed to finally sit down and outline very clearly the remaining chapters of this fic, so strap in, folks, because I'm determined to get this (all 31 chapters of it) finished by Halloween, at the very latest.
1944

Amy can just barely remember a fight she and Tom once had, on the train on the way to the seashore with Wool’s. They must have been about eight or nine; she thinks it was just before he found that cave. She knows at sixteen- going on seventeen- she is hardly an old woman reminiscing over her long lost youth, but for the most part her childhood memories, beyond the most salient ones, have blurred into a dusty, greyish beige haze of cold stone walls and a muddy little garden and shifting church pews and the occasional dash of color.

So she only sort of recalls accusing Tom of jealousy for teasing her over Johnny- Johnny who shipped off to war ages and ages ago and who may be dead or in prison or on some ship fighting in the Pacific- and she only sort of recalls the way he’d been viscerally wounded, as if she’d said something truly foul to him, and how he’d pinched her. She can still feel the pinch of his little child-nails, sharp as needles, on the tanned skin of her arm. How she’d laughed and laughed until he’d smacked her, and then they’d gone rolling and brawling across the floor as the train rattled on to Cornwall.

She and Tom are far too old now to settle matters with a fist-fight. She wishes that were the case, really- it’d be a weight off her conscience, if she were able to set him to rights by delivering a good thrashing, like she could simply grab him by the back of neck and shake all the things she hates about him out through his ears. He likely wishes the same of her. Corrective measures and all that. They’re both utterly confounded and outraged that they have not grown into the people they longed for. How hard is it to just be, she wants to scream at him, just be nice and good and leave the rest of it- the politics and the blood purity and the dark magic- toss out that rubbish and just be normal and safe and decent with me, God, please.

They could really be happy, she used to think, if he’d just do as he were told. If he’d just listen to her, things would be much better. And she knows he’s thinking the exact same thing. The two of them, hissing and snarling at each other from their respective corners like stray cats in an alley. It’s not as if she wants anything spectacular of him. But it would be a nice change of pace, were he to suddenly prove himself capable of using that brilliant mind of his for something other than his own advancement and a seething loathing for the muggles who surround them.

So since they can no longer have fist-fights, and since two prefects dueling is hardly an option, they instead have had to come up increasingly twisted ways to hurt each other. On Samhain he runs between the fires with Irene Greengrass, and gallantly puts out her skirt when it catches some kindling on it and begins to smoke. Amy watches him carry her between the last of the bonfires, and sees how the light turns Irene’s ash blonde hair an otherworldly silver. She has the prettiest mask as well, carved vines framing a fox’s sly face. Tom’s is a jagged wolf.

Amy drinks butter beer and raps her knuckles on the sheep on her face when Matthew walks by masked as a ram. He hears her snickered ‘bah’ and laughs over his shoulder at her, but he doesn’t stop walking, waving to Joe and Bert instead. Ruby comes to sit on the bale of hay beside her, crossing her ankles elegantly, and rolling her eyes at a passing cat call. “Chin up,” she says. “You’ll snare him yet. If not, Mummy is quite willing to send me the latest love charms out of Madras. Completely verified by three different enchanters, I’ll have you know. ’S’how cousin Leela got her man-,” at the look on Amy’s face- or her mouth, really, since that’s all she can see, Ruby
squeals with laughter. “I’m joking, Ames— well, about Leela, that was a bit cruel of me, what really happened is that—”

Amy doesn’t need a love charm, verified or not, to get Matthew. She just has to be patient, she thinks. She can be patient. She can be like Tom, a snake in the grass, waiting to strike. She can wait. She stays behind nearly every Quidditch practice to help him clean up, embraces him first and foremost when they smash their first and second matches, decimating both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, shares her notes without complaint in Charms, makes a special effort to strike up conversation with him in the common room and on the way to classes— Merlin, they end up walking back from Herbology twice a week together, always, and if Tom just so happens to usually be coming out of Ancient Runes with Alexander Nott at that time, oh well—

There’s nowhere to go for Christmas, so she stays at Hogwarts, and exchanges quite a few letters with Matthew, who does not need to hide his owl post, pureblood that he is. She knows that will really get to Tom. Matthew is pure. Pure by whatever deranged standards wizards have developed, but the Abbotts are a well-known magical line all the same. ‘Filthy blood traitors down to the last of them’, as Charles Burke would sneer, but that’s rather beside the point. The point is that if Tom is going to parade around playing his little games with Irene Greengrass and her well-tailored skirts and her cashmere sweaters and her velvet hair ribbons— well, then Amy can bloody well go out with Matthew Abbott.

And she does feel guilty, of course she does, because Matthew seems mildly surprised and flattered by her sudden avid interest in everything he has to say and how funny she finds him, all at once, but it’s not as if it’s all for show. She does like him. He’s her friend. It’s not as if there’s a shortage of attraction between them. He was the second boy she ever kissed. She is not a very sentimental girl, but surely that has to count for something. She’s not manufacturing this out of thin air. In a nicer sort of world, she thinks she and Matthew would get on very, very well, and she wouldn’t spare a thought for anyone else.

It’s just that this world has Tom, and untangling her roots from him has proven to be a very laborious and time-consuming process.

When everyone comes back on the first, Matthew wastes no time at all in asking her to Hogsmeade with him, and they kiss for the second time in three years, across from Honeydukes. Then he buys them both hot chocolates, and she remembers just how pleasant he tasted back then. It is nice. Easy, even. Gentle and slow, like lolling on a swing, easing back and forth, pendulous.

Kissing Tom is always some sort of dance— not in that they’re all over each other, but that someone is always conceding or insisting or they’re trying to work out who ought to be in charge of what and once they managed to get into a hushed argument outside a detention he was supposed to be supervising, all because she felt that it was completely absurd that she not be allowed to grab the back of his neck with both hands when they were snogging, when he was the one who’d just the last week backed her into a bloody suit of armor and she’d almost lost an ear.

Matthew doesn’t argue with her. Matthew doesn’t want to argue. In fact, there’s nothing for them to argue over. He’s a perfect gentleman. He holds doors. He offers her his hand if she’s coming down the stairs after him, and smiles so warmly that she can’t even feel patronized. He takes her books without complaint, waits for her outside her classes, lets her kick off her shoes and put her feet up on his lap when they sit on a sofa together, is very willing to dance around a room to prohibited records on the phonograph Marge brought back. Matthew is shorter than Tom, but his hands and feet are larger and his shoulders are broader and she feels pleasantly girlish and protected when he comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her.
She should be perfectly besotted. Matthew is no stunner himself but his charm makes up for his lack of eye-catching looks and Amy is distantly aware that, by all accounts, she’s really ‘snagged’ him. It may not be common knowledge that she’s a no-name orphan of disreputable origins, but it’s not exactly a great secret, either. She’s not even beautiful or especially graceful to make up for it, like in the stories. She should be flattered and honored that he’d want to go steady with her so quickly. She should be in awe of her good luck. Matthew’s a keeper. He’s marriage material. He’s the sort of bloke girls save themselves for, the sort girls want to swoop in and save them.

And she is a little besotted, because while she has friends, and she loves them dearly, this kind of interest and affection is special. And if someone who’s not Tom can show it for her, that must mean she’s somehow worthy. That she’s alright, really, not damaged goods or a freak or broken in any way from her childhood. It must mean she’s deserving after all, that good things do come to those who wait, that she ought to have been his girl the moment he kissed her when they were fourteen, what was she thinking, she must be mad to have not snatched him up.

But three weeks into it, when not just Hufflepuff but their whole year is quite aware of it, Amy kisses him goodbye outside the library and joins the line waiting to sign in, and lo and behold, Tom cuts in front of Anna Cullen, who is behind her, with a murmured apology and the sort of smile you just can’t say no to, and it occurs to Amy, very belatedly, that in fact, this may not have been such a splendid idea. That throwing herself into attracting Matthew’s attention and securing him as some sort of trophy, the same sort of trophy Tom has with Irene, may, in fact, make her a horrible, rotten, no-good person.

Because she can feel his stare boring into the back of her neck, and when she finally chances a glance behind her, she knows instantly, that someone is going to have to pay up for this. Tom is completely straight-faced. Placid, even. There’s no hint of malice or anger or even irritation in his dark eyes, no restless frustration in his limbs, he’s not disheveled or frantic or ready to throw himself at her feet and beg for forgiveness. He’s furious. She knows he is furious because when he is truly, chillingly enraged, he will tug at his collar every so often, and casually scratch his chin with the back of one thumb. Those are the only signs. Well, that and the fact that she can see his gaze pinpointing on the slight smear of her (borrowed) lipstick.

Amy finishes signing her name, hands him the quill, and strolls towards the stacks. Once she’s out of the immediate view of the front desk, her pace quickens, and what follows is a near-silent, completely hushed, extremely nerve-wracking game of cat and mouse. She’s not scared. She’s just… considering things. Considering that she may, in fact, be nearly as much of a bastard as he can be. What is wrong with her? Was it worth it? Really worth it? For God’s sake, she feels like she just led a lamb into a lion’s den! What did she think was going to happen? He was going to grind his teeth a little, glare at her when no one was looking, and go about his day? That that would be it? Just a bit of fun? Silly Amy, trying to make Riddle jealous! Isn’t she a laugh and a half? Clever girl, that one!

How could she not have seen this coming? But of course she did. Of course she knew exactly how angry it might make him. Or, well, she’d hoped. Amy has to consider, as she turns yet another sharp corner, skirting around a group of startled second years, that her real fear was never that Tom would be incensed, enraged, that he’d be out for blood because she of her involving herself- quite publicly- with someone else. That’s never what she was terrified of, because she’s an awful person. What she was really scared of, was that he wouldn’t care at all. This was a test she was afraid he wouldn’t bother to take.

That he’d impassively go about his day. That he’d keep on with Irene Greengrass and they’d get married and have loads of disgustingly well-bred children with a French nanny and a summer home in Scotland. That he really wouldn’t give two shits what she did or who she did it with, because she
only ever a passing amusement for him, brought on by proximity and convenience. Something to
pet and play with when he was bored, and yes, a bit of a bother to lose her, but what of it? There’s
always another one, with a shinier coat and a spring in her step. So she wasn’t worried, in the end,
about anyone but herself, really. Because when it comes down to it, she is a coward and a
hypocrite. Perfectly willing to throw him over one moment, sneer about how horrid he and his
friends are, how she’d never be caught dead as some accessory for him, but when it comes down to
it…

Well, when it comes down to it, she’d take advantage of someone else just to feel wanted.

“Lost, are we?” Tom says, blocking off her exit from the aisle she’s in. Amy seriously debates
hexing him and running the other way, the no-noise policy be damned, but decides that trying to
stem the damage before it can start is probably the better option.

“Listen,” she says appeasingly, uncertainly, because she really did have him on the ropes for a
while there, it was he who had to prove himself, to try and claw his way back into her good graces,
and didn’t that stroke her ego just a little bit, aside from all the moral issues? Didn’t it make her
feel so nice, to make him squirm and apologize and beseech her? To feel catered to?

“No,” says Tom in a soft voice that is incredibly uncomfortable- she feels like someone just slid an
ice cube down the back of her blouse, and while she doesn’t cringe away when he approaches,
she’s not exactly raring for a fight; fists clenched, either. “I think you’ll listen now. I’m really
perplexed, Amy, if we’re being honest. You made it quite clear, unless my memory fails me,” and
now he’s altogether too close, one hand resting on the bookshelf just above her head, caging her in,
“that you wanted to- how did you phrase it? Oh, that’s right. See each other in private, not in
public. Because the idea of being in any sense attached to me was so incredibly repellent that you’d
much rather be hitching your skirt up in a broom closet-,”

To think she was almost scared, before he had to go and say something like that. “Fuck off,” Amy
snarls, as angrily as one can in a library, which means she has to compensate for the lack of volume
with spittle. “You could have at least had the decency to tell me before you decided to shack up
with Irene-,”

“Please, as if you couldn’t have put two and two together,” he retorts. “Why do you think I’m with
her, Amy? Let’s try and work it out, shall we? For starters, her family’s valued at a worth of seven
hundred thousand galleons, not counting the legal firm her uncle’s started, nor the pegasi breeding
in Wales-,”

“Oh, well that’s cleared it all up!” she jeers. “I look forward to the wedding invitations-,”

“I can’t believe I need to justify myself to you-,”

“Right, because I should just smile and offer my congratulations to the happy couple, while you
throw a temper tantrum the instant you see me step out with anyone else-,”

“You swore,” he almost yells, and they both look around frantically, waiting for someone to come
rushing over, but when no one does, he continues in an almost strangled voice, “we promised each
other- you promised me you’d never- not with anyone else, you said it would always just be the
two of us, you swore to me, don’t deny it.”

He steps back from her, breathing harshly, and for a moment Amy sees what might be raw fear on
his face. She has not seen that in ages, she thinks. He’s frightened. What is he scared of? Her?
Himself? What she might do to him, or what he might do to her in return? “What are you saying,”
she says incredulously, “that you don’t count what you’re doing- what, should I be a bloody nun,
while you get to cavort around with whoever’s daddy’s got the most money-;”

“Irene and I aren’t like that,” he snaps, then somehow reddens and whitens at the same time. “She’s- you don’t understand, she’s not-;”

“Oh,” says Amy, “she’s not a slut, you mean? Not common and ill bred like me, your perfect Slytherin princess, is that it? Irene would never dare let a man so much as see her kneecaps, never mind put his tongue in her mouth? Yeah? Is that what you want to say? She’s something special, is she? Real swell girl. Not like me.” Her guilt and shame from earlier are completely forgotten in the face of this.

“For girls of her background,” he says through his teeth, “it’s different. They marry for the family, for the lineage, not for themselves. There’s a certain way things are done. Even to be with me, she’s taking a risk. I’m not part of the Sacred 28.”

“Terribly sorry I haven’t got a father whose favor you’d have to beg,” she sneers. “So sorry, Tom, how can I ever make it up to you? Sorry I haven’t spent the last few months moping after you-;”

“We could have still gone on as we had been,” he hisses.

“You’re disgusting,” Amy tells him flatly. “You’ve got her convinced you’re this prince among men, and you want to see me on the side?”

“What did you think was going to happen?” he explodes again. “I have to make connections, I have to have a leg-up, and if I have to tell a girl she’s pretty and hold her hand to do it-;”

“I like Matthew,” Amy blurts out, “and not because his family is rich or well-connected or breed fucking pegasi! Because he’s kind. And loyal. And well-intentioned, and he treats me right, and because he likes me too. You know what you are to her? The closest she can get to slumming it,” she accuses. “So really, I pity you. I do, Tom.”

Tom looks at her for a moment, and then an accusing voice calls, “Who’s talking back there? Quiet in the stacks, how many times must I tell you children?”

“You pity me,” he repeats, and one of his eyebrows lifts slightly. “Alright. But maybe I’m not the one you should be worried about.”

For a moment she just curls her lip defiantly at him, and then it sinks in. “Don’t,” she says, although she’s not sure what she’s forbidding him from. “Don’t- Tom, don’t you dare, you leave him out of it, this is between you and me-;”

He shakes off her hand, already striding away. She pulls her wand. “I swear, if you so much as touch a hair on him-;”

“Not a single hair, I promise,” he calls lightly over his shoulder, just as the librarian comes into view, peering suspiciously at her. Amy puts away her wand, snatches a random book off the shelf, then drops it in shock when it belches up color-changing ink on her hands.

Amy seriously considers brewing Matthew some Felix Felicis and slipping it into his tea, although Madam Amell, the school nurse, has only just started letting her make Pepper-Up potions for the students flocking to the infirmary with February colds. Most of her apprenticeship work is resigned to filing things, cleaning bedsheets (and occasionally bedpans, to her horror), sweeping, mopping, and fetching Madam Amell tea and sandwiches from the kitchens. But she has learned some properly useful things, like how to provoke a scab with a charm, and how to siphon away dirt or blood from a wound, and how to transfigure just about anything into a bandage or ice pack.
Mostly, she watches her boyfriend like a hawk, clings to Matthew with an intensity that Joe and Bert joke about and Vera and Ruby seem mildly disturbed by. She’s always by his side when he’s not in class or safely tucked away in the common room, she watches what he eats, what he drinks, surreptitiously examines his mail before he can open it, never lets their walks together take them anywhere near the dungeons, avoids entire streets of Hogsmeade where Slytherins are known to congregate, and memorably once trips down a flight of stairs when she sees Lyle Rosier walking near him on the floor below.

