Summary

Iris Lupin started the First Wizarding War with everything. Recruited to the Auror Academy, she had her dream job, adorable twin godsons, and a wedding scheduled to the love of her life. Yes, her brother was marrying Sirius Black, and Lily was marrying James Potter, but she could live with that. She had everything. Then, Albus convinced her to join The Order and she found herself drowning under the weight of a war that seemed impossible to win. Suddenly, everything she had was just a list of things to lose.

Her entire life shattered the day she found the Dark Mark on his arm. Without him, she threw herself into the war completely, barely surviving finding her best friend’s body, losing Harry's custody hearing, and torture at the hands of Crouch Jr. When the war ended, she took a
position on the International Auror Team and ran from all of it. After winding up on the wrong side of a dark curse, her career's brought to a screeching halt. Albus is back with another request. Take the DADA post, and she can see Harry. But, going back to Hogwarts means confronting everything she'd spent a decade running from - the biggest of which currently resides in the Hogwarts dungeons.

Notes

The majority of the story isn't really Explicit. I'll provide warnings at the beginning of Chapters that may have content people wish to skip. I can be a slow updater, and am in the process of moving. I will have the summer off before attending law school, so if there's interest in the story, I can (hopefully) have more frequent updates then.

Additional character tags will be added as they crop up in the story. FYI, for anyone reading for the Wolfstar pairing, the primary pairing is Snape/OC. Remus plays a pretty significant role in the story, as he's my OC's twin brother. Wolfstar will eventually become a heavy secondary pairing, when we reach POA, but Sirius is currently still in Azkaban. We will see him in flashbacks to the Marauder Era. The James/Lily pairing is sadly only in flashbacks and references, as their cannon deaths stand.

This story is largely centered around the HP adults. The kids still play a significant role, but the adults are actively trying to keep the kids out of trouble which changes/alters cannon events. I do have an unrelated story I started working on, but put to the side for this, that centers around the HP kids. Hopefully, I'll post it at some point.

I'll add pairings between the HP kids, as they get older. I don't have any currently picked out, so I'm open to suggestions. I will say upfront, I'm not a huge Ron/Hermione or Harry/Ginny fan, and probably wouldn't write those pairings well.
Prologue

An Unspeakable End to an Illustrious Career

By: R. Almeidus

A six-month, inter-continental manhunt for notorious Death Eater, Augustus Rookwood, reached a dramatic end in Cairo on the 3rd of July.

Rookwood, formerly an Unspeakable with the Department of Mysteries, has been on the run since 1981. Testimony from fellow Death Eater and current Headmaster of Drungstrang Institute, Igor Karkaroff, revealed Rookwood to be working as a spy within the Ministry of Magic. Rookwood is accused of feeding classified Ministry files to You-Know-Who and his followers, as well as, participating in the torture of numerous muggles and muggle-borns. Following the accusations of his comrade, Rookwood fled from Britain, disappearing until he was spotted in India this past February.

A covert, international team of Aurors tracked Rookwood across a total of sixteen countries and three continents. The team was said to be led by world-renowned Lead Auror Iris Lupin, 31, who is credited with filling nearly as many Azkaban cells as the, now semi-retired, Senior Auror Alastor Moody.

On that fateful Wednesday earlier this month, the Auror team met Rookwood and three, currently un-named, associates in a confrontation that resulted in the deaths of Rookwood’s three associates. Asian Auror, Shin Lang, and African Auror, Asha Noah, sustained minor injuries. Lead Auror Lupin, however, was immediately evacuated to a nearby medical facility for transport to Saint Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. She is considered to be in critical, but improving, condition.

Rumors have begun circulating that the injuries sustained in a direct duel with Rookwood have brought a swift, early end to Lead Auror Lupin’s famous career. Head Auror, Rufus Scrimgeour, has declined to comment at this time.

She crumped the paper in her hands, tossing it aggressively across the room, wishing she had her wand to set it ablaze. She should never have asked Kingsley to bring her the Daily Prophet so she could catch up on what she’d missed, in her less than lucid moments, the past few weeks. At least, this article had the grace not to dredge up any previous romantic entanglements or past traumas - even if it did make her sound to be hovering in a state somewhere between an invalid and her deathbed.

She froze when she heard a knock at her door, unsure who could be visiting. Alastor maybe? Remus was at work, and Molly was alone with a house-full of children at this hour. Kingsley had only just left, having, regrettably, delivered the news that the nerve damage she sustained from her latest clash with a dark curse meant she no longer met the qualifications required for Auror field work. Scrimgeour couldn’t possibly be here with termination paperwork already, could he?

“I’m not accepting visitors,” she shouted, suddenly wishing she still had her crumpled paper to chuck at whoever was on the other side of that door.

The door opened, anyway, with a familiar voice fluttering through as it did. “Well, that is most
unfortunate.”

“Oh, Albus, I’m sorry,” she apologized, inwardly cursing herself, as the older gentleman shuffled into the room. “I didn’t realize it was you.”

“No matter,” he assured, waving her apology off. He moved closer to her hospital bed, clad in velvet purple robes, before settling himself in a chair beside her. “Sherbet lemons?” he offered, placing a box on her bedside table, next to the books Remus brought her and the handmade cards she’d received from the Weasley children.

“Thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I believe it is customary to bring something to an old friend, if they fall ill,” he smiled whimsically.

“We’re old friends?” she laughed, before quickly backtracking. Albus Dumbledore was not a person to speak curtly to. “I’m sorry. I’m in a bit of a mood today, but that’s no reason to be short with you.”

“It’s quite alright. Kingsley did warn me it might not be an ideal time to speak with you, when I met him in the lobby.” His eyes, somehow, landed directly on the remnants of her Daily Prophet, as if he knew exactly what she’d learned prior to his arrival. “However, as this is not entirely a social call, I fear it could not wait.”

“You want to discuss Rookwood?” It wasn’t unusual for the Headmaster to take an interest in criminal proceedings. He was a well-respected member of the Wizengamot, and he’d been involved in dozens of Death Eater trials over the past decade. He didn’t, however, typically seek her out while still in the hospital to review such matters.

“Something of greater importance, actually,” he corrected, though she couldn’t fathom what could possibly be more important than the impending trial of Augustus Rookwood. “There’s a vacancy at Hogwarts I’d like you to consider filling.”

“I have a job,” she snapped, more harshly than she intended. She couldn’t bring herself to apologize this time, though. He must know she’d only just learned her time as an Auror was done. Yet, here he was, swooping in like a vulture.

“I’ve seen the Healers’ reports, Iris. You do not need me to tell you that the field portion of your career has reached an early end,” Albus said, not unkindly, despite her tone. “I’m sure the Ministry will no doubt offer you a consolation position, coordinating operations from London. I can’t imagine they would want to let such experience go to waste. Or, you can come and work for me.”

“The Defense post?” she scoffed, finally realizing what job he was offering. There was only ever one vacancy, after all. “Everyone in the wizarding community knows that job is cursed. At least with the Ministry, I won’t be out of work in a year’s time.”

The words sounded bitter to her, even though she pretended to elude a confidence she didn’t feel. The idea of being chained to a desk in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, planning out operations for other Aurors to go on, sounded more like a nightmare than a desired career move. That said, she wasn’t wrong. Accepting the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts would buy her a year, at most, before having to decide where to take her life next.

“You’re a talented curse breaker, Iris,” Albus reminded with a wink. “I have no doubt, should you accept, we’ll manage to keep hold of you for years to come.”

She found herself oddly touched by his confidence, even if she disagreed. While Albus had been
hard pressed to find any in recent years, there had certainly been exceptionally qualified teachers holding the post in the past. None had survived more than a year, for a variety of reasons. She sincerely doubted she’d be any different.

“Harry will be starting Hogwarts this year,” he added, filling the silence between them.

As if she didn’t know. As if she hadn’t been keeping tabs on Harry since that Halloween night. “It’ll be pretty hard to ban me from seeing him, if he’s sitting in my classroom.”

“On the contrary. I was quite hoping you might like to accompany him to Diagon Alley for his school supplies, following your release from here.”

She sat there stunned, for a moment, hardly believing what she was hearing. She’d fought tooth-and-nail for custody of Harry, following the deaths of his parents and Sirius’ arrest. By right, she should have been the one to raise Harry in their absence. It had been what Lily and James had wanted.

She’d been arguing against the great Albus Dumbledore, however. So, naturally, she’d lost miserably. Godmother or not, she apparently couldn’t compete with blood protection - despite it coming from Lily’s horrid sister and her, even worse, husband.

As if that wasn’t enough, she’d been forbidden to see him. Albus had even gone so far as to send Alastor after her, the few times she managed to get near Privet Drive.

“We’ve been sending him acceptance letters, but have yet to hear back from him,” Albus continued. “I suspect he may not be receiving them.”

“You left him with the worst kind of muggles imaginable. Of course, they aren’t giving him his letter.”

“Would you have truly stayed in one place, after everything that happened, if I’d granted custody to you?” That was low, even for him.

“Remus would have.”

“Remus, at the time, was in a no better state of mind than you.”

She glared at him, but could offer no counterargument. The Headmaster was right. She’d spent the better part of the past decade running away from her problems, throwing herself into the most dangerous operations possible. And Remus - well, losing James, Lily, and Peter in one fell swoop had shattered him. But, it had been Sirius’ betrayal that truly broke him. It had taken her years to get even a semblance of her brother back. She could only really consider him stable for the last three.

“Harry’s to stay with me until September 1st,” she insisted, leaving little room for argument. She would not be the one to return him to the Dursleys. She may not have had any leverage ten years ago, but she certainly did now. If Albus truly wanted her at Hogwarts this fall, he was going to need to learn to give a little. “They may not consider me capable of being an Auror any longer, but I can still take down anyone who would dare lay a finger on my godson.”

The Headmaster sat quietly for a long while, leaning back in his chair in deep thought. “If you must,” he eventually agreed. “Consider it a trial period.”

“You’re not going to implore the importance of blood protection for the thousandth time?”

“As I said, it would be merely a trial.”
“You’re serious?”

“You’re serious?”

“You’re serious?”

“About both offers.”

“About both offers.”

“Even if I were interested in the post,” she started, because she couldn’t entirely deny a part of her was. She couldn’t see herself going back to the Auror Office as a desk-lackey, essentially, and teaching younger versions of herself at the Academy. It would be too painful. She could work for Remus, but it would be far from fulfilling, and she would drive him nuts.

*Then again,* returning to Hogwarts would mean confronting the very thing she’d spent over a decade running *from.* “Severus and I under the same roof, for an entire school year? Even you can’t be that foolish.” He was practically *giving* every paper in Britain their next headline.

“Forgive me,” he mused softly, sounding anything but apologetic. “I thought, given the amount of time Severus has spent here these past few weeks, that it would no longer be of concern.”

Her heart stopped. “Severus has been here?”

“Ah, I’ve said too much.” The twinkle in his eye told her he’d said *exactly* how much he’d meant to. Albus Dumbledore was not Rubeus Hagrid. He did no divulge information without express intention. “Think on it, Iris. I’ll expect your decision come Monday.”

“Wait-” she needed to know what he meant by Severus being here. It was obviously during the two weeks she’d been in and out of consciousness.

Dumbledore, apparently, had nothing more to say, and with a sweep of his robes, the Headmaster was gone.

“Oh bloody hell!” she groaned, collapsing back against her pillow with a huff.
Chapter One

Chapter Summary

Iris frees Harry from the Dursleys. They visit Diagon Alley. Iris reconnects with an old friend. Harry gets his own room. Remus meets Harry.

Chapter Notes

So, the Diagon Alley adventure went on way longer than I intended. Hopefully it doesn't feel like it drags too much for you.

He caught a glimpse of Dudley’s watch, where his arm hung off the couch. There was only five minutes till his birthday. Running his fingers through the dirt floor, he drew himself a cake. He’d just finished the eleventh candle, when Dudley’s watch flickered to midnight.

*Happy Birthday to me,* he whispered, blowing away the dirt candles. It would be the closest he’d probably ever get to a real celebration.

There was a loud bang from outside, as the storm raged. He hoped the waves weren’t strong enough to wipe the shack out completely. It didn’t feel like it was made from very strong wood.

A series of light knocking followed the bang, which almost seemed to grow louder the more it went unanswered. Uncle Vernon came bustling out of the bedroom, rifle raised, with Aunt Petunia cowering behind.

The knocking paused, room falling quiet except for the rain. Then, out of no where, the door burst off its hinges and fell to the ground with a thud. A woman, in black jeans and an unbuttoned trench coat, stumbled through the open doorway, looking waterlogged and ragged. “Sorry about that,” the woman apologized, running her fingers through her long chocolate-brown hair so it no longer clung to her face. “Bit more of a dramatic entrance than I intended, but the ruddy latch was stuck.”

The mysterious woman pulled, what looked like, a black stick out of her jacket. With a quick flick of her wrist, the door was back in its place. His jaw dropped. How had she done that? She hadn’t even *touched* the door.

“That’s better,” she nodded, assessing the door’s functionality, then turning back their way. “Bloody freezing rain out there.”

“You,” Uncle Vernon hissed, raising his rifle that much more.

The woman looked a far cry from intimidated, though. “Oh, put that blasted gun away, Dursley,” she ordered, with a roll of her eyes. “I’ve put far scarier people than *you* in Azkaban Prison blindfolded.”

If possible, Aunt Petunia hid behind Uncle Vernon that much more. He liked this woman already.
“You’re not allowed to be here.”

“Yes, well, situations change.”

“Not this one,” Uncle Vernon insisted, obviously trying to sound in control. He didn’t think his Uncle was doing that great of a job. The mystery woman simply raised an eyebrow, looking as if she might be stifling a laugh. “I won’t allow it.”

“I think you’ll find you’re not in much position to negotiate here, Dursley,” she smirked. With another flick of her stick, Uncle Vernon’s gun turned into a snake. Aunt Petunia screeched, while Uncle Vernon dropped the snake like it was on fire. He clutched his side laughing. It wasn’t any longer than the average garden snake, after all.

Curiously, the woman crouched down to the young snake. She reached out her hand, and the snake gently coiled around her wrist. She ran a finger lightly over the snake’s head, sending a wink his way.

“You look so much like your father,” the woman observed softly, sounding a bit sad. “Those eyes, though… those are Lily’s.”

“You knew my parents?” he exclaimed. He’d never met anyone who knew his Mum and Dad before. Except for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, but they would never say much beyond how foolish they were to die in a car crash.

“Your mother was one of my dearest friends,” she told him, still crouching on the floor so she was at his eye level. “My deepest regret is not having been able to save them that night.”

He frowned a bit. How could she have stopped a car accident? Then again, how had she repaired the door so quick or turned a gun into a snake?

“NO!” Uncle Vernon cried out, shattering the muted air. “I forbid you to tell him another word.”

Fire flashed across the woman’s eyes, as she stood, spinning towards his Uncle. “I’ve only just been released from the hospital, after sustaining a career-ending injury chasing a wanted criminal across sixteen countries, Dursley,” she snarled menacingly, twirling the stick in her hands. “So, I’m a bit testy at the moment. Might want to be careful when telling me what I can and cannot do.”

“What is that thing?” he asked, pointing at the stick. It didn’t look scary, but Uncle Vernon’s eyes had grown wide with fear when she’d rolled it from finger to finger.

She turned back his way with a kind smile - far different from how she looked at the Dursleys. “This here, Harry,” she said, holding out the stick for him to see. It was just under a foot long, and looked to be carved out of black wood of sorts. The wood was smooth from the tip till three quarters of the way down where the wood seemed to twist and swirl into the form of a handle. There were two rings of alternating silver and green stones at the top of the twisted handle, and another two at the bottom where the twisted wood met a round bulb. “This is my wand. I’m a witch.”

“You’re a what?”

“A witch,” she repeated, telling him in so many words that he’d heard her correctly. “Just like your Mum. And, you, my dear,” she added, kneeling down in front of him once more. “You are a very special wizard - same as your father.”

That didn’t make any sense. Surely, she’d made a mistake. “I can’t be a wizard. I’m ordinary.”
“Really?” she laughed, eyes twinkling knowingly. “Never done anything unusual? Anything you couldn’t explain?”

He thought about Dudley’s birthday at the zoo, when he’d been talking to the boa constrictor and somehow made the glass disappear to set it free. He thought about all the times Aunt Petunia had tried to cut his hair, only for it to grow back almost immediately.

“Ah, there it is,” the woman grinned, as if sensing the memories running through his head. “Which means, I have something that belongs to you.”

She reached into her pocket, and pulled out a yellowish envelope with emerald green writing addressed to him. Finally, he had hold of the mysterious letter Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had been keeping from him.

Turning it over, he briefly admired the purple wax seal, before eagerly tearing the envelope open. He quickly pulled out the thick stack of papers, reading the top one, before anyone could think to snatch it away this time.

......

Hogwarts School of
Witchcraft and Wizardry

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall
Deputy Headmistress

......

He couldn’t believe it. He really was a wizard, and he’d been accepted into wizarding school!

“Hogwarts is a very prestigious school,” she told him when he finished reading. “One of the best wizarding schools in the world. Professor Dumbledore is one of the greatest wizards of the current age, and Hogwarts is lucky enough to have him as Headmaster.”

He was really going! He was going to finally be free of the Dursleys! He couldn’t wait. But, there was one thing he couldn’t move past. “You knew;” he accused, spinning on his Aunt and Uncle, who were glaring at the mystery witch in outrage.

“Never mind them, Harry,” she intervened. “Sordid excuse for non-magic folk. They were never going to tell you the truth. That’s why I’m here now. Couldn’t let you go on thinking you weren’t special.”

“Oh! That reminds me;” she exclaimed, pulling a slightly crushed box from under her jacket.
“Happy Birthday, Harry.”

He opened the box to find a round cake with bright pink frosting and messy green lettering. “A friend of mine from Hogwarts made that for you. I will warn you, his cooking’s a bit hit or miss.”

“Is this for me?” He didn’t care how horrid the cake might taste. He’d never received anything for his birthday before.

“Of course it is,” she nodded like it should be obvious. “You’re turning eleven. That’s one of the biggest birthdays in the Wizarding World. I promise we’ll pick you out a great present in the morning. I’ve got a lot of birthdays to make up for.”

“But why?” He didn’t understand why she was being so nice. First, bringing him his letter and a cake. Now, she was promising him a present.

“I’m your godmother, Harry,” she smiled softly, and he stood there stunned. He had a godmother? He was surprised the Dursleys hadn’t tried to pawn him off on her. “For a lot of reasons, I wasn’t able to be with you the past few years. People, far more important than I, decided it would be best for you to stay with your Aunt and Uncle for a time. But, that’s not going to happen anymore, okay? Not if I can help it.”

He nodded, trying not feel too hopeful. Was it really possible he could leave and never see the Dursleys again? It seemed almost too good to be true. “What’s your name?” he finally asked, not wanting to call her ‘the mystery woman’ anymore.

“Merlin, I’m not doing this property at all, am I?” she chuckled, shaking her head. “My name’s Iris, and it is so very good to finally see you again.”

“You too.” He didn’t remember ever meeting her, but he reckoned he must have. She was his godmother, so they must have met at least once when he was a baby.

“I’ve had enough of this nonsense,” Uncle Vernon growled, coming between them angrily. “I am not paying for him to attend some freak school and learn magic tricks.”

Iris stood to full height. Even with her heels, she still had to look up to meet his Uncle’s eye. Despite the height difference, his godmother looked so threatening, she might as well have been a giant. “Harry is one of the most famous wizards in history. Everyone in our world knows his name. His parents - your sister,” Iris spat, shooting daggers at his Aunt. “Died protecting him. They would want Harry to attend Hogwarts, and I won’t allow the two of you to besmirch their memory by-“

“My parents died in a car crash,” he cut in, not following what Iris was saying.

“A car-“ she sputtered, looking taken aback. “I didn’t expect the likes of you to tell him the truth, but do you mean to tell me the best you could come up with was a BLOODY CAR CRASH?”

He watched Iris carefully step towards his Uncle, backing the trembling man against a wall. He thought he might finally understand how his, seemingly kind, godmother managed to fill all those prison cells she’d mentioned earlier. “After tonight, you won’t be seeing Harry for the rest of the summer,” she growled, punctuating every word. “And you best hope Albus Dumbledore doesn’t deem it necessary for him to return next summer, or the three of us are going to have a nice long chat.”

She glared into his Uncle’s eyes a moment longer, as if making sure she’d driven her point home. “Now, get out of my sight,” she ordered with a wave of her hand.
Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia both jumped, hurrying to the bedroom. Dudley was quick to scurry after them, leaving him and Iris alone.

“Sorry about that, Harry,” Iris smiled sadly. “I never cared much for your Aunt and Uncle to begin with, but knowing how little they respected your Mum…”

“Iris,” he started to ask cautiously. “If my parents didn’t die in a car crash, what happened to them?”

His godmother sighed heavily, looking like she held the weight of the world on her shoulders. “Come sit, Harry,” she said, moving to the couch and patting the space beside her. “Years ago, there was a dark wizard - a wizard so dark that people today still don’t speak his name.”

“Can you tell me?”

“The wizard went by the name of Lord Voldemort,” she told him, not seeming to be one who feared the name. “Now, I’ve always believed that fearing his name only gives credibility to his deeds. But, not everyone feels the same. Voldemort did terrible, unspeakable things, and, for some, his name brings back memories of that. I tell you this, so you’ll use the name at your own discretion.”

“Okay,” he nodded, though he didn’t really see what was so scary about a name.

“When your parents and I were in school, Voldemort had begun gathering followers,” she continued, voice thick. “By the time we graduated, he’d reached the height of his power, and we had little choice but to join the fight against him.”

“It was a dark time, Harry. I got plucked by the Auror Office - that’s the division of dark wizard catchers - straight out of school. The government passed emergency laws, allowing them to bypass the usual application and recruitment process.”

“Were my Mum and Dad Aurors too?”

“No,” she shook her head. “They were entirely wrapped up in the fight against Voldemort.”

“They never did get the chance to find real jobs,” she added sadly, and he slid closer. He’d never known anyone who might have cared about his parents like he did. “Anyone who dared to oppose Voldemort was marked for death, and it was impossible to know who to trust. There were double agents and spies everywhere - on both sides. Voldemort gained control over nearly everything we held dear.”

“I saw many great wizards and witches fall at his hand,” she said, running a soothing hand through his hair. “Your parents fought hard. They were two of the bravest and strongest of their age. But, no one lived, once Voldemort decided to kill them.”

“Did- did it hurt?” he asked softly, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“No,” she whispered, pulling him into a warm hug. “No, Harry. It was over instantly. They would’ve hardly felt anything at all.”

“That’s good.” He wouldn’t have wanted them to suffer.

“Your parents were heroes, Harry.” She pulled back to look him in the eye. “They loved you very much, and would be so proud of you.”

He offered her a small smile, grateful to have someone who knew and loved them. There was so much he wanted to know about them.
But, there was one question that kept gnawing at him. “Where was I, when Voldemort attacked them?”

She froze beside him, obviously having hoped he wouldn’t ask that very question. She ran a hand through her hair, gathering her thoughts, before turning back to him. “I suppose you ought to know,” she admitted. “The whole school will already know your story. It’s legend.”

“What?”

“I told you no one ever survived, once Voldemort marked them for dead.” He nodded. “Well, that was true. Until he met you.”

“Me?” he exclaimed. “Voldemort tried to kill me?”

“He did. Though, for reasons no one knows, his curse rebounded that night. Voldemort ceased to exist, and you were left with that scar.”

He traced the lightning shaped scar on his forehead, feeling the heavy weight of what it stood for. He had lived, where others had not.

“Scars like that,” she said, brushing his bangs gently with a finger. “They form when you’ve been touched by dark magic.”

“I’ve got a few myself,” she winked, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere. “Though, none of mine were earned in the defeat of the darkest wizard of all time. And they're not nearly as cool looking.”

“Harry,” she said after a moment, sounding serious again. “There isn’t a witch or wizard in the world who doesn’t know your name. You’re bound to garner a lot of attention at school. The other kids have grown up hearing your name in connection to Voldemort’s downfall. If it ever gets too much, I want you to tell me, okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed, relieved he would have someone he could turn to, if needed.

“Good. But, I don’t want you worrying about any of that now. It’s time for bed,” she grinned, rising from the couch. He tried to protest, wanting to know more, but she simply shook her head and goaded him into lying down.

“None of that. We have a big day planned tomorrow, and I’ve kept you up much too late already.”

Glancing down at the meager blanket the Dursleys had given him, she scowled. Pulling out her wand, she transformed it into a thick wool quilt. She then procured a fluffy pillow out of no where. Tucking the blanket around him, she ran her fingers through his hair and kissed the top of his head. “Happy Birthday, Harry. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He wanted to ask where she meant to sleep, but his eyes suddenly felt heavy. They fluttered shut, and he was fast asleep in seconds, content and happy for the first time in his life.

[[[ ]]]

She woke up early, needing to send a message to Dumbledore, confirming Harry would be attending school in the Fall. Not wanting to be anywhere near the Dursleys, she opted to use magic to clean herself up and change her clothes. She’d take a shower when she got back to her own flat.

She left her trench coat by Harry, so he would know she was coming back if he woke while she was out. The sun poked through the cracks around the shack’s door, indicating it was a far better day
than the one before. Grabbing her ray-bans and the snake she’d transfigured the night before, she left the shack and apparated to the mainland.

She found a nice grassy area to release the young snake, regretting she couldn’t keep him. He would have made a nice peace-offering for Severus. But, she and Harry had too much to do today to be carting a snake around as well.

“Expecto patronum,” she whispered, when she found an alley with no muggles. The silver lion ran happy circles around her, until she managed to carrel it long enough to record her message to Dumbledore. She didn’t own an owl, but she might want to look into buying one while at Diagon Alley. They provided a much more convenient form of corresponding than patronus charms. She’d want to keep in regular contact with Remus, after all, when she got to Hogwarts.

She glanced at her watch. The bakeries would be opening shortly. Making her way up the street, she ducked into the first one she saw, ordering herself a latte and Harry a pastry. She doubted his retched aunt and uncle fed him much. The boy was too thin for her liking.

Thanking the barista, she took her order and quickly found an alley to apparate back to the shack in. She slipped in quietly to find Harry sitting on the couch, fully dressed, with the quilt folded neatly beside him.

“Sorry, Harry,” she apologized. She hadn’t wanted to worry him. “I thought you’d sleep longer. Pastry?”

His eyes lit up, and he reached for it eagerly, making her glad she stopped. “Thank you!”

She joined him on the couch, enjoying her latte, and mentally plotting out their day. There wasn’t really a timetable, but she told Remus they would probably be home in time for dinner. Hopefully that would give him enough time to get Harry’s bedroom sorted. He’d seemed quite pleased to have the task.

“Ready to go?” she asked when her godson finished his breakfast.

“Definitely!”

“You can say goodbye, if you like?” she offered, gesturing to the bedroom. “I’ll wait.”

“I’d rather not.”

She smiled, having expected that. “Didn’t think so.”

Grabbing her trench coat from the end of the couch, she slipped into it but left it unbuttoned. It was far too nice out for that. She led Harry out of the shack, offering him a pair of sunglasses when his eyes squinted at the bright sunlight. They borrowed the boat she presumed Dursley rented, sailing back to the mainland.

“We’ll have to take muggle transportation,” she explained, heading in the direction of the nearest train station. “I apparated here, and side-apparition is definitely not best for your first experience with magic.”

“What’s apparition?”

She forgot he wouldn’t know that. “It’s very tricky magic. Here, I’ll show you,” she grinned, pulling him into an alleyway.
With a pop, she disapparated from in front of him and popped up behind him. He spun around to face her in amazement. "Wicked!"

"You won’t learn it for years.” She laughed when his face fell. There would be plenty of magic to keep him occupied until apparition lessons in year six. She couldn’t wait till he saw Hogwarts for the first time. “A lot can go wrong with apparition, and tons of wizards actually chose not to pursue it. I don’t know how they manage, though. It’s incredibly useful.”

When they arrived at the station, she was pleased to see there was a train leaving for London in ten minutes time. That would put them on an even better schedule for the day than expected. She quickly bought them tickets, and ushered Harry to the appropriate platform, so they wouldn’t miss it.

Once seated on the train, it occurred to her that she hadn’t told Harry about her new job. “I just realized, I haven’t mentioned that I’ll be teaching at Hogwarts this year.”

“You are?” He grinned happily.

“Yes,” she nodded, finally feeling like she’d made the right decision in accepting. Albus and Remus were right. Harry needed her. She failed as a godmother these past ten years. Admittedly, she had been given little choice. But, she vowed, from here on out, she wouldn’t let Albus or the Ministry dictate the time she was allowed to spend with him ever again.

“Like I mentioned last night, I’ve been working as an Auror since graduating Hogwarts. But, I got hit by a particularly nasty dark curse on assignment this summer.” That was the child-friendly version, anyway. “I have some nerve damage - tremors and pain, stuff like that. It couldn’t be healed by magic, and it doesn’t make for a very good Auror. So, Professor Dumbledore was kind enough to offer me a teaching post.”

If swooping in and exploiting her lack of employment could be considered kind, that was. She loved Albus. She really did. But, sometimes his approach lacked some needed tact.

“So, you’ll be with me all school year?”

“You bet.”

She hoped he wouldn’t be embarrassed, having his godmother among the staff. She would have to try not to be too overbearing. Though, she could already see herself needing to document every milestone he hit during his seven years at Hogwarts. There would be photos and journals. Severus would tease her relentlessly.

No, she amended. He wouldn’t. They weren’t those people anymore. Not to mention, after February, she’d be lucky if he so much as spoke to her all school year.

Not wanting to dwell on that thought, she quickly shifted her focus back to Harry. He needed to be her priority now. “Still got your letter? I know the basics of what you’ll need, but they update the supplies list each year.”

She watched him pull the envelope out of his pocket. He shuffled the papers a bit to find the list she mentioned. “I need three sets of plain work robes, one pointed hat, a pair of dragon-hide gloves, and one winter cloak for my uniforms.”

“They got rid of the gray blazers, I see.” That was smart. It got a bit much, in her day, having to wear a sweater, gray blazer, and her robes. “We can grab you a few pairs of grey pants and some white dress shirts, later this summer at a muggle shop. The school will provide your sweaters and ties, once you’ve been sorted into your House.”
“There’s a whole list of spellbooks!”

“Hope mine made it on there in time. Should be *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* by Quentin Trimble, for my first year students.” Remus had helped her chose the best texts for each level.

“It’s right here!” Harry exclaimed, pointing to the bottom of the list.

“Excellent.” Curious, she reached out for the list. “What other books do they have you getting?”

She skimmed the list, noting the usual Charms, History of Magic, and Transfiguration texts. Severus was going with *Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger, these days. That was a good choice.

*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is a good read,” she told Harry, handing him back his list. “Newt Scamander was a childhood hero of mine.”

“The last few things I need are… a wand.”

“That is the essential bit.”

“A telescope…”

“For Astronomy class.”

“A caldron, a set of glass phials, and brass scales.”

“Those will be for potions,” she told him, ignoring the pang in her heart from the memory of days spent in that class. Severus used to grumble at the instructions in their text, crossing bits out and *improving* upon them. She used to laugh, watching his face scrunch up adorably. But, she’d still sneak a glance at what he was writing in the margins, so her potion would come out as good as his. Stealth wasn’t her strong suit back then, though, as Severus would catch her every time. He’d just roll his eyes, and move his book in between them to use. She took ninety percent of their History of Magic notes anyway, so it was really only fair.

“It says here, students may bring an owl, a toad, or a cat as a pet.”

“I’d recommend an owl,” she suggested, thinking that might not be a bad birthday present. “They deliver letters for us in the magic world. But, take some time and think about it.”

“Can we really buy all this in London?”

“Just have to know where to go,” she winked. She had so much to teach him. “This is our stop, Harry.”

He quickly pocketed his letter, once more, then followed her out of the station and onto a busy London street. They navigated their way through the crowds of tourists and summer shoppers. She kept a hand on Harry’s shoulder to guide him, and make sure he didn’t get lost in the hustle of people.

When they arrived outside the dingy-looking pub, she saw Harry glance up at her confused. “I promise it gets better,” she assured him, opening the door. Admittedly, The Leaky Caldron wasn’t all that impressive - if you didn’t know where it led.

She slipped inside after Harry. She’d barely made it out of the shadows, into the dim light of the
pub, when a familiar voice rang out. “Iris Lupin, as I live and breathe.”

“Hey, Tom,” she greeted. The older barman came round the bar, walking over to give her a small hug.

“ Heard about that nasty business with Rookwood,” he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Damn shame. The Auror Office will be hard pressed to find a replacement for you.”

“Thanks, Tom,” she said genuinely. That meant a lot. “Let me introduce you to my godson,” she added, gesturing to Harry, who smiled timidly.

“Merlin’s beard,” Tom breathed, and she could kick herself for not thinking that through. “Harry Potter.”

A hushed silence fell over the pub, with all heads whipping in their direction. Suddenly, there was a flurry of scraping chairs. Everyone scurried over, lining up to shake a startled Harry’s hand. Thankfully, she’d had the mind to warn the boy of his fame beforehand.

Still… “Could you have said that any louder, Tom? He’s a kid, not a stage performer.”

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s fine. Probably best to get him used to it now.” It would only get worse when he got to school, after all.

She crossed her arms, watching the frenzied line carefully, until she spotted someone in the back corner. “Is that Quirrell?” she asked Tom. “I thought he was still away on sabbatical.”

“Nah,” Tom shook his head. “Poor kid ran into a vampire or something, while abroad. Stutters worse than usual now. Pity the kids that’ll have to try and make sense of his lectures.”

She snorted at that. “Me too.”

When she noticed Doris Crockford circle round to shake Harry’s hand a fourth time, she decided enough was enough. “Okay, everyone,” she interrupted loudly, coming between them and Harry like a bodyguard. “Harry has important things to attend to.”

The crowd deflated, shuffling sadly back to their seats. She waved goodbye to Tom, before steering Harry towards the back of the pub. Their exit happened to take them right past Quirrell, and she, regretably, knew it would be rude to ignore her future colleague.

“Professor Quirrell, nice to see you.”

His eyes twitched, as he started to hold out a hand for her to shake, only to twitch and pull it back. Tom was right. Whatever Quirrell saw on sabbatical, he was definitely jumpier than normal.

“L-Lupin, I h-hear you’ll be t-teaching at H-H-Hogwarts this year?”

“I am. Are you resuming your Muggle Studies post?”

“Y-y-yes.”

“Great,” she said, plastering on a smile and starting to lead Harry away. “Harry and I will see you in a few weeks, then.”

Once out of earshot, she leaned over to Harry. “Don’t worry. Muggle studies isn’t even an option
until your third year, and there are way better electives I can recommend.”

Harry grinned back at her, as they reached the brick wall in the back storage room. “Now, which one is it again? I always get this wrong.” She started counting the bricks, when it dawned on her. “Oh right!”

She tapped the third brick up and second across three times with her wand. The bricks vibrated, quivering until a small hole formed. Then all the bricks started to shake, opening the hole wider until it formed an archway leading to the cobblestone streets of Diagon Alley.

As the bricks transformed from a solid wall into an archway, light streamed into the dusty, dim storage room of The Leaky Caldron. Iris smiled down at him, and encouraged him forward with a nod. “Welcome to Diagon Alley.”

It was overwhelming. Everywhere he looked, there was something new to see. There was a store with stacks of caldrons lined up outside. Another had cages of owls hung up over the windows. They walked passed people in strange-looking clothes and many adults wore witch and wizard hats. There were street carts with potion supplies and others with silver instruments he’d never seen before. He couldn’t even see into the bookstore, with the spellbooks piled almost to the top of the store window.

He paused for a minute in front of a store, where four boys around his age had their noses pressed up against a display window. He marveled at the glimpse he could get of the glistening broomstick they appeared to be admiring. “This is amazing!”

“Nothing quite like your first trip to Diagon Alley,” Iris started to say, before following his gaze. “Ah, you mean the new Nimbus 2000. Just got released last week, actually. It’s supposed to be the fastest racing broom on the market. What I wouldn’t give to have had one of those when I played Quidditch.”

Iris briefly mentioned the wizarding sport, when she’d told him about Hogwarts and its four Houses. He didn’t know she played, though. He’d have to remember to ask her more about it later.

When they boys left, leaving the window open, Iris allowed him to move closer to the display. It’s sleek and shiny design was captivating. According to the sign, the broom handle was made of mahogany, and he could see the words Nimbus 2000 written in gold near the top. He wondered what it would be like to soar across the sky on a broom such as this. His dream, however, was hampered a bit by Iris, who reminded him, with a knowing look, first years weren’t allowed broomsticks.

“Come along, Harry,” she instructed, leading him further along the cobblestone alley.

They passed a witch outside an apothecary, overhearing her grumbling about prices. His stomach sunk. “Iris, how am I to pay for my school supplies? I don’t have any money.” He didn’t imagine the school provided everything he needed, and he certainly couldn’t ask Iris to pay. They’d only just met, and she’d done so much already.

“That’s why out first stop is Gringotts. It’s a wizard bank.” She pointed towards a three-tiered, white marble building at the far end of the alley, towering high over all the other shops. “Professor Dumbledore gave me the key to your vault before I came to get you.”

“I’ve got a valut?” That was hard to believe. Surely, if the Dursleys had known he’d inherited any
sort of money, there would be nothing left. They were always grumbling about how much of a burden he was.

“Oh, you’ve got a vault,” Iris laughed, before sobering up and turning his way with a frown. “You didn’t think your parents would leave you with nothing, did you?”

She didn’t seem to require an answer to that, merely grumbling something about the Durselys and setting off again. “Even if they had, I’d make sure you had everything you needed.”

Finally, they arrived at the large, intrinsically designed bronze doors of Gringotts. Standing guard outside was a short, bald creature, with large pointed ears and a hooked nose. The goblin, as Iris informed him, wore a scarlet uniform with gold accents.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed, eye wide.

“Wait till you see the inside,” Iris said, as the goblin opened the bronze door for them with a bow. She ushered him inside quickly, whispering, “Be careful around the goblins. They don’t like wizards much. Lot of history there.”

Inside they came to face a pair of silver doors, a warning against thievery etched into it. A second goblin opened these doors with a bow. Through them, they entered a grand banking hall, line with tall marble pillars. Above head, hung three glistening crystal chandeliers, with brass finishes. Flanking both sides of the hall, were tall wooden teller desks, piled high with coins, quills, inkwells, and ancient-looking books. Goblins in suits were hard at work behind each one.

“Hagrid!” he heard Iris call out, drawing his attention to the largest man he’d ever seen walking towards them.

“Iris,” the giant smiled behind his wild beard and shaggy, tangled hair. “It’s good to see yeh.” He pulled his godmother into his large arms, completely dwarfing the fierce former-Auror. “This must be Harry,” the giant said, releasing his godmother and turning to him. “Haven’t seen yeh since you was a baby. Look just like yer Dad.”

“Hi,” he greeted quietly, not quite sure what to make of the large man yet.

“Harry, this is Rubeus Hagrid,” Iris introduced with a comforting smile. He relaxed some, trusting his godmother wouldn’t steer him wrong. “He’s the gamekeeper at Hogwarts. He also made your cake.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a grin. He had enjoyed that cake. It was thoughtful of the man to make it for him. “The cake was delicious. Thank you.”

“T’was nothin,” the giant shrugged with a shy blush. “Turning eleven. Big deal for a wizard.”

“What brings you here today, Hagrid?” Iris asked curiously.


“Ah yes,” Iris nodded, obviously understanding what he meant. “He did mention that to me. I’ve got to arrange my part later this month.”

He tilted his head, listening to the adults. They were being deliberately secretive, which was interesting. Iris had been nothing but forthcoming with him thus far.
“Best be off,” Hagrid announced, glancing at a pocket watch. “Mustn’t keep Dumbledore waiting. See yeh at Hogwarts, Harry.”

“Bye!” he waved, watching the giant disappear through the silver doors behind them.

“Okay. Off we go,” Iris said, resuming their walk to the front of the busy hall.

“Iris, what was Hagrid talking about?”

“Can’t tell you that one, Harry,” she admitted. “Top secret business. Only Professor Dumbledore and a select few faculty members know about it.”

They finally reached the front desk at the far end of the hall. “I have Mr. Harry Potter here to make a withdrawal,” Iris told the goblin formally, passing over a small gold key. He couldn’t see the goblin, until it leaned over the tall desk to peer down at him.

It must have deemed him acceptable of whatever it was looking for, as it passed the key back to Iris. “I shall have Griphook bring you down to the vaults.”

“Thank you,” Iris said appreciatively, with a slight bow of her head. He observed her mannerisms carefully, wanting to be sure to learn how to not offend the goblins. He wouldn’t give them more reason to dislike wizards.

Griphook led them through a door at the back of the hall into a stone cavern lit by torches - a stark contract to the marble lobby. A cart came whizzing up the rails, and they climbed in. “Might want to hang on Harry. It can be a bit of a bumpy ride.”

The words barely left his godmother’s mouth, when the cart raced off, hurling them around twists and turns. The further down they went, the colder it got, and he noticed Iris tugging her coat a bit tighter around herself.

Eventually, the cart came to a screeching halt, flinging him forward. Iris’ arm quickly stuck out to catch him like he’d seen Aunt Petunia do with Dudley in the car. They followed Griphook out of the cart, with Iris passing the goblin his key. The goblin unlocked the vault, then allowed them both to enter. His mouth fell open, when he took in the piles and piles of gold, silver, and bronze coins.

“I’ll pick out what you’ll likely need to get you through the year,” she offered, sensing he didn’t have the faintest idea where to start. “I can always come back later in the year, if you run out.”

“Thanks,” he said gratefully, watching her carefully chose the appropriate amount of each type of coins. “So, the gold ones are Galleons, the silver are Sickles, and the bronze are Knuts. We can go over conversions and all that later.”

She quickly checked the bag, before officially deeming it sufficient and handing it over to him. Then, they were in the cart once more, ascending back to the surface in just as wild a ride as their descent.

When they left Gringotts, Iris handed him back his new sunglasses and put on her own. “I think our first stop should be for your robes, so we can get you in for a fitting before the crowd.”

“Sounds good.”

Iris led him to a store, which sign read Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions. As soon as they entered, a short witch blew passed them, confirming he was to be attending Hogwarts. She ushered them into the back room, where a boy with pale blonde hair was currently being fitted. The witch
gestured to a few seats nearby for them to wait.

They’d only just moved to sit down, when the shop door chimed and a voice cried out behind them. “Iris?”

His godmother turned round, smile quickly forming, as she was excitedly pulled away by a woman near her age, leaving him alone with the blonde boy.

"Iris?" she heard a familiar voice exclaim from behind her and Harry.

"Narcissa!" she grinned, spinning round to greet her old friend. "It's so good to see you." She pulled the woman into a tight hug. She could hardly recall the last time they'd seen each other. Long enough, apparently, that her friend's normally all brunette hair, from her Black family heritage, had been partially dyed a similar blonde to that of her husband. It was, as always, immaculately pinned up, creatively displaying both the blonde and brunette strands. "I love the hair."

"This is why I need you around more," Narcissa laughed, tucking a tiny tuff of loose hair behind her ear. The woman naturally oozed an air of sophistication she couldn't achieve if she worked her entire life on it. "What's it been now, a year and a half?"

"Probably longer," she admitted regretfully, searching her memories. "Dinner at Novella's maybe?" She was fairly certain she'd been to that restaurant within the past two years, and she only ever went somewhere that fancy with Narcissa.

"Honestly, you're not here nearly enough." She smiled at her friend's grumblings. They certainly didn't have the easiest friendship - with the war, her marriage to Lucius, and of course Bellatrix. But, somehow, they always found their way back to each other. "I mean, what is it going to take to for us to keep you in Britain more than a week or two a year?"

"Lucius hasn't told you?" That surprised her. Lucius was on the Hogwarts Board of Governors. She thought for certain he'd have been raging over her nomination for the Defense post being approved. Lucius may owe her for his freedom - something she'd only helped with for Narcissa - but he certainly didn't like her. A feeling that could easily be considered mutual.

"Told me what?"

"I'll be teaching at Hogwarts this year."

"The Defense post? Really?" she questioned in shock, before quickly amending, "Not that you won't be great at it, of course. All your first hand experience."

Narcissa's eyes widened suddenly, and she gripped her arm hard. "Does Severus know?" she blurted out, pulling her down on a nearby bench. "Tell me everything."

She groaned. She should have known Narcissa would eventually bring him up. He spent a great deal of time at Malfoy Manor, particularly in the summer months. She could only imagine what sort of mood he'd been in since February. She would have to tell Narcissa the truth. Occulmency expert she may be, Narcissa still always seemed to know when she was lying.

"I haven't seen him yet," she said, cringing under Narcissa's glare. "I keep putting it off. Facing Rookwood again, honestly, sounds more appealing." Particularly if another round with the Death Eater got her out of having that conversation with Severus permanently.
"Don't be silly," Narcissa scoffed, with a wave of her perfectly manicured hand. "He'll be thrilled."

She glanced at Narcissa skeptically.

"Okay, maybe not at first," her friend admitted. "But, he's been much happier since we got word you made it back alive. We had him over for dinner last week and he was positively cheerful. For Severus, that is."

"Narcissa…" she started, knowing she'd have to confess. She could really use her friend's advice, after all. "I did something stupid before I left, back in February."

"Oh dear," her friend sighed, closing her eyes. "That does tend to be your MO as of late, doesn't it? How foolish are we talking?"

"I slept with Severus."

"Well, that's hardly a concern," Narcissa chuckled, looking relieved. She shouldn't. That wasn't the stupid part. "You two have been doing that on and off since the war ended."

"I got the owl telling me to report to the office, later that same night," she finally voiced, bracing for Narcissa's reaction.

"Tell me you didn't," her friend pleaded, clearly picking up the details she hadn't explicitly mentioned.

"If I'd have woken him-" she quickly tried to defend, despite realizing it was futile. "Narcissa, you know he'd have been Severus about the whole thing either way. I just took the coward's way out, and didn't face that in person."