But aside from some suspiciously adept bludger-hits from Slytherin’s beaters, there are no glaring warning signs of some sort of retribution from Tom. Amy relaxes after three weeks pass without any major incidents. Tom carries on with Irene as if their conversation- if you can call it that- in the library never happened. She begins to question her own perception of things. Maybe he wasn’t really serious. Maybe it was just a boy of seventeen’s idle threat. Maybe he just wanted to scare her, to make her anxious and fretful, maybe he thought better of it-

She’s doing some final bed-checks of the infirmary on a Sunday night in early March when Mister Pringle stalks through the doors, dragging Reynard Lestrange and Henry Rowle after him. Neither are small boys, but they’re both so badly beaten that they’re reduced to mewling kittens in comparison to their usual swagger. Reynard’s face looks like ground beef and Rowle is clutching his nose and dribbling blood down his front. “Fightin’ like muggles, brawlin’ in my corridors, misuse of magic, lucky we’re told to take ye to the Infirmary first to get patched up before I can cane your arses blue- Oh, you’ll be hearing from the headmaster indeed! Owls home, ye blubbering little worms- attackin’ a man from behind like that, downright cowardly, I say-,”

Amy is standing there, still folding sheets, trying to work out who attacked who, when Professor O’Rinn enters, leaning heavily on his runic cane, levitating a prone and nearly unrecognizable form with his wand. “LUCINDA!” he bellows, and Madam Amell comes rushing out of her office, brushing past a still grousing Pringle and Lestrange and Rowle, and when she says in a very firm, slightly shaken voice, “Set him down, immediately, and get Dumbledore. I want a direct line to St. Mungo’s if he stops breathing,” Amy knows.

“Matthew?” she calls out, voice wavering in the sterile air, and Madam Amell says, without looking up, “Get me some Skelegrow and a pair of scissors, please, from the closet. Now, Amy.”

Matthew’s lovely auburn hair is about the only part of him not black and blue or bloodied, as it turns out.

Chapter End Notes

A 'harrowing' experience is one that is acutely distressing or painful. To 'harrow' someone is to cause them great torment or vexation.

This chapter had to be split in half due to length issues. On the plus side... a quicker update?
Amy poisons both Rowle and Lestrange within hours of their arrival in the infirmary. Not badly enough to kill or even seriously injure them, unfortunately, but she sabotages both of their potions while Madam Amell is bent over Matthew, and the nurse only notices when Rowle starts to choke on his own vomit. Amy is sent back to the Hufflepuff common room shortly after that, and while Amell must know she deliberately botched the potions, she says nothing of it, only instructs her to get some sleep and come back the next morning. When she returns, sleepless and white-knuckled from slamming her fists repeatedly into her mattress and screaming into a pillow, both of Matthew’s assailants are gone.

That’s the beauty of healing— injuries that would keep muggles laid up for weeks can be healed overnight. Matthew’s injuries were more severe; by Amell’s count he had a shattered nose, a broken cheekbone, two teeth dangling by a thread, both lips split, a fractured left wrist, multiple sprained ribs, and three crushed fingers. By morning the broken bones have been healed and most of the swelling has been reduced, but he is still covered in bruises and barely conscious from the amount of numbing charms Amell placed on him. Amy brews two batches of wound-cleaning potions, scrubs down the storeroom, reorganizes the office bookshelves, and then finally asks for permission to sit with him before her first class of the day starts.

“Miss Benson,” Lucinda Amell halts her at the door, looking up from her copy of Mediwizard Monthly.

Amy turns back round, flushed pink with unspoken shame.

“I don’t know what sort of tiff you’ve found yourself in the middle of,” Amell says thoughtfully, “but the next time you want to sabotage a contusion reduction draught, I’d suggest adding more lacewing flies. Gives a much nastier kick. Professor Slughorn could tell you himself that tripling the fireseed portion isn’t going to do much but provoke some stomach problems and heartburn.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Amy replies dutifully, then sits next to Matthew for the next twenty minutes, listening to his steady breathing and trying very hard not to cry. She doesn’t get to cry. She’s the one who started the whole damn thing. It would be unbelievably selfish of her to turn this into some excuse to break down. It’s her fault. Not for what Tom’s done- but for putting Matthew in that position in the first place. Just because she wanted to be vindictive, and petty, and spiteful. What if O’Rinn and Pringle hadn’t been there to break up the fight? What if they’d hurt him even worse? Lestrange is practically deranged, and Tom gave him free reign to do just as he pleased- it could have ended with someone in St. Mungo’s, easily.

But eventually, she has to go to class, and the sixth year Hufflepuffs and Slytherins have Potions together on Monday mornings. Tom is already sitting at the table they’ve shared for the past six years when she enters the room, flanked by Vera and Ruby. He has the expectant look of a dog waiting for his master to return from work. If his ears could be perked, they would be.

Amy hesitates.

“I’ve a mind to go over there and break his nose,” Ruby hisses in her ear; she hasn’t directly confirmed to anyone that Tom had anything to do with Matthew’s beating- and she knows she’ll
never have any concrete proof of it- but rumors are quickly spreading all the same. Not all of them, she knows, are going to paint her as some innocent bystander in all of this. If people were perplexed by her association with Tom before, they’re going to be infuriated now. And the horrible thing is that as vicious as they might get, she’ll deserve it. She’s not innocent in this.

She has known exactly what Tom is for years now, and she used someone else to deliberately provoke him- because why? Because she craved the attention, the validation? Because she wanted to feel wanted? Because she was upset that he’d found someone else to manipulate to every little whim? She’s sick. He might be profoundly disturbed to have even considered setting the likes of Rowle and Lestrange on someone as good-natured and inoffensive as Matthew Abbott, but she is truly sick. Bad enough that she was playing with matches- she went and burned down a perfectly nice house while she was at it, all because she decided to show off a little, to prove to him that she could play games with people too.

Vera squeezes her hand silently.

Amy just gives her head a little shake, and takes her regular seat next to him. Neither of them say a word for the next few minutes, until Slughorn has predictably been held up again by some fawning student in the corridor, likely hoping to snatch an invitation to his next little dinner party. Amy grinds the image of a mutilated face into the corner of her parchment with her quill, until Tom says, just loudly enough to be overheard by the people behind them, “I really am sorry about what happened to Abbott. It’s awful, the way some people carry on here. Like animals.”

“Awful,” she agrees woodenly, without looking up. After a moment he rests a hand carefully on her shoulder, then jerks back as if stung when she glances at him with swollen red eyes and the closest she can manage to a snarl on this little sleep. Eventually she feels some eyes drift away from them as class finally begins, and neither her nor Tom say anything, carrying collecting ingredients and chopping things up with knives and stirring their cauldrons as usual. He’s much more careful about his things than he has been in the past, as if worried she might suddenly grab a handful of something, toss it into his bubbling potion, and try to blow his face off.

She’s certainly considered it, but at this point she knows it’s not worth it. They are not going to be well-matched in a game of chicken. No one would ever be well-matched against Tom in that, because he genuinely, truly, has no limits. There is absolutely nothing that could make him swerve away or hesitate at the last instant. Nothing. She could very well escalate things, and she might even cause him some genuine, temporary suffering or bother, but when it was his turn it’d be so much worse. And she has too much to lose. That’s the problem. Amy has made the quite the nice little nest for herself here. She has friends and interests and things she wants to do and people she wants to be with. What does Tom have? Nothing. Nothing he’d be that sorry to lose, at any rate. A collection of shiny but ultimately hollow trinkets.

He’d gladly shatter them himself to get back at her. After all, he can always nick some more.

They’re cleaning up as class ends when Al Black bumps into her as she puts away a bottle of newt eyes. He murmurs an apology, but she feels something brush into the pocket of her blazer. Amy stares after him, then glances around and casually settles her hands into her pocket, her fingers grazing the note he left there. Tom is still watching her very closely, so she doesn’t dare so much as glance at it until she’s back in the dormitory, safely ensconced by a fortress of pillows on her too-soft bed.

She visits Matthew again after her last class, shortly before dinner. He’s conscious and alert, and to her horror he even smiles when he sees her, albeit somewhat painfully. “It looks a lot worse than it is,” he remarks dryly as she hurries over to him, her shoes squeaking against the freshly mopped
marble floor. “Are you alright?”

“Am I alright?” Amy chokes out, coming to a halt in front of him. “Look- look at yourself, how can you ask-,”

“Because you’re pale as chalk and you’ve got bags under your eyes like you’re about to go on vacation,” he says patiently, and gently pulls her by the wrist to sit on the edge of the bed. “Here. You really need to eat something, Ames.” He tears his bread roll in half and hands it to her. Amy takes a quick bite to appease him, but it tastes like ashes in her mouth. Matthew watches to make sure she chews and swallows, though, so she does.

“I’m going to be fine,” he says, although he winces a little as he shifts. “Just a bit sore. S’no different from that time I took that bludger hit in fourth year, remember-,”

“This is nothing like that,” she snaps, then flushes as a feverish third year a few beds down looks their way. “You were attacked, Matthew, that’s not- They should be expelled. They’re going to be expelled, aren’t they? I know Pringle took their wands-,”

“Dippet came to see me a few hours ago,” he takes her hand as if she’s the one in need of comforting. “They’re not being expelled. But that’s no surprise, Rowle’s got that uncle on the board of governors-,”

“They could have killed you,” she spits out, and then, to her revulsion, she really does start crying, ugly, snotty tears.

“They’ve each lost Slytherin fifty points and they’ve got thrice-weekly detention until the end of term,” he says, groaning under his breath as he shoves the tray of food out of the way in order to properly embrace her. “And they have to turn in their wands to Pringle every day after their last classes. Besides… I heard Lestrange was caned so hard they had to carry him back to the dungeons.”

“Well, that’s lovely,” she sniffs, wiping furiously at her eyes and nose, disgusted with herself. “Brilliant. Matthew, I’m so sorry. I-,” she doesn’t know how to say this, but she can’t bring herself to lie to him, not now. “You don’t understand. This is my fault. It had nothing to do with you-,”

“I know,” he tells her, and she freezes in his arms.

“You-,”

“Amy, I know I haven’t got top marks, but I’m not blind,” he says plainly. “You think I didn’t realize, around when Lestrange was trying to kick my ribs in, that it might have been less to do with me and more to do with Riddle?”

Her stomach twists into frantic knots. “Matthew, I’m sorry, I really am-,”

“Stop it,” he says, the first and only sign of genuine irritation she’s ever seen from him outside the quidditch pitch. “Just stop it, Amy. What the hell do you have to apologize for? You think I’d believe that you put them up to this? I know it was him.”

She can barely look at him. “But he wouldn’t have-,”

“Listen,” he takes her firmly by the shoulders. “I know you two have… history. Alright? That’s plain for anyone to see. And he’s… Merlin, Amy, I don’t how to say it, but if you ever need help, you know that I’d be there in a heartbeat, right? Not just because we’re going out, because you’re my friend, and I want you to be happy. I want you to be safe,” he adds pointedly. “And I’m not
afraid of him. He’s a coward. He’d rather send his little fan club after me-,”

Tom deciding he needs to personally handle Matthew is just about the last thing Amy wants. “He’s
not,” she bursts out, “that’s not- you don’t understand, alright? This is my fault. I- I only started
going out with you because I was angry with him!” she squeezes her eyes shut as soon as she’s
said, already regretting the words. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t- I wasn’t straightforward with you. I swear,
I wasn’t trying to- I never wanted you to get hurt, I just…”

“Look at me,” he says shortly, and she does, and bruised and scraped up as he is, she still feels a
flood of warmth and affection just looking at him, at how he never looks away, how his expression
hasn’t contorted in rage or disgust, just steady acceptance. She doesn’t deserve him at all, she
thinks with a jolt. She really doesn’t. She looks at Tom, and she’s always holding her breath ever
so slightly, not sure what she’ll get. With Matthew, she always knows, always.

“I don’t believe you,” he tells her. “I don’t believe it was all some act, I don’t believe you don’t
why you can’t blame yourself for this. Alright? You are a good person. You are a good person
who’s been taken advantage of by a selfish bastard who only cares about himself. You can’t let
him convince you that this- that this is all there is to it. Right? I mean- for Merlin’s sake, we’ll be
graduating next year,” he even smiles, and she thinks she could love him, can feel it lapping around
her toes like the sea, but she can’t. She just can’t wade in any further. “We’ll be done with school,
and- and who knows what then, but you don’t have to be afraid. I’m not. I care about you. And
whatever- whatever comes, we can face it together.”

You should be afraid, is all she can think, in the face of this outpouring of support, and warmth,
and affection. You should be afraid. I have to be afraid, because you aren’t.

The very worst part is, it’s not even just that she’s afraid. It’s because he’s wrong. Tom is selfish
and a bastard, but he’s never taken advantage of her, not in any way she didn’t explicitly agree to.
It was her idea to bury the rabbit. He didn’t force her. She went with him to explore up on the cliffs
of her own free will. He didn’t drag her into that cave kicking and screaming. She fell. He reached
for her. He really did, she remembers, the look on his face as his fingers grazed her arm and she
dropped like a stone.

She helped him keep track of his lies and omissions about who he is and where he’s from and who
his people are. He came to her Quidditch games. When he invited her to Slug Club dinners, she
shined her best shoes and gladly went along. They’ve exchanged gifts for nearly every birthday of
theirs, even when they were furious with each other. He saved her from Mulciber. He kissed her
first, out on a cold balcony while the band played in the new year. He called off the basilisk. She
helped him break into the office at Wool’s. He hurt Peter for her.

It has never just been the case of him taking and her meekly giving, or him smugly leading and her
obediently following. He cares. That is the most horrible part, what she can’t bring herself to say
aloud. If he only cared about himself, Matthew wouldn’t be here in the first place. Sure, she could
say it was just a matter of pride, that Tom couldn’t stand the idea of her being with anyone else,
and that’s likely part of it, but it’s not just that. He wasn’t gloating at her gleefully in Potions today.
He was genuinely perturbed by her anguish. It’s just that for Tom, this was a firm declaration of
feelings- for him, it was like saying ‘look at what I’d do for you’.

And of course that’s wrong, and horrible, and unhealthy. Of course it is. Matthew’s right. Of
course there’s more to life than this. Of course she cares. But she’s got to be sensible about this.
And playing with matches a few feet from a pile of rags soaked in petrol is not very sensible at all.
She knows now once and for all that she and Tom are two weeds who were straining to grow out of
the same crack in the pavement. They wrapped around each other to survive, to get some sunlight, some rain. But it’s too late now. So long as they’re in the same ground, there’s no untangling those roots without yanking them both out entirely.

“I’m really, terribly sorry,” she says, and stands up, out of his Matthew’s reach. His face falls as her shadow passes over it. The sun is setting a brilliant scarlet outside the glazed windows of the infirmary. “I do care about you. Truly. But I don’t- I don’t think I can see you anymore, Matthew. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t-,” he echoes, shaking his head a little. “Amy. Don’t do this. Come on. I know this isn’t what you want-,”

“It is,” she says firmly. “It is. I’m sorry. I don’t want to be with you anymore. We’ll always be friends, but- I just can’t.”

“You don’t have to be with someone-,”

“I don’t have to be with anyone,” she corrects him. “And I’m not. Going to be with anyone. I need to think about my future. Like you said. We’ll be graduating next year, and I- I just have to get things sorted. I’m terribly sorry. I am.”

Afterwards, she skips dinner to cry some more, and when she feel too sick to do much more of that, she goes up to the deserted Astronomy tower and meets Alphard, like his note said.

“Right,” he says, all-business like, “I’ve not here to play knight in shining armor-,”

“Oh dear,” Amy says, because he can still make her want to laugh even when her nose and throat are stuffed with mucus. “I hope not.”

“Hysterical,” he says, running a hand through his long, dark hair, which Al Black always does when he’s about to go on some tangent. “I’m just here to give you fair notice. I’m about to do something fairly ill-advised that’s going to indirectly benefit you.”

“What are you talking about?” she groans, taking a seat at one of the desks.

“I’m not sure what Riddle’s told you about his little… dalliance with Irene, but he’s got ulterior motives,” Al says flatly.

“I know that,” Amy mutters into her hands. “Obviously. I don’t care. I just don’t care anymore, alright? I want to- I don’t know, I wish none of this had ever happened-,”

“You’re supposed to be my admiring audience, not sitting there feeling sorry for yourself,” he says with typical Black family haughtiness.

Amy squints back up at him. “What? Al, please get to the point-,”

“My point is he’s planning on blackmailing the Greengrasses,” Al snaps.

Amy gapes at him. “Wh- with what?”

“He knows Irene’s father’s having an affair.”

“Loads of men have affairs.”

“He’s having an affair with his coworker.”
“His coworker-,”

“His half-veela coworker,” Al says, with no small amount of satisfaction. “You know what a veela is, don’t you?”

“Really gorgeous, they shoot fireballs, can’t they fly-,”

“Entirely besides the point,” he waves her off, pacing the way Professor Merrythought does while lecturing. “The point is, to people like my parents- the Greengrasses- hells, the entire pureblood echelon- a halfbreed is a halfbreed. Irene’s father’s had an affair with one. She’s just had a child.”

“Christ,” Amy murmurs.