"You two are impossible."

"Remus hasn't let up on me about it either."

"I knew I liked your brother for a reason."

Only because I never told you what he really is. That was one of the few things she disliked about Narcissa. She was a Black, and now a Malfoy, to the core. Blood was everything to her.

"You know, I don't think it's an issue," Narcissa mused, a short while later. "I think it's a good thing."

"A good thing?" she snorted in disbelief.

"Yes," Narcissa stressed. "Okay, these past few years have been… challenging," her friend recognized. "But, now you're staring anew. You're going to be teaching at Hogwarts - no more traipsing across all of creation. This can be a clean slate, for the both of you."

"When did you become so optimistic?"

"I've been friends with you for twenty years," she reminded, eyes sparkling. "Some of your good nature was bound to rub off on me."

Feeling like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, she placed her hand on top of her friends. "I'm so glad I ran into you today."

"Me too," Narcissa responded genuinely, before looking around the store confused. "What are you
"Oh shit!" she cursed, ignoring Narcissa's flinch at her swear. It was a testament to their long-standing friendship that the proper socialite in Narcissa no longer scolded her for it. "I completely forgot I'd need those. I'm actually here with…"

Narcissa's eyes followed her hand to where Harry stood awkwardly talking to, who she assumed must be, Draco. She hadn't seen Narcissa's son since he was a toddler. She and Narcissa tended to go out, when they met to catch up, so she and Lucius didn't run into each other. It was just easier that way, unfortunately.

"Oh," Narcissa breathed, suddenly connecting the dots. "Yes, of course. He would be about Draco's age. Where do you think he'll be sorted?"

"I'm not entirely sure," she answered honestly. "We only really just met."

"That's right," her friend nodded, before turning toward her in excitement. "Oh, I do hope he's in Slytherin. He and Draco would be such good friends."

"He looks so much like his father. It's hard to imagine the hat shouting out anything but Gryffindor."

"Now, that would be interesting," Narcissa grinned slyly. "You and Severus are so competitive. You'll probably spend the whole school year betting on who's godson will surpass the other's."

That certainly sounded like them. "I know better than to bet against Narcissa Malfoy's son," she countered with a wink.

"You will look after Draco, won't you?" her friend begged seriously, gripping her hand tightly. "He's never been on his own before. Lucius wanted to send him to Drungstrang, but I wouldn't allow it. It's just too far."

She knew exactly why Lucius would want his son at Drungstrang, but she refrained from commenting. Instead, she squeezed her friend's hand back. "Of course I will," she promised. "Anything for you. You know that."

"Oh look. He must be done," Narcissa cried, glancing at where Draco and Harry were swapping places. "Draco!" she hollered. "Come here and meet Professor Lupin."

The young boy bore a striking resemblance to Lucius, but his mother had obviously instilled a sense of respect in him - at least when she was present, anyway. He stood beside his mother attentively, clutching his bag of robes.

"Draco, dear," Narcissa called for his attention. The boy's eyes snapped up to her. "This is Professor Lupin. She's going to be teaching you Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts this year. She's also a very dear friend of Mummy's; so, if you have any trouble, you go to her, all right?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Draco," his mother scolded, nodding sharply at her.

"Nice to meet you, Professor," he greeted obediently.

"You too, Draco. Your Mum's told me all about you," she smiled. Kneeling down to his level, she moved her sleeve up enough for him to glimpse her dark green leather braided bracelet, with a
sterling-silver snake charm imbedded into it. "Here's to hoping for Slytherin, right?"

She held her hand up for a high-five, which he eagerly returned. "You bet!"

Standing back up, she placed a hand on her friend's arm. "It's been so good to see you, Narcissa. I've missed you."

"Well, we simply won't be letting this much time go by any longer, then," she said, leaving no room for objection. "Dinner next week?"

With a tisk, her friend reached out for her trench coat, moving it to assess her current outfit with a frown. "Probably some shopping too, I'd say," Narcissa added, and she tried not to flinch. She knew that look. "We need to update this wardrobe of yours - pick out some clothes that will actually make you look like a teacher and, maybe, remind Severus just what he's missing."

"Whatever you think is best, Narcissa," she agreed, knowing there was little point in arguing. Once Narcissa Malfoy decided on something, there was no changing her mind.

"I'll owl to arrange it." Narcissa leaned in to kiss both her cheeks. "Bye, dear."

She waved to Draco, as the pair left. When they were out the door, she wandered back over to Harry. He stood on a footstool, a long black robe thrown over his head, with his arms out like a scarecrow. "Sorry about that, Harry. I haven't seen Narcissa in a while."

"That's okay."

"Oh good, Ms. Lupin," Madam Malkin breathed, as she breezed back into the room with a full pin cushion. "Professor Dumbledore said you'd be coming by today for your teacher robes. I've laid out a few standard black academic ones for you. We can have them fitted after Mr. Potter."

"Great," she thanked politely, while simultaneously deciding to murder Albus. Honestly, did he really think she couldn't handle a robe fitting on her own? It was going to be a long school year.

[]

After leaving Madam Malkin's, a bag of robes each, Iris took him next door to buy quills, ink, and parchment. The Wizarding World didn't use pens, she explained. Though, Iris seemed to wish they did.

While his run-in with the blonde boy during his robe fitting had left a bad taste in his mouth, Iris appeared more relaxed and happy than ever, following her encounter with the boy's mother. She gleefully showed him a bottle of ink that changed colors as one wrote, and a second bottle with invisible ink. He felt a little better after that, able to match Iris' wide grin briefly.

Next, they went searching for his telescope. Iris recommended a collapsable brass one, stating it would fit more easily in his backpack and would be less likely to break, particularly if he accidentally tossed his bag on the ground too hard. She sounded to be talking from experience, so he took her advice and made his purchase.

Her good mood faltered a bit, when they started looking at caldrons. She didn't even crack a smile at his attempt to buy a solid gold one. Instead, she simply redirected him to the section of pewter caldrons, promising him he could get a nice set of scales.

He noticed her eyes kept flickering to a man with long black hair, who was talking to the shop owner. He mustn't have been whoever she'd thought he was, however. Because, when the man
finally turned around to leave, his godmother's tense shoulders relaxed. With a shake of her head, she was back to her usual self.

"Iris?" he started to ask on their way to the Apothecary, taking advantage of her renewed contentment.

"Yes, Harry?"

"That boy in the robe shop - he said kids with muggle parents shouldn't be allowed to attend Hogwarts."

"I'm sorry, Harry," she sighed, pausing in front of the shop. "I should have warned you about certain purebloods. I didn't think the first wizarding family we'd run into would be the Malfoys."

He couldn't fault her for that. She couldn't be expected to remember to tell him everything about the Wizarding World the first day they met. "Purebloods?"

"It can be hard to explain," she said, looking like she was collecting her thoughts. She held the Apothecary door open for him, and he tried not to get distracted by the shelves upon shelves of herbs, powders, and other strange ingredients. He wanted to learn all he could from her.

"Pureblood families are those who have no muggles or muggle-borns in their family tree," she explained, grabbing a basket and skimming the shelves. "There are only a select few left. The Wizarding World would've died out long ago, if people hadn't started marrying muggles."

She stopped to place two jars of herbs in their basket, before continuing. "As such, most of us are what we called half-bloods, where they have one magical parent and one muggle or muggle-born parent."

"Like me? Because my Mom was a muggle-born?"

"Exactly," she nodded, grabbing various bags of dried roots. "I'm half-blood too. My Mom was a muggle."

"Not a muggle-born?"

"Nope. Didn't have a magical bone in her body. Though, sometimes I questioned that. She had this sixth sense - always knowing when I was up to no good."

He smiled at that. He couldn't almost picture a small Iris causing trouble, and being scolded by her Mum. "She sounds nice."

"She was," Iris agreed softly, hand pausing on a package of five different bright powders. "I'll have to tell you about her sometime."

Not wanting to make his godmother dwell on what was clearly a sad topic for her, he quickly redirected the conversation. "So, do purebloods think muggle-borns are bad?"

"Not all of them," Iris corrected, placing the box of powders in the basket and moving onto a section of vials containing what appeared to be various dried insects. "There are some families, like the Malfoys, who hold blood status in high regard. They go to exhaustive efforts to maintain, what they consider, a 'pure' bloodline."

She added a few more ingredients to his basket. "But, there are also a number of pureblood families who would never even think of looking down on a muggle-born. In fact, I have a pureblood friend
who is more fascinated by muggles than anyone I've ever met. He actually works for the Ministry of Magic in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Division."

"Really?" he exclaimed, thinking that sounded a far cry from the Malfoy boy he'd met earlier.

"Oh yes," she grinned, leaning over to him conspiratorially. "Buy him a screwdriver or a spark plug, and he'll be happy for weeks."

He laughed, finding it even funnier when she assured him she was dead serious. Iris reviewed the items she'd collected briefly, before pronouncing them sufficient. "This should do you for a while," she said, handing him the basket so he could checkout.

He asked her how she knew just what he needed, when it wasn't specified on the supplies list, but she got that haunted expression once more. "Just good at potions," she winked, pushing him toward the line.

"While you buy these, I'm going to run across the way and buy you a trunk," Iris told him. "We're starting to get too many packages to carry."

She was right, so he nodded and promised to wait for her on the bench outside the Apothecary. He didn't have to wait all that long, in the end. By the time he'd paid for his position ingredients, and managed to get all his boxes and bags to the bench, Iris was walking over with a large brown trunk.

She placed the trunk in front of the bench, undoing the latches, and started packing his purchases inside. "Iris," he began hesitantly, thinking of his godmother's bright smile when she hugged the blonde boy's mother. "Are you going to be mad, if I don't like your friend's son?"

Iris paused, and looked up at him confused, before it dawned on her. "You mean Draco?"

"Yes," he nodded nervously. "He wasn't very nice."

"His father isn't either," she acknowledged, resuming her packing. "I can barely stand to be in the same room as the man."

That surprised him. It was hard to imagine that, given how close she seemed to be with Draco's mother.

"He's not my biggest fan either," Iris added, closing the trunk and flicking the latches.

"Your friend doesn't mind?"

"I wouldn't say that," his godmother amended, standing up with a slight winse. "She'd love for us to get along. She's just accepted that will never happen."

Stepping over his trunk, Iris slid onto the bench next to him, leaning back against the wall behind them with a sigh. "My friendship with Narcissa is certainly complicated, to say the least. She was a lot different when we first met. She'd only just begun dating, her now husband, Lucius Malfoy. He's one of the most avid and politically active purebloods in Britain."

"I shouldn't give you the wrong idea. Narcissa is definitely all about bloodlines," she admitted sadly. "She kind of had to be. Even before she married Draco's father, she was a Black. They're one of the most ancient pureblood families. So, all that pureblood nonsense was drilled into Narcissa since birth. But, if it weren't for Lucius, she would be a far more silent supporter."

"That sounds terrible." He hoped he wouldn't ever meet the Black family. They sounded even
worse than the Malfoys.

"There aren't many Blacks you'd like," Iris agreed, sounding as if Narcissa might be the only one she did. "But, believe it or not, Narcissa's sister - Andromeda - actually broke away from the Black family and married a muggleborn."

"Whoa!" he exclaimed in surprised.

"I know," his godmother grinned. "She got disowned for that."

"Now, Narcissa's other sister, Bellatrix, she's the complete opposite of Andromeda," Iris continued, all humor lost from her voice now. "She took the Black family mantra to an extreme. She joined up with Voldemort, and I had to put her away in Azkaban."

"You had to put Narcissa's sister in prison?"

"She did terrible thing, Harry. I couldn't overlook that - not even for Narcissa." There was more to that story than she was saying, he could tell. Something in her tone, however, made him think now wasn't the time to ask. "Thankfully, Narcissa came around to agree, eventually."

"She did?"

"The thing about Narcissa is she's something of a mix between her two sisters. She values blood purity, like all the Blacks, but she's less vocal about it. And, she would never do the things her sister did."

That sounded true. The woman who'd breezed into Madam Malkin's gave off an aura of superiority, but she'd looked at his godmother warmly and seemed to genuinely care for her.

"Nothing about our friendship has ever been simple," Iris sighed beside him, rubbing a hand over her tired-looking eyes. "We disagree on virtually everything, but we've found a way to put that aside and focus on what matters. Does that make sense?"

"I think so."

"Good," his godmother smiled, slapping her knees and standing back up. "That being said, you don't have to befriend anyone you don't want to."

She bent down to grab the handle of his trunk. "Narcissa and I met at Hogwarts. She was one of the Prefects in my House, and she looked out for me. We work hard to maintain a friendship, because we want to."

"That makes sense." He leapt off the bench, feeling much better. He was relieved to know she didn't expect him to be friends with Draco, and wouldn't be mad if he wasn't. Remembering something he'd overheard in the robe shop, he looked over at his godmother deviously. "So, she's going to help you buy new clothes?"

Iris groaned, flashing him a glare. "Don't you start too. You're supposed to be on my side."

He couldn't help but laugh, envisioning his t-shirt and jeans godmother wearing posh robes and feathered witch hats like Narcissa Malfoy. With a shake of her head, Iris started laughing too. "Come on," she chuckled, lightly whacking his arm. "Let's go get your spellbooks."
She groaned, starting to feel the strain in her lower back where the damage from Rookwood's curse was most prevalent. Since adding eight school books and a few extra reads, Harry's trunk had grown quite heavy to pull along behind her. Harry had offered to take it from her several times, and she probably should've accepted. She was being stubborn, not ready to accept she wasn't in her prime Auror condition anymore.

"First years aren't allowed broomsticks. So, for your birthday, I was thinking I could get you a pet," she recommended, trying to take her mind off her new physical limitations. She wanted to get Harry something special. She'd missed ten birthdays. She had a lot to make up for. "Have you thought more about if you want a toad, a cat, or an owl?"

"Can I really get an owl?" Harry asked excitedly, skipping a few steps as they ventured toward Eeylops.

"Of course you can," she smiled. His constant wonder was infectious. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this relaxed, or laughed this easily. Her engagement party, maybe. Or Harry's birthday.

"I was actually thinking of buying one myself," she told him, having decided it would be a good idea. Remus would want updates on how Harry was settling into school. She would want to know how Remus and the shop were doing too. "I haven't been around enough to take care of one before, but they're quite useful for communication. I imagine it would be good for me to have one at Hogwarts."

She held open the door to the dark owl emporium. With a content grin, she watched Harry run about the store, carefully examining each cage for the perfect owl. She wandered close behind, skimming the rows and rows of owls herself.

Her heart skipped about halfway through the store, when her eyes fell on a soft pale face and a pair of deep brown eyes. It was unusual, but not unheard of, to find a Barred Owl at Eeylops. The feathers of her underbelly were whiter than most, with light brown markings streaking down vertically. She was stunning, and her heart melted at first sight. Not needing to see any more, she quickly grabbed the owl's cage, and went searching for Harry.

She found him toward the back of the shop, jumping excitedly in front of a cage. "Wow!" she heard him exclaim. "Iris, look at this one!"

She made her way over to the cage he pointed at. If she thought her find rare, it was nothing compared to the fluffy snowy owl, with amber eyes, that Harry found. "She's beautiful, Harry." She honestly was. If she had not already fallen in love with her own, she might have been jealous.

"Can I get her?" he asked with hopeful eyes.

"I think she's perfect. Grab her cage."

Harry reached for the top of the cage enthusiastically, startling his new owl a bit. The owl curiously assessed her new owner for a moment, before settling back down in her cage, obviously deeming the delighted eleven year-old acceptable.

"Is that your owl?" He pointed to the cage in her hand, and she nodded. "I like her, Iris. She's pretty."

"I think so too. Let's go get our girls some food and treats."

After piling their arms with several boxes of treats, they checked out and headed back into the
sunshine. Nearing Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, she was happy to see a free table outside. She needed to sit down for a bit. "Why don't we stop for ice cream, Harry. You must be hungry, and I need to send a letter to my brother." It would be good to let her new feathered friend stretch her wings for a bit, and the short journey across London would be a nice test outing for the owl.

"You have a brother?"

"Oh! I can't believe I haven't mentioned him!" How could she have forgotten to tell him about Remus? "Remus and I are twins. He's quite looking forward to meeting you. He was really close to your Dad - more so than me, actually. I was one of your Mum's friends."

It would probably be best if Harry learned about James from Remus. While she and James found themselves growing closer post-Hogwarts, she'd never truly forgotten the hell he'd put Severus through those first five, almost six, years of school. He'd been apologetic enough for them to grudgingly form a sort-of friendship, but, much like Lucius with Narcissa, she'd mainly tolerated James for Lily's sake.

"Can you tell me about them?" Harry asked softly. It broke her heart how little he knew of his parents. Lily had loved her son so fiercely, and, whatever else she may think of him, James had been an amazing father.

"I think we can do better than that, Harry," she started, setting his trunk down by the open table. "We've got albums of photographs we can show you."

"Really?" He looked so happy he might burst, and she found herself loving her godson that much more. She hoped Lily and James would be glad to see her and Remus taking him in and, hopefully, building a home together.

"Of course," she promised him, making a mental note to pull some of those albums out of her closet.

Grabbing a few sickles, she handed them to Harry. "Here, order whatever you like. I'll have the same."

While he hurried off into the parlor, she relaxed into a seat, relived to take some strain off her back. She was in for a long road, if something as simple as a trip to Diagon Alley was taking this much out of her. No wonder she'd been forced to resign. She wouldn't last five minutes as an Auror, in her condition.

Pulling a piece of parchment out of the extendable pocket inside her trench coat, she started to write out a brief note to Remus. Harry popped up a few minutes later with two large chocolate and raspberry ice creams.

"What are you writing?" he asked curiously, passing her one of the ice creams and settling into the chair across from her.

"Remus is arranging your room," she explained. "I want to make sure he buys you some proper clothes. Ones we don't need to tie with elastics to fit you." She might as well have him grab the trousers and dress shirts Harry would need for school too, she decided, adding those to the note.

"You don't have to do that. That's a lot of money."

"Money I have," she said absentmindedly, as she carried on with her letter. When it finally sunk in what he'd been saying, she put her quill down and looked over at him. "You're not the first nephew I've splurged on, so I'll have none of that." She was going to give Harry the world, from here on out, if it killed her. He would get every ounce of love from her and Remus that he failed to receive from
"Remus has children?"

"Remus?" she laughed, realizing how that must have sounded. "No, but my friend Molly has seven. I'm the godmother to her twin boys, and something of an aunt to the rest." She swore half their salaries went to the Weasley children each year. Neither she nor Remus could seem to resist spoiling them rotten.

"We'll have to visit them this summer," she mused, more to herself than Harry. It would be good for him to meet some other wizarding children his age. She had a feeling Harry would get on nicely with the lot of them too, which would be a plus, given how important the ginger-haired kids were to her. "Ron's the same age as you, and he'll be starting at Hogwarts in September too."

Temporarily putting her letter aside, she eagerly dug into her ice cream. In the July heat, it would be turning to soup before she knew it. They ate in a comfortable silence for a while, before Harry broke it. "Where do you live?"

"On the other side of London," she told him, pointing her spoon in the general direction. "Remus and I share a flat above the bookshop he owns. It overlooks a far less crowded Wizarding Village than this one."

"Remus doesn't sell school books," she added after another bite. "So, we didn't need to set up shop on Diagon Alley. Which is great, because the rent here is outrageous."

More than outrageous, really. They could've easily drained the Potter vault of its gold, trying to rent both shop space and a flat on Diagon Alley. Coming from no money at all, that was never going to have been, so much as, an option for them. Remus still managed to do more than all right for himself, building quite the successful business. Collectors came from all over Britain to visit his store, in search of some of the most rare first editions in the Wizarding World.

"Are you sure there's room for me?"

She tried hard not to visibly sigh at how little the boy thought of himself. She could kill the Dursleys for everything they put him through - for making him believe he was nothing more than a burden to people.

"Harry, you're our family. Of course we have room for you," she assured genuinely, placing a hand over his. "Remus is clearing out the office in the flat. He primarily uses the office space in the shop, anyway, and well, I don't really need one anymore."

She would have an office at Hogwarts, after all. If she needed to get work done over the summer holiday, she could make do at the kitchen table.

"Will you miss being an Auror?"

That was a loaded question, but Harry had no way of knowing that. "I will," she nodded, trying to keep her voice from growing too thick. It was still so raw. "But, given a few weeks with continuous access to clean clothes and running water, I may be singing a different tune."

She couldn't deny she wouldn't miss that part of the job - particularly after this past operation. She didn't even want to know what she looked like when she was transported to Saint Mungo's, much less what she smelled like.

Done with her ice cream, she grabbed her letter. She folded it into an envelope, scribbling Remus’
name on the front. "All right, Astraea, ready for your first flight?" She opened the cage, and tied the envelope to the eager owl's leg. With a quick pat, she sent her off, confident the owl would reach her destination. She had seemed anxious to prove herself.

"Is Astraea her name?"

"It is. I'm named after a Greek goddess, so I thought it only fitting she be as well."

"What is Astraea the goddess of?"

"Justice."

"Because you were an Auror," Harry concluded, looking pleased with himself.

"Exactly. What do you think you're going to name this gorgeous girl?" she questioned, sticking a finger through the cage to stroke the snowy owl affectionately.

"I haven't decided. I want it to be perfect."

"She'll love whatever you pick." By the way the snowy owl hooted each time Harry had snuck her a treat during their ice cream break, she could tell a strong bond was beginning to form. "Take your time, though. There's no rush."

While he finished the last of his ice cream, she had Harry pull out his list. "What do we have left?"

He skimmed through the supplies list, as she stood to throw out their trash. "Just a wand!" He exclaimed, spinning round in his seat to face her.

"We can't be forgetting that, now can we?" she winked, coming back to the table and grabbing the handle of his trunk. "We'll want to go to Olivander's, then. He's the best wandmaker in Britain."

He jumped excitedly out of his seat to follow her to the shabby-looking store, with its peeling paint. It still looked virtually the same as the day she and Remus had come here for their wands. The bell chimed when they shuffled through the tattered door into the tiny store filled with ceiling high shelves of dusty wand boxes, piled haphazardly onto each other.

"Good afternoon," Olivander's soft voice greeted, appearing from behind one of the many rows of shelves. "Ah, Ms. Lupin, it's been many years since I last saw you. Though, it feels like yesterday." His eyes closed briefly, fingers waving through the air, in concentration. "Blackthorn wood. Ten and a quarter inches. Dragon heartstring core."

"Right as always," she smiled. There wasn't a wand sold from his shop that Olivander didn't remember. "It's served me well, all these years."

"Ah, it would, my dear," Olivander nodded whimsically. "A warrior's wand for a warrior princess."

She chuckled a bit. She'd certainly never been compared to any sort of princess before. Yet, that was why she adored Olivander. He saw the world differently. "Hopefully, it won't grow too bored of me with our new life in academia." Blackthorn wands thrived on action, and her's had certainly grown accustom to a fair share of that.

"The wand chooses the witch for a reason, Ms. Lupin," Olivander reminded her, a knowing twinkle in his silver eyes. "But, that reason is not always one-dimensional."

"And who do we have here?" the older man's gaze flickered over to Harry, who was waiting
patiently behind her. "Ah yes, Mr. Potter. I expected I'd be seeing you soon."

She sat in the single chair Olivander kept in his shop, watching Olivander take Harry's measurements. While the tape measure did its work, Olivander begun climbing up and down the many ladders in the shop, piling dusty wand boxes of varying colors on his desk.

She closed her eyes for a bit, leaning her head back against the wall. It had been a long day, and Olivander seemed to be going through dozens of wands with little success. She wasn't concerned. Olivander loved a challenge. She'd been one herself. Curious, he'd said, given he'd found her twin brother's match the first go.

"You're a tricky one, eh?" Olivander commented, sounding positively gleeful. "Your godmother, here, was too. Not to worry. I always find a match."

She heard the wandmaker pause mid-step on a ladder. "I wonder…"

She didn't like that tone. Forcing her eyes back open, she watched carefully as Olivander pulled out a black box, blowing an incredibly thick layer of dust off the top. He had a gleam in his eyes she'd never seen before, as he removed the wand from its box and passed it to Harry. "Try this one, my boy. Holly wood. Eleven inches. Phoenix feather core."

Perking up at that, she leaned forward in her seat to observe the interaction meticulously. Phoenix feathers were rare, but Olivander did have a tendency to use them. It was the wandmaker's peculiar interest in how this particular wand would react to Harry that concerned her. She had a sinking feeling she knew where he was going with this.

Her breath caught in her throat, seeing red and gold sparks burst forth from the wand. She quickly plastered on a smile and clapped, as Harry looked happily over his shoulder at her. When he turned back, her face fell. She glanced over at Olivander with apprehension, but the wandmaker merely remarked on how curious the match was.

"I don't understand. What's curious?" Harry's quiet voice asked.

She cringed, wishing she could halt Olivander in his tracks and spare the young boy such knowledge. She bit her tongue, though. Harry deserved to know the truth.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter, and no two are alike," the wandmaker explained. "However, it so happens, the Phoenix who produced the tail feather at the core of your wand, gave one other feather."

Harry tilted his head intrigued. "It is most curious that you should be destined for this wand, when its brother gave you that scar."

Deciding that was enough, she quickly encouraged Harry to pay for his wand, and then ushered him out to Diagon Alley. Once outside, Harry cautiously glanced over at her. "Iris, what does it mean that my wand is the brother of Voldemort's wand?"

"Wands are fickle things, Harry," she said, keeping her voice even. She placed a hand on his shoulder, pushing him lightly in the direction of The Leaky Caldron. "They chose their wizard for a variety of reasons. It's nothing to worry about."

She was lying, of course. She didn't know what it meant, but her gut told her she needed to find out. That wasn't for Harry to be concerned about now, though. He was only eleven, after all.

His shoulders relaxed at her reassurance, and she felt relieved. It would be best if he continued to
think it of little interest. He'd be less likely to share the information with anyone else that way. Whatever the reason this wand chose Harry, the Auror in her had a feeling the less people who knew the better.

They took the underground across town, gaining quite a few stares from the many commuters. He supposed they didn't see a lot of people carrying owls about on their daily commute. He was relieved, when Iris announced they'd reached their stop, and he followed her out to a quiet, historic-looking shopping district.

They reached an older bookshop, with curved bay windows displaying a variety of creatively arranged books. The shop almost seemed like it'd been pulled out of a different century, except for, what appeared to be, fresh black paint coating the wooden exterior. Artistically painted in a white script, along the top of the shop, were the words Mischief Managed Bookshop.

"Don't let the silly name fool you," Iris smiled, digging out a set of keys and flipping to the correct one. "Remus has built up quite a reputation over the years."

"The muggle side does all right too," she added, unlocking the shop for, and holding it open for him. "We're near a University."

He slipped through the open doorway into a far more modernized interior. The mint green carpet provided a nice contrast to the dark wooden bookshelves lining the outskirts of the room, and forming narrow pathways off the center of the store. Under each bay window sat an olive green sofa and dark brown, distressed coffee table. A wooden staircase to the right led up to a second floor loft area, which appeared to contain a far more colorful children's section.

"Remus will show you around tomorrow," Iris told him, leading him down the center aisle and left of the checkout desk. "He knows the ins and outs of this place much better than I."

They entered a standard office, carefully packed up for the evening. "Ready for the fun part?" Iris winked, gesturing to the wall behind the desk. The very solid wall. "Well, go on," she encouraged. "Trust me."

Glancing at her skeptically, he sighed. He walked behind the desk, figuring she hadn't steered him wrong thus far. Closing his eyes, he walked forward and kept walking until he tripped, crashing into what felt like a chair.

Opening his eyes, he found himself in a completely different, far messier, office than the one he'd left. The antique wooden desk was cluttered with scattered papers, and piles of books were strewn all about the floor.

"Remus isn't quite as neat as Blake." He jumped at his godmother's voice, as she popped up beside him with his trunk and owl cage. "He's the squib who runs the muggle side."

"Squib?"

"Someone born into a magical family, but has no magical powers themselves. It's a rare occurrence, but it happens," she explained. "Remus can't run both sides at the same time, and we couldn't just hire a muggle. Blake sometimes has to come over to this side to ask Remus questions or get his signature. A squib was our best bet, and Blake's been quite a reliable hire."

He navigated the obstacle course of books, behind Iris, who'd conjured his trunk and owl cage to hover along with them. Exiting the office, his jaw dropped at the vast contrast between the muggle
The older hardwood floors were scuffed up from years of foot traffic. To his right, was a wrap around mahogany counter, with stacks of books piled lazily in front of it and a whole host of books lying haphazardly all across it. Toward the left side was a long, packed, two-shelf book case, pressed up against a wooden staircase, with different kinds of spellbooks displayed on top. Much like the office, there were piles of books on the floor, randomly placed in odd corners and in front of shelves. Hanging from the ceiling was a black chandelier with five wax candles in place of lightbulbs. Up two small steps at the back of the shop was a large room, stuffed full of bookcases, the books arranged with much of the same attention Olivander seemed to take with his wand boxes.

"Whoa!" he breathed in amazement.

"I know," Iris nodded with a smile. "Remus put his whole heart into this place. Our flat's just upstairs."

He wandered behind her up the black wooden staircase, lined with ceiling high bookcases on the left side. In the loft, amongst more shelves and stacks of books, was a small sitting area with far more comfortable and well-worn couches and armchairs than he'd seen on the muggle side.

Up a second, smaller set of wooden stairs, he found a hardwood landing with a black, residential-like door. Flicking to a different key on her ring, Iris unlocked the door, opening it to reveal a surprisingly normal, muggle-looking flat.

With a wave of her wand, she sent his things in first, setting his trunk down beside a sofa and his owl cage onto of the coffee table. "Remus?" she called out to the quiet flat, following him inside and shuttering the door. "He's probably gone out to get dinner. We thought you might be tired of having your hand shaken."

"Yeah, a little," he admitted. "Thanks."

He stood by the door, in what was a standard living room, with a tan sofa and two white armchairs, situated around a black wooden coffee table. They even had a TV, sitting on top of a black two-shelf bookcase. Halfway across the room, almost acting like a divider, was a dining table. It was currently set up for four people, but looked large enough to accommodate more.

He watched Iris move to the far end of the room and toss her keys in a bowl on the kitchen island. She removed her trench coat, throwing it lazily over the back of one of the two black barstools in front of the island. She walked round into a basic kitchen, with white cabinets, a stove, refrigerator, and dishwasher - same as any muggle home he'd ever seen.

"Sorry about the mess," Iris apologized, gesturing to the array of parchment, quills, and open books cluttering the living room space. She passed him a drink, which she must have grabbed from the fridge when he wasn't paying attention. He accepted it gratefully. "Remus has been helping me draw up lesson plans."

He didn't think it was anything to apologize for. The flat felt homely, lived-in - a far cry from Number 4 Privet Drive. Aunt Petunia had kept everything sterile and in its place. He never felt comfortable there. But here? He could see himself growing up happy and safe here. Maybe even loved, he thought, glancing over at his godmother.

"Shall we see how he did with your room?"

"Sure," he agreed. She led him down the hallway, pointing out the bathroom door and Remus' room
Her room was at the far end of the hall. On the right was a linen closet, and then a door with a small wooden sign, reading *Harry's Room*.

He barely had time to process the sign, when she opened the door and his eyes grew wide at the large space. To the right of the door was a small desk, with a few new notebooks and a pencil cup full of quills. There was even a small rack of ink bottles. Up against the right wall was a full-size bed, topped with a blue comforter and four pillows. On either side of the bed was a nightstand. The left was empty, but the right held a lamp and a small picture frame. Across from the bed was a tall wardrobe, flanked by two empty four-shelf bookcases. At the back, long blue curtains were pulled open to reveal a sliding door leading to what looked to be a balcony.

"You can decorate it however you like, of course," Iris told him, as he wandered about the room in awe, trying to take in every detail. "We just wanted to nail down the basics."

*The basics?* Didn't she know this was more than he'd ever owned in his life?

"Hopefully, he's managed to find you some clothes," she continued, moving to open the wardrobe.

"Oh perfect," she assessed, sounding pleased with what she found. "This should be enough to get you started. We can buy more as we go."

"This- this is all mine?" he exclaimed in disbelief.

She closed the wardrobe, turning to face him. "Well, we weren't going to make you sleep on the couch-"

He cut whatever else she planned to say off, when he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. "Thank you."

She staggered briefly, nearly losing her balance, before her arms circled round him in return. "You'll have everything you deserve from here on out, Harry," she promised, placing a kiss on the top of his head.

"Now, this is a sight to come home to," a quiet voice rang out from the doorway.

"Remus," Iris grinned, pulling back from the hug, but keeping an arm around his shoulders for support. "Harry, this is my brother."

He turned to where a tall young man leaned lightly against the door frame, hands tucked into the pockets of his tan trousers. He stood almost half a foot taller than his sister, in a light blue jumper with the collar of a white dress shirt poking out. His hair was a lighter brown than Iris', and sprinkled with flecks of grey. He could see the resemblance between them in the man's kind green eyes and friendly smile. He appeared tired, almost older than his twin, but it was the faded scars cutting across his face that stood out as the biggest difference.

"Welcome home, Harry," Remus greeted with a gentle voice, filling him with an incredible warmth. "Shall we have something to eat before we unpack your things?" he suggested, pointing down the hall toward the kitchen. "You must be starving."

He nodded his agreement, feeling at ease with Remus already. He couldn't seem to find the words to express what it felt like to be treated like family by a man who hadn't known him even a minute.

"Hope you don't mind Italian," Remus said, pushing himself off the door frame. "I picked up some pasta at a muggle restaurant down the road. We have both tomato and alfredo sauce, because your godmother always has to be different."
He laughed at Iris' outraged expression. "Alfredo sauce is great, Remus," Iris glared in protest, starting down the hall. He shuffled after the twins, mouth watering at the delicious aroma drifting all the way down to his room.

"The room looks amazing, Remus," Iris told her brother, and he couldn't help but silently agree. "Thank you."

"Anything for Harry." Remus said with no hesitation, making his heart swell.

They settled into the three place settings Remus arranged, and he dug into the pasta eagerly. He chose the tomato sauce, chuckling at the overly pleased look Remus flashed his twin sister.

"I hope you didn't lose too much revenue closing down the shop for the day," Iris said, once they'd all taken generous helpings of pasta.

"I actually didn't have to," Remus corrected. "Molly came by the shop with the kids, and offered to run the store for the day. Blake ran the muggle side, as usual."

"That was nice of Molly."

"They're all looking forward to meeting you, Harry," Remus informed him, glancing his way across the table. "Our friends Molly and Arthur have a few kids your age. Reckon, you'll get along nicely," Remus elaborated, and he vaguely remembered Iris mentioning them during their trip to Diagon Alley. "I told her we'd probably give it a week or two. Let you get settled in first."

He smiled appreciatively at how considerate they were being, allowing him to ease his way into this new life. "Are they going to Hogwarts too?"

"Percy and the twins already do, so they can tell you all about it," Remus nodded. "Ron, their youngest son, is starting his first year, same as you."

"We still need to decide what we want to get Ron in honor of his first year at Hogwarts," Iris jumped in, as if she'd just remembered that was something they needed to do.

He picked at his pasta, casually listening to the siblings plot things out. He enjoyed absorbing their conversations just as much as participating in them.

"I was thinking about that a bit today," Remus mused in between bites of his dinner. "Ron mentioned he was getting Charlie's old wand. I thought maybe we should take him to Olivander's and buy him a proper one."

"That sounds perfect," Iris agreed. "Ron's probably got hand-me-downs for everything else. Least we can do is make sure he has his own wand."

"It's only fair," she added, waving her fork about. "Given we got the twins new Clean Sweep 7s for making the Gryffindor team last year."

This must be what Iris meant when she said he wasn't the only nephew she bought stuff for. He couldn't help but feel really lucky.

"I imagine Harry won't object to another trip to Diagon Alley this summer, right?" Remus grinned his way, drawing him back into the conversation.

"No way! It was awesome!" he cried, excited by the prospect of going back. He quickly launched into a detailed recap of his crazy ride through the caverns below Gringotts and all the shops Iris had
taken him to. Remus listened attentively, seeming genuinely interested in hearing all about it. Iris sat beside them contently, occasionally adding a detail or two he'd missed or answering a question he posed her way.

It was easily the best dinner he'd had in his life. Iris and Remus allowed him to have multiple helpings of pasta. He got to lead most of the conversation, and neither of them seemed annoyed he was talking so much. In fact, they were encouraging him to, with Remus asking him all about the Nimbus 2000 he'd seen and how he and Iris had found such rare and beautiful owls.

After dinner, Iris suggested he and Remus put his school things away in his room, while she cleaned up the dishes. Remus grabbed his trunk from the living room and he carried his snowy owl's cage along behind him. He was thrilled to have some time to get to know Remus, who Iris said had been good friends with his Dad.

He put the owl cage on his empty nightstand. At Remus' suggestion, he opened the cage to allow the owl to stretch her wings and fly about his room. Remus hung his robes and cloak up in the wardrobe, so they wouldn't wrinkle. "We can buy a perch for your owl tomorrow," Remus promised, pointing to the open corner by his desk as a place they could put it. His owl hooted happily at that, almost as if she understood.

They stacked his spellbooks on one of his new bookshelves, with Remus telling him he could have a look around the bookshop in the morning for any books he'd like to read for pleasure. "Ah, I see Iris got you Hogwarts A History," Remus commented, pulling the book from his trunk. "It's a Lupin family tradition. Our Mum bought us each a copy before we started school. She actually read it on the train with your Mum - that's how they became friends."

Soaking up that bit of information into his memory, he watched Remus place the book on his other nightstand, beside a black picture frame. Curious, he walked toward the photo which showed a young redhead woman, arms wrapped around, a young man with unruly black hair and round glasses. "Is that…?" he started to ask, pointing to the frame.

"Your Mum and Dad," Remus confirmed. "We have plenty more to show you, but I thought you might like to have one on display."

Wordlessly, he picked up the frame, running his hand over their smiling faces. "It's moving!" he exclaimed, when he noticed his parents were dancing around a fountain, on a loop of sorts, within the frame.

"All wizard photographs move," Remus explained, latching his trunk closed and moving it off the bed to the floor in the back corner. "I actually bought a camera for your godmother to take to Hogwarts, while I was out today. I'll show you how it works in the morning."

Feeling overwhelmed by everything they'd willingly given him without thought or complaint, he placed the frame back on the nightstand and hugged his father's childhood friend snuggly. "Thanks, Remus."

"Always, Harry," Remus vowed, much like his sister had earlier.

"All right," Remus announced a moment later, glancing at his watch. "Time for bed."

"You must have had quite the adventure," Remus commented from behind, coming to join her in the kitchen. He leaned against the counter beside her, grabbing a towel and starting to dry the wet dishes.
she'd laid out on the mat. "Poor kid is worn out."

"Bit of a whirlwind really," she admitted, feeling exhausted herself. She hadn't slept much between arriving at the Dursleys' rented shack and leaving for Diagon Alley. "He didn't know anything about his parents or the Wizarding World."

"You didn't think he would."

"They told him Lily and James died in a car accident," she said, rinsing off a plate and passing it to him.

"They what?" he exclaimed loudly, just managing to keep from dropping the plate.

"Shhh," she hushed, glancing over her shoulder to the quiet hallway. "Don't wake him." Harry had only gotten a little more sleep than she had. He needed to rest.

"He's not going back," Remus assured firmly, more to himself than her, given she agreed wholeheartedly. "Albus tries to say otherwise, I'll be right there with you."

"The Lupin Twins united? Albus Dumbledore doesn't stand a chance."

"Ha," he snorted, drying the bowl she handed him. "We both know he'd bulldoze us down in seconds."

"I'm going to need you to watch Harry one day next week." She had no idea which day yet, but she could, without a doubt, expect a prompt owl from Narcissa telling her such, by early tomorrow morning.

"I'd be happy to. He can help me out in the shop," her brother agreed eagerly, obviously looking forward to having some more time with James' son. She could tell, like herself, he was already enjoying Harry's presence in their lives immensely. "What have you got planned? Auror business?"

"No." She wished. "I ran into Narcissa when I brought Harry to Madam Malkin's."

"How was that?" Remus asked with a knowing laugh.

"Well, Lucius wasn't with her, so surprisingly pleasant."

He nodded, tossing the dish towel over his shoulder, so he could grab a butterbeer from the fridge. Knowing he was still listening, she continued on. "Though, she's decided I need a completely new wardrobe. One that will make me look more like a Professor - and make Severus want to fuck me."

"Yeah," he whistled in amusement. "That's not really the part of your relationship with Severus that needs help."

She paused in her dishwashing, hands almost elbow deep in soapy water, to glare daggers at her twin. He raised his hands in surrender, backing down from that argument. Though, she could see he was still biting his lip to hide his smirk.

"So," he drew out. "Shopping with Narcissa should be fun."

"You've met Narcissa, right?" she muttered rhetorically. The two mostly got along, for a Gryffindor and Slytherin, and she knew he found Narcissa primarily tolerable when not accompanied by her husband. "She looks like she walked straight out of the 1940s."

"Relax," he grinned, resuming his chore of drying. "Narcissa's known you for over twenty years."
She's not going to dress you up like some posh aristocrat." He was right. For all their differences, Narcissa knew her well. She would likely work very hard to choose a wardrobe they both approved of.

", she raises a decent point," Remus added, a devious twinkle in his eye. "Something other than ripped jeans and t-shirts might help the kids recognize you're their Professor and not some seventh year who forgot her uniform."

Shutting off the water and grabbing a towel to dry her hands, she turned to lean her hip against the counter facing her brother. "Did you, Narcissa, and Albus get together or something?"

"Albus is in on this too, now?"

"He asked Madam Malkin to have teacher robes ready for me today, like I wasn't capable of doing so myself."

Her brother's eyes practically lit up at that, head tilting back in deep laughter. "That might be the greatest thing I've ever heard. The great Albus Dumbledore had to owl a tailor to insure one of his professors has got the proper uniform."

"Bugger off," she smiled, despite herself, flicking the water on and spraying him with the hose.

She shrieked, when he swatted her with the towel, the hose slipping from her grasp and drenching her t-shirt. Remus howled proudly, while she scrambled to shut the water off.

Suddenly remembering it wasn't just the two of them anymore, their ears strained to hear any sign they might have woken Harry. They were met with nothing but silence and the light hooting of their new owls. Sharing a relieved glance with her brother, she grabbed her wand off the counter to dry both their clothes.

They resumed putting the dishes away in the cabinets silently, until Remus deemed it safe to resume his teasing. "Did it even occur to you that you might need teacher robes?"

"No," she grudgingly admitted, hating when he was right. "I hate you."

"No you don't," he chuckled, putting the last dish away. "Now, come on, we have more work to do on your third year curriculum."

Sighing, she followed her brother into the living room. Remus flopped down unceremoniously onto the couch, pulling an open book on dark creatures out from under him. She settled into her usual spot on the floor, back resting against an armchair. She tugged the coffee table a bit closer to her and reached for the parchment outlining the first few lesson plans she had for her third years.

Third year would be mostly an in-depth review of dark creatures. They were to begin with bogarts. Then, they'd move onto hinkypunks and red caps. That was as far as they got yesterday, before she'd realize the time and had to leave for the Dursleys.

"You should probably move onto grindylows next," Remus suggested, flipping a few pages in his book. That would make sense. It would start transitioning the kids to more complex dark creature lessons. She could also easily order a grindylow to use for a practical lesson, or fish one out of the Black Lake if she were feeling adventurous.

"Maybe grindylows could lead into a series of lessons on water-dwelling creatures?"

"Yeah, that's good," Remus agreed, pointing his quill at her, eyes not wavering from the pages of his
book. "I like that. You could end with kelpies, then transition into nocturnal beasts."

"Care to guest star for my lecture on werewolves?" she teased, quickly scratching all that down on her parchment. She suddenly had the inspiration she needed for weeks of lessons - enough to fill, at least, her first term.

"Cute," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You know, you're good at this," she mused, as she added a grindylow to her supply list. "Albus should be hiring you."

"Defense may have been my best subject in school, but that in no way compares to your thirteen some-odd years of hands-on experience," he reminded, peering at her over the top of his book. "You're bringing a lot more to the table than you think."

"I suppose."

She didn't feel qualified, though. She wasn't exactly known for making positive decisions. She'd spent the past decade traipsing through the dingiest places the world had to offer, tracking dark wizards and straggling Death Eaters, usually getting herself injured in the process. The more dangerous the operation the better. All to avoid dealing with the parts of her life that mattered - the parts she got to leave behind waiting, every time she disappeared for months at a time.

That didn't sound like the makings of a good teacher. It sounded like a case for an intervention. Or therapy.

Maybe that's what this job offer really was: one giant intervention, forcing her to confront everything she'd been running from head on. The biggest of which currently resided in the Hogwarts dungeons.

"Besides," Remus continued absentmindedly, returning to his reading. "Someone needs to mind the shop. It's our primary source of income now. Hogwarts Professor doesn't exactly equate to Lead Field Auror for the Ministry, in regards to salary."

"Tell me about it," she groaned. That was an understatement. Her salary was essentially being cut in half. She'd probably cry when she saw the lack of an extra zero on her first paycheck.

The bookshop was currently thriving, so they wouldn't have to cut back too much. While her salary had provided the initial shop start-up funds and they'd relied on it to survive at the beginning, they mostly lived off the cash flow of the business now. In recent years, her pay was used to build up their savings and to indulge in the occasional luxury.

The store income would easily compensate her lower wages. Which was good, considering they were now supporting Harry too. They would still be able to splurge on the Weasley children, as well. They just wouldn't all be getting Nimbus 2000s.

"Do you think I should have taken the Ministry's offer?" she couldn't help but ask, after she finished outlining her nocturnal beasts lesson plans. "Gone and worked at the Academy with Alastor?"

"I think you'd be miserable there."

"That's not exactly a no."