“Now, not very many people know this yet. And by not very many,” Al pauses, “I mean likely just Atticus Greengrass, his mistress, Riddle, and me.”

“How do you know?”

“Because your boyfriend’s so incredibly arrogant that he forgot to lock up his notes on it in his trunk three weeks ago,” Al smiles, blinding white in the dull lamplight of the tower room. Amy hardly thinks it’s fair that so many people who don’t have dentists have such good teeth.

“He’s not my boyfriend. And- he takes notes?”

“Let’s not quarrel over semantics, alright? Of course he takes notes. He’s playing detective, or spy, or whatever you want to call it, and so he’s got notes. He’s going to threaten to leak it to the Daily Prophet, and Greengrass is going to agree to pay or bribe or do whatever Riddle wants to keep that from happening.” Al pauses for breath, then adds, “At least, that’s how I’d do it.”

“I don’t understand,” Amy says, “what this has to do with me-,”

“Because I’m going to leak it first.”

“What?”

“Not to the Prophet,” he says dismissively. “I’ll let Walburga find out, and she’ll do most of the work for me. It’ll make an awful last few months of school for Irene, I admit, but she’s no saint herself, and better it get out here than in the society papers, right? And Riddle will have nothing on her family. Really, she might thank me in a few years.”

“Alphard,” Amy says furiously, “you can’t just- what’s in this for you, anyways? Why do you care?”

“Because as soon as it’s got out that I sprung the fucking leak,” Al says impatiently, “Tom’s going to do something for me, and by that I mean he’ll be furious at all those months wasted, so he’ll finally let loose with the ax he’s been hanging over my neck for the past three years. He’ll tell Wally, she’ll tell our parents like the good little daughter she is, and I’ll be off the bloody family tree. Good riddance. I’m seventeen, I’m of age, and I’ve got my own separate inheritance left over from Auntie Drella. I can hardly wait.”

“What is he going to tell your sister?” Amy asks after a long moment of shock.

“That I haven’t the slightest interest in women, pureblood or otherwise,” Al shrugs. “Hardly befitting of an heir, you know. He could have aired that laundry years ago, but he hasn’t. He’d rather I feel like I owe him something. I’m sure you’re familiar with the habit. But… I’ve decided
I’d much rather it go this way. I control it. Not him. It’s my choice. But I thought I should let you know. You’re really too clever for him, but I suppose you’ve heard that one before.”


“Too good?” Al laughs. “I don’t know. Goodness is very overrated. Any of my housemates will tell you. You’re bloody practical, Amy Benson. That’s worth twice as much as just being good.”

Chapter End Notes

Pep talks can be found in the strangest of places?

I keep having to up the chapter count as we race to the finish line, but I can confidently say we should see a conclusion by chapter 32. The final chapter will be an epilogue.
1944

Al gets his wish granted, to Amy’s dull surprise; two weeks into April there’s something of a muffled explosion in the Slytherin social scene. Irene, who has always had the carefully maintained and displayed friendship of girls like Walburga Black and Rose Parkinson and Geraldine Bulstrode, is very suddenly cast adrift, sitting by herself at meals and walking to class alone and, rumor has it, crying in the lavatory after Ethel Flint said her father ought to be brought up on bestiality charges. The next week, Irene is gone, abruptly taken out of school by her mother, and when she returns at the start of May, Amy never sees her and Tom share so much as a glance each other’s way again.

Maybe that’s for the best. Tom’s never had the best grasp on offering comfort. There’s another society explosion shortly after that, although this one reveals itself in the form of a Howler, which proceeds to scream itself hoarse and smoking with rage while Alphard leans back in his seat at the Slytherin table as if settling in to listen to a wireless drama. His older sister regards him in silent fury all the while, for his nonchalant reaction, and Tom never even looks up from his meal, but Amy knows all the same. He’s far too content for her liking; she’d expected some sort of secondary attack on Al, beyond that, but there’s nothing. It’s as if he genuinely doesn’t care.

Well, she doesn’t care either. She hasn’t the energy to care. She feels as though she cried everything out of her, like she’s been reduced to a husk of a person, a scarecrow. She doubles her hours working in the infirmary, finishes out the Quidditch season with a decisive win for Hufflepuff, and tries to ignore her housemates’ whispers and the fact that Joe and Bert won’t really speak to her anymore beyond asking a question about the homework they had the night before.

Matthew… she tries not to even look at him, which is difficult when she sees him every day, but they manage to time avoiding each other’s gaze perfectly. He’s heartbroken, she thinks. She broke his heart. There’s no triumph in that. She dragged him through the mud with her and didn’t even have the decency to stay around and help him clean off afterwards. He ought to hate her. He doesn’t, of course.

Vera and Patsy seem baffled by the entire thing; Marge thinks she’s mad to have broken it off with a catch like Matthew, and Ruby vents her frustrations on increasingly outlandish gossip about the Slytherins in their year. Lestrange’s got syphilis. Rowle’s actually illegitimate. Burke cheated on his OWLs. Malfoy got a muggle girl pregnant. Nott’s mother’s in an asylum. Riddle drowns puppies in his spare time. Some of them might even be close to true. But Amy is too tired to care.

She eats dinner late most of the time in Madam Amell’s office, listens to her complain about her grown sons who never write nor floo in to visit, she doesn’t speak up in class anymore, she buries her sketchbook in the bottom of her trunk, because the last drawing in it is of Matthew in his Quidditch jersey, the quaffle tucked under his arm. She earns her apparition license and can’t even summon up a smile of relief to know that now she can really go anywhere, at any time, that she’ll never have to feel trapped or helpless again. For the most part, she’s left alone. Vera and Ruby care about her, but they’ve got their own lives to worry about. She wouldn’t expect them to be fussing over her constantly anyways; it’d just make her retreat even more. Amy has not felt like this since she was six years old, sat in the back of a lorry, watching Wool’s first come into view in the rain-pelted window. She can still smell the leather of the seats and see the worms writhing in the dirty
puddles, if she concentrates.

Tom waits a respectable amount of time- to let her grieve, she supposes, oddly enough, and then sidles around again as the school year draws to a close. He has the sense at seventeen that he did not have at sixteen; he does not behave as if everything is fine and she ought to be throwing herself into his arms. Rather he adopts the air of a truly contrite prisoner sat before the parole board, making his case for early release. There is no ‘I never meant to hurt you’ or ‘I’m sorry you’re upset, but this ridiculous, Amy, really’ or ‘Don’t be such a child’. He does not try for a debate on the matter of who’s been wronged more.

Instead he sits next to her on one of the bluffs overlooking the lake, and taking her stillness for a good sign, carefully enfolds her in an embrace, as though she were something very delicate and fragile he was afraid he might crush. It’s been a long time since they’ve laid hands on each other and she accepts that he will always smell vaguely reassuring and familiar to her, like home, that it will always in some sense feel right and good. That does not mean there isn’t a curdling sensation of dread in her stomach, or that the hair on the back of her neck does not prickle uncomfortably. She doesn’t respond to it, just sits there, digging her fingers into the warm earth, until he lets go, although one of his hands rests comfortably on her thigh. It’s not even crude or some type of sly come-on, it’s just normal, in a sense. It would be normal, to her, if she laid down with her head in his lap. It would be normal to seek him out even when she wants to take him by the scruff of the neck and hold his head under the water until he stops thrashing about and his lips go blue.

“I’d like to try to make it up to you,” he says carefully, as if all she needs is a little nudge in the right direction, and it will be just like old times again, when she belonged to him and he to her, when they were both fully invested in each other, before they even knew any spells, before Hogwarts, when for all they knew they were the only two strange children in the entire world. Sometimes she thinks he would have preferred that, as delighted as he was to learn there were others like them, that there was a whole hidden world just waiting for the taking.

Sometimes she thinks they both would have liked that very much, if it had just been the two of them. If magic had only been theirs, not anyone else’s, just something they shared, like they were only two real people in the entire world, and everyone else was just background noise, like characters in a story that they’d written together. Given the chance, he’d probably prefer it that way. Like Adam and Eve. An entire world constructed to cater to them and only them. She wants to say that she would reject that concept outright, that she has always craved the belonging and community she found in the magical world, that she’d never have wanted it to be only them, forever and ever. She wants so badly to say that.

If he’d been expecting a typically biting response or even tears of horror or revulsion from her, he must be sorely disappointed. Amy cannot give him that ammunition. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t. She turns to him instead, dry-eyed and straight-faced, the wind ruffling loose strands of her hair, and just looks at him steadily. He nearly shies away from her, for an instant, as if expecting a sudden contortion or snap, that she might strike him, or hex him, or scream in his face that she will never forgive him, never, that she will never, ever hold him close again, that she would rather be dead than be with him.

“There’s nothing to make up,” she says instead. Not bitterly or kindly, just neutrally. This is not something he gets to make up. “It’s alright,” she adds, because that is what he wants to hear. It’s alright, Tom, I forgive you, I love you- Not that, though. She’s never said it, and she doubts it would even register with him, truly. To him love is not something that people declare verbally. It is what they do or don’t do to each other. It would be easy for her to declare that he doesn’t know what love is, can’t begin to fathom it, but that would be a lie, and she will not lie, she won’t. Not to
herself, at least. To him, of course. She’s been lying to him for years and years. It’s always been so easy, because he doesn’t think her capable of it, thinks it against her basic nature.

For once, her mind is perfectly clear, empty, void, and she knows that if he tried to peer into her head at this very instant, it would all be haze and fog.

He relaxes minutely, and moves his hand from her thigh to her wrist, his fingers massaging the inside of her callused palm. “I promise, nothing like that will ever happen again. I swear. I hate to see you like… like this. You know I want you to be happy, don’t you? Amy?” His voice doesn’t crack when he speaks anymore, but there is something raw and scabby to it all the same, like peeling wallpaper. He desperately wants the reassurance. And maybe he does want her to be happy, in a sense. Just with him. She’s not allowed to be happy if it’s in his absence.

“I know,” she says. “Yes. Of course I know, Tom.” Her other hand closes over his, not in a comforting pat, but an act of containing, restraining. She needs to clip her fingernails; they’re digging into his knuckles like talons. He doesn’t seem to mind. “I just need time. You understand, don’t you?” She bites down on her lower lip, as if in consternation, and watches him ease up, the sharp angles of his face recede. His eyes have never, ever softened in her memory, but his mouth can and does, it’s part of his appeal. No one wants to be charmed by a boy who can barely summon up a good-natured smile or laugh.

He leans forward and kisses her forehead, as if somehow receiving her blessing, and then lets go of her hands. “You can have all the time you like.” She does not believe that for an instant, but she’s not afraid. He wants to believe it, himself. He really does. He wants to believe, if only temporarily, that he really could be that boy, that man. Someone understanding, and patient, and gentle with the things he cares for, the things he possesses. If she believes it, she supposes he tells himself, it must be true, at least a little. That he really could wait ages and ages for her to warm up to him again, to forget, to forgive.

“I’ve got a job for the summer,” he tells her, waiting for her to smile encouragingly or approvingly at him, and she doesn’t, only nods intently, as if this were expected, and in a sense it is- He’d never consent to going back to a foster home for the summer, certainly not now that he’s a fully fledged adult in the wizarding world. “At Borgin and Burke’s, the artefact shop in Knockturn. Nott’s father is good friends with the owners. They’ll let me have the flat above, if I work weekends too and don’t ask for overtime.” He pauses, and then adds meaningfully, “I’m sure they could use a girl to answer mail and check over the accounts every week, to help run the register.”

She’s surprised he’s even asking, and not just flat-out telling her that he’s got it all taken care of and all she has to do is nod and smile and tempt every wealthy ne’er-do-well looking to buy a cursed brooch or enchanted monocle into coming into the shop with her cheery demeanor and a fresh coat of lipstick. The two of them truly alone for once, having the run of some drafty shop and the flat above, scandal be damned, they’d pretend she was boarding somewhere else, and she’d just slip round the back after closing and they could have some mock domestic existence for a few brief months, the sort of thing she’s always privately longed for, shamefully or not.

“I’ve got a job too,” she says instead, firmly. “Madam Amell recommended me to St. Mungo’s. I’ll be working reception and the tea room, they’re short-staffed as of late, what with the wars. If they’ve no complaints about me, I might get to assist in the laboratories and stock rooms by the end of the summer.”

He says nothing for a moment, and in spite of herself she partially tenses, the way he did mere minutes ago, when he thought she might turn the back of her hand or her wand on him, and then he says, “Congratulations. I’m sure you’ll do very well. Rose has an uncle working there, head healer
for the Spell Damage floor. I’ll tell her to put in a word-,”

“No,” she says swiftly, “thank you, I’d- I’d rather work my way up myself.” She reddens as she
says it, because she is not yet made of stone, and he seems to take that for a good sign, a sign that
gradually things will work their way back to normal for them, like she is a horrible knot he can
untangle with a bit of focus and determination.

“Too humble,” he says with a slight smile, and she does not smile back, but she doesn’t look away
or scowl either.

Amy rooms with a Welcome Witch named Tabitha, who lives in the sole remaining house in an
otherwise bombed out London street, entirely concealed from muggles. There is no ward or
enchantment powerful enough to ward off a V2 rocket, as far as Amy is aware, but it doesn’t seem
to bother Tabitha much. She has a husband named Sebastian who works at the Ministry in the
Department of Magical Transportation, and a toddling son named Christopher, who happily plays
in the small garden, unaware of uncaring of the grey rubble and sandbags lining the rest of the
street. Tabitha and her family are perfectly polite, but keep their distance. Amy prefers it that way.

Every morning they apparate into St. Mungo’s reception hall; the hospital was constructed in 1656
and still looks it, and Amy spends most of her day on her feet, running to fetch tea or skirting
behind the counter to check people in or making sure the tables in the tea room are cleaned off and
that no one smuggles any un-examined gifts past the checkpoints and avoiding the more flirtatious
healers with nothing to do on their break but bother one of the new girls. She completely wears
down her already considerably worn shoes, her heels and toes are dotted with blisters, and some of
the smells and sights are downright nauseating, especially the time someone comes in with an
entire deer’s head, antlers and all, protruding from their chest, but it does keep her busy, constantly,
with hardly any time to stop and mope, and that’s good for her.

And she does like the work, exhausting and tedious as it can be. A few times she gets to observe
examinations or potions administering, and a helpful mediwizard sneaks her into the laboratories in
the cellars for a brief tour to look at the bubbling vats and tightly sealed bins of ground up
ingredients and the rows and rows of bookshelves, all healing texts dating back, some claim, to the
time of Merlin. She doesn’t get to wear the eye-catching lime green robes of a healer, but she does
get to feel like she’s part of something important, something useful, helping people, not hurting
them or using them for some obscure greater good.

But she is still required to check in every week with Mrs Cole, as part of the arrangement. Cole
thinks she’s volunteering at an ordinary hospital, and Tom at an ordinary antiques shop, although
she “can’t imagine who has the time or money for antiques in these days”. Them having work
means she doesn’t need to find or pay for living arrangements for them for the summer, so she’s
not inclined to pry much, and Amy is glad to hear that Bianka and Dennis and the others are
supposedly still doing well enough out in the country. Tom sometimes asks her to get tea with him
after one of their check-ins, and she always politely refuses, and he is oh so courteous and
understanding, but she’s watching and waiting all the same.

She doesn’t have to wait very long. Tom misses a check-in during the first week of August, which
is entirely unlike him. Cole is concerned, but not alarmed. “Boys of his age,” she informs Amy,
“entirely flighty, the lot of them. Granted, Tom’s always kept a cooler head than most, but really- I
explicitly told him to call ahead if he wasn’t going to able to meet at this time. What sort of shop
hasn’t got a phone?”

“I’ll try to ring him myself,” Amy promises distractedly, although of course there are no
telephones in St. Mungo’s either.
Afterwards she apparates into the alley outside the Leaky Cauldron; you can’t apparate directly into Diagon or Knockturn Alley, they have wards up as security measures, even before Grindelwald was rampaging through Europe. It’s raining lightly as she rushes down the streets, takes the steps two at a time, descends into the underbelly of the shopping district, a hand on her wand all the while, because she’s not going to be caught unaware here again, not ever- Borgin and Burke’s is still open, since it’s midday, and she pauses for a moment, composing herself, before slipping inside. The bell on the door jangles discordantly, and she instantly looks to the register, but Tom isn’t there, only a bored looking man in his forties.

“Can I help you, Miss?” he asks skeptically, lip curling as he takes in the sight of her very muggle and bedraggled appearance. “Taken a wrong turn, have we-,”

“Is Tom Riddle working today?” she cuts him off coldly.

“Who wants to know?” the clerk shoots back.

She doesn’t have time for this. “His girlfriend,” she replies automatically, every syllable lathered with sarcasm.

The clerk looks even more skeptical, but finally says, “No, he clocked out yesterday just before closing. Family emergency.”

Family emergency? She stares, still dripping water onto the floor.