"It's not a yes either," he sighed, reluctantly shifting to a sitting position and putting his book down on the table. "There were pros and cons to both offers, but I think the Defense post is the best fit at this time."
"That, and Harry is going to need you," he added leaning forward to rest his forearms on his knees. It put them in more direct eye contact, forcing her to really listen to him. It was annoying how he always managed to do that. "Right now he's excited, but, like most first years, that will turn to nerves quickly enough."

"I would be around more to help with the shop, if I'd taken the Academy job," she protested a tiny bit more. Because, while she'd left him alone for long stretches during her little dark wizard crusades, she felt guilty doing so when she was essentially permanently bound to Britain.

"More reason for you to teach at Hogwarts. Your customer service skills are dreadful."

She glared at her twin, reaching back for a pillow and chucking it at his smug face. It had little effect, merely encouraging him to laugh that much harder.

Sobering up, after a few minutes, he tossed the pillow back on the appropriate chair. "Molly actually asked if she could work at the shop a few days a week. It's just going to be her and Ginny come September 1st, when Arthur's working. She thinks it will be good for them to get out of the house."

"Whatever we'd normally pay someone, double it." It was the least they could do. Aside from the many gifts they dotted on the children, Molly and Arthur wouldn't accept any further help from them. She couldn't exactly fault them for it. She and Remus probably wouldn't have either, were their roles reversed. Still, that didn't mean they couldn't slip them some extra funds in her part-time salary, unbeknownst to Molly.

"Already done." She should have known. Remus thought of everything. "So, you can stop worrying about coverage during the full moons and whatever else is racing through that head of yours."

"Fine," she grumbled, accepting she'd lost this round. "I already talked to Albus anyway, though. He says you're welcome at Hogwarts anytime - the twins' quidditch matches, Christmas and Easter holidays, any of it."

"Looking forward to it. Now, can we get back to these lesson plans, please?" he urged, picking his book up and resuming his lounging on the couch. "There's only four more weeks till September 1st."
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Ron gets his wand. Iris finally goes to see Severus. Remus knocks some needed sense into his sister.

He was unpacking a box of books they'd just received, when he heard the swoosh of the fireplace in the backroom and the sound of pattering feet. "Aunt Iris! Uncle Remus!" a chorus of child-like shrieks rang out.

"Incoming, Remus," his sister warned from across the room, where she'd been attempting to rearrange one of his messier displays.

Smiling, he came round the counter just in time to be plowed down by the ginger-haired eleven year-old. Wrapping an arm around the boy, he leaned back against the front of the counter for support. Glancing over, he watched his sister catch Ginny out of a running leap, one hand grabbing the nearest bookshelf so she didn't stumble.

"Mum said you're taking me to buy my own wand," Ron exclaimed with, perhaps, the widest grin he'd ever seen on the boy.

"We are," he confirmed, looking up to see Molly finally making her way into the front room. "Olivander's - best wand shop there is."

"Thank you so much for doing this," Molly said gratefully when she reached them.

"Our pleasure, Molly," he assured. It honestly was. The seven Weasley children had been a bright spot in, what would otherwise be, a fairly dreary existence for him and Iris. He didn't want to imagine where either of them would be, had the Weasleys not been such a prominent part of their lives. He'd probably be a depressed, old before his time, bookshop owner, still moping over Sirius. Iris would probably have taken even more risks with her life, if possible, and ended up dead in a desert somewhere.

"Are you sure you're okay minding the shop? We can close for the day, if you'd prefer to come with."

"Don't be silly, Remus. I'm happy to do it."

"We appreciate it," Iris said, setting Ginny back on the ground. "Let me just go get Harry and we can be off."

Ruffling Ginny's hair affectionately, Iris started upstairs to their flat. Harry had been so immersed in *Hogwarts A History* this morning, they'd let him stay in bed reading a bit longer. Iris had gone up an hour or so ago to urge him into the bathroom for a shower. She'd left him eating an early lunch on the couch, when she came back down to work.

Ginny and Ron took advantage of the delay, running into the backroom where he kept books for their age bracket. Now alone, Molly turned his way, looking happy to have another adult to talk to. "How is he settling in?"
"Surprisingly well. Took to Iris straight away. Seems comfortable with me too," Harry and Iris got on thick as thieves. Semi-parenting almost seemed to come as naturally as breathing to her. Harry appeared to enjoy spending time with him too, often seeking him out when Iris was busy preparing for the start of school or out with Narcissa, who'd been unusually active in Iris' life these past few weeks. It was nice to see Iris reconnecting with her friends, and he certainly wasn't objecting to the added time with Harry.

"How could he not be?" Molly said kindly, glancing up to the loft area. He soon realized she was checking to make sure his sister wasn't about to reappear, when she asked, "And, how's Iris?"

"Iris... is being Iris," he sighed. There really was no better explanation than that. His sister, like always, was putting on a front. No one excelled at pretending all was well, when a raging storm was brewing beneath the surface, more than Iris. She'd been stewing on all the hurt and pain she'd endured in her life, going on a decade now. One of these days, the impending explosion would finally unleash, and it wouldn't be pretty when it did.

"Harry's been a welcome distraction, but I'm dreading the day it finally hits her this isn't just a long vacation."

"Has she seen him yet?"

He chuckled a little at that. Of course, she hadn't. Iris could stare down the worst sort the Wizarding World had to offer and not even flinch. But, facing the man she'd been in love with since she was eleven? Asking her to step in front of the killing curse would be easier.

"She'll leave it to the 31st. Mark my words." That was the last possible day she could push it off to, which meant that would be the day Iris would finally break and go see Severus Snape. "The good thing is, once she gets to Hogwarts, they'll be stuck with each other till next June. With any luck, they'll manage to fit, at least, one proper conversation in during that time."

The sound of an excited Harry running down the stairs above, followed by Iris calmly telling him to slow down, cut off whatever Molly had been about to say. That was probably for the best. She wasn't Severus' biggest fan.

"Harry, this is our friend, Molly," Iris introduced after they reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Pleasure to meet you," Harry greeted, suddenly looking nervous and sticking close to Iris. He'd anticipated as much. Despite the fact that Harry had been excitedly asking about meeting the Weasleys for days, it was still overwhelming. His experience with the Dursleys, and whoever their friends were, likely only made meeting new people more nerve-racking for him.

"Oh, you're so sweet," Molly smiled warmly. He could see Harry visibly relax, putting some space between him and Iris now. Molly had a way with people, especially children. Harry would be comfortable with her in no time. "Let me get the kids back over here. Ron! Ginny!"

"Coming!" their collective voices hollered from the backroom. The two came bounding out from behind a shelf, clearly in some sort of race, sliding to a halt in front of their mother. With a shake of her head, she crossed her arms and gestured expectantly in Harry's direction.

"Hi, I'm Ron," the boy grinned happily, with a wave. They'd warned both kids to be wary of their fanfare around Harry, and he was proud to see Ron following through on that. "That's my sister Ginny. She can be shy," Ron added, pointing to Ginny who had shuffled closer to Molly during the exchange.
"I'm Harry," Harry said, smiling back, before he turned Ginny's way. "Hi, Ginny."

Ginny beamed back at him, stepping around her mother to wave at him.

"Okay," Iris called out. "Wand shopping anyone?"

"Me!" Ron cried, bouncing a bit on the balls of his feet. "Can Harry help me pick out my wand?"

"In the words of Olivander, the wand must choose the wizard," he quoted with a wink. "But, we can stop in Quality Quidditch Supplies. You can show Harry around in there."

"Wicked!" Ron exclaimed, pounding a fist in the air. "Bet they have the new Nimbus 2000. It's the fastest broom in the world!"

"They do," Harry confirmed, looking pleased to have something to contribute. "I saw it when Iris took me to Diagon Alley a few weeks ago."

"No way!" With that, they lost the boys' attention completely. Harry eagerly started recounting every detail he could remember about the broomstick, Ron's jaw dropping in amazement. Soon, Ron was animatedly explaining the rules of quidditch to Harry and listing all his favorite players.

"Well, they're becoming fast friends," Iris acknowledged sounding relieved. "Does Ginny want to come along?"

"Can I, Mummy?" the girl asked, looking up at her mother with hopeful eyes.

"Are you sure you two don't mind?"

"Not at all," Iris assured her. They'd initially offered to take all the kids, but the twins were at their friend Lee's house and Percy was, apparently, already studying for his O.W.L.s. Molly had said Ginny would stay with her, but he knew his sister wouldn't let that happen. "It'll spare me the all boys club."

"As if you wouldn't fit right in with that," Molly teased knowingly. "You can go, if you like, sweetheart," she agreed finally.

"Yes!" Ginny grinned, jumping into Iris' arms. With little hesitation, his sister hoisted the ten year old onto her hip. She would definitely be hurting in the morning.

"But, no roping your aunt and uncle into buying you everything under the sun," Molly instructed sternly, pointing a finger at her daughter. "This trip is for Ron."

"Yes, Mummy."

"Don't worry, Gin," he heard Iris whisper conspiratorially. "We'll make sure you get an ice cream and some sweets."

"Ready, everyone?" he hollered, so Molly wouldn't overhear and yell at them for spoiling her children, yet again.

"Yes!" all three children nodded.

"Have fun," Molly waved, walking with them to the fireplace. "And, I expect you two to be on your best behavior."

"We will."
"I'll take Ginny through first," Iris said, returning Ginny back to the floor. "Then you can send the boys."

Iris grabbed Ginny's hand, walking into the fireplace. She tossed some floo powder, and the two disappeared in a green flame.

"All right, Ron," he called out, interrupting what was surely more quidditch talk. When he had the boy's full attention, he continued. "Harry's never traveled by floo powder before. Think you can take him through with you? I'll bring up the rear."

"Sure, Uncle Remus," Ron nodded, looking happy to be given the responsibility. "Come on, Harry. It's really easy." Ron quickly took Harry's hand, pulling him into the fireplace and the two were gone shortly thereafter.

"Thank you again, Remus. I haven't seen Ron this excited in a long time."

"We love the kids, Molly. We're happy to spoil them rotten," he reminded her. "I'll have them back before closing."

"Take as long as you like," she said. "And, I insist you, Iris, and Harry come for dinner."

"We never pass up an opportunity for your delicious cooking," he agreed, grabbing some floo powder and tossing it into the fireplace. "Diagon Alley."

With a slight cough from inhaled soot, he stepped out onto the cobblestone walkway where Iris and the three kids were waiting. "First stop, Olivander's," he announced, laughing as the kids practically dragged them down the alley with glee.

It didn't take Olivander nearly as long to find a match for Ron as Iris described it taking for Harry. Three wands in, and the 14 inch willow wand, with a unicorn hair core, was shooting out red fireworks. They all clapped, smiling at Ron's excitement. He was glad they'd decided on getting him a wand. Every first year deserved to have this experience. It was a right of passage, and something all the first years would be talking about their first week of school.

Once Olivander boxed Ron's wand back up, he paid the seven galleons and handed the bag to Ron's waiting hands. Ron took the bag proudly, high-fiving Harry and Ginny. Chuckling he led the lot of them out of the shop and down the alley toward Quality Quidditch Supplies.

"You know, Uncle Remus has a unicorn hair core too," Iris told Ron as they walked.

"Really?" the boy cried, sharing a smile with him. Ron seemed pleased they had that in common.

"I do," he nodded. "They make some of the most faithful of wands. My wand, however, is made of cypress wood."

"Makes him self-sacrificing and heroic," Iris winked, and he backhanded her arm playfully.

"Mine's willow wood. What does that mean?"

Deciding it best to leave out the part of wandlore that said it may indicate some unwarranted insecurities in its owner, he opted for the more encouraging bit of legend. "It means you have great potential."

"Harry said his is made of holly."
"Yes," Iris confirmed. "But, it's the phoenix core that's most interesting. Olivander always said they're quite picky in choosing their owner. I expect you'll have a special bond with your wand, Harry."

"What kind of wand do you have, Aunt Iris?" Ginny asked curiously.

Iris pulled hers out, rolling the black wand between her fingers like the showoff his twin could be. "Blackthorn wood with a dragon heartstring core."

"Olivander said Iris has a warrior's wand," Harry piped up.

"That would be the blackthorn wood," he explained to the kids. "It's said owners and their wands must pass through danger together to truly bond. So, I imagine, given your aunt's role as an Auror, she and her wand must have a bond like no other."

He grinned wickedly at his sister, who simply rolled her eyes. "Ignore your Uncle," she muttered. "As fun as wandlore is, it's still exactly that."

"Remus, why don't you take the boys into Quality Quidditch Supplies, and let them run wild?" Iris suggested, pulling the group off to the side so they could form a plan.

"Yes!" the boys grinned at each other.

"I'm going to take Ginny to Sugarplum's," she told him and he saw Ginny's face light up. Ginny loved alone time with her Aunt Iris. The sweets were likely an added bonus. "Percy's been appointed a Prefect. Thought he might like a new set of quills from Amanuensis."

"Thank Godric you remembered," he breathed, kicking himself for forgetting Percy's owl, proudly informing them of his achievement. "That completely slipped my mind. The boys and I will stop into Gambel and Japes too - grab some stuff for the twins, so they aren't left out."

"Meet you at Florean's in an hour?"

He glanced over at the boys enthusiastically discussing quidditch. "Best make it an hour and a half. I have a feeling we'll be staring at the new Nimbus for a while."

A little over an hour later, she and Ginny started making their way to Florean's, arms full of six bags of sweets and a nicely gift-wrapped box of elegant quills for Percy. Ginny had a stuffed purple puffskein resting on of her shoulder. At least she hoped it was stuffed. Thinking about it, she probably should've checked that before giving Ginny the money. She'd never hear the end of it from Molly, if she'd bought the girl a living pet.

Rounding the corner, she noticed Remus and the boys heading their way. Her eyes widened at the number of bags in their hands. When they caught up to them, Ron and Harry excitedly showed her their new Chudley Cannons jerseys. Harry acquired a few new posters for his room, which she was pleased to see. Ron had also made sure to buy Ginny a miniature Nimbus 2000 that soared around the palm of her hand.

"Molly is going to kill us," she assessed, as they piled their purchases around a table, while the kids went inside to buy sundaes.

"She must be used to it by now," Remus shrugged unconcerned, dropping into a chair. "When have we ever gone shopping with the kids and not bought out the entire alley?"
That was a fair point, she admitted, settling into the seat beside her brother. They'd been at this since Bill and Charlie were small.

The kids joined them a short while later, with Harry recounting a complete crash-course on everything he'd learned about quidditch to her. She listened intently, occasionally adding a few anecdotes about her time on the Slytherin team. Ginny appeared almost as enthralled as the boys. She made a mental note to remember that, and get the girl flying. She doubted the Weasley brothers let their little sister join in on their summer quidditch practices.

After they finished their ice creams, they made their way back to the fireplace. Back in the bookstore, Molly hurried over to greet them, frowning when she noticed all the bags.

"I swear, Molly, it's never intentional," she defended, looking sheepish under her friend's intense gaze.

"Honestly, you two are worse than the children," Molly laughed, shaking her head, and relieving her of the bags. "Come along. Arthur got out of work early today. He just arrived with Percy and the twins. They're upstairs getting dinner started for me."

Her head snapped to Remus, eyes widening. He, too, shared a similar expression. Their entire kitchen was full of muggle technology. As fascinated with muggle artifacts as Arthur was, he was bloody terrible at using them. Their flat wouldn't survive Arthur Weasley attempting to cook dinner in it.

"Remus, why don't you and Molly take the kids upstairs? I can close up shop down here," she suggested.

Remus agreed, swiftly ushering the three kids and a startled Molly up the stairs. Chuckling a bit, she pulled out her keys and locked the front doors. She tidied up the counter as best she could, relocating some of the unopened boxes from their latest shipment to the shelf behind it. They could deal with that in the morning. They'd bid on them from a bookstore that closed down in Wales. If they were lucky, there'd be a rare find buried somewhere in the lot. Remus had been fairly successful in previous bids. He seemed to have developed a sixth sense for it.

Deciding nothing more could be done in the shop tonight, she made her way up to the flat, blowing out the candles with a wave of her wand. She'd barely opened the flat door, when she was all but flattened by her twin godsons. "Aunt Iris!"

Laughing, she pulled them each into a tight hug. It had been too long since she'd seen her two mischief makers. She'd missed them.

"Did you like our joke shop finds?" she asked, finally able to shut the door and move further inside.

"Yes!" George grinned.

"It's going to be a good school year," Fred winked.

"Just remember, set off a dungbomb in my classroom, and I will show no mercy," she warned in amusement.

Percy shuffled over to her next, his Prefect badge shining bright from where he'd pinned it to his jumper. "Thank you for my new quills, Aunt Iris," he said, starting to hold out his hand. Loving to embarrass him, she wrapped her arms around him instead, ruffling his hair a bit.

He only protested for a minute, before grudgingly hugging her in return. "Congratulations on
making Prefect, Percy," she said. "Uncle Remus and I are so proud of you," she added finally releasing him.

The other three kids had made themselves at home in the living room. Ginny appeared to be reading Harry's copy of *Hogwarts A History*, with her feet dangling over the arm of her chair. Her stuffed puffskein, which she could swear just blinked, sat in the girl's lap, and her tiny Nimbus whizzed about her head. Harry and Ron sat on the floor, backs against the coffee table, each holding a controller for the Nintendo she'd broke down and purchased last week. Harry seemed to be guiding Ron through, what looked like, an intense game of *Super Mario Brothers*.

Admittedly, though she would never say so in front of Remus, she'd bought the game system more for herself than anything. It had been something of an impulse buy, when she was supposed to be buying just a few movies for them to watch with Harry. But, given, how much enjoyment Harry had got out of it thus far, she didn't regret it - even if Remus accused her of having no self-control. He'd been the one to send her for the movies. So, really, this was partially her twin's fault.

Moving to the kitchen, she was met with the mouth-watering aroma that could only be associated with Molly Weasley's cooking. Honestly, she and Remus would be lost under a mountain of take-out containers, if Molly wasn't constantly insisting they come for dinner or coming by the flat to cook for them. Remus had miraculously inherited some of their mother's abilities in the kitchen, but, regrettably, most of Hope Lupin's talent had largely been lost on her only two children. She, herself, might be able to brew any potion set in front of her - having known Severus for twenty years. Put her in a kitchen, however, and the chances of her whipping up something edible were slim to none.

"There's our world traveler," Arthur hollered, tossing his arms in the air, when he finally noticed her. "Free of her hospital bed, at last."

"Arthur," she grinned, letting him kiss her on the cheek. "How are the raids coming?" she asked, grabbing a butterbeer from the fridge and tossing two to the twins. She felt out of the loop, not working for the Ministry any longer. She used to receive reports from all the divisions in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, so she could monitor if any of their cases might be related. She would miss knowing all the ongoings of the magical world.

"Seven this week," he commented, sounding exhausted. Damn. Seven was twice as many as usual. "Nothing on Lucius Malfoy, though, I'm afraid."

"Arthur!" Molly scolded, tilting her head her way.

"Right," Arthur nodded, lightbulb going off in his head. "Sorry, Iris. I-"

"Relax, Arthur," she assured. "I don't think it's much of a secret that I'd love to nab Lucius as much as anybody." If it hadn't been for Narcissa, and Lucius turning on Bellatrix, she'd have succeeded at that ten year ago.

"I must say," Arthur said a moment later, glancing about the kitchen. "I do love coming here. So many marvelous things," he announced happily, moving in front of the microwave. "For instance, what is this contraption?"

"It's called a microwave," she told him, taking a sip of butterbeer to conceal her smile. "We use it reheat leftover food."

"Fascinating," Arthur breathed, leaning so close his nose practically pressed up against it. "How does it work?"
"Remus would be happy to explain that to you," she chuckled, grinning wickedly at her twin over Arthur's shoulder.

Remus scowled at her silently, rolling his eyes, before he pushed off from where he'd been leaning against the wall. "I'd be happy to, Arthur."

When she got enough pleasure from listening to Remus attempt to review the fundamentals of a microwave with Arthur, she turned Molly's way. "Anything I can do to help, Molly?"

"NO!" everyone in the room shouted collectively.

Raising her hands in defeat, she backed out of the kitchen and joined the twins on the couch. They told her all about their day at Lee Jordan's house, and about the owl they'd received from Oliver Wood, telling them he'd been named Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. The twins would be working overtime this season, if any of the stories they'd previously shared about Oliver were anything to go by. Good thing she and Remus bought them those Clean Sweep 7s last year. They'd be able to keep up with all the extra practices.

A short while later, Molly announced dinner was ready. Harry and Ron quickly paused their game, running alongside the rest of the kids to the table. She followed close behind, settling in beside Remus. It was a tight squeeze when they had the entire Weasley family over, but Remus always seemed to manage to extend the table enough to fit everyone.

"This looks amazing, Molly," she said, admiring the delicious-looking roast beef and mash potatoes. Harry, too, appeared to be salivating at the display. Wait till he saw the start-of-term feast at Hogwarts.

She sat back, quietly enjoying her dinner, as she watched the six kids chatting animatedly about Hogwarts and Remus discussing the store with Arthur and Molly. For the first time since waking up in Saint Mungo's, she thought, perhaps, losing her job with the Ministry might not be all bad. Harry was back in her life, Remus looked better than she'd ever seen him, and she wouldn't be missing quite as many milestones in the Weasley children's lives anymore.

She would be there for wand shopping and first days. Quidditch matches and practical jokes. Prefect badges and, probably, Head Boy ones too.

She would be there for holidays and birthdays. Full moons and sibling movie nights.

For the first time in a decade, she would have the chance to be a better aunt, a better sister, and a better friend. She would have the chance to put right all the parts of her life she'd fucked up these past few years. Hopefully, she wouldn't fail at her second chance, the way she had her first.

Knock. He glared at the door. There were very few people who could pass through his wards. A list that grew considerably smaller, when he considered it was the day before he returned to Hogwarts.

By the third knock, he grudgingly rose from his armchair and moved to the door. He swung it open, just as she raised her hand to knock a fourth time. She was nothing if not persistent.

She looked surprisingly good, compared to the last time he'd seen her - half dead in Saint Mungo's. Her hair was longer, fuller too. Access to hair care products on a regular basis, and lacking the stress of Auror life, was obviously breathing life back into it. Her low-cut v-neck clung tight to her chest, making him wish she'd had half a mind to wear a jacket. Certain parts of his anatomy were
forgetting to be angry with her - particularly when his eyes fell to her long, endless legs, cascading out of her absurdly short pair of black shorts.

"You cut your hair?" she frowned, drawing his eyes back up to her shocked face. Her hand reached out, absentmindedly brushing his, now, chin-length black hair, before she seemed to realize what she was doing and quickly shoved it back in her pocket.

The haircut had been an impulse reaction to her disappearance. She always liked his hair longer, and he'd wanted to hurt her. In his fury, it had seemed a logical way to go about that. He'd regretted it almost immediately. The only person he'd really hurt was himself, because he preferred his hair on the longer side too, and she hadn't even been around to witness its shortest phase. He could magic it back to its original length, but it was a matter of pride now.

"I expected you to be halfway to Albania or somewhere by now," he snapped. She was back finally, leaving him far better options to hurt her like she had him.

It had the desired effect. Her eyes hardened into ice, and he could see her fingers curling inside her pockets. "You know as well as I do, that part of my life is over," she snarled.

He did. Even if he hadn't heard the Healers telling Remus, the subsequent flood of articles that followed surely would've informed him. The Prophet had been predicting the demise of her career, before she'd even woken from her coma.

"Perhaps," he admitted reluctantly opening the door further and allowing her inside. "Though, not of your own accord." No, if she had her way, this visit would likely involve hours of heated sex, before she ran off on her next operation like he was nothing to her. The routine was growing tiresome.

"You're seriously going to criticize my life choices?" she accused, brushing passed him so he could close the door.

That was surprisingly low. She didn't often use his past against him in such a way - not even on occasions where he might actually deserve it.

Two could play at that game, though. Because, for once, he wasn't the one in the wrong. "What are you doing here?" he muttered, spinning round to where she stood awkwardly, in the center of his living room, arms crossed. "It's not like you to just show up unannounced. That's more typical of how you leave places now."

A flicker of hurt flashed behind her eyes, and it took all he had not to back down. He didn't typically hit back that hard either, but leaving him with nothing more than a note? If he could even consider the minuscule two sentences she'd managed to string together a note. That stung. She may as well have taken off without a word. It might have hurt less.

"I accepted a job at Hogwarts," she finally confessed. "Thought you might want to know, prior to the start-of-term feast."

"You took the Defense post?" He knew that, of course. Albus mentioned it nearly a month before. He wasn't about to tell her that, though. "That's a one year job, at best."

"Albus apparently believes I'll, somehow, miraculously defy the odds," she shrugged tossing her hands in the air. She sounded as if she didn't trust Dumbledore's assessment in the slightest. With a sigh, she sat down on his couch, leaning tiredly on her elbow. "Whatever happens, it's one year I don't have to worry about what to do with my disaster of a life."
"And…" she added quietly, staring off into space. "It's Harry's first year."

"You've seen him?" he breathed, feeling his anger deflating. He moved to sit next to her, leaving more space than he normally would. Albus hadn't told him she'd been allowed to see Lily's son. He supposed it made sense. If she'd be teaching at Hogwarts, they would certainly be running into one another. Iris wasn't the type to see the young boy and not mention who she was to him.

"Looks so much like James, it's terrifying," she told him with a shutter. That must be difficult. While she'd managed to reconcile with Potter, far more than he ever did, she'd never quite forgiven the man for everything he and Black put them through in school. "He's been staying at my place. I'm bringing him to Kings Cross in the morning."

"Remus is going as well, I presume?"

"He's supposed to," she nodded. "He's spent a lot of time with Harry, this past month. They're getting along well."

"Good." No one deserved to build a relationship with Lily's son more than the Lupin twins. He would never forget the sheer anguish Iris felt when she lost the custody hearing. It had been enough to send her knocking on his door, after all. Had Remus not been completely consumed by his depression over Black's betrayal, at the time, he suspected the man would've felt the pain of Harry being ripped away from them equally as so.

"Really?" he heard Iris question, drawing him back to the present.

"I don't begrudge your brother," he reminded her sternly. She was being petty, pretending otherwise. If anything, Remus had become his closest friend since the War ended. "Not anymore. You know that."

"I do," she admitted, and he could see the pent up animosity start to leave her too. She leaned against the back of the couch, closing her eyes for a minute. He longed to close the distance between them, but it was probably too soon.

"You'll be happy to know Alastor's no longer speaking to me."

Curious, he raised an eyebrow as a means for her to continue. Alastor had been her mentor at the Academy and through her early Auror years. They'd fought alongside one another for The Order, and been with each other when they found the Prewett twins' bodies. As far as he knew, they remained close to this day.

"The Ministry offered me a position teaching the new cadets, in addition to back-channeling and organizing ops from the London Office," she explained. "Alastor is taking it as a personal slight that I've chosen to take my knowledge and skills elsewhere."

"You turned down the offer?" he questioned, sitting up quickly in surprise. "All you've ever wanted was to be an Auror." It was literally one of the first things she mentioned, when they met on the Hogwarts Express.

"That's not all I've ever wanted," she whispered, voice thick. "It isn't exactly the first time I've considered walking away from it either."

She met his eyes, barring into them with that look of hers that could bust straight through his occulmency shield. As much as being an Auror had consumed most of her life, she had, in fact, offered to quit once before. And, it was his fault she hadn't followed through on that.
A heavy silence filled the room, as they continued to stare at one another. Eventually, he couldn't take it any longer, sighing wearily. "So, he really looks like James?"

"More than either of us would like," she smiled sadly, disappointment in her eyes at the change in topic. He was always doing that - backing away whenever they got close to the heart of the issues between them. "He's got Lily's eyes, though. He's a sweet boy, like his mother too."

He nodded, distractedly, finally taking the time to really observe her. Good as she looked, in comparison to when he'd sat by her bedside in July, there was a new set of tension weighing down on her shoulders. She seemed burned out, like Remus when a full moon was coming on.

Sliding closer to her on the couch, he rested a hand lightly on her knee. Her eyes flickered up to his yearningly. "Are you okay?"

"Sev, I need your opinion on something," she said at last. "Something you can't tell Albus about."

He withdrew his hand immediately, glaring over at her. "You show up here after seven months, and now you're asking me to lie to my boss?"

She cringed, making him feel a tad guilty. She rubbed a hand over her face, leaning her elbows on her knees. "For what it's worth, I haven't told Remus either."

"Why not?" It wasn't like her to withhold information from her twin.

"Because for someone keeping a wolf-sized one of his own, he's terrible at keeping other people's secrets."

His lips twitched into a small smirk. "He get's that guilty look on his face."

"Tell me about it," she chuckled, cracking a small grin herself. "He got us in trouble constantly as kids, without even saying anything."

Not just as kids. He'd witnessed Hope Lupin effortlessly drag information out of her son, straight up to the final days of her life. "What's this important secret?" he asked warily.

"Harry's wand has a phoenix tail feather," she started, though it was obviously more than that. If the boy got his wand, like most students, at Olivander's, a phoenix core wouldn't be all that out of place. "The feather came from Fawkes, Sev."

His eyes widened, suddenly realizing what had her so worried. "His wand and the Dark Lord's share the same core?"

"They're brothers," she confirmed. "Do I need to be concerned?"

"Possibly," he admitted, wishing he could give her a more reassuring answer. He, honestly, didn't have the faintest idea what it meant. The only thing he knew for certain was, she was being wise in minimizing who she divulged such information to, and demonstrating immense trust by telling him. "I'll research it."

"Thank you," she smiled gratefully, reaching over to squeeze his hand. Their eyes met once more, before she hastily glanced away. "I should go. I have to meet Harry at the Weasleys by nine tomorrow, and I've hardly packed."

With regretful eyes, she pulled her hand back and moved to stand. The effort must have twisted her nerves the wrong way, because she stumbled a few steps, clutching her back in, what looked like,
immense pain. "AH!"

Rising quickly, he walked across the room to grab a small vial he'd been keeping on the table by his armchair. "You should use this," he instructed, passing the vial to her. "I brewed it this morning. I'll have more when you get to school."

She frowned at the vial in her hands, until it suddenly dawned on her. "Albus already told you I'd be working at Hogwarts."

"He thought you'd have already mentioned it. I knew you'd wait as long as you could, though."

"Maybe if I'd known I'd get such a warm welcome." she grumbled, before shaking her head and taking a calming breath. "Never mind. I'm just going to say thank you, before we start arguing again."

"That's probably wise."

He watched her pull her shirt over her head, unconcerned by his continued presence. He bit hard on his tongue at the sight of her creamy breasts poking, ever so slightly, out of her black-lace bra. It took every ounce of will-power he had to keep his feet firmly planted where they stood.

She uncapped the vial, staring at it a moment, then looked over at him hesitantly. "I might need some help."

"Of course," he nodded, trying to shake off the charged air filling the room. She was in pain. That was what this was about.

He took a few steps toward her, growing concerned when she wouldn't turn around for him. "Iris?"

She chewed her lip, uncharacteristically nervous. After twenty years, they ordinarily had an unparalleled level of comfort around one another, and yet, he couldn't even get her to look at him right now.

"It's not pretty," she warned, arms crossing over her body self-consciously.

"The scars," he reminded himself. Iris could hardly be considered vain. Beautiful as she was, she, herself, put very little stock in her looks. That didn't mean, however, that she wouldn't be affected by the intense scarring that now covered a large portion of her back.

"If you think that matters to me, you don't know me all that well," he said softly, tucking some loose hair behind her ear. She leaned into his palm. Then, with a deep breath, she slowly turned.

He tried to mask his hiss at the bright red, irritated lines, angrily cascading like mangled tree branches across her back. He would murder Rookwood with his bare hands, should he ever get the opportunity.

Determined to make sure she knew he didn't see her as any different - that she was still the most stunning woman he ever laid eyes on - he casually reached out for the vial. Pouring the salve into his hands, he rubbed them together and went about massaging it onto every inch of the scarring, as gently as possible. Her muscles started to relax under his touch, and he found himself greedily dipping his fingers a smidge lower under the waistband of her shorts than strictly necessary.

After the salve was fully applied, he tossed the vial on the couch. He stepped closer to her, feeling her instinctively lean back against his chest. Running his fingers lightly down her bare arms, he buried his face in her hair, breathing in the familiar citrus scent of her shampoo - same as the bottle
still sitting in his shower where she'd left it.

With a kiss to her hair, he spun her back around, needing to look deep into those enchanting emerald eyes. The passion-filled haze between them shattered almost instantly, when his gaze landed square on the center of her chest. "You still wear it?" he breathed in disbelief, wondering how he'd never noticed before.

"What?" she questioned, still shaking off the dreamy fog. Following his eye-line, she glanced down at the platinum silver band dangling from the chain around her neck.

Raw fury suddenly danced across her eyes, as she ripped herself out of his grasp. "Of course, I still wear it," she growled, angrily grabbing her shirt off the couch. She stormed toward the door, not bothering to put her shirt back on, in her haste. "It actually meant something to me."

"Iris-" he tried in vain, wincing when the door slammed behind her. Cursing his stupidity, he snatched the empty vial off the couch. He flung it hard against the nearest wall, watching as it shattered into tiny pieces.

He glanced up from his book at the click of the lock. Looking at his watch, he frowned. She hadn't been gone as long as he'd anticipated, which could only mean one thing. The two hadn't really talked about anything that actually mattered.

He choked back a laugh, when she stumbled into the flat wearing just a black bra, clutching her crumbled t-shirt haphazardly in her hand. It would appear they hadn't talked much at all. "That didn't take long," he commented with amusement.

"What?" she questioned confused. Following his gaze, she looked down to assess her state of undress. "Oh shit, Remus. That's not what happened," she glared, tugging her shirt over her head. "He brewed ointment for my scaring."

"Well, that's disappointing." While not as ideal as a genuine conversation, sex would've, at least, been better than an argument - the other likely scenario for her early arrival home. Grunting, she collapsed into the chair across from him, burying her face in her hands. Realizing this would likely be a long conversation, he marked his place and set the book down on the table. He crossed his legs, hands folded in his lap, and gazed across at his twin expectantly.

"He saw the ring," she finally admitted, mumbling through her hands.

"Ah, so you brushed off whatever he might be feeling, and apparated away before even putting your shirt back on?" he recapped, knowing full well he was correct in his assumption. These two were impossible, but predictable. "I sincerely hope at least one neighbor got a decent look."

"You're really going to defend Severus?" she exclaimed, head snapping up to glower at him. "You, of all people?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know perfectly well, any animosity Severus and I had died out long ago," he reminded her, not that she needed it. "And, you did sneak out on him, with barely a note, before taking off on a six-month long manhunt. I mean - Rookwood sighting. Don't know how long I'll be gone. - really? You couldn't have added another sentence or two?" He'd been hurt for Severus, when the man reluctantly showed him the hastily scribbled note his sister left on her pillow.

"We haven't been in a relationship deserving of anything more than that, for nearly a decade." She
crossed her arms defensively, though her eyes told him she knew that was complete bullshit. She didn't wear an eleven year old engagement ring, every single day, because she was still sleeping with her ex-fiancé. Whether she'd admit it to herself or not, his sister remained entirely committed, both physically and emotionally, to Severus Snape.

"He stops by here when you're gone."

She immediately dropped the hem of her shirt, which she'd been unconciously playing with.
"What?" she breathed, her throat sounding dry.

"He knows I'm alone, so he checks up on me," he elaborated. Severus, honestly, went out of his way to be sure he was okay, whenever Iris was gone. The man brought him a whole host of potions to help ease into and recover from his transformations, every full moon. They met for lunches and dinners. Sometimes the potion master would just turn up at the shop, grading essays behind the counter, while he worked. They'd come a long way since Hogwarts. "We commiserate over not knowing if you're alive or dead."

"You never told me that."

"I promised him I wouldn't," he shrugged in explanation. Initially, he assumed they would manage to come back to one another themselves, if given sufficient time to heal. He knew better now. It was time for him to step in. "But, you two have had ample time to work things out on your own, and failed. So, I'm enacting the ancient art known as a brother's prerogative to meddle."

"You and Albus both," she sighed, leaning back in her chair, looking lost in her own thoughts. "Did Severus come to the hospital?"

"You know the answer to that." His sister could be dense sometimes, but she wasn't oblivious. Lord Voldemort, himself, wouldn't be able to keep Severus away from the hospital when she was hurt. "He was there almost the second I got word to him. Barely left for two weeks, until they told us you'd be likely coming to shortly."

He'd tried to convince Severus to stay beyond that, but couldn't exactly blame the man for leaving. Needing to know Iris would live was a far cry from being ready to forgive her.

"I don't know if I like this," Iris squinted across the way, a hint of a smile breaking through. "You two being friends."

"Tumultuous teenage years aside, we were always going to become, at the very least, friendly, in the end." He'd never particularly disliked Severus, like James and Sirius had. He certainly hadn't supported their continuous bullying of the boy who'd been nothing but kind to his sister. His deepest regret was not standing up to them more - intervening like his sister and Lily had. "We had some pretty strong common ground pulling us together. We both love you."

His twin's smile was gone like that. "Severus doesn't love me," she scowled, jumping from her seat to pace about the room.

"If he did- Merlin, Remus," she cried, tossing her hands in frustration. "I would've quit being an Auror for him."

He watched his sister snatch a piece of parchment off the table, crumpling it in her hand, as she continued to bare a hole in their carpet. "I would've even left the bloody Order, if he'd just been willing to renounce his own ties and run away with me to Brazil or Africa - anywhere Voldemort's reign hadn't yet seized."
"And thank Godric, he somehow managed to keep his head enough to refuse," he finally snapped, tired of having this argument over-and-over again. She froze instantly, spinning to face him in shock. He rarely raised his voice, much less to her, but this had gotten out of hand. "Voldemort would've murdered you both, before you so much as set foot out of Britain." She was plenty smart enough, with more than sufficient Auror experience, to know the truth of that.

"On top of that, he saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives with the information he passed you and Dumbledore from inside Voldemort's inner circle." Severus certainly hadn't joined up with Voldemort's followers because he believed in their cause, and he'd been quick to turn spy against them. "The attack on the Ministry alone would've been a bloodbath, had we not known ahead of time it was coming."

"That's not the point," Iris protested feebly. She was fighting a losing battle, and she knew it.

"No, it's exactly the point," he corrected sternly, knowing she needed to hear this. Someone needed to finally take the truth and jam it into that thick skull of hers. "Whatever you tell yourself, Iris, you haven't been punishing the man for nearly a decade, because your life didn't turn out like some tacky 'on the run' romance novel. You're punishing him, because he had the audacity to risk his own life to save yours."
Flashback - 1971

Chapter Summary

First meetings. House sortings. Iris gets some needed reassurance, from an unexpected source. Narcissa and Lucius find themselves a pair of mentees.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long. I hadn't initially planned on this being a flashback chapter, but I found myself referencing these events in upcoming chapters.

I have a good amount done on the next two chapters, so hopefully those will be up this week.

"Remus, I think there's room in this compartment!" He glanced up from comforting Lily, over her recent fight with Petunia, to see a slightly out-of-breath girl poke her head through the door with a polite knock. "Do you have room for two more? Everywhere else is full."

There was already more people than he'd like in the compartment, he assessed, with a glance to the two boys sitting across from him. Lily, on the other hand, smiled kindly at the girl. "Sure. We can make space," she nodded, as did the two boys. He couldn't find himself arguing when it forced Lily to shuffle closer to him on the bench to make room.

"Thanks!" the girl grinned, looking relived, and gestured down the corridor for someone to join them.

He watched the girl carefully, in her ripped jeans and Welsh Nationals t-shirt, lug her Hogwarts trunk into the compartment and hoist it onto the luggage rack above. After plunking her backpack down in the spot beside Lily, the girl disappeared back down the corridor. She reappeared with a second Hogwarts trunk, easily storing it beside hers.

He suddenly understood why, when a pale, sickly-looking boy, shuffled in behind her. He offered a small, smile to the group, before sitting down next to the boy who introduced himself earlier as Sirius Black.

"Thanks again," the girl said gratefully, sitting beside Lily. "We only just made the train."

"Someone needed to make sure her hair was perfect," the boy teased, exhausted eyes lighting up with mischief.

The girl glared at the boy exasperatedly, giving him an inclination the two were likely related. He'd only ever seen siblings act like that. "Yes, Remus," she sighed dramatically. "It was my french braid that delayed us, not the fourteen times you had to run back in the house to hug Mum."

The two glowered at each other playfully, until Lily broke in. "You're siblings?"
"Twins," the girl confirmed, spinning to face Lily. "I'm Iris. That's my brother, Remus," she added, pointing across the way.

"Lily," his friend greeted, shaking Iris' hand. "This is my friend, Severus."

To his surprised, Iris leaned around Lily to wave at him. Her emerald eyes were seemingly endless, like one could get lost just staring into them. Curiously, Iris appeared uninterested in Potter and Black's introductions, mostly ignoring them to pull out a book from her backpack. Seeming unsurprised by his sister, Remus quickly moved to shake the boys' hands instead.

Apparently unused to being overlooked, James Potter cleared his throat until Iris' eyes flickered up from her book. He was pleased to see annoyance dance across her face, as she glared over at the Potter boy.

"So, you like the Welsh Nationals?" Potter asked, sounding desperate to make casual conversation that would reel the girl into his charms. Something told him Potter was in over his head.

"No. I just like the t-shirt."

Remus groaned, banging his head against the padding behind him. "Ignore her," he told Potter apologetically. "My sister's native language is sarcasm."

Iris rolled her eyes theatrically. "Sorry," she grumbled, sounding anything but. "Yes, I like quidditch."

"So do I," Potter beamed, dragging the conversation back to himself. "I'm going to play for the Gryffindor team." Potter puffed out his chest proudly, clearly not noticing Iris had returned to her reading. That brought a small smirk to his face.

"How do you know you're going to be in Gryffindor?" Lily asked, sounding confused. He'd told her there was really no way to know for certain until they got to Hogwarts.

"I suppose I can't be sure," Potter admitted, looking affronted to be questioned on it. "But, my Dad was a Gryffindor. It's where the bravest of heart are sorted. That's where I'm headed, if I get a choice."

He snorted, unfortunately louder than he'd intended, as Potter and Black's eyes snapped to his.

"Where do you want to end up then?"

"Slytherin," he announced unashamed, refusing to shy under their sneers. "I prefer brains over brawn."

"Seems to me you're neither," Black assessed, sounding pleased with himself. Potter beamed at the boy beside him, offering him a high-five.

"That's not nice!" Lily scolded, glancing at the two boys in outrage. Remus looked like he wasn't sure how to react. From the corner of his eye, he caught Iris looking menacingly at the row of boys across from her, over the top of her book, like a predator waiting to strike.

"He's not wrong," Potter added unperturbed. "No one with brains would choose to be sorted into Slytherin."

"My whole family's been in Slytherin," Black mumbled. "I'm hoping to break from tradition."

"Our whole family's been in Gryffindor," Remus chimed in for the first time. "Dad says we're likely
"I don't know, Remus," Iris commented, not bothering to look up from her reading. "Slytherin doesn't sound so bad."

All eyes whipped to her. Three jaws dropped, as the boys across from them stared at her in a stunned silence. He, too, glanced down the compartment to the chocolate-haired girl, who sat casually reading, one knee pulled close to her chest. "What?" she sighed, finally gazing up from her book. "Ambition and cunning aren't bad traits to have, if you want to be an Auror."

Even her twin brother was looking at her like she had three heads. Iris, however, seemed unconcerned by the mood in the compartment. He wished he had her confidence. She appeared to put little stock in anyone's opinion but her own.

"Plus, green's my favorite color," she added, leaning around Lily to wink at him. He just blinked back at her confused. What was happening?

With a knowing grin, Iris resumed her reading. Getting over their shock, Black and Potter started conversing with Remus. Obviously, given he was a hopeful Gryffindor, they'd deemed him worthy of their attention. He chatted quietly with Lily, until his friend turned to the girl next to her. "What are you reading?"

Iris' emerald eyes lit up, seeming happy to be asked. "Hogwarts A History," she told Lily, moving the book so Lily could see it too. "Mum bought Remus and I each a copy, so we could learn more about the school. He's already finished. I got distracted by my spellbooks."

He offered her a half smile. He'd immediately dove into his spellbooks too, fascinated by all they had to offer. They'd provided a welcome distraction from his parents' frequent shouting matches.

"Hogwarts A History!" Lily exclaimed with interest, eyes eagerly skimming over the open page. "I wish I'd thought to buy a copy. I don't know much about the school."

"Oh, you must be muggle-born!" Iris cried. He stiffened beside Lily nervously, unsure how Iris' family might view muggle-borns. She hadn't offered a last name for him to gage that by.

"My Mum's a muggle too." His shoulders relaxed, as Iris carried on. He shouldn't be so suspicious. The girl had been nothing but nice to them both thus far. "You can read with me, if you like?" Iris offered to Lily, before looking over at him. "Or, I could move to the middle and we could all read?"

"That would be wonderful," Lily nodded enthusiastically. "What do you think, Severus?"

While he was loathed to give up sitting so close to Lily, his friend looked so excited, he couldn't say no to her. "Sure."

"Great!" Iris quickly moved between him and Lily. She had a pretty smile, he noticed, when she settled in next to him. It seemed to reach all the way to her eyes. "Just let me know when you're ready for me to turn the page."

The three of them read quietly for a while, occasionally commenting on something interesting they'd read. After some time, Potter announced loudly that he and Black were going to take a walk. They made a point to ask only Remus to join, so the three of them would know they weren't welcome. Not that any of them seemed remotely enticed by the prospect.

"You should go," Iris encouraged her brother, when Remus looked hesitant to agree. "Have fun."
"I'll come back before we get to school."

"Uh-huh," Iris nodded absentmindedly, waving off her brother's promise.

His eyes followed the three boys as they existed, not bothering to shut the compartment door behind themselves. "Well, they seem positively dreadful," Iris assessed, once they were out of earshot. "I do hope Remus finds other friends when we get to school." He smirked at her, hearing Lily laugh in agreement from Iris' other side.