“Would you mind-,”

“He’s an orphan,” she snaps. “He hasn’t got any bloody family. So what-,”

“Distant relatives, then. Some cousin or other. Dead. Very tragic. He was summoned for the funeral. Now, would you please-,”

She’s already storming back outside as the wind picks up, tugging at her oversized coat and the ragged hem of her skirt. Distant relatives. Merope. His mother’s name was Merope Riddle- No. Merope Gaunt. His grandfather was Marvolo Gaunt. How the fuck is she supposed to find out where Marvolo Gaunt is, if he’s even still alive? But- Riddle, his father was a Riddle, a muggle, Tom Riddle, he was named for his muggle father, there have to be records, there must be-

She spends the next two hours in the nearest library, combing through newspaper records, hoping, praying, until finally, she finds a society announcement in an paper dated August 1903. RIDDLE - BLY. Thomas Henry Riddle and Mary Florence Bly were wed August 13th, 1903 at St. Werstan’s Church, Little Hangleton, Sutton. The bride is the daughter of-

She stands up suddenly, chair screeching back on the smooth tiled floor. A passing librarian glowers at her. Amy ignores them. It might not be right people. There could very well be multiple Riddle lines roaming about Britain. But Thomas- and the year makes sense, his father would have had to have been born not too long after that. Even if it is them, that doesn’t mean Tom’s gone to see them. He could be looking for any surviving Gaunts. There’s no guarantee that Merope Gaunt was from anywhere near the same place as the Riddle family. But… He doesn’t have the Trace to worry about anymore, she tells herself sharply. He doesn’t need to fear the Ministry breathing down his back. He’s free for the summer. He took time off work for it. Come on, Amy. You know. You know why he might want to find his paternal side.

After all, Merope Gaunt has been dead for seventeen years. But Tom Riddle Sr. never once came looking for his son. Maybe he didn’t know. Maybe he did. It wouldn’t be like Tom to just let that
rest, though. He’d want to know. He’d have to know. Have to know whether it was intentional or not. For her the concept of being unwanted, discarded, has always haunted her like a specter. For him it is more like an angry, throbbing wound, a cut that refuses to heal over, to seal up. The idea of being unwanted or replaced- it doesn’t make him feel hopeless, it makes him feel angry. So very angry.

So she goes.

She’s never been to Little Hangleton so she can’t apparate there. She can, however, take the Knight Bus from London, and see if the driver is willing to make the trip. He is, although he warns her that there’s- “...Nothing out there for the likes of us, lass. Pure muggle, that village is, aside from a Gaunt or two. Don’t think there’s any of them left, now that I think of it. Back when this was still a stagecoach, see, sometimes a girl would hire it to take her into London. Years and years ago. Wretched thing, she was, poor bird. What was she called- Meredith? Marian?”

“Merope,” says Amy under her breath, but he doesn’t hear her over the constant screeching of the brakes and growl of the engine.

The bus deposits her on the village outskirts, in the shadow of one of the two hills looming over it. It is minuscule, perhaps even smaller than South Brent. At the very least, it makes for a short walk. She doesn’t get very far. There’s a line of cars winding up the southern hill, where she can make up an impressive manor house overlooking the cobbled streets. Her brisk pace slows to a halt. Several of the cars are clearly police. She stops, looks around wildly, and then makes for what appears to be a pub.

It’s packed, and it’s not even five o’clock in the evening yet. Not just men; women, children, even a few dogs, all wedged behind tables and in booths, crowded around the bar, chattering and gossiping. The mood is almost… jubilant, although something has clearly happened. For an instant she thinks she glimpses Tom in a back corner, and her heart stops, but it’s just another dark-haired youth, taking another pint from a smiling waitress.

“Excuse me,” she says, once she’s wormed her way up to the bar. “Could you-,”

“Give you one free shot on the house, darling,” the bearded barkeep tells her, grinning. “For celebration’s sake.”

“What are you celebrating?” She asks, declining to mention that she’s not yet eighteen.

“Haven’t you heard? The witch is dead. Ding dong. Like the film, yeah?”

She frowns at him as he slides her a glass. “That’s our best brandy, right there-,”

“Who’s dead?” she presses, not touching it.

“The Riddles. The witches, I should say. Miserable lot. Stingy. Their good-for-nothing son kept a running tab here, didn’t even have the decency to pay it off in full before he dropped dead-,”

“Tom Riddle’s dead?”

“Him, and his prissy mother, and the old wanker himself. All three of them. At once! They found them this morning, they did. They’re calling in all sorts of examiners and doctors and detectives,” he scoffs, “to try to find out what did them in. Gas leak? Stroke? Can’t say I care, myself. You see any weepy eyes round here? Course not! Like we hadn’t, any one of us, considered going up there ourselves with an axe from time to time and just-,”
He slams his hand down on the bar in a mimed blow, making glasses rattle. Amy jerks back, but no one else seems to notice, still laughing and talking and speculating wildly.

“Well- do they have any suspects?” she asks hoarsely.

The barkeep snorts. “The gardener, for one. Bryce. Strange, twitchy young bloke, that one. Bad leg. Came back here two years past from the war, discharged, you know. Went to school with him, I did. Temper nearly as bad as that leg. They took him up to Great Hangleton, they did.” He’s distracted by someone calling his name, smiles at her, and then moves away. Amy stares at the shot in front of her, and when her hands begin to tremble, downs it immediately.

She goes for a very long walk after that, steering well clear of the manor house on the hill, crawling with policemen, and instead takes the dirt lane leading through the nearby woods. She’s not sure where she’s going, or what she’s doing, or what she’s going to do. She knows who killed the Riddles. That doesn’t mean she has any proof of it. She feels the shack before she sees it, the slight shift in the air, the way she always does when crossing over from muggle to magical. She’s not sure if muggles can see it as well, or if they even see what she sees, but what she sees is a fallen down fence, an overgrown garden filled with weeds as high as her waist, and the derelict remains of what was likely once a much larger residence, now crumpled and crippled and the bare remains of stone walls, and in the middle of that, a ramshackle wooden shack.

The door is hanging off the hinges. There’s several dead snakes nailed to it, swaying slightly in the damp summer breeze. Amy clambers over the ruined fencing and walks forward, feeling as if she’s sinking into the ground with every step. She pauses just outside the door, pulls out her wand, and casts a revealing charm. Nothing. “Lumos,” she grits out, and slips inside. The floor is little more than planks on loose dirt, and said planks are covered in broken glass and shattered wood. The low ceiling is full of holes, the walls are rotting away, whatever furniture there once was is toppled and destroyed. The shack is empty, silent, little more than three small rooms, including a tiny, cramped kitchen littered with fractured dishes.

G A U N T is carved into the small fireplace’s stone mantle. Amy traces the letters with her fingers. Gaunt. The heirs of Slytherin. This is where the people Tom so idolized, so longed for, lived. A shack in the woods. In crushing poverty. Forgotten by the rest of the magical world. Discarded. This is where his mother lived, she realizes. This is where Merope Gaunt was raised. She searches the shack, but the only trace of any of the residents beyond some ragged remains of clothes to be found is a crumpled up letter in a dusty drawer. She can barely read the stained and blurry writing, but what she can make out is:

Father,

can’t anymore, I want

loves me, he’ll love me

won’t see me again

Morfinn won’t be

for the best

I wanted

more

Mother wouldn’t have
told me

never listened

not useless

Goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

So the wiki seems to think Tom murdered his father's family in August 1943. I'm doubtful of this, since he would have been sixteen in August 1943 and thus underage and still subject to the Trace. I'd have liked to devoted more time to Amy's work at Mungo's but that would have doubled the length of this chapter, most likely, and I'm trying to stay on target.

The next chapter will be the penultimate one. It will be very long, cover a great deal of time (roughly the length of Amy's seventh year) and a lot of things are going to happen in it. Because it will be so breakneck and likely (I hope?) intense I'm doing an epilogue, because if I left it like that you'd probably all be calling for my head on a spike. The epilogue will hopefully conclude Amy's narrative in a satisfying or at least sufficient manner. Thank you all so, so much for the incredible support and feedback for this fic, especially given that it practically revolves around an OC, plays fast and loose with canon, and began as a random one-shot. I'm really touched and gratified by how much people seem to have enjoyed Amy as a character, and it's nice to be wrapping things up with over 100 bookmarks and all your comments and kudos.
AUGUST 1944

Amy hates to make a decision on an empty stomach, so she comes to her conclusions over dinner a day later, after reading the headlines in the Prophet about Morfinn Gaunt being put on trial for a triple homicide. While Tabitha tries to coax her son into eating just a bit more of his green beans and her husband attempts charm after charm on the leaky kitchen sink, Amy gulps down bites of lukewarm food, studying the seams of the table, and decides. She has two choices in front of her. Neither of them involve going to the Ministry, which she’s oddly grateful to not have to consider in the first place. She has absolutely no evidence that Tom was even present in Little Hangleton on the day of the murders. She doesn’t even have proof that the Riddles were related to him.

So she has two choices. She can confront Tom about it, and they can fall into the old song and dance of denial, fury, admission, threats, promises, and all the other steps. Or she can lie. She is going to have to lie, because Tom likely knows she went looking for him at Borgin and Burke’s. What he doesn’t know is that she managed to track down the Riddles, just as he did. He cannot know that she knows what he did. So she is going to have to make this the most convincing lie of her life. She drags her fork across her clean plate, inhales, and then lets it go.

To her mild surprise, she’s not afraid or even seized with dread. Not really. She’s not even that outraged on the behalf of the Riddles, who were by all accounts really the most unpleasant people. She’s just decided. She can sit in the burning house and watch the flames blacken the furniture and race up the curtains and stay there, seated demurely on the sofa, waiting for the roof to cave in, or she can get up and start moving. She knows which she’d prefer, and not sitting still has never been a problem for her. Amy gathers up her dishes, walks over into the kitchen to set them on the counter, then rolls up her sleeves to help Sebastian fix the sink.

That Sunday she sits docilely through their check-in with Mrs Cole, pointedly avoiding eye contact with Tom, and pictures a fork scraping in a circular pattern along a china plate, running over the grooves and bumps of the detailing. That’s all she thinks about, although she smiles and nods and talks about how heartwarming it is to care for those wounded soldiers and how she’s learning so much about medicine and maybe she can go for her nursing license someday, all while picturing the fork rasping along the plate, over and over again. She can still hear the leaking of the faucet in the background, although she is not sure if that’s from Tabitha’s kitchen or the bathroom hiding the Basilisk’s den.

Afterwards she walks down the busy street with Tom, and as they turn onto a quieter lane, leans over and gives him an accusing shove. He missteps for an instant, then rights himself, balancing on the kerb, a pale hand on her shoulder, fingers digging in through her stiff blouse. There’s a new ring on his finger, right hand. Tom likes shiny things, but she’s never seen this one before. It looks like a signet. Black stone. Onyx? Either way, it’s very old, and she has a very good idea of where he may have gotten it from. That’s alright. It will make things a little easier.

“That wasn’t very polite.”

He looks more bemused than anything else, she supposes, because he is just shy of six foot at seventeen and she has not exceeded five foot three since the age of fourteen. She scowls at him in response, the fork still scraping the plate, round and round, in her head, cocks her head just so, and
snaps, “Where the hell were you last week? Cole was having a fit- you could have gotten us both in trouble. I even went round to Knockturn to look for you-.”

He relaxes; part of her feels some sense of smooth, gliding delight, like skimming your hand across a pool of water, at how easy he is to predict. This is what he was hoping for. Outraged little Amy, secretly worried for him and unwilling to admit, still common enough to give him a shove like they were tiny kids again, still hopelessly devoted to him, in spite of all her gritty edges and her professions to the contrary. The corners of his eyes crinkle slightly in relief, like he’s just barely restraining a smile.

_I could push you into the street in front of the next oncoming car_, Amy thinks softly, as the fork still winds its way round the plate and the faucet echoes in her otherwise vacant mind, _and you’d never even see it coming_. In some sense, it is almost endearing. She wonders at that; is this how he feels, constantly, around her? Equal parts smug and savage but slightly charmed all the same, at her wide blue eyes and her open book of a face, the way her mouth falls open in shock or horror and how her nose scrunches up when she is enraged? The slight gap between her front teeth? Her freckles? How she cannot help but touch him, even when upset?

He lets go of her shoulder, but the hard indents remain as she shifts from foot to foot restlessly. “You shouldn’t have gone there alone. It’s not safe. Especially these days.”

“Oh, come off it. I didn’t forget my wand this time.” She glances away slightly, as if vaguely embarrassed all these years later. He was so angry with her back then, when he found her and Mulciber, but she thinks part of him probably liked it, all the same. Part of him probably found it reassuring. He’d been the one to save her. She’d had to depend on him. If he hadn’t been there- If I hadn’t been there, he probably thinks, if I hadn’t been there, what would she have done? Tried to run? Begged? But he was there, he found her, he saved her. Saint Tom. Her hero.

“I’d hope not,” he scoffs, but it is gentle, and he dares to let his fingers skim along her jaw, turning her face ever so slightly back to him. Amy blinks hard, as if caught off guard, then lets herself lean into it ever so carefully. “You shouldn’t worry about me like that. I had to meet with Abraxas and Alexander. Nothing serious.”

“The clerk said you went to visit family,” she scoffs hoarsely, like she’s in need of some tea with honey. “Hardly one of your best lies, Tom.”

“He didn’t know that, did he?” He retracts his hand, and she takes a step back, feeling the heat flood her face, as if angry with herself for allowing that much contact. “Look, let me make it up to you,” he suggests. “We can stop anywhere you like before I have to go back. I got tipped well yesterday for finding the right scarab for a warlock from Algiers.”

“I should get home,” she hedges, scuffing the toe of her shoe along the pavement. “I’ve got to be up early tomorrow…”

“I won’t keep you late, I promise,” he takes her hand easily, as if it’s the most natural thing, and it’s so casual that for a split second she wavers all the same, because why- why couldn’t it be like this all the time, why couldn’t they hold hands in the street and go for tea and talk about their jobs and just be bloody ordinary and lovely and typical? But it can’t. So she focuses on the fork scraping the plate clean and after a moment, nods.

SEPTEMBER 1944

Tom is Head Boy, to no one’s surprise, after years of Dippet fawning over him and the rest of the Slug Club. The Head Girl is Evie Bostwick, a Gryffindor, which Amy considers a good choice.
There’s too many eyes on the Heads, from the faculty to the student body, for Tom to do anything truly horrendous, but a counterbalance is nice all the same. Evie is aggressively level-headed and if the rumors are true, completely immune to masculine charms. Amy also once watched Evie lay Ned Avery out mid-air with a strong right right hook to the jaw when he fouled on her during a quidditch match, so that’s reassuring.

The prefects’ compartment feels incredibly cramped all the same. Amy’s left knee continuously brushes up against Matthew’s. Matthew, who may as well be carved from stone, for all that he is reacting. Every so often, Tom glances his way, and while he does not smirk or sneer or even smile mockingly, the thinly veiled aura of triumph is there all the same, watching Amy fold her arms across her chest and stare out the window while Evie lectures them on the updated code of conduct, and Matthew sit there glowering directly at him.

When they’re dismissed to start their rounds, Matthew mutters something about starting with the front of the train and working his way back, and leaves her standing in the corridor, a hand braced against the wall as the Hogwarts Express rattles its way out of the London suburbs. “You forgot your rulebook,” Tom says from behind her, handing it over with a practiced look of disinterest. He desperately believes her renewed devotion is predicated on him being on the very best behavior, and that means giving her the cold shoulder in public.

It’s not nearly as practiced for her; she takes it gruffly and then finds the nearest loo so she can flush it down the goddamn toilet. He had the nerve to stand up there in front of everyone and reiterate how acts of violence, magical or muggle, against another student was an immediate disciplinary hearing- unless you have a relative or family friend on the board of governors, that is, was the unspoken lining. It takes multiple flushes and several close calls with overflow. She regards herself critically in the already grimy mirror, probably from all the smoking that goes on in here. She cut her hair herself just before school started. This year, she doesn’t want it any longer than her chin. It looks an awful lot like a helmet. She ruffles it to no avail, bites down hard on the inside of her gum, and then flushes the toilet once more, with emphasis.

She spends the majority of the rest of the ride comforting two muggleborn first years who don’t believe her when she tells them that the bombers can’t find Hogwarts on a map.

On their first day of classes, the Daily Prophet bothers to report that the Nazis have surrendered Paris to the Allies. They do not mention the 129 civilians massacred in Indre-et-Loire; Grindelwald’s own massacre of 63 in Belgrade gets priority page-space, naturally, with full-color pictures. Amy is glad she’s never had the money for a subscription, as she leans over Ruby’s shoulder to read it, strawberry jam dripping onto the crisp pages flattened out on the table top.

Two weeks into the school year, Professor Witherspoon returns. Her first stop is not her office nor her old Charms classroom where they’ve had to endure a series of frustrated substitutes but the Infirmary. O’Rinn is no longer the only teacher with a cane, although Witherspoon’s limp is far worse, because she lost most of her left leg at the hands of one of Grindelwald’s lieutenants. Amy has seen muggle prosthetics before, rudimentary wood and metal, but as she gapes from behind Madam Amell, Witherspoon begrudgingly bundles up her long skirt to reveal a perfect replica, albeit it carved from a smoothed out tree branch of sorts, as if it’d grown right from the stump, shedding bark and leaves along the way.

“A Vinogradov design,” Amell comments, running a clinical hand up and down. “Any pain?”

“No more than expected,” Witherspoon says through her teeth, then catches Amy’s eyes and forces an adult’s reassuring smile. There are shades of grey to her auburn ringlets that were never there before, and fresh lines to her sun-weathered face. “That’ll teach me to go running off to the
battlefield, won’t it?” The bangles around her wrists are gone, but the bells at her neck remain. There’s a new one, glinting cold iron compared to the rest of the copper and gold.

“A pity Bastiat got away,” Amell says, helping her sit back up. “Heard you gave him one hell of a fight, Calliope.”

“And one less of an eye,” Professor Witherspoon smiles savagely, and for an instant she is not the warm and cheerful teacher Amy has always known, but a witch, a witch who went to kill other witches for what she believes in. It’s funny how that works. Magic has ceased to amaze Amy, but the line between people and forces of nature still does. It is marvelous, and not in the splendid sense, in the terrifying one. No wonder the muggles used to fear them so. No wonder, when they could call down storms and fire and lightning with a few words, when they could kill a hundred in a matter of seconds, when they used to roam free and bold through villages and cities and the wilderness, bending an increasingly unwilling world to their will.

Witherspoon resumes teaching her classes the following week, and Amy leaves some chocolate from Honeydukes for her on her desk.

OCTOBER 1944

This final Samhain Amy does not run between the fires with anyone or join the throngs of masked students roaming the streets of Hogsmeade, dancing and laughing and drinking smuggled firewhiskey. Instead she completely derelicts her duties as a prefect, and goes up into the hills overlooking the village and surrounding forest with Vera and Ruby. Between their respective classes, extracurriculars, homework, and the general sensation of encroaching dread that anyone’s final year of schooling might bring, they really see very little of each other beyond at meals or while getting ready for bed. Amy has a thousand things she wants to say, to make it up to them, somehow for being so good to her, all these years, for being her friends even at her pettiest or most spiteful or pathetic.

But she is only seventeen, and it’s difficult to put into words, what seven years of easy companionship and whispered conversations with the lights out and homework assistance and walking together to class and sitting together for all their meals and taking the train here and back again and seeing them cheering for her in the stands at quidditch games and above all, their remarkable tolerance of all her defects and mortifications. She thinks she loves them as simply and easily as one might love one’s sisters. They find a leaf-covered slope to recline on, and pass around a packet of cigarettes and a smuggled bottle of champagne that Ruby kept transfigured as a handbag for weeks on end.

The taste is somewhat off because of it, but Amy doesn’t mind.

“They should have warned us earlier that we’d have to get our lives in order,” Ruby bemoans. “What’s it got to be, then- Mungo’s for you, Ames, ever the martyr, and Vera’s going into Arithmancy so she can tell fortunes and predict stock market crashes-,”

Vera throws a handful of dead grass and leaves at her; Ruby yelps as it gathers in her long silky hair, and nearly drops her lit cigarette into the dry earth, causing both Amy and Vera to blanch in horror, then laugh.

“And I,” Ruby pronounces, wrinkling her nose at them in distaste, “will have to endure a dreadful desk job at the Ministry until I can find something better.”

“Yes, the work is much less rigorous here,” Vera imitates her in a shrill falsetto, making Amy choke on her next sip, “not like in Madras-,”
“There’s no bloody wars in Madras!” Ruby swats at her, scoffing, then reclines back again. “Although they say the muggles are winding theirs down, at least. Simon should be home soon enough, aye?” She nudges at Vera, who smiles and nods tightly, but they all know what she is thinking, what they are thinking. Never soon enough, it seems. They’ve been promising an end to the war- to both wars- for years now. Always just on the horizon, even when it seemed like they were on the verge of being invaded.

Tom will be eighteen in December. He is technically listed as in school, a good school, so he ought to avoid the draft. But if it doesn’t end, like they promise… She supposes it’s not much of her concern. He’s wormed his way out of tighter spots before. She’s not going to throw herself on the ground wailing at the thought of him being shipped off. She wishes she could even enjoy the prospect, think of it as some looming comeuppance. But she can’t. War is not what anyone deserves. You could put the most vile people in the world before her, and she would still not say they had it coming, the constant feeling of being in a slow motion crash, of waiting for the smoke to clear, the embers to burn down, the clouds to pass. The sirens to stop wailing and wailing.

“I love you,” she tells her friends, laying with her one cheek planted in the cold, bristly ground, the wind stirring her skirt and her hair. “Promise me we’ll never spend too long away from each other.” She is never this sentimental, and her eyes are still dry, but she had to say it all the same, the gnawing sensation in her gut terribly afraid this is the last time, last time forever, that something will happen, to her or to them, and she’ll have missed her chance.

“I love you too,” Vera has extinguished her cigarette with a murmured cooling charm. She lies down on one side of Amy, and Ruby on the other. They momentarily link arms as if bracing themselves for some gale to descend upon them from the far off sea.

Ruby sighs gustily. “Well… You have made the whole experience bearable, I’ll admit.”

“Fuck off,” Amy says happily around the lump in her throat. Ruby squeezes her cold hand.

Dumbledore has gone the following morning, to seek out Grindelwald, some people say, or to get himself killed, other people say, or to join up with the cause, even more people say. Apparently he didn’t bother asking Dippet for permission. The headmaster is rather tiffed, and even more tiffed to have to resume his post as the Transfiguration professor. Amy is glad the seventh year class is nearly all review of past materials, anyways. No sense in ruining her NEWTs.

DECEMBER 1944

The snow in the highlands seems unusually heavy that winter, not just bluster and chill but cloying, heavy, stifling cold, like being wrapped up in a damp, suffocating quilt. It starts to snow early as well, and the last quidditch match before the break is called off after four hours of fumbling about in the grey moat of the air, a tie between Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Amy lands in dismay, ripping off her goggles, and after a very long, scaldingly hot shower, troops back up to the castle with mud and slush encrusted boots, only to discover that Vera was called back from the stands two hours before, because her father was there to pick her and Miriam up early.

“There was word,” Ruby tells her in a too-tight, too-small voice, as if struggling to close the lid on a tiny box packed full of grief and anger, “Simon was killed in Ardennes.” It will later be called the Battle of the Bulge, but Amy’s knowledge of the current war is lacking, so all she knows then is that Simon Goldstein died defending a bridge one cold day in December, after surviving two years of fighting prior to that.

What is more blinding than the snow outside or the deep well of grief is the fact that she cannot comfort Vera, because Vera is gone, and no one else beyond Ruby and a few others are even aware
of it. So with no consolation or support to offer, Amy sits in her muddy boots on the floor outside
the Great Hall with Ruby, watching their classmates track in more snow and dirt and chatter on
happily about the upcoming holidays, entirely oblivious.

A few days later, she tries very hard to write a letter, but cannot think of what to say, what could be
said, what could come even close to relieving anything. In the end she doesn’t, and just stands
blankly in the Owlery for a while, listening to the gentle hooting and shuffling of talons and wings
overhead. Everyone else soon leaves for the Christmas holiday, as usual. There is no question of
returning to the muggle world this year. Amy sits in an empty common room, listening to some of
Ruby’s borrowed records on the phonograph, petting someone’s cat that they did not bother to
bring home with them.

Tom gives her a set of what she believes are genuine pearl earrings for Christmas; she bakes him
cookies and is mollified by the ease at which he accepts them, the utter lack of suspicion or
wariness. For all he knows she could have sprinkled them with arsenic, not sugar. In turn he is
mollified by her fumbling shock; no one has ever given her anything this expensive before. Vera
pierced her ears with a sterile sewing needle and an ice cube when they were thirteen, but her
jewelry collection is very scant, as he well knows.

Tongue-tied, she turns them over in her hand the way a small child might their first lost teeth,
disgusted and fascinated at the same time. She doesn’t want to know where he got the money for
these, assuming he bought them. A thought comes to her, that maybe he simply went upstairs and
pilfered through his dead grandmother’s jewelry, after he murdered her and his father and
grandfather, and the image of Tom evaluating which items she might like, taking his time, sifting
through some fine, ornate dressing table in a lavishly decorated bedroom is enough to make her
seize with momentarily hysterical laughter. Luckily, it doesn’t make much noise, and is easily
mistaken for a shocked gasp.

“Let’s see them, then,” he says good-naturedly, like a father indulging a lovingly spoilt daughter,
and she sees the slight smile playing on his lips, how convinced he is that all is well once more.
They may still avoid one another in public, but in this moment of private, secreted away in some
dusty alcove, he can pretend that she is once again entirely his. Amy is in no particular rush to rid
him of that delusion, and pushes her hair out of the way to put them on, then stands very still so he
might inspect her.

“I thought they might be too big,” he says. “You’ve got absurdly little ears.”

“You always know just what to tell a girl to make her feel special, Tom,” she intones waspishly,
and her return to good-natured sarcasm seems to give him some jolt of confidence. She knows he is
about to kiss her and knows that she could back away or side-step it or even shy away in a show of
faux-modesty, as if she’s simply not good enough for him anymore, after betraying him with
Matthew like that, but she also knows that it will be a smoother ride for her in the long run if she
simply lets it happen.

So she stands there, waiting for a possessive crush of his mouth against her own, but it’s almost
tender, almost tentative, really, and that catches her more off guard than some juvenile attempt at
dominance would. When she doesn’t immediately respond, to her surprise, he pauses, pulls away,
although he keeps a hand cupped round the side of her jaw, his thumb brushing perilously close to
her eye. She blinks hard, uncomfortable, and he lets go.

“Don’t cry,” Tom says quickly, his hands moving to her forearms, as if to comfort her. She wasn’t
going to, although now she wonders if she should. Perhaps if she cried more often in front of him,
they could have avoided a lot of this. He sounds frustrated, but not with her. With himself? As if
she is some Transfiguration equation he has yet to resolve, and he blames his own ineptitude. “Alright? I’m sorry. I know I said I could wait. You still need time. I understand.” He’s telling himself this more so than her.

He doesn’t understand. How could he? He hasn’t got the register for it. Amy doesn’t think he sits up late at night and broods over everything he’s ever done that was less than morally decent. She doesn’t think he dwells on what he did to Matthew, or Alphard, or Irene, or his father. Time as a measure of healing grief or anger does not mean anything to him at all. His own emotions are not linear or cyclical. They are sporadic eruptions, distractions from a larger goal, occasionally embarrassing or annoying, but not anything to fret over. So if she needs time, then- well, if it were up to him it’d have been a matter of days.

“I know you’re trying,” she tells him throatily, although she has to study his shoes instead of his drawn face. They’re very shiny. He obsesses over polishing them, truly. She’s watched him spend a good ten minutes fussing over them before a meeting of the Slug Club. “I- I want to go back to the way things were, I do. Really.” Her eyes sting then, to her annoyance- now she really could cry, because that’s not a lie, not really. She does want to go back. But they can’t. Or, he wants to think they could. But they can’t. That’s not how this works.

“When we’ve graduated, everything will be different,” he says soothingly. “We won’t have to worry about any of this.”

Right. Her friends. His murdered relatives. Her conscience. His tattered shred of one. Mere obstacles, obviously. Everything will be ever so marvelous when that’s all left behind.

She wipes at her eyes, and smiles bravely. Tom smiles back, and admires her new earrings again in the pale winter light.

MARCH 1945

Grindelwald falls in mid-March, when the heavy snow is just starting to show signs of melting, and the weather is just shy of frigid once more, making Quidditch practices slightly more bearable. It is a momentous shock, of course. Three of Grindelwald’s most prized lieutenants and their corresponding dictatorships had fallen since November, but everyone had assumed that the fighting would still continue for some months. No one knew where Dumbledore was, where the special forces assigned by the Ministry were planning to strike next, if the French were going to finally topple Bastiat once and for all, whether the Greeks’ coup had really been successful-

And then, all at once, it’s over, a war that’s been raging in earnest since 1939 and building for the decade prior to that. The only lens Amy has ever seen the wizarding world through, one of intense infighting, horrific acts of terrorism and mass murder, of an overarching obsession with purity, and supremacy, and dominance over the ‘lesser creatures’ they view muggles and goblins and elves and veelas and werewolves and anything or anyone that they won’t let hold a wand, is shattered.

She and her generation have only ever known Hogwarts and Britain and the Ministry and their divided world at large in the context of Grindelwald’s encroaching presence. At some point, one resigns themselves to it, the knowledge that the world is never going to be safe, and united, and accessible. That it might just be them, on some very solitary isles in the Atlantic Ocean, and that’s it. A very small plot of earth to plant roots in.

There’s a one hour time distance between Austria, where Grindelwald falls, his notorious fortress conquered in a night, and Great Britain. So when Albus Dumbledore claims victory in a duel that reports will later say lasted nearly three hours, it is just shy of four o’clock in the morning in the Alps, and just shy of three o’clock, the witching hour, in the highlands. News comes by way of the
Minister himself contacting Dippet, who then summons all the teachers and informs them, who then do their level best to keep it to themselves, but inevitably within what seems like minutes not only do the heads and prefects know, but the entire school. The explosion of noise; cheers and screams and running feet, is such that for a few perilous minutes it feels like the castle itself is shaking.

Amy has never associated loud noises and shouts in the middle of the night with anything good, and wakes up in a blind panic, certain they’ve just been blitzed, grabbing at her wand and jamming her feet into her slippers. But then Marge and Patsy come barreling into her dorm room, waking up Vera and Ruby as well, jumping up and down and screaming and cheering, sparks trailing from their wands, and after a few heart-pounding moments she’s able to understand what they’re saying. Ruby is jumping up and down on the bed and laughing, Vera is shaking with sobs, her head between her knees, and Amy rubs at her eyes and tries to understand how any of this is going to work now that the one of the wars is over.

The snow still on the grass outdoors shimmers red and green and purple in turn from the fireworks bursting in the air until dawn. Students freely roam the halls, gossiping and laughing, and no one is surprised when classes are canceled for the day. Amy doesn’t feel much like getting dressed; she stays under her lump of covers, staring at the plants covering the low ceiling, and the way they shift and move in time with the distant music from the floors above. Ruby runs out in a dressing gown with Marge at some point, and Patsy goes to find Teddy to celebrate, and after a little while Amy asks Vera if she’s going to get breakfast.

“I’m not hungry,” Vera says, in the raw voice of someone just finished crying. She sniffs, hard. “Are you?”

“Not really,” Amy admits. “Want to go to the kitchens? It’ll be quieter.”

If the house elves know that Grindelwald has been defeated, they don’t show it, continuing their work quietly, although occasionally one or another wanders over to attempt to force more food upon them. Amy watches her teacup automatically refill itself, and reaches across the ancient stone table to take Vera’s hand, which is shaking.

“I know we’re supposed to be happy,” Vera says, loathingly. “But I can’t. I can’t. He’s not even dead. They’re going to shut him up somewhere. Like none of it even happened.”

“The muggles won’t do that. Not with their war criminals,” Amy tells her, with a confidence she does not feel. “They’ll hang them all, I bet. Or shoot them. It’s easier- it’s easier for wizards to forget.”

The Killing Curse, after all, does not leave marks the way muggle forms of violence do.

“It’s not easy,” Vera snaps. “They make it easy. So later they can tell us it wasn’t that bad, you know? Then they can start it all over again.”

Amy no longer knows if they’re talking about wizards or muggle soldiers, curses or bombs.

“We don’t have to forgive anyone,” she rests her chin on her fist, watches the sun begin to peek through the high windows above them. “I don’t plan to, anyways.”

MAY 1945

Three weeks ago they swore Truman in as president of the United States. One week ago Hitler committed suicide. Five days ago the Soviets flew their flag over Berlin and the Axis troops in Italy
surrendered. Three days ago the Netherlands was liberated from the Nazis. Two days ago Prague rose up to drive out the occupation and Canadian troops liberated Amsterdam. Today Germany surrendered and Britain will begin to bring home POWs. Tomorrow the war in Europe will come to an end. Tomorrow people will dance and shout and sing in the streets or sit in bed and weep the way other people did when the news from Nurnengard broke.