"Anything from the trolley, dears?" a kind older woman interrupted from the doorway.

With bright eyes, Lily and Iris grinned at each other, running to the cart piled high with mouth-watering sweets. While Lily eagerly started to peruse the various options, Iris glanced back his way. She frowned a little at his small shrug, almost as if sensing why he hadn't joined them.

Hurrying over to him, she grabbed his hand, tugging his shocked form over to the trolley. "Come on," she urged. "I always buy too much, and I'll need someone to eat the rest. At least make sure I get something you'll like."

Getting the sense there was no changing Iris' mind when it was made up, he joined the girls in marveling over their choices. Once they each had a handful of sweets, they took advantage of the empty cart to spread out. He and Lily returned to the same side, while Iris flopped down across from them.

"Did you mean it when you said you wanted to be in Slytherin?" He couldn't help but ask. While he'd been far less outspoken about it, her brother had been just as appalled by her defense of his chosen House. If she'd just been being nice, he didn't want to get his hopes up he might know someone in Slytherin.

"I don't really think I'd be a good fit for Gryffindor - not if they're anything like my father and his friends," she shrugged, biting off the tip of a liquorish wand. There was a story there, he could tell. She got the same haunted look he did when mentioning his father. It was intriguing to him that the parent she took issue with was the magical one, but he knew better than to ask.

"For a while, I thought maybe Ravenclaw. They value books and learning," Iris continued, unaware his attention had started to wander. "But, I've heard they can get nasty when competing for top scores."

"Really?" Lily sighed sadly, looking dejected. "I was thinking I'd like to be in Ravenclaw."

His heart sank. He had hoped Lily would be in Slytherin with him. He couldn't imagine being separated from the only friend he'd ever had.

"I'm sure they're not all bad," Iris backtracked quickly. "There's good and bad kids in every House, I'd guess."

"But, if you're both in Slytherin, maybe…"

"I'll still be your friend, even if you're in a different House," Iris assured with a warm smile, making him feel slightly guilty for assuming he'd lose Lily if she were in Ravenclaw. Of course they could make it work. They were best friends. "We can meet up in the library and during free periods. I bet Ravenclaw and Slytherin will have some joint lessons too."
"We'll always be friends, Lily," he interjected with a reassuring touch to her shoulder. Lily beamed back at him in relief.

"See!" Iris exclaimed, tossing her hands in the air with pride. "Look at us, defying inter-house rivalry before we even get to school."

She tugged nervously at her tie, shifting her weight awkwardly, between Lily and Severus while they watched their first few classmates be sorted into their Houses. Remus had joined them too, once the Hogwarts Express arrived at Hogsmeade Station, but she could see his eyes longingly follow Sirius Black on his journey to the Gryffindor table. He had obviously become fast friends with Sirius and James during the train ride. That was okay, she supposed. Remus was born to be a Gryffindor. At least he wouldn't be alone, if she didn't join him there. Their father would be proud of him too.

"Evans, Lily," Professor McGonagall called off her list.

Turning to her left, she gave her new friend a hopeful smile. "Good luck!"

"You too," Lily whispered back, before walking up to the stool.

Heart thumping for her friend, she reached for Severus hand. He stiffened beside her, looking startled. "Sorry," she apologized under her breath. "I just hope she gets what she wants."

"It's okay," he said, lips tilting up in a half smile. The tension in his shoulders eased, as he linked his fingers through hers. "Me too."

She suddenly found it impossible to tear her gaze away from his onyx eyes, until the sorting hat cried out, "Ravenclaw!"

Reluctantly, they both glanced back to the sorting, watching Lily hop off the stool and hurry toward the cheering Ravenclaw table. She squeezed Severus' hand lightly, sensing the raging war inside him between being happy for Lily and disappointed they would likely be separated.

She held Severus' hand tightly through the next few sortings. But then, Professor McGonagall was calling out her name. "Lupin, Iris."

With a great effort, she slipped her hand from Severus', not quite understanding the sudden feeling that she was leaving a piece of herself behind with him. She shuffled forward to sit on the stool, biting her lip, as she felt the sorting hat being placed upon her head.

A hushed voice spoke in her ear, making her gasp, but she couldn't register the words over her pounding pulse. From this vantage point, she could see everyone in the hall clearly. Her eyes flickered over to the Gryffindor table, where Sirius Black sat proudly, having defied the Black family legacy. Unconsciously her gaze seemed to shift immediately back to the first year line, landing smack on James Potter, with his arrogant demeanor and cocky grin. She couldn't imagine being forced to spend the next seven years learning and living with the likes of them. They were everything she didn't want to be.

Her confidence faltered a bit, when she looked two boys down to her twin brother. The full moon had been nearly a week prior, but he still looked exhausted. His transformations were taking more out of him each and every month. He would need her more now than ever, and being sorted anywhere but Gryffindor would make that increasingly difficult. Her father would be furious with her - even more so than normal.
But, as her eyes came to finally meet the onyx orbs of Severus Snape, she knew exactly what she need to do. *Not Gryffindor,* she begged the hat silently.

"Slytherin!" it roared, merely a second later, almost as if waiting for her to come to her own decision.

Feeling a heavy weight suddenly lift off her shoulders, she released the breath she'd been holding. She couldn't remember the last time she'd made a decision entirely for herself, and it felt right.

Running to the cheering Slytherin table at the far left, she slipped into the open seat beside an older girl with dark brown, almost black hair. "Welcome to Slytherin," the girl greeted with a smile and a light hand to her shoulder. "I'm Narcissa - one of your sixth year Prefects."

"Iris," she grinned back at the girl.

"Lupin, Remus," Professor McGonagall's voice rang out, drawing her attention back to the front of the Hall.

She watched Remus hesitantly step up to the stool, glancing nervously at her from the corner of his eye. She knew she'd let him down. Lupins were supposed to be in Gryffindor, and they always said they'd be there together. She just hoped he'd come to understand eventually.

"Is that your brother?" Narcissa asked, leaning over. "Bet he'll join you soon."

Her heart sank a bit, everything suddenly becoming real. She'd never been apart from her twin brother before. She, honestly, wasn't sure who she even was without him. But, Remus was a true Lupin. He wouldn't be joining her. He would find himself exactly where he wanted.

"I'm not so sure," she corrected sadly. "Our whole family's been in Gryffindor."

"Oh," Narcissa breathed, eyes widening with understanding about what it meant for her to be there - at the Slytherin table. "I'm sorry."

"I'm happy to be here," she was quick to say. She didn't want Narcissa to get the wrong idea about her. "Gryffindor isn't for me. I'll miss Remus, though."

"You'll still see him," Narcissa promised, and she was right, of course. She and Severus had just been assuring Lily of the same thing, earlier that day.

"Plus," Narcissa added, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "We're your family now too."

"Gryffindor!" the sorting hat shouted, drowning out her reply, but Narcissa seemed to receive her gratitude regardless.

She offered two polite claps for her brother, before it became clear Slytherins didn't cheer for Gryffindors. She glanced over, as conspicuously as possible, at Narcissa, trying her hardest to mimic the older girl's sophisticated but stoic posture. She likely failed miserably at the attempt, but she thought she managed to improve a tad, by the time Severus' name was called.

Severus approached the stool with more confidence than those who'd gone before him, but still looked equally as terrified the hat might swallow him whole. She offered him a small wave, though he didn't seem to notice. The hat hadn't been lowered on his head for long, before it shouted, "Slytherin."

Exhaling deeply, she clapped enthusiastically beside Narcissa. He waved happily at her when he passed, moving to sit across the table. The tall blonde boy beside him was quick to shake his hand
and slap him lightly on the back. "Lucius Malfoy," she overheard the blonde boy introduce himself to Severus. "Seventh year Prefect."

When their final few classmates were sorted into Houses, she settled back into her seat on the bench beside Narcissa. Glancing across the table, she met Severus' eyes once more and smiled. This felt right. This felt like home.

......

She hurried into the Great Hall, having slept a few extra minutes than normal. She started to head over to the Slytherin table, when she caught a glimpse of her brother. The first week or so of classes had been flying by so fast; she almost didn't realize she'd hardly seen Remus.

He was sitting at the far end of the Gryffindor table, chatting animatedly with Sirius, James, and the newest member of their little group, Peter Pettigrew. She should probably try and stomach his friends for a half hour, and sit with him for breakfast. She really hadn't seen him since Potions class on their second day.

She took two steps toward the Gryffindor table, when she heard her name. "Iris! Over here!" Her head snapped to the middle of the Ravenclaw table, where Severus, Lily, and Marlene were waving to her. Grinning at her friends, she momentarily forgot all about Remus, and ran over to join them.

"There you are," Lily greeted, when she slipped onto the bench beside Marlene. "Severus said he waited in the Common Room for fifteen minutes before giving up."

"Sorry," she apologized, eagerly grabbing some toast. "I overslept."

"I only just got down here too," Marlene added, yawning into her goblet of pumpkin juice. "Iris and I were at the library till curfew last night. She was helping me with my Defense essay."

"We have Charms this morning, right?" she asked, hoping she remembered to grab the correct spellbooks in her half-asleep state.

"Yep. Double period," Marlene nodded. "Means you get to see our lovely faces most of the morning," she added, laying her head lazily on her shoulder with a wink.

"You're not using me as a pillow all morning," she chuckled, playfully pushing Marlene off her shoulder so she could eat. She practically choked on her pumpkin juice, at Marlene's perfectly executed puppy-dog pout.

Their laughter got cut off by the flood of nearly a hundred owls soaring into the Great Hall, signaling the post had arrived. Marlene and Lily each caught small boxes of sweets, which their parents had been sending nearly every morning for the first week. She'd initially found it odd she hadn't received so much as a letter from her mother, until it finally dawned on her there was likely a good reason for that - her father.

To her surprise, however, a small barn owl landed in front of her this morning, sticking its leg out for her to untie the letter it carried. Her heart sank, when she recognized which parent the handwriting belonged to. She supposed she should count herself lucky he hadn't sent a howler.

Her friends eyes widened, as they watched her tear the unopened letter in half. "It's not worth reading," she shrugged in response to their unasked question. "I already know what he's going to say."

She was met with three sympathetic smiles in return. She hadn't spoken much about her father, but
her silence had apparently been enough to give her friends some insight into their relationship. It probably helped that, unlike her father, she'd hardly shut up about how incredible her mother was.

Severus reached across the table, touching the top of her hand lightly. "You're happy, Iris. Don't let him get inside your head."

"Thanks, Sev," she said gratefully. She'd probably shared the most with Severus, particularly regarding her father's expected reaction to her sorting. Not only did they spend the most time together, being in the same House, but she'd found he, too, had a challenging relationship with his father. Though, admittedly, from what she'd heard, she'd keep Lyall Lupin any day, over Tobias Snape.

"Hey, Iris!" She turned to see her twin brother jogging over to their table.

"Remus!" she exclaimed, lighting up.

"Mom slipped a letter for you in with mine," he said, handing her a folded piece of parchment. She flipped it open, smiling at the sight of her mother's perfect penmanship.

"What did Dad say to you?" he questioned, eyes landing on the torn up letter knowingly.

"Don't know," she shrugged, trying to sound unaffected by its arrival. "Didn't read it."

"Good."

"Do you want-" she started to ask him to join them, when he cut her off, almost like he hadn't even heard her speak.

"I've got to go, Iris. We're going to sit outside for a bit before first period," he told her, pointing to where his three friends were waiting at the back of the Hall.

"Oh. Okay," she sighed disappointed.

"I'll see you in Defense later," he hollered over his shoulder, as he ran off to meet up with James, Sirius, and Peter.

She watched him leave the Hall, head tipped back in laughter at something James said. Her eyes started to water. The walls of the grand room suddenly felt like they were closing in on her. She couldn't breathe.

"Iris?" she vaguely registered Lily's concerned voice ring out through the fog around her.

She sprung up from the table abruptly, accidentally knocking Marlene's comforting hand from her shoulder. She hadn't even felt her friend reach out. "I'll meet you guys in Charms," she managed to breathe out, before darting from the Hall.

Needing some air, she ran out the front doors. With a few deep breaths, her heartbeat started to even out. She wiped the tears from her eyes, feeling foolish for overreacting. She and Remus had only been separated a week, and it had been a good week at that. So what if he wanted to spend more time with his friends? Hadn't she done the same, when she'd decided to sit with hers this morning? Hadn't she wanted him to grow a little more independent, and rely on her less?

Realizing she still had her mother's letter in her hand, she sat down on the front steps to read it. Her Mum always knew what she needed to hear.
My Dearest Iris,

Congratulations on your sorting. As you brother lent me his copy of Hogwarts A History when he finished, I've been able to read up on Slytherin House. I think you'll do well there. Gryffindor, it seems, is for the brave. While you have far more courage than you realize, my sweet girl, you also have so much more to offer the world than just that. I think Slytherin will hone in on the ambition you need to achieve everything you desire and more. A little cunning wouldn't hurt either. We want to show the Wizarding World there will be no better Auror than Iris Lupin, after all.

I'm so glad to hear you're making friends. From the sounds of your letter, Severus, Lily, and Marlene all seem quite lovely. I hope to meet them all soon. Be sure to invite them to visit over the Holidays and during the summer. They'll always be welcome. Particularly Severus. He seems as if he could do with a break from his home life.

Now, to the biggest issue at hand, my dear. I have no doubt this separation from your brother is eating away at you, by now. You are an amazing sister, and I am so proud of how much you've cared for Remus, all these years. But, I want you to remember that you matter too. Remus will be fine. He's stronger than we give him credit for, and he's forming a strong connection with his new friends too. I think this time apart will help you both learn who you are as individuals, and, I promise, that will only make your bond as twins even stronger.

Continue to look out for your brother, as you always do. Just be sure to look out for yourself equally as much. I love you, Iris, and I am so very proud to have a Slytherin daughter.

All my love,

Mum

She smiled through wet eyes, finally feeling like she could breathe again. No matter how bad things got, her mother always knew how to make it all better. She folded the letter back up, slipping it into her bag. She had a feeling she'd be reading it more than once.

She was just about to grab her bag and rejoin her friends in the Great Hall, when she heard someone ask, "Mind if I join you, Miss Lupin?"

Her eyes practically bugged out of their sockets. She knew that voice. Sure enough, when she glanced up, behind a pair of half-moon spectacles, she was met with the piercing eyes of Professor McGonagall.

"Mind if I join you, Miss Lupin?"

"Huh?" The girl jumped at her voice, before glancing up. She tried to mask her amusement at the young Slytherin's wide eyes. "Yes, of course, Professor," she agreed, hastily attempting to dry her eyes.

Pretending not to notice the tears, she took a seat on the step beside Iris. She'd grown concerned when she saw the young girl running out of the Great Hall earlier. She suspected she knew the cause, and it was something she was far better suited to help with than Horace.
"How are you settling in, Miss Lupin?"

"Me?" the girl exclaimed, plastering on a fake smile. "I'm fine, Professor. Hogwarts is amazing."

"Miss Lupin," she said lightly, in a tone that indicated she knew the young Slytherin was lying. "Over my many years, I've taught several pairs of twins who've been separated by the sorting. The first few days are usually fine, and then it starts to hit them, right about now."

"I asked to the hat not to put me in Gryffindor," Iris admitted quietly, looking away. "Ah, I see," she nodded. That actually made a lot of sense. From what she knew of the Lupin family, a large part of Iris' life centered around being a support system for her brother with his transformations. Not to mention, Remus had been bitten, while Iris hadn't. She would imagine, regretbably, that Iris likely carried a burden of unwarrrented guilt over that. A heavy weight for an eleven year old to carry. It wasn't all that surprising to hear a small part of the girl wanted some distance from that. "You're questioning if you made the right choice?"

"Remus is alone. I'm supposed to be looking out for him."

_You're supposed to be an eleven year old kid_ is what she _wanted_ to say. "From what I've seen, your brother is doing just fine," she assured instead. It wasn't her place to judge the rest.

"I've found, sometimes, people have the tendency to lump twins together as if they were a single entity," she continued. "The twins that find themselves in separate Houses are usually the ones who need to find their own identity the most."

She suspected Iris and Remus Lupin might need help with that more than most. Remus seemed to shy behind his sister's bolder personality, while Iris seemed to take caring for her brother to an extreme. It certainly wouldn't hurt either of them to learn who they were on their own.

"I like being in Slytherin. Is that bad?"

She sighed, knowing the magical community, several professors included, considered all Slytherin students bad kids. Something that was completely absurd. Merlin had been in Slytherin, for Godric sakes. She handed out detentions to Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws equally as much too. "Of course not," she was quick to say. Despite it being her rival House, some of her best students, over the years, had been in Slytherin. "While I would be honored to have you in Gryffindor, I think you're in exactly the place you need to be."

"Really?"

"Truthfully, sometimes I think the sorting hat isn't looking at the traits we embody the most, but, in fact, those so buried deep inside us that we need to be around like people to bring them to the surface," she mused, pleased to see the girl was curiously soaking up that information. "Your brother, for instance, could do with a little more courage, don't you think?"

"Definitely," she agreed. "A little self confidence too."

That was true. Though, she had a feeling James Potter and Sirius Black wouldn't be letting him stay shy forever. Those two boisterous boys already had Remus starting to come out of his shell a little bit each day.

"Now, you, my dear," she grinned. "You have confidence in spades. You don't need Gryffindor for that." It took a great deal of bravery to choose a path that strayed from family tradition, after all. "But, with a little ambition, plus some cunning and pride to help pull it off, I think you're going to do
great things, Iris Lupin."

The young girl blushed a tad, and her heart swelled a bit. While they'd only had two transfiguration lessons thus far, she could already tell Iris was smart and driven. She was a talented witch, and would be even more so, by the end of her seven years at Hogwarts. Whatever the young Slytherin wanted to achieve, she would. Something in her gut told her that.

The warning bell for first period suddenly sounded, startling them both. "Best get going, Miss Lupin, before we've started that greatness off with a detention."

Nodding, the girl quickly grabbed her bag, throwing it over her shoulder as she stood. Iris started to take a step up the stairs, but turned back around to wrap her arms around her neck. "Thanks, Professor."

"Anytime, dear."

[[[]]]

Flying was his least favorite class. He already couldn't wait for second year, when he could finally drop it. Nearly a month and a half into classes, and he still struggled to kick off from the ground. Lily wasn't fairing much better, and she looked like she wanted to throw up by the end of every lesson, but at least she'd progressed to hovering. Marlene had managed to move into a group working on short thirty second bursts, last week. Though, she still looked longingly back at the hovering group, clearly missing the easier task.

Iris, unlike the rest of them, seemed to thrive in flying class. Madam Hooch had long since given up on imposing limits on Iris. She'd removed the spell on Iris' broom, so it wouldn't vibrate when she got too high, and allowed his friend to soar about the grounds at her leisure, so long as she remained in sight. Whenever Iris grew bored of that, she'd try and help him, Lily, and Marlene. She would offer to help Remus too, if Potter wasn't already doing so, but she continued to blatantly ignore a struggling Sirius Black and a hopeless Peter Pettigrew.

He often found his eyes following Iris' distant form in awe, as she zig-zagged or dove straight for the ground before shooting back up at the last second. It was mesmerizing to watch. Marlene frequently teased that he might have managed to hover by now, if he stopped staring at Iris so much.

He couldn't help it, though. She made flying look as effortless as breathing. Even Potter, who wasn't too far behind Iris, was impressed. Potter still wobbled a bit when he got too high or dove too low, but Iris' maneuvers were all smooth.

"You're not going to get anywhere, if you don't even mount the broom," Marlene laughed, lazily dragging her broomstick over his way.

He glared at the Ravenclaw, trying hard not to blush at being caught gazing at the dot he knew to be Iris, yet again. "I'm just trying to see how she does it," he mumbled, not that he actually thought Marlene would believe that.

"Uh-huh," Marlene grinned knowingly, plopping onto the grass near by.

"What are you doing?" He asked, looking down at where she was lounging backwards on her elbows.

"Taking a break."

Shaking his head, he sat down beside her, deciding he'd earned himself a break too. He was fairly
certain Madam Hooch would disagree. She was busy with Peter Pettigrew, though. Pettigrew was even worse at flying than he was, so they could be certain Madam Hooch would be occupied for a while.

“You two haven’t given up already, have you?” Iris laughed, flying low to hover in front of them, a short while later. “There’s still an hour left of class.”

“I think Severus could use some help,” Marlene called up to her, glancing at him wickedly.

He scowled at her, but she remained unperturbed. There was little point in arguing either, seeing as Iris had already landed softly on the ground and dismounted her broom.

“Still struggling to kick off, Sev?” Iris questioned sympathetically. She was the only one who didn’t make fun of him for it, so he nodded honestly.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, likely mentally running through things she hadn’t tried yet, before her eyes lit up. “Hang on a second, Sev! I think I have an idea!”

“Madam Hooch!” Iris hollered, gaining their flying instructor’s attention. “Can I take Severus up with me? I think it might help.”

Madam Hooch tilted her head in consideration, before nodding. “Very well, Miss Lupin. Keep it to twenty feet or so.”

“Yes, Madam Hooch.” Iris grinned down at him, holding her hand out. "Well, come on then, Sev."

Reluctantly, he allowed her to pull him up off the ground, wary of whatever this plan of hers was. She mounted her broomstick, then pat the spot behind her. "Hop on!"

"Wait, you want me to what?"

Iris rolled her eyes. "Will you just get on?" With a huff, he stood behind her. She looked at him expectantly. "You’re going to want to hold onto my waist."

"Why are we doing this?" he sighed, leaning forward to wrap his arms around her.

"Because, the broom can sense you're scared," she said. "That's why you can't kick off the ground. We're going to eliminate that fear right now."

He opened his mouth to protest, when he was immediately tossed backwards as the broom sped up into the sky. Iris’ laughter filled his ears. He clenched his arms around Iris’ waist, hiding his eyes in the crook of her neck.

What felt like hours later, the broom slowed down to a stop. "You can look now, Sev."

With a deep breath, he picked his head up off her shoulder and peeked one eye open. Iris had brought the broom to a hover about fifteen feet off the ground. He wobbled a bit, shaking the broom, but Iris easily managed to stabilize them.

She smiled at him over her shoulder, and he couldn't help but get caught up in her enthusiasm. Deciding to trust her to keep them steady, he opened his eyes fully and loosened his grip so it would be more comfortable for Iris. They hovered there for a long while, as Iris let him grow accustom to having his feet dangling in the air.

"Think you're ready to do some flying?" Iris asked, when his breathing evened out. "I'll go slow."
"Okay," he nodded, bracing himself against her back. She was true to her word, though. She started off slow, keeping the broom level with none of the deep dives and racing turns he saw her do on her own.

"This isn't so bad," he admitted. It was actually kind of nice, feeling the light breeze sweep through his hair.

They glided through the air, with Iris teaching him how to lean into turns and how to slow down and speed up. He was just starting to feel like he might be getting the hang of things, when they heard the bell ring.

"Guess we have to head back down," Iris sighed. She started to dive back down to reality, and he found himself feeling disappointed. He'd been enjoying their time away from the rest of the class - certain Gryffindors in particular.