But Amy doesn’t know most of that yet, because the Daily Prophet has done little but breathlessly report on the efforts to scourge the last of Grindelwald’s forces and diehard loyalists from eastern Europe. Since his fall and the Allied successes, the ‘muggle war’ has become a secondary concern. ‘At last, they’re cleaning up their own messes’, the current Minister was quoted as saying (strictly off the record, of course). ‘High time they got that nonsense well in hand.’ A relief, certainly, but then again, it was never their war to begin with. All magical governments swore to practice a strict policy of non-engagement in all muggle conflicts when the Statute of Secrecy went into effect over two centuries ago. Rather convenient that they’ve managed to wrap both up at the same time.

What Amy does know is that she has her first round of NEWTs beginning in three weeks and that’s she running out of time, in more way than one. Most of her days are spent behind stacks of books in the library, underlining and scratching out and frantically searching through her bag for old notes, only leaving when the lamps begin to dim themselves out and the librarian walks around ringing her bell. The standards for accredited Healers are rigorous indeed and she has to do well, better than she’s ever done in her life when it comes to school. She wears the same clothes two days in a row, showers sporadically, barely eats. She suspects she’s truly becoming delirious when she looks up from her work, eyes aching, and sees Tom standing over her.

“Yes?” she mutters, because they’d agreed not to come up to each other in public like this, but for once everyone else is just as harried and frenetic, and no one immediately takes notice.

“I thought I’d left my ink well over here the other day,” he says apologetically, and then leans over to scoop it up, muttering in her ear. Her shoulders twitch, but she doesn’t shake her head or scowl at him, and then he’s gone.

It’s a complete abuse of his powers as Head Boy for them both to be roaming about when not on patrol this late at night, but the upper gallery of the dueling hall is as secluded and empty as it was all those years ago on her birthday. Her birthday was really nearly two weeks ago, when it was still April, but he’d said he’d had a surprise for her, and she supposes this must be it. Not a duel, she hopes. She hops up onto the edge of the balcony railing and straddles it, skirt bunched up above her knees and legs dangling on each edge. He remains standing, shaking his head in bemusement, and this time when he kisses her, she does not sit there stiffly and take it.

Amy kisses him hard, almost meanly, jerks him by the collar and scratches at his neck with her nails, debates splitting open his lower lip with her teeth, then relents, and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. She probably tasted like coffee and cough drops; she’s been fighting off a cold recently and she hates to take potions for that sort of thing. Tom looks at her, surprised, mouth red against the pale skin of his jaw, and then hands her a letter.

She unfolds it, scans the first two paragraphs, skips down to the signature, then looks back up at him. “Why’s Oliver Parkinson writing about me?” she demands. “I’ve never met the man in my life.”

“Read it again,” he urges.

She does, then stops. “I hereby… Submit with the utmost of confidence… my recommendation that Miss Amy Benson be strongly considered as a potential candidate…”
“I told you Rose’s uncle was head of the Spell Damage floor,” Tom says, his swollen lips tugging into a smirk. “Didn’t I?”

“I haven’t even taken my exams yet,” Amy finally looks up from the letter. “He can’t bloody well recommend me to be accepted for an apprenticeship under him if they haven’t seen my scores-,”

“I told you,” Tom exhales in amusement, as if she’s being silly. “I could put in a good word through Rose, so I did. Your scores will be fine, whatever they are.”

Her cheeks smart with heat as if he’d just slapped her. “You don’t think I could have gotten in on my own merit-,”

“Of course I do,” he snaps, “if any of this were fair, certainly. But you have to be practical about this, Amy. They’d take one look at your surname, and shuffle you to the bottom of the pile. You’re hardly the only from our year applying, they can’t take everyone-,”

“So you thought you’d fix it for me?” she can’t keep her voice from raising, not this time, and he frowns. “I- This is my life, you can’t just-,”

“I can’t make things easier for you? No one’s going to give you a medal for struggling to get ahead. You’re letting your pride get in your own way.”

“And you never have,” she scoffs, then flinches when he grabs her by the waist and lifts her, not ungently, to the ground. Now the height difference between them is far more pronounced. She hates having to look up at him like this, so she sits down roughly in a rickety old chair instead. He does the same, a hand on her knee.

“I didn’t claim to be perfect.”

“Of course not,” she mutters.

“You don’t understand.” There is something in his voice. Not a waver, but close, like a string on a violin, feeling the vibrations of the one next to it. She looks up at him. In the dark the sharp lines of his face blur and fade so all that really stands out are the hollow of his eyes. “Once you’re working under Parkinson, you can only go up. You won’t have to worry. Your career’s made. This is what you wanted, isn’t it? No more fetching tea or finding people’s cloaks for them or playing secretary,” his tone curdles into contempt. “No more scurrying around having to beg pardon to so much as brew a potion or cast a charm. And we’ll be seeing quite a bit of each other. I’ll be at the Improper Use of Magic Office-,”


“No,” Tom smiles as if confessing a really funny secret joke he’s been keeping to himself for ages now. “Mr. Greengrass.”

“You haven’t got anything on him anymore. Alphard-,”

“Alphard needed to believe he’d gotten one over on me,” says Tom easily. “I thought I might let him have this one, since he was about to swept off the playing field entirely anyways. One last hurrah. Irene’s father was sleeping with that halfbreed, true. Got her pregnant, was hiding the child, true. But he was also using her to funnel money to some very interesting names across the Channel. I believe there might actually be some sort of prison time for that kind of thing, you know, providing financial support to men associated with Grindelwald and the like, all in the interest of the greater good. Passionate about his causes, Greengrass.”
“Clever boy,” says Amy. It is not a compliment.

“So I’ll be joining his office shortly after graduation,” Tom shrugs. “It’s really the least he can do, in exchange for not spending the rest of his life rotting in Azkaban.”

“You, working for Improper Use of Magic,” says Amy. “Now that’s funny.”

“Isn’t it?” He glances down at the letter clenched in her fists. “Don’t crumple it, Amy, I don’t want to bother with a duplicating charm.”

She smooths it out on her skirt, folds it up. “You’ve got us both all sorted out, then?”

“Almost.” He removes his hand from her knee, and for a moment she almost wonders whether he is wringing his hands, the thought of which nearly makes her laugh all over again until she pictures the fork, scrape-scrape-scraping along the rim of the plate, and then the Gaunt ring is off and resting black and beady, like the shell of an ancient beetle, in his palm, and for the first time all year, she lets herself sag with relief, like a puppet with their strings cut. He’s too intent on what he’s about to say next to notice.

“I want to give you something else, as well,” he says. “A promise.”

“What kind of promise?” she whispers, barely daring to breathe.

He traces his yew wand in a looping line round his palm and fingers, and a slim silver chain materializes as if raised from his own flesh, locked round the ring. “I don’t expect you to wear it. But I thought… you might like this rather more than just a scrap of paper.”

“It’s just a trinket.” Come on, she thinks. Come on, you bloody simple-minded fool, come on-

“It was my grandfather’s. Now it’s mine. It can be yours as well.” He’s not talking just about the ring. They both know that he’s really referring to the engraved G on it. “You saw in the papers, I’m sure. What that Morfinn man did. He took away the only family I had left.” But of course, Tom Riddle Sr. took away the only family his son had left, inadvertently or not. Tom just tidied up the loose ends. “This is all I have left of any of them.”

Does he honestly expect her to believe this tale, she wonders. That the ring just so happened to fall into his hands, that some kindly auror handed it over to him as they carted his uncle off to prison? Maybe he doesn’t really care what she believes, so long as she agrees.

“You said it yourself, years ago,” she murmurs. “A mudblood is not going to do any wonders for your career.”

“You are not a mudblood,” he says. “You’d be a Gaunt. Like me. My family is gone, Amy. I am the only one left. But it doesn’t have to be that way. We can start over again. We’ll be graduates, end of next month. Starting careers. Things are going to move quickly, especially now that the war’s over.”

“You can’t just change your name and expect people to see you as a whole new man.”

“Can’t I?” He presses, “Can’t you? We’re alone, Amy. We’ve been alone all our lives.”

“I’m not alone,” she says, but her voice cracks, because she has never felt more alone, even in the midst of this triumph.

“You are,” he says, “or you wouldn’t be here with me right now. You are alone. You have always
been alone. But not with me. I saw your file, when I was looking for mine.”

“I know,” she says, although she didn’t know, she doesn’t want him to say it, please, she doesn’t want him to-, “You don’t- Tom, don’t-,”

“She left you,” he says. “Your mother. She was a common whore, and she left you. Could hardly make a decent living with a five year old underfoot, could she?” He is not even trying to be deliberately cruel, that is the worst part. The way it spills and leaks out of him all the same, the bitterness, the rage, as if he’d been personally affected by any of this, as if he really felt for her-

“She left you,” he repeats. “Without so much as a goodbye, didn’t she? No father. No relatives. Nothing. She went back to the brothel and left you to rot.”

“She couldn’t keep me. They would have taken me away anyways.”

“She could have fought for you. My mother could have fought for me. She let herself die,” his hand is a white claw round the ring, “she let herself die and she let me go. They both let us go. I was worth something. More than Wool’s, more than any of it. So were you. It’s not right. So let’s make it right, the two of us.”

“I knew you were a romantic at heart,” she says, heart pounding. “But there’s no need to rush into anything-,”

“I’ll let you,” he takes her by the elbow. “I’ll let you decide everything. When and where and who and how we do it. I’ll let you win every single fight, I swear. You can pick out the wallpaper and what street we live on and the good plates and where we go to eat dinner every time. I’ll never make you wash or scrub or sweep a single thing, I promise. I will never make you sit home and mind my children or change sheets and pack my lunch. Let me have this, and I will be a perfect saint, really, I swear it, Amy. Just let me have you and let yourself have my name. My real name. You could be happy, if you let yourself. We could be happy. Please,” he says. “Don’t make me ask you again, please.”

“You love me,” she tells him, commands him.

“I do,” he allows. She knows he will not let himself sink to the depravity of saying it aloud just yet.

“You won’t leave me.”

“Never.”

“And I won’t leave you.”

“Never,” he says fiercely, and she knows then. That is a promise as well. Never. He will never, never let her leave. It can be sweet, like this, or it can be bitter, but she will be kept either way. With or without the name, with or without the ring, with or without a respectable title like ‘wife’ or ‘Mrs’. She holds out her hand in response, and he coils the ring on the chain onto it. Amy closes her fingers over it, and imagines the metal branding its way onto her skin. “You said it first,” she reminds him.

“I love you,” he takes her chin instead of her elbow and kisses her until her knees falter. “Now you.”

JUNE 1945
“I love you,” she reminds him, as she pulls her blouse back on. Exams ended two days ago, tomorrow is graduation, and it’s something of a tradition to let the seventh years have the run of the grounds once they’re finished with their NEWTs. The curfew is still in effect, but so long as you’re not obnoxious about it, no one really cares what they do. It’s also something of a tradition for couples to sneak out into the forest to ‘celebrate’, but neither Tom nor her are that stupid, so they walked round the lake instead and found a secluded grove. It’s a truly gorgeous late June night; the crickets are chirping in the trees and the stars are out in vivid display; the air is warm, but not too damp or too dry.

“I know,” he remarks lazily, already dressed- it’s always been like that with him, he never likes to lay there too vulnerable for long, even with her. He’s missed one of the buttons on his shirt, though, and now it’s crooked. She debates pointing it out, but instead passes over the thermos. He would have been quite content to wait to celebrate anything until after the ceremony tomorrow, after the last boat ride and the last train ride and the last time walking through the barrier at King’s Cross. But she lured him out here with the promise of sex and alcohol that wasn’t cheap fire whiskey, and she’s already kept one half of that.

“What’s the vintage?” he asks after a moment, swallowing.

“You’re the expert,” she tugs her hair, now longer than her shoulders once more, out of her collar, and smooths down the creases in her new trousers. That was one of her few graduation gifts to herself. No more bloody uniform skirts. No more skirts at all. She’s going to dress exactly how she pleases from now on, whether it’s under a healer’s robes or not. Tom was vocally disappointed at the sight them, but less so upon noticing that she’d worn the earrings. The pale glint of the chain round her neck is just barely visible through her blouse. The ring hangs heavy against her chest. Sometimes she imagines it feels like it’s burning with hatred for her.

“Not nearly old enough,” he laughs then, unbidden, and Amy turns to regard him as he hands the thermos back to her. “Who gave you this? Mishra? You could use this for cooking vinegar.”

Amy presses it thoughtfully to her lips, then admits, “I brewed it myself. Funny the sort of things you pick up in between fetching teas and cloaks for healers.”

He stares at her, chuckles again, and then reaches for the thermos. But before his fingers can so much as brush it he’s wavered, and then slumped forward, gasping in shock as his muscles go slack, uselessly trying to so much as lift his head. Amy catches him; she’s strong enough to hold him up herself, if only for a little while, before she adjusts to be more comfortable. His head lolls heavy against her chest, and his fingers scrabble for purchase along her chest and stomach and hips. “What’re you- I can’t- Amy,” he slurs furiously, and just to be safe, she slips his wand out of his pocket and tosses it a good six feet away, into the dewy grass.

“You’ll be alright,” she assures him. “I promise. I diluted it a good deal. It’s just a paralytic, Tom. The sort of thing they use on patients in the hospital. If you feel yourself going numb, that’s normal. You’ll wake up perfectly fine in oh, I don’t know, six or seven hours, I’d imagine? Don’t worry. You’ll remember most of this.”

His body may not be cooperating, but he’s determined- she’ll give him that- he makes a valiant effort to raise a hand to yank at the chain round her neck- whether to break it loose, or pull it taut and strangle her, she’s not sure. Amy huffs, and easily pushes him down, so his head is resting across her lap instead. She imagines they must look like one of those old paintings of Christ and the Madonna or something like that. Perhaps she should be weeping more openly, and cradling and kissing him.

“I had to,” she says, “I had to, you know. I don’t stand a icicle’s chance in hell of beating you in a
duel, with wands or without, and I haven’t got your knack for the Unforgivables, Tom. But you did teach me some things. How to guard my mind, and how to lie convincingly. And I was always the better brewer, you have to admit. Does anyone know you’re out here with me?”

He blinks, hard, purpling in rage and effort.

“I didn’t think so,” she admits. “I could snap your wand in half, chuck it in the lake, and chuck you in after it, and no one would be any the wiser, yeah? But I won’t. I do love you. I really do. I’m terribly sorry it had to be like this, but you didn’t leave me with much choice.”

She touches the ring under her blouse self-consciously. “I could have gone without all this fuss, but you needed it to hear it from me first. We don’t have much time with you still conscious, so I’ll make it quick. I’m afraid I can’t marry you. It’s completely out of the question. I’m sorry to have led you on like this, but think of it this way- you’re hardly going to miss out on anything, it’s not like we were ever saving ourselves for marriage,” she blushes, and then adds in a much colder voice, “and I really did need you to give me the ring. Of your own free will. I know you probably put all sorts of nasty little spells on it to prevent theft, but I didn’t steal it. You gave it freely, and now it’s mine.”

It is easier to not look at him and to watch the blackness of the lake instead, so dark and bright under the moon. “I can’t stay, either. Or, I won’t. Part of you had to know that, right? And it’s not because you’re a liar, and a thief, and a murderer. It’s not because you hurt my friends or you killed the Riddles. I’m selfish, Tom. I really, really am. Maybe even more selfish than you. You were willing to make concessions for me. To take risks for me. But I can’t. I won’t. I love you, but I haven’t respected you in a very long time. I’m afraid of what I might have to watch you do. And I won’t stay with someone who makes me afraid, no matter how many pretty things he gives me or what sort of promises he makes.”

Absently, she smooths back his hair from his mottled forehead. “I’m practical. I don’t want any trouble. I want this to be easy for both of us. So you have to let me go, or I’m going to take this ring you gave me and go to Atticus Greengrass with it, and we’ll see what the Ministry has to say about the fact that you’ve got a convicted killer’s ring or the fact that you took off work on the day of the Riddle murders or the fact that you’ve told me quite a lot of incriminating things, and really, what reason have I got to lie to them about a former prefect and Head Boy who graduated with full honors and top marks?”

“You have to let me,” she repeats herself. “I know it’s going to be difficult, but you really do. You can’t hurt my friends or follow me or try to force me to stay. I won’t let you. And eventually, maybe you’ll see this was for the best, Tom. I don’t want to ruin you. But I won’t let you ruin me. It’s my life. Mine. Not yours. Not anyone else’s. I’m not going to live it on your terms. I’m not going to stay and watch you lie and cheat and kill until you’ve got a fancy enough seat. I can’t be there to make you feel better about yourself.”

Carefully, she extricates herself from under him, then kisses him on both cheeks, ignoring she can taste tears- of rage or frustration or something else- on his flesh. She removes the earrings and tucks them into his pocket, picks up the thermos, and steps over him. “I love you,” she says, and now she is crying as well, and she is not ashamed for him to see her tears now. “I’m so very sorry it had to be this way, believe me, I am.” His eyes are half-lidded now. She wonders if he can still hear her at all.