After they dismounted, they grabbed their bags and said goodbye to Lily and Marlene. Thursdays they had dinner with Lucius and Narcissa, which meant they needed to head down to the Slytherin common room. Narcissa was sitting on a couch by the fireplace when they entered, while Lucius was talking to a few seventh year boys on the other side of the common room.

"Iris, dear, come over here," Narcissa called, pointing to the spot next to her on the couch. "You too, Severus," she added, when he hesitated to follow. "We all know you two are practically a package deal."

Iris hopped onto the couch beside Narcissa, while he sat in the armchair closest to Iris. Lucius must have seen them enter, as he wandered over to join them, taking the armchair by Narcissa.

"Face that way, dear," Narcissa instructed Iris, gesturing to their left. "Let me fix this braid of yours, before we head off to dinner."

"Thanks, Narcissa," Iris said, shifting on the couch obediently. "We just had our weekly Flying lesson. It always gets messed up in the wind."

With a practiced ease, Narcissa undid Iris' windswept braid and started to weave it into a far more elaborate series of braids. Narcissa was always redoing Iris' hair. He didn't really know why. He thought Iris looked pretty as she was, particularly when her hair got a little tousled in the wind.

"Ah, yes," Narcissa nodded. "Rumor has it, you're the best flier in the entire first year class."

"She is!" He exclaimed. "She's even better than Potter."

"I should hope so," Narcissa smiled. "Those Gryffindor boys need to be taken down a few pegs."

"Have you thought about playing quidditch, Iris?" Lucius asked, crossing his legs with his hands folded in his lap.

"I thought first years couldn't-" Iris spun toward Lucius, but got cut off by Narcissa lightly pushing her head back.

"Keep looking straight, dear."

"Sorry."

"Lucius is friends with Steve Laughalot," Narcissa explained. "He's Captain of the Slytherin team this year."
"We watched your flying lesson today," Lucius added. "Steve was impressed."

"Really?" Iris smiled excitedly, but managed to keep her head still.

"There are a number of players who'll be graduating this year, Steve included," Lucius continued. "He hasn't been thrilled with his reserve players, and wants to have some better options lined up for the incoming captain."

Pausing in her braiding, strands of Iris' hair wrapped around her fingers, Narcissa leaned over Iris' shoulder. "He'd like you to train with the team this year. You'd have to use the school broomsticks, and you wouldn't actually be a member of the team. But, you'd have a decent chance at playing next season."

"Iris is going to play for the Slytherin team?" She would be amazing, and he knew she loved quidditch. She had like five Welsh Nationals t-shirts.

"She'd still have to be chosen at Quidditch trials next fall, with a new Captain," Lucius admitted, standing up and walking over to assess Iris up and down. Iris watched him from the corner of her eye, but otherwise kept her head where Narcissa wanted it. "I'd say she's got a fairly decent build for a seeker."

"I'd say Iris is more of a keeper," Narcissa corrected, turning his way with a smirk. "Wouldn't you, Severus?" she added with a wink. He nodded awkwardly, feeling like he was missing something. Every once in a while, he got the feeling Narcissa was talking in double meanings.

"That's possible," Lucius mused, wandering over to a nearby table. The next thing he knew, Lucius was chucking an empty ink bottle directly at Iris. Instinctively, Iris spun to catch it, messing up part of the braid Narcissa had been working on. "You're right," Lucius nodded. "She'd make a fair keeper."

"LUCIUS MALFOY!" Narcissa shrieked, glaring daggers at her boyfriend. "WAS THAT REALLY NECESSARY?"

"I was testing her reflexes," he shrugged, before pointing at Iris. "Well done, by the way."

"Thanks," Iris grinned proudly.

With a frustrated huff, Narcissa pulled Iris hair back tightly, picking up the fallen strands. She braided it a little further, before quickly tying it off. "There you go, dear. Double dutch french braids. Now, you're ready for dinner."

"Great!" Iris said jumping off the couch. "Thanks!"

"Anytime, dear. Shall we venture to dinner?"

They followed along behind Narcissa and Lucius, who were walking hand in hand. Lucius leaned over, conspiratorially whispering to his girlfriend, "They're eleven. All those little romance hints are just going over their heads."

“I'm just getting an early start,” Narcissa laughed, leaning into Lucius so he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Mark my words, those two will be talking about getting married by their graduation.”

He nearly tripped over his robes. That was absurd. He was obviously going to marry Lily. Everyone knew that, didn't they? He glanced over at Iris, to see if she thought the idea just as
ridiculous as he did, but she wasn’t paying attention. Instead, her face was scrunched up, as she took advantage of Narcissa being distracted to pull at the, almost painful looking, braids. Narcissa always pulled her hair as tight as possible, so it wouldn’t fall out.

As if sensing his gaze, Iris ceased in playing with her hair and looked his way. He stumbled a bit at her bright smile, his own lips twitching upward, almost automatically, in response. Perhaps, the idea wasn't so completely preposterous, after all.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Remus continues to meddle. Platform 9 & 3/4. Iris and Severus start putting the pieces back together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He frowned, staring at the large black SUV Iris was leaning against. "When you said the Ministry was letting you borrow a car, I assumed they'd be including a driver."

"I'm the driver," his sister protested, like it should be obvious.

"Maybe I'll just apparate." Iris behind the wheel of a motor vehicle sounded like a sure way to die.

"Get in the car, Remus," she growled, pushing off the car and moving around to the driver's side.

Grumbling, he reluctantly slid into the passenger seat. He glanced warily at his sister, who glared back at him, as she put the keys in the ignition. "I have a license," she mumbled, pulling out onto the roadway.

"I don't doubt that you have one." She'd worked for the Ministry, after all. They carried Muggle IDs for a whole host of reasons. "I just question how authentic it is." He certainly didn't know of a time when she'd taken, much less passed, a driving exam.

His twin merely rolled her eyes, and continued driving. They rode quietly for a long while. There was still a bit of friction from their argument the night before. She'd woken up unusually early, and snuck out to pick up the Ministry car when he'd been in the shower.

"You were right," Iris admitted, finally breaking the silence about halfway to the Weasleys. "About what you said last night. I thought the worst day of my life would be the day I found the Dark Mark on his arm. But, really, everyday after that was a thousand times worse."

That was surprisingly honest. Iris didn't typically discuss that period of her life, and she certainly didn't do so that openly. He'd learned some details from Severus, of course, now that they were friends. He also knew a thing or two about having to live without the person one loved.

"Living in constant fear that the next Death Eater captured would be him, or that the next time he'd passed me information would be the last time I'd see him alive," she continued, voice heavy, her eyes not leaving the road in front of them. "I'd relive finding his Dark Mark over and over on a loop, for the rest of my life, to never feel the rest of that again."

"Hey," he whispered, reaching to place a comforting hand on top of hers, where it rested on the shift. "I know you're terrified to let him that close to you again." That was what this was all really about. Iris had lost everything during the War, and she'd promised herself she'd keep everyone at arms-length so she'd never have that much to lose ever again. "But, you're going back to Hogwarts today. You're going back to the place it all began. If there were ever a time to give it another go, it's now."
She didn't say anything at first, but she eventually glanced his way briefly. "Let's say I wanted that..."

"Are we really going to keep talking in hypotheticals?"

"Fine," Iris sighed. "I want my fiancé back. Happy?"

"Immensely." He didn't miss the side-eye his twin threw him for his sarcasm.

"How do I convince Severus?" If he knew his friend at all, he could be fairly certain it wouldn't take much convincing.

"Well, having actual conversations, instead of starting an argument to avoid having sex or having sex to avoid starting an argument, would be a decent first step."

"Severus and I talk, Remus," Iris snapped defensively.

"If you say so."

"I'm sorry," his sister apologized, a second later. "I know you're trying to help. I shouldn't be short with you."

"I'd be on edge, if I were going back to Hogwarts after everything, too," he said. So much had happened since they last walked those halls. They'd lost so many - Lily, James, Peter, and Marlene. His husband was responsible for, at least, three of those deaths. He didn't think he could return to the Castle, and not see ghosts around every corner. He had to give his sister a lot of credit for being willing to even try. "You get a pass this time."

"I really won the lottery in the brother department."

"Don't I know it," he agreed with a laugh. "Look, Iris. If you really want to fix things with Severus, just be honest with him. No more of these half-truths or hidden meanings. A relationship doesn't work if you have to keep reading between the lines."

He knew that better than anyone. Next to Sirius turning out to be a soulless bastard, communication had been their fatal flaw. Their respective roles in The Order certainly hadn't helped that any. They'd spent the better part of their marriage smoking, drinking, fucking, and lying. It was war, and they'd never had the opportunity to know who they were, as husbands, in a time of peace.

"I think you missed your calling, Remus," Iris chuckled, drawing him back to the present. "That or you've been reading one too many self-help books on the slow days at the shop."

He laughed, despite himself, knowing that couldn't be further from the truth. "You want to know where I learned it all?" he asked, shifting in his seat to face her as best he could. "From watching you."

"Me?" she scoffed in disbelief. "I'm hardly the pinnacle for a successful relationship."

"Not anymore, no." He'd grant her that. "But, there was once a time when you and Severus were the envy of us all. You two practically breathed in sync." So much so, James had 'studied' their interactions for weeks, attempting to learn some secret trick that would help convince Lily to go out with him. It'd gotten so bad that Iris threatened to knock his teeth out, if he didn't stop staring at her all the time. Sirius had noticed too. Though, as the self-proclaimed heartthrob of Hogwart's, it drove him mental to think Severus might be more successful at romance than him.
"It feels like a lifetime ago, when it was that simple."

"Life gets messy, doesn't it?" he sighed, his thoughts reluctantly straying to Sirius and how easy everything had been before the War.

"Remus," Iris started slowly, almost sensing where his mind had wandered. He cringed. He didn't need her worrying about him the whole school year. She'd already spent a lifetime doing that. He often wondered if he was a large part of why she and Severus hadn't yet repaired the fractured pieces of their relationship.

After Sirius' arrest, Iris swallowed her pain, boxing her own feelings of betrayal on a shelf, to deal with his. She'd worked tirelessly, without complaint, to get him sobered up and off her couch. She'd bought him an old, dilapidated storefront, and told him to make it the bookstore he'd always dreamed of. She'd given him a sense of purpose and financial stability. Two things that were hard to come by as a werewolf. Two, of the many things, he'd lost the day Sirius was sentenced to Azkaban. She'd built him back up, while simultaneously falling to pieces herself.

It wasn't lost on him, how much his sister had sacrificed for his well being. She'd shouldered the weight of the War and its aftermath herself, so he wouldn't have to. But, now, it was his turn to help her. That all began with Severus.

"Are you sure you're going to be-"

"Severus isn't Sirius," he cut in, sharper than he intended. Because, even his husband's name brought him pain. It was true, though. Severus' biggest offense, during his time with Voldemort, wasprobably lying to Iris about it. Something his sister needed to find a way to get over. "He was never really a Death Eater. You can hold the fact that he lied to you over his head, for the rest of your life, or you can let it go and be happy."

He breathed a sigh of relief, as they turned onto the dirt drive leading to The Burrow. Any longer a car ride, and Iris would surely turn the conversation back on him. He didn't want to discuss Sirius right now. Not when they were bringing James' son to Kings Cross today.

"Looks like Harry's rearing to go," he observed, pointing to the boy jumping up, from where he'd been sitting on his trunk, at the sight of their car.

Iris parked the car off to the side. Harry ran over, a wide grin on his face, hugging them both as they exited the car. He almost immediately launched into a rapid recap of his evening at the Weasleys, barely stopping to breathe.

"You enjoyed your sleepover then, I take it?" he assessed with a laugh, having honestly not understood a word of the boy's speed-talk.

"It was awesome!" Harry nodded excitedly. "Ron's whole room is Chudley Cannons, and Mrs. Weasley's dishes wash themselves. We even got to toss gnomes out of the garden, and-"

"Aunt Iris! Uncle Remus!" a pair of twin voices hollered, unknowingly cutting Harry off. He and Iris glanced up just in time to be all but plowed down by his sister's twin godsons.

"FRED WEASLEY!" Molly's voice shrieked from inside the house, before they'd even finished hugging the twins.

"You never saw me," Fred gulped, looking like a deer caught in headlights. He took off in a run, sneaking around through the back door.
Eyebrow raised in amusement, Iris turned to George curiously. "What's your brother done now?"

"He may have told Ron he needs to battle a troll to be sorted into Gryffindor," George snickered, clearly a silent participant in this little prank.

"That's not terrible," he shrugged with a smirk.

"I know," Iris agreed, glancing his way. "I honestly thought he'd tell him something far worse than that."

"Were you the one who told Charlie you had to eat a snake to be sorted into Slytherin?"

Iris burst out laughing at that, confirming he had it right. "I almost forgot about that," she smiled. "I told him that after you said you had to outrun a lion to get into Gryffindor."

"You always have to one up me," he assessed. Though, admittedly, their magical-creature-loving Charlie hadn't exactly been horrified by either prospect. He'd almost been disappointed when he got to school and found out about the sorting hat.

George's eyes darted back and forth between them, breaking out into a wide grin. "This is why you two are my favorite people in the world."

He chuckled, as Iris winked knowingly at her godson.

"What do you have to do to be sorted?" Harry piped up nervously. As anticipated, Harry's anxious excitement over starting at Hogwarts was quickly morphing into typical first year jitters.

"It might seem silly, but part of the experience is not really knowing the answer to that, Harry," he admitted truthfully. "It was a sort of tradition, even in magical families, to not reveal the secrets of the sorting to anyone who hadn't started their first year.

"It's not a test. It's not something you prepare for," Iris added on reassuringly. "The only thing you really have to do is be yourself. That's what the Houses are about, after all. Being with like people, who'll bring out the best in you."

"Iris, we should start loading all the trunks," he suggested, suddenly remembering they needed to be at Kings Cross before eleven.

Iris glanced down at her watch, eyes widening. "You're right," she nodded. "Even with the car's magical enhancements, we'll still want to be on the road in twenty minutes, at the latest."

Following the boys, they ventured into the Weasley house, finding Molly hastily moving about the kitchen. "Oh, you're here already!" she cried, when she noticed them. "We thought we'd start getting the car packed," he told her, thinking it best not to mention the time. She'd had five teenage boys to get ready this morning, plus Ginny. Given how challenging that had been with just Harry this summer, he had officially decided Molly Weasley was Wonder Woman.

"Not before you have a spot of breakfast you won't," she insisted, pointing a spatula at his sister. "You likely won't think to eat again until the Feast."

"And you," she added, turning the spatula on him. "Are far too thin as it is."

Chuckling, he shared a knowing look with his twin, before sitting down to dig into what was left of the breakfast Molly had cooked. There was little point in arguing with Molly when she got like this.
"BOYS!" Molly yelled up the stairs. With thumping footsteps, Ron and Fred came bounding down the stairs. Percy followed behind them, shortly thereafter. "Go put your trunks in the car," she ordered the lot of them, who nodded obediently.

"Oi!" Iris said, snapping her fingers at the twins as they walked by. "You two make sure you have everything before we leave, because I'm not turning the car around."

"Yes, Aunt Iris," they grinned innocently.

Once the kids had everything loaded in the car, and he and Iris had ate enough to satisfy Molly, they all piled into the SUV. Harry marveled at the number of seats that had magically been squished in to accommodate them all. "Everyone buckle in," Iris advised, tapping her wand on the dashboard. They were running a tad behind schedule. She was likely speeding the car up even more than the Ministry had.

Whatever his sister had done to the car worked well enough, as they pulled into the car park at Kings Cross with twenty minutes to spare. He and Iris hurried to grab enough trolleys, while the boys unloaded the trunks.

"Here, everyone grab a trolley," he instructed, dealing one out to each of them.

Once all trunks and animal cages were loaded up, they started to make their way into the station. "Iris, what platform does the train leave from?" Harry asked.

"Platform Nine and Three-Quarters."

"But there's no such thing?"

"There is, if you're a wizard," she winked, as they arrived at the barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten. "Trust me."

Molly sent Percy and the twins through first, Harry's jaw dropping in amazement as the three Weasleys disappeared through the barrier. He almost missed when magic brought him that kind of wonder and awe.

"Okay, you two are next," Iris smiled at Ron and Harry. "It works just like the wall in Remus' office. Walk straight through."

"Best do it in a bit of a run, if you boys are nervous," Molly suggested.

With determined nods, the boys took off, one after the other, and vanished through the barrier. Molly went next with Ginny. He and Iris followed closely behind, grinning when they walked onto the bustling platform and saw the familiar scarlet and black steam engine.

"I haven't been back here since seventh year," Iris commented, looking nostalgically up at the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters sign hanging above them.

"I took Bill and Charlie that one year, so Molly wouldn't have to drag all the kids out alone. Other than that, me either."

They wandered slowly toward the back of the train, where the twins were loading everyone's belongings into a set of compartments. He found Harry waiting for them patiently, feeling a slight pang in his chest. He would miss seeing the boy everyday. It had only been a month, but he'd grown accustom to having a full, almost hectic, flat this summer. He'd be alone again, when Iris joined the boys at Hogwarts later today. He was suddenly quite glad Molly would be working at the
shop a few days a week. She and Ginny would be good company.

"I won't likely see you until Christmas, Harry," he said, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice. He didn't want Harry to feel guilty or less enthusiastic about going to Hogwarts. "But, I want to hear all about school. Send letters with Hedwig."

"I will. I promise," Harry agreed, water forming in the corners of his eyes. The boy then wrapped his arms tightly around his waist, burying his tearful eyes in his jumper. "I'll miss you, Remus."

"I'll miss you too," he swallowed, blinking away his own tears. With a deep breath, he pulled back, ruffling the boy's unruly hair. He then moved onto hugging each of the Weasleys, an embarrassed Percy included, in turn.

"I'll see you tonight, Harry," he heard Iris say, hugging Harry anyway.

At the sound of the train whistle, the boys hurried onto the train. A few seconds later, their heads popped out of the compartment windows. They waved, as the train pulled out of the station, until it disappeared from sight.

He watched her from the doorway for a while. Her back was to him, as she emptied a box of books onto her desk, giving him a chance at some uninterrupted observations.

She looked thinner than he'd noticed the evening before. He'd have to make sure she started eating properly, now that she wasn't traipsing across the globe. Her movements were slower now too, more thought being put into them than normal. She was obviously still in pain. He should probably double up on the pain potions he brewed. Iris didn't know the definition of taking it easy. She'd likely try and push through the pain to do everything she'd normally do.

"Unpacking by hand?" he interrupted at last, when he noticed her back twinge as she moved a particularly heavy box. She'd be out of commission before the Feast, if he didn't stop her now. "That's such a Lupin family thing to do."

Iris' mother had raised her children to appreciate their magical abilities. Magic was a gift, and not to be used for chores or any task that could easily be completed by hand.

"I suppose I am my mother's daughter, after all," Iris commented in that skeptical tone she always took when compared to her mum.

"The world should be so lucky." They could all do with a few more Hope Lupins. Next to Iris, she might be the single most incredible woman he'd ever had the privilege to meet. She'd been a true treasure, and the surrogate mother he hadn't even known he'd needed. She'd opened her home to him, without thought, providing him an escape from the chaos of his own family. Even with Black and Potter's regular presence there, he'd still spent many a weeks at the Lupin residence each summer. So much so, that, when she finally insisted Lyall move to the cottage permanently, Hope cleared out the office and gave him his own room.

"I imagine she'd be pleased to know you listened to her many lectures about not using magic for trivial matters." He'd been on the receiving end of a few himself. Hope could be truly formidable, when she'd wanted to be.

"Probably the only part of my life she'd be happy about."

He didn't have time to disagree with that, yet again, as she'd finally turned round to face him. His
throat ran dry, eyes taking in her vastly different appearance. Gone were her typical jeans and t-shirts. In their place were a dark green dress shirt, tucked into black slacks adjoined with a silver belt. Stiletto heels replaced her old, scuffed-up leather boots. Her hair was down from its usual braids, curling just the way he always liked. The ends of the brown strands perfectly framed a snake necklace, which wrapped around the back of her neck with its head and tail resting on their respective collar bones. It'd been carved out of silver with emeralds for eyes.

"See something you like?" Iris smirked knowingly. She casually leaned back to rest against her desk, brushing a hand through her hair, allowing him to notice the glint of their former engagement ring on her right hand.

"New look?" he questioned, trying and probably failing to sound unaffected.

"Narcissa," she answered simply, and it was really all the explanation he needed.

"I should have guessed. Only she could transform you from grunge rocker to Slytherin heiress."

"She'll consider her mission accomplished, when she hears you approve," she laughed, head tilting back slightly.

Propelled forward by the sight, like some sort of siren call, he boxed her in against the desk. He smirked, as her smile faded, giving way for the lustful haze claiming her eyes.

"I shall have to send her my thanks," he commented, brushing his fingertips lightly down the sleeves of her shirt. "Shame your teacher robes will cover it."

"Like you've ever been one to share," she countered defiantly, challenging him.

As much as he'd like to, he didn't rise to the bait. They'd never make the Feast if he did.

His gaze flickered to her right hand, where it rested to brace her trapped weight against the desk. The center emerald glistened up at him, the same color as her eyes. "I owe you an apology for last night."

She glanced up, meeting his gaze with those perfect green orbs. His favorite color. "I think we both know I'm the one who should be apologizing - for a lot more than last night."

"I am glad you're here," he admitted, brushing her hair behind her ear.

"Oh you are?" she grinned, eyes sparkling deviously under her raised brow.

"If you hadn't got the job, it would've gone to Quirrell." His hands traveled lower, eventually brushing along what felt like the lace of her bra. He paused there, running his thumbs faintly up and down.

"That new turban of his doesn't do it for you?" He was pleased to hear the considerable strain it took for her to keep her voice steady, at just his gentle, almost nonexistent touch.

"He was stringing up garlic throughout his office and classroom earlier." He slipped a knee between her legs, parting them gently, and forcing her to sit more firmly on top of the desk.

She swallowed hard. "I heard he had a run in with a vampire over his holiday."

"The odor in his corridor is already growing intolerable." He flicked a nipple, through her shirt, that had risen under his touch. Finally, a whimper escaped her lips. She loved to challenge him, but he always won in the end.
"Don't know what he's so scared of." Her arms slipped under his teacher robes, to wrap around his waist. He bit down hard on his tongue, to stifle his groan, as she tugged him between her legs and flush up against her. "Personally, I've always been rather fond of dungeon bats."

He rested his forehead against hers, fingers tangling in her curls. "Keep talking like that and we won't make it to the start-of-term feast," he warned, breath mixing with hers.

Sighing, her head fell to his shoulder. With, what looked like, a strenuous effort, she placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back a few inches. "Tempting as that may be, we'd both be fairly shitty godparents, if we missed our, respective, godsons' sortings."

She was right, of course. That didn't mean he had to like it, though.

"Very well," he growled, taking a few steps backwards. He needed the distance to clear his head. Noticing the black teacher robe she'd thrown haphazardly over her chair, he quickly grabbed them. "Do put this on," he ordered, tossing the robe at her. "I can't sit next to you all evening dressed like that."

"It's going to be a long school year then," she