It is one of the hardest things she’s ever done, to turn her back on him, to walk away and leave him lying under the velvet sky and the constellations they used to pick out together. It is hard as running back to Wool’s that night was, with the planes overhead, it is hard as watching Peter
Morgan weep in that dark barn, it is as hard as letting go of her mother’s hand was when she was five and didn’t yet quite understand that she was never coming back for her. But she does it all the same, and by dawn she is milling anxiously about with the several other idiots brave or stubborn enough to sign up for the European Magical Relief Services, waiting for the portkey that will take them to Dover and then across the Channel into France to activate.

Patsy and her boyfriend mean to be mediwizards; Amy stands beside them as if everything is fine and dandy, feeling the ring’s metallic coldness against her pounding heart, and when Teddy asks her if she’s disappointed to miss out on the graduation ceremony, she just smiles and shakes her head. They should be calling Tom’s name, just about now, the last time he may ever hear himself addressed as Riddle, if he has his way. She imagines her empty seat among the rows and rows of folding chairs, the silence after they call her name, the fact that Vera and Ruby will share a boat back across the lake with Marge, not her. It is still not as painful as turning her back last night was. The portkey begins to tremble; they all crowd around, placing a hand on the old bicycle, and Hogsmeade disappears in a blur of green and brown and blue sky around her.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was like pulling teeth, I never want to write a chapter just shy of 10,000 words again, and I probably never will. I could have split in half but I was determined to see seventh year presented as one long stretch, and I think it works better pacing-wise all together like this. If you manage to slog through all of it, I commend you.

In some ways this was very frustrating to write, and in others way it was a bit of a relief. There's still an epilogue to get through and so the story isn't technically over yet, but I’ve debated for a long time whether or not there is any way to properly resolve a relationship like this with people like Tom and Amy that doesn't end with someone dead.

In the end this ended up being something of an ode to both Amy's pragmatism and her strength of character. Her refusal to let her life be defined by someone else, even if they are someone she will always deeply care for, was the crux of this chapter. It doesn't work if she's not tempted- and she definitely is- by the scenario Tom presents. The sad irony is that by the time Tom reaches a point in which he's willing to put a relationship between the two of them before his own ambitions, however mildly, it's far too late. Amy is unable to 'overlook' or 'ignore' what he's done and what he's likely to do in the future, and refuses to remain complicit in a life that she's not even sure would be worth anything, if it was handed to her on a platter. She essentially writes herself out of the narrative, which in some sense might be very disappointing to read, but in other ways, I hope it might be at least a little uplifting that she is able to wrench back her own agency before it's too late.

The more historical aspects such as the ending of both wars took a back seat to the personal drama, which I think was fairly inevitable, since this has been my first attempt at combining both a semi-original plot with was is essentially historical fiction. I'm hoping to tie up some of the very loose ends in the epilogue. I don't really know what the reaction to this very long, very dramatic chapter will be but I hope people found at least some part of it gripping or moving. Thank you for all your support and feedback once again!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so much for your feedback and comments and general support for this fic, it means more than I can say, especially for a fic that started on a whim and had a *very* erratic update schedule.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1957

Mae loves the beach best like this, after sundown, when the lifeguards have gone off duty and most of the tourists have packed up to go drink and gamble and shop. The sun is hanging low and hazy orange over the blue-grey sea and the sand is starting to cool off. She’s dug herself a nice little channel to lie in, her shorts bundled up to her hips, letting the tide surge up her legs and then back down again. She could almost fall asleep like this, despite the sand in her hair and the sunburn on her face and arms, at least until a sandaled foot prods at her.

“You promised,” a voice says accusingly.

Eyes still closed, she murmurs in assent, then wrinkles her nose as something drips down onto her pedal pushers. She lost the belt for them a few days ago, and Mum’s going to be furious. She’s really completely neurotic about that kind of thing, being careless with clothes. You’d think they were about to be inspected at any moment, the way she goes on and on when Mae gets a stain on a blouse or loses a sock. To be fair, she does lose an awful lot of socks, mostly because they get sand in them and then she takes them off, leaves them somewhere, and forgets. She doesn’t see the big deal. They’re not exactly charging you through the roof for a pair of bobby socks.

But for all that she can be sloppy with her clothes, that doesn’t mean she wants to be… dripped on. Her eyes snap open in an immediate glare, and she hooks a hand round the offending ankle of the bothersome foot, yanks hard, and sends Isaac sprawling onto the sand with a muffled shout. He was wringing his wet shirt out on her, the little brat. Isaac is her cousin in all but blood; his mum and hers are old schoolmates. He’s only seven, but he’s usually less of an annoyance than his little brother Joel, at any rate. Joel is five and unbelievably shrill. Mae can hardly believe he’s the product of two such mild-mannered people as Auntie V and Uncle Danny. Auntie V is an arithmancer, for Merlin’s sake, and Uncle Danny works for a bank.

That’s why they’re here in the spring, at any rate. Uncle Danny has business in Gibraltar and thought he might as well bring along the wife and kiddies. Mae’s barely seen any of him, since he’s busy doing boring muggle work things, and Auntie V spends nearly all her time cooped up gossiping about their old school days with Mum, or helping her and the O’Neills in the clinic, but Mae has seen quite enough of Isaac and Joel. Thankfully they’re leaving in a few days, although she supposes she ought to at least pretend to be upset over it, to not hurt Mum’s feelings.

Maybe it’d be easier if any of them were Mae’s age. Eleven is really too old to be running around like a little kid, but too young to do anything exciting or interesting, either. And she’s sick of being treated like such a baby. Mum’s always on her about where she’s been and where she’s going- Mae leaves a note every time! They live on a bloody rock on the tip of a peninsula. It’s not as if there’s all that far to go. God, anywhere would be better than here.
Mae loves the ocean and the caves and the Moorish Castle, loves to visit the Upper Rock reserve and see the macaques, loves to go out and pick candytuft and rosemary and jasmine and periwinkle and narcissus and asphodel with Mum for her potions and salves, loves to walk the cliffs and stare out into the horizon or watch the planes come in. She likes to feed the feral cats and watch their kittens come out to explore the alleys and back streets, she likes to go out on Teddy’s boat and look for dolphins and whales, she likes to bird watch from the top of the Rookery and watch the petrels and cormorants and herons and egrets and even a few flamingos come in to deliver the mail, rain or shine.

But still. The obnoxious tourists and the traffic and the noise and the drunks and how jampacked everything is and the fact that she’s never even left the peninsula all seems to balance out the good bits. She’s got barely any friends her own age at all because the magical population is so minuscule- a thousand, if that, and most of them are expats waiting around in the sun to drop dead of something- she’s never even been to a proper school, she’s always stuck cleaning something or running errands for Mum while she’s working, and oh, that’s right, now she’s expected to entertain the brats while everyone else socializes.

She snatches Isaac’s sodden shirt away from him and whips him hard cross the back with it in a proper rat-tail; he screeches in pain and flings sand at her, but then gamely follows her away from the water all the same, shouting for his brother. Joel comes running up, dragging a long stick of driftwood behind him, although Mae shoots him a dirty look as they near the dunes, and he drops it guiltily. “Quiet,” she snaps. “Alright? You’ve got to be quiet. She hates the noise and she doesn’t like strangers.”

“How d’you know it’s a she? Maybe it’s a boy,” Isaac says sullenly as they stagger up through the sand and patches of tall grass.

“She told me, numskull.” Mae places her hands on her hips, lifts her chin imperiously, and says, “Stay. Here.”

The brothers come to an uncomfortable halt as she looks around the barren dunes, then sits down cross-legged, drumming her fingers into the sand. “Fernanda,” she calls, “come out, lovely girl. Fernanda, I’ve got a treat for you.” She rummages in her pocket, then comes out with the dead shrew, which is really nearly mummified as this rate. Hopefully Fernanda won’t mind. “I killed him this morning, and he’s a plump one. Come on out, darling girl.”

Isaac and Joel are staring at her. Mae furrows her brow at them. “What?”

“What’re you saying?” Isaac demands. “It just sounds like-.”

Joel imitates some strangled hissing noises, bug-eyed. Mae waves the dead shrew at them threateningly, then starts as something warm slithers across her. Fernanda is young, only a foot long, and she flicks the yellow tip of her tail at Mae’s ankle impatiently. Mae beams, strokes the back of her triangular head, and feeds her the shrew in her hand. Fernanda never speaks until she’s eaten; when she’s done and the shrew is moving down the length of her in a new bulge, she flicks her tail at Isaac and Joel and questions, “Who are they, Warmblood?” No one ever said vipers were polite, after all, although some are. Fernanda’s just especially blunt for a snake.

“My friends,” Mae tells her. “My mother and theirs once shared a nest.”

“They’re pinker than you,” Fernanda observes critically. “Are they from the North?”

“From England. Everyone’s pinker there.”
Fernanda shudders slightly. “That is no place for a snake. The sun is too far.” She slithers up Mae’s arm, resting her head on her shoulder. “The hatchlings may approach.”

“You can come touch her, if you want- gently,” Mae warns, and after some hesitation, Isaac and Joel both come over to stroke the viper’s gleaming grey scales. “Isn’t she pretty?”

“I thought she’d be slimy,” Isaac frowns. Lucky Fernanda can’t understand him.

“Snakes aren’t wet, stupid,” Mae rolls her eyes. “They’re not like a frog. And they’re not scary, either. Not if you know how to treat them nice.” Once she caught a few older boys trying to kill a grass snake. She got so angry that her magic made one of them break out in swollen hives, and the others thought he’d stepped on a hornet’s nest and ran off screaming. Mum was upset because she’d thought she’d tried to do it on purpose, but it was an accident. If Mae was going to do something to them on purpose for hurting a snake, it’d have been a lot worse than some silly hives.

After a few minutes Fernanda slithers off to finish digesting her supper, and Mae stands up with a sigh, brushes off her dusty clothes, and begins the long uphill walk back to the clinic with the boys. They’ve barely walked ten minutes before Joel is complaining about his feet hurting, so as much as she wants to leave him on the side of the road, he’d probably just get run over by a motorcycle. Mae lets him clamber up onto her back, then keeps walking, feeling the muscles in her tanned legs burn, frowning as one of her sandals continuously rubs up against a blister on her heel.

The clinic is one of the stone buildings dug into the seat of the Rock itself, which most of the wizards still refer to as Mons Calpe, like the Romans did. Of course, the Romans thought it was one point of the world, and Jebel Musa in Morocco the other. Two pillars on the two edges of a flat world. The way Mum acts, they might as well be right. Mae’s never been beyond either of them. It’s within sight when she remembers she has to stop by the Rookery and pick up their mail. She sets Joel down, and prods him and Isaac towards the clinic. “Go on, your mum’s probably miffed we’re late. I’ll catch up.”

Reinvigorated without a sweaty five year old on her back, she dashes up the precarious set of wooden, crumbling steps to the Rookery, slams through the door, rattling the bell, ignores the dirty look she gets from Mr. Fierro, who looks after the birds and sorts everyone’s mail, and runs her fingers along the wall full of boxes, the same you’d find in at muggle post office, searching for the B of their name. There it is, seven down, third from the right side- she scrounges in her pocket for her key, then jams it into the rusting lock and pries it open. A few letters, probably cards for Mum. It was her birthday last week. Thirty, only Mae’s not allowed to say it, because it’s rude to comment on a lady’s age. Even when she is your mother.

She grabs the envelopes and her key, and turns to go when Fierro waves her over. “Package for your mother, missy.”

Mae rolls her eyes at being called ‘missy’ but obediently signs for it anyways, even though he’s really not supposed to accept the signature of an eleven year old. Things are a bit lax here, Mum likes to say. They’re technically under the jurisdiction of the British Ministry of Magic, but the Spaniards like to interfere as well, so no one’s ever really clear about what laws apply and to whom and who to direct their complaints to. Not that anyone’s writing government officials. There’s only two reasons a wizard would come to Gibraltar, Mae thinks. To con tourists or to hide.

The box is light, she notes, juggling it in her dirty hands along with the letters, but she supposes that’s a good thing. If she drops it she won’t break anything. Mae wouldn’t call herself clumsy (although some people might) and Mum agrees- “You’re not clumsy,” she’s told her a thousand and one times, “you’re careless, is what you are. You’ve no respect for other people’s things. Or your own, half the time!”
That’s not really true. Mae just doesn’t see the point in fussing over objects. They’re just things. Inanimate, unthinking, unfeeling. Who cares if she breaks a plate or dents a vase? They’ve got magic, they can just make new ones. It’s not as if anything they own is that expensive. Nearly all her clothes are bought second-hand or patched up by Mum, and while Mum dresses slightly better, she’s had the same wardrobe for years now, as much as she likes to ogle over fashion magazines and window shop.

Inside the clinic, it reeks of blood and magic. Isaac and Joel have recovered from the long walk and are gulping down murky lemonade on the stairs leading up to the flat that Mae and Mum share with the O’Neills, although Teddy and Patsy aren’t there half the time, too busy with their work at the orphanage in Granada. Mae is always stuck there one weekend a month, playing with a bunch of foundlings orphaned by the war or abandoned by their parents. It’s not all misery and tears; the orphanage is a pretty white-washed building up in the hills, surrounded by wildflowers, and there’s a pomegranate tree in the courtyard and they always have fresh fruit and vegetables. Mum says it’s like heaven, compared to how she grew up.

But Mae wouldn’t know, because Mum doesn’t like to talk about that.

Auntie V is on the phone with someone, the cord winding out onto the back patio, voices muffled. The connection cuts out half the time, especially whenever someone’s using spells in here, but Mum says it’s better than nothing. Mae likes to make prank calls on it. She skirts behind the counter, the linoleum floor crinkling under her sandals, and sets down the mail, then peeks into the exam room, where Mum is enthusiastically mopping the stained concrete while Jaime Isola makes his case for not being able to pay off his debt on time… again.

“D’you need help?” Mae asks, only to be shooed out by the end of the dripping mop. The door slams shut in her face, but she listens at it anyways, while Jaime whines about getting ripped off by Bernie Robba and how when he got sent to collect dues from the Cavillas one of them cursed him. Jaime’s a criminal, which isn’t that surprising, since Mum has a strict ‘don’t make me ask, I won’t make you tell’ policy, only no one has to even ask guys like Jaime Isola to start spouting off at the mouth about everything shady they do to pay the bills.

Finally Jaime’s prattling cuts off, and she can barely make out Mum murmuring in a low voice, then some rustling, and finally the doorknob turns and Mae hurries out of the way as Jaime limps out, pulling on his blood-soaked shirt. “You won’t regret it, cariño,” he says smoothly, although it’s somewhat dampened by the fact that he’s got a burgeoning black eye and his nose was clearly just reset by Mum, still slightly crooked.

“I’d better not,” Mum says sharply, wringing out the mop with gloved dragonhide hands. She always mops, because she says cleaning spells don’t get rid of the smells properly. She looks to Mae. “You get the mail?”

“It’s on the counter, and I’m starving,” Mae retorts. “Did you at least put the kettle on? Is Auntie cooking tonight?”

“How many times have I told you not to leave our mail out in the open like that? Anyone could walk in here and take it,” Mum exclaims, even as she carries the bucket of filthy water over to the door, flings it out past the stoop, and then yanks down the CLOSED FOR ANYTHING BUT LIFE THREATENING EMERGENCIES, TRESPASSERS WILL BE HEXED sign. She then locks the door, all three times, even the bolt.

Mae sighs dramatically, scoops up the mail again, and makes her way upstairs, pulling a face at Isaac and Joel, who are slurping their drinks. Auntie V is hanging up the phone, clapping her hands together. “Danny’s laid up with work, so we won’t wait around for him any longer. Shall we have
“Better than beans on toast!” Mae shouts down the stairwell, and giggles when Mum yells back about how that’s only once a month, you liar.

She shoulders open the door to the office, and puts the mail down on the cluttered desk. And that truly, really, might have been the end of it, only as she turns to go she catches a glimpse of something—her name? Mae pauses, studies the desk before her more carefully, and then spots it, peeking out from under the folds of a month-old copy of the Daily Prophet. Mum’s subscription delivery is sporadic, to say the least, not that there’s ever anything interesting in the news. Mae likes the gossip columns and reading the birth and wedding announcements, although most of them are old pureblood families with ridiculous names, giving birth to children with even more ridiculous names.

But the newspaper isn’t her concern at the moment; Mae yanks it out from under the lamp it was sitting under, ruffling over the cover page emblazoned with GAUNT AND OPPOSITION LAUNCH BID FOR MINISTER, TUFT SEEKS REELECTION WITH MAJORITY PARTY. The envelope bearing her name on it green ink neatly slides out into her waiting palm. She tosses down the paper and hungrily studies the writing. Miss M. Benson, Sabath Healing Clinic, Old Moorish Way, Westside, Gibraltar.

No one’s ever addressed her as ‘Miss’ before. No one’s ever written her a letter before. Birthday cards from friends of Mum don’t count. In February, a few months ago, when she turned eleven, she got a card from Mrs. Weiss, who Mum calls Bianka but whom Mae is not allowed to, and her name was misspelled as ‘May’. M-a-e. How hard can it be to remember? She goes to tear open the envelope, but the wax seal is already cracked in half, the contents missing. Mae stiffens in surprise as she thumbs the seal, tracing the red crest.

Then she slams her stolen mail back down on the table, collects herself by digging her nails into the soft, aging wood of the desk, puts on a smile, and walks back out for supper.

The stuffed peppers are really good, she has to admit. Auntie V’s loads better at cooking than Mum, and Isaac and Joel are too busy stuffing their faces to talk about meeting Fernanda. Mae swore them to secrecy, but she doesn’t trust them not to blab. Mum would be really upset; not that Mae was talking to snakes again, but that she showed someone else it. She says being a parselmouth is really rare, even for wizards, and that people used to think it meant your powers came directly from the Devil, so she must never tell anyone about it. Mae doesn’t see what the big deal is. Plenty of witches and wizards have all sorts of familiars—cats, owls, toads, frogs, bats, rats, rabbits, even wolves or lions or tigers, in some parts of the world. What’s wrong with snakes? If she could talk to the macaques no one would care.

Mum and Auntie V have a glass of red wine each and talk about their work and how nice the weather here has been this week and how they’ll have to come visit again, maybe in the summer. “You’re getting so big,” Auntie V tells her, not for the first or last time. “Really, Mae. Growing like a weed, you are. You’ll be a teenager before we know it, won’t you?”

Mae shrugs sullenly, as is expected of her, and gulps down some more of her milk, the peppers pleasantly burning the inside of her mouth.

Then Mum remembers something Auntie Ruby told her in her last letter from the States, where she’s working now, with her new beau, in New York. Mae would love to go to New York. Or London. Or even Madrid. Or Paris. Anywhere, really. She keeps an old map that used to belong to Mr. Sabath on her low bedroom ceiling, sticks colorful pins in all the places she wants to visit. The places she will visit, when she’s of age and Mum can’t keep her cooped up here a minute longer.
It’s only six more years. She feels a sharper stab of anger than usual, watching Mum laugh with her friend, having stolen Mae’s mail and lied about by omission. What right has she? Eleven’s well on the way to being grown up. She got a letter. From Hogwarts! And Mum kept it for herself instead.

But then she traces the familiar lines of Mum’s face; her sun-bleached light brown hair, gathered back in a messy knot at the nape of her sun-leathered neck, the freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks, the round curve of her chin, her smiling lips, and she softens all the same. Mae loves her mother, she does, even when she wants to hate her. And she’s never doubted for an instant that Mum loves her. They do everything together. Sometimes they’re almost friends, in a way. Tomorrow is a Sunday and she will sit behind Mum on her bike as they race down the hills to the book store, and Mum will haggle over prices while Mae sits in the dusty back room and reads to her heart’s content, devouring as much knowledge as possible, and then they will go get ice cream and walk around and mock wealthy tourists or play hopscotch or kick around a football on the beach.

But she can’t stand to forgive her right now, so she finishes her supper instead, takes a cold shower, and goes up to her attic bedroom to read while they put the boys to bed. Right now she’s halfway through Alice in Wonderland for the third time. Mae loves it, loves the language, the absurdity, and above all, desperately wants to believe that she too could follow a white rabbit down a deep, dark hole and see and do all sorts of marvelous and strange things. She’s a witch, she is, just like Mum, and once she’s got her wand- well, it will be straight through the looking glass for her. She even has an Alice headband, red with white polka dots, which compliments her dark hair and blue eyes quite well.

She’s just at the part where Alice is shrinking when her door creaks open, and Mum slips in, having changed into her own pyjamas, the bundle of mail in hand. “Thought we could open it up together. Did you comb out your hair?”

“What’s there to comb?” Mae wrinkles her nose; Mum wears her hair unfashionably long, for all that she likes to keep up with trends, but Mae’s has always been short, which is good, because it’s wavy and thick, and a real pain to deal with once it gets down to her shoulders. She runs her fingers through it jerkily, ignoring Mum’s sigh of exasperation as she sits down on the end of the bed. “Very nice, darling.”

“Very nice, darling,” Mae imitates her almost perfectly, then suppresses a smirk when Mum smacks her with one of the envelopes. Then she remembers that she’s supposed to be angry, and stops, brooding, as Mum hands her the first letter. Mae pries it open with a fingernail, rips out the card too carelessly, and flips it open. “Hi hello dearest Amybelle-,”

“Don’t be cheeky!” Mum pokes her in the rib.

“Ow,” Mae snaps, “fine. Dearest, darling, most lovely Amy-,”

“I very much doubt the Abbotts wrote that,” Mum says dryly.

Mae sighs, then reads the note properly. It’s the usual well-wishes and whatnot, from Mr. and Mrs. Abbott, whom she has never met, but who Mum knows from school, like her aunts. Mr. Abbott is an auror, and his wife is an herbologist. They just had a baby last year, with a dollop of red fuzz atop its head. They’ve signed the card as Sincerely, Matthew and Evie. She’ll probably never meet them, just like how she’ll never go anywhere, or do anything.

She reads two more cards, and then Mum hands her the box, but Mae doesn’t open it. She can’t
stand to wait any longer. “There’s never any mail for me,” she complains pointedly, watching her mother carefully. She barely blinks. Damn! “I mean, don’t you think- I am eleven now, oughtn’t I to have-,”

“You know Ulls-de-Banya doesn’t take witches until their twelfth birthday,” Mum says patiently, since they’ve had this exact conservation half a hundred times in the past two years. “Next year, love, I promise. I visited there once, it’s really quite nice, up in the mountains… We’ll have to work on your Catalan, of course.”

“I don’t want to go there,” Mae blurts out angrily, “I don’t want to wait, I want to go where I’ve actually been invited!”

Mum pauses, and Mae shifts in bed indignantly. “Have you gone through my things, Mae?”

“You took my letter!”

“Mae-,”

“You had no right,” Mae says venomously, “no right to not tell me. They always send it before your birthday, and I could go- we’re in a British territory, they’d let me go, but you- you stole it! It was mine!”

Mum jerks back then as if stung, as if her words had reached out and slapped her, then recovers herself. “Listen. I know you’re upset, but I was going to tell you. We’ve just been so busy these past few months, and then with the visit-,”

“Liar,” Mae mutters. “You were never going to tell me, were you? You never tell me anything!”

Mum exhales slowly, massaging her forehead. “I’m sorry, Mae. But I swear I was going to tell you, I just- this isn’t easy for me either. To… to accept that you’re growing up, and so fast. I thought we’d have more time. You’re right,” she reaches out and takes Mae’s hand in her own warm one. “I should have let you see it as soon as it came. I was just- I was just afraid, of… “

“Of what? Me leaving you?” Mae rolls her eyes. “Mum, it’s just school! Everyone goes! What does it matter if I go to Spain or Scotland? I’d still be leaving you.”

“I would rather you stayed close by, is all.” Mum says slowly. “And… this is your home. Our home. I know you’d like to… to go abroad, but I really think you’ll like school in Spain. It’ll be good for you.”

“Why wouldn’t Hogwarts be good for me?” Mae demands sharply. “What? Will they turn me into a toad because I can speak to snakes?”

“Of course not!” Mum lets go of her hand. “It’s- there’s a lot of memories there. For me.”

“Well, you’re not the one going, are you!”

Something about the look in Mum’s eyes frightens her, and what frightens her more is the way she takes both her hands, this time. “That- it wasn’t just an acceptance letter, for you. I’ve had a job offer. Over there.”

“Back in Britain?”

“At Hogwarts,” Mum smiles, but it’s not a happy smile, somehow. “They’ve… one of their professors has taken a leave of absence, and I was asked if I might fill in for them, just for this next
school year. Potions, you know.”

“You’re a healer, not a potioneer.”

“Mae, I work with potions, it’s my job, and I can certainly manage the school curriculum,” Mum says tightly. “But I- obviously I haven’t-,”

“But then it’s perfect!” Mae brightens, shoves back the covers, scrambles up onto her knees, gripping Mum by the shoulders, “Isn’t it? I can go to Hogwarts, and you can teach there! In the fall! You won’t have to worry about me at all, and- that’s it, right? Have you said yes yet? How much would they pay you? Where’ll you stay?” The last of Mum’s birthdays gifts has fallen onto the floor, unnoticed.

“I haven’t replied yet,” Mum gently loosens Mae’s white-knuckled grip. “Settle down. They’re not looking for an answer until the end of next month. And I… even if I were to take the position- temporarily, of course- I don’t know that it… that it would be good for you,” she settles on, too carefully, minding her words and tone too much.

Mae narrows her eyes. “Why not?”

“Because- you don’t know how things go over there, the community’s much larger, they’re- they’ve got a terrible preoccupation with blood status, I don’t want you exposed to that, the house system is barbaric and divisive-,”

“Ulls-de-Banya has houses too!”

“Not based off character traits,” Mum says sharply, continuing to tick off on her fingers, “the castle is old and drafty, they haven’t updated anything since the Victorian era, the coursework is rigid, the weather’s shit, and-”

“And what?” Mae presses.

“Nothing,” says Mum. “That’s it. The weather’s shit, and I know how much you love the sun.” She holds up Mae’s sunburned arm limply, then smiles, this time almost sadly.

“I’m not a plant, I could survive some bad weather and rainy days,” Mae mutters. “But if you’ve already made up your mind-,”

“Of course I haven’t. We’ll… we’ll talk about it some more. Later.” She tugs the covers back up around Mae. “Do you want to read me some of your book?”

“No,” says Mae, “I’m still awfully irked, so I’d like a story as payment, please.”

Mum sighs, but she seems a little better than before, some of the tension leaving her face and shoulders. “Alright. What about?”

“About the beginning.” Mae has heard this many times before, but right now she just wants it again, for comfort, or a reminder of some sort.

“Fine. In the beginning… there was a girl named Amy who wanted to see the world.”

“So she signed up for the Relief Services with her friends.”

“Yes. With her friends Teddy and Patsy, she signed up to go into Europe and help the people there, who’d been hurt by Grindelwald.”
“And the Nazis.”

“They too. So she did, right after graduation, they sent her across the Channel and into France-,”

“And then she met a boy-,”

“Don’t interrupt, love. She went to France and they helped heal people and rebuild their homes and protect their villages, and they traveled around all over, and sometimes it could be dangerous, and sometimes it was fun, but mostly it was very hard. Because so many horrible things had happened, and so many people were dead, or missing, or… or had lost the ones they loved. So she was very sad.”

“And one day-,”

“Mae!”

Mae closes her eyes, smirking. Mum ruffles her hair. “And one day, she met a soldier-,”

“A muggle soldier.”

“Yes, and he’d been a prisoner and gotten hurt, but now he was free and happy, because he was going home soon. So even though she was a witch, and he an ordinary man, they became very good friends.”

“And…”

“And they fell in love, and when people fall in love, they do stupid things like sleep together, and sometimes that means a baby.”

“So there was a baby.”

“Right. But he had to go home, and she had to stay and work. But she promised to come find him when she was too fat and too tired from the baby to work any longer.” Mum pauses for a long while. “But he got sick. And when she found out, she went to see him, but he was too sick for any visitors. And… and then he passed away. So she was really sad, and didn’t know what to do. Until an old healer named Sabath offered to let her stay with him, to have the baby. So she did.”

“And she named her Mae.”

“Right. Because all the prettiest things blossom in May. And they lived in Gibraltar and helped Mr. Sabath with his work here, and then Teddy and Patsy got married and came to stay as well, and when Mr. Sabath died…”

“He left it for all of us,” Mae finishes the story with a bleary smear to her voice, rubbing at her eyes. “And they stayed there forever and a day, and Mae went completely nutso because her mum wouldn’t let her do anything or go anywhere or have any kind of life at all, and locked her up in the attic-,”

“Haha, hilarious.” Mum kisses her on the cheek. “I love you, Mae-flower. You know that, right?”

“Yep. Love you too.” Mae smiles in spite of her lingering irritation. “Can I have my letter now?”

“In the morning. Here, we forgot one.” Mum picks up the box, smiling in bemusement. “Must be a scarf or something. From your aunt Ruby, maybe?”

Mae undoes the ribbon across it, then lifts the top off, pushing back the paper. Then she laughs.
“Some joke! These are just someone’s old gloves, Mum- Mum?”

Something ripples across her face, like a pebble tossed into a pool, and then it’s gone. “Silly,” she agrees, picking up the gloves lightly. “Haven’t see these in years. Thought I’d lost them for good.”

“Is there a note?” Mae moves to rustle through the packaging, but Mum’s already taken it off the bed and put the gloves back in the box.

“No, I don’t think so,” she says distantly. “It’s late, huh?” Outside the sea and sky are matching midnight blue. She flicks off the lamp, so the only light is the dull glow of Mae’s charmed night-light in the corner, a spinning carousel that goes round and round, casting dancing shadows on the wall. “Get some sleep, darling. See you in the morning.”

“Night,” Mae replies, still a bit confused, but Mom doesn’t look upset, really, just… She doesn’t know how to describe it. It’s sort of like the look she had when she first found Mae playing with an adder on the back porch, when she was five. Weary acceptance. Like she’s not surprised, but not very glad, either. Mae doesn’t like it when she looks like that. Especially not at her. But she really is very tired, and she’s excited at the thought of getting to read the letter for herself in the morning. So she nestles under her old baby quilt and goes to sleep.

In the hall outside, Amy Benson shuts the door to her daughter’s bedroom very carefully, then reactivates the usual security wards. Even if someone broke into the clinic, and got up into the flat, they would not be able to enter that room, she reminds herself. It’s alright. They’re alright. She turns the gloves over in her hands, then goes into her office, releases the charm on the wardrobe in the corner, and puts the gloves in the bottom, beside the jewelry box. It seems to twitch slightly, but that could just be her imagination and the dark. Her chest burns, although she has not worn a ring round her neck in many, many years. She closes the wardrobe and leans back against it, resting her hot scalp on the cool mahogany. Only then, after a few moments, does she let herself glance down at the scrap of paper in her palm.

Thought I’d return something of yours. Remember, fair’s fair.

She studies it in the dark for a minute more, and then curdles it to ashes on the tip of her wand.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes:

1."What the fuck was that? You said 'tie up loose ends' not 'unravel a new ball of yarn!'" I'm sorry! I'm sorry, this took about three drafts to write. Initially it was from Amy's perspective, and Mae did not come in until the very end. That wasn't working out too well, one thing led to another, and here we are. Mae came about somewhat spur of the moment, and then took charge, much like her mother, of the narrative, and refused to let me go until I'd let her say her piece.

2. "Where are they, again? I'm confused." Gibraltar or the Rock of Gibraltar sits on the very tip of the Iberian Peninsula, across the strait from Morocco. It has been and continues to be a British Overseas Territory. I knew from the moment I decided on an ending point for this fic that the setting was not going to be in the UK but somewhere else entirely. Ulls-de-Banya is my attempt at a reference to Catalan mythology surrounding witches having horns in their eyes and also an attempt at a Spanish school
of magic. Because I didn't want to default to Beauxbatons.

3. "Who is Auntie V?" Vera, just in case anyone didn't get that. Auntie Ruby is Ruby, obviously. I wanted to make it clear that Amy is not isolated or living entirely in fear, and that she still has a strong social circle and friends. "So the Abbotts are-" Matthew and his wife, yes.

4. "Has she just been lying to her kid for years?" I think it's safe to say so, yes.

5. "Does Tom know? Is he keeping tabs on them?" What do you think?

6. "Is this it? You're leaving us with a massive cliffhanger?" In my (meager) defense, the only way to *not* end this fic in a cliffhanger would have been for this chapter to involve someone's death, and fairly early on I decided that neither Tom nor Amy were biting the dust in this fic. I was also not prepared to do a massive time jump to say, the 1980s or even the 1990s, so here we are. I also wanted an open ending, because there is a chance (I'm not guaranteeing anything, I have other projects I'd like to work on) that I will come back to this fic, maybe in a sequel, maybe in a spin-off, maybe in an 'in-between' area, and I don't want to write myself into a corner in regards to the plot. So for now, this is where I leave Amy, and Tom, and everyone else.

If you would prefer to think that Amy never sees Tom again, and she and Mae live happily in Spain, that's valid. If you would prefer to think that they all find themselves back at Hogwarts for one reason or another, that's valid. If you would prefer to ignore this epilogue because you found it infuriating and you think it ruined the entire story, that's valid. Personally, what I liked about this was that Amy is with people who love her, and who she loves freely and fully in return, and that she is raising a child who has never, ever, doubted that she is wanted and loved and that she belongs.

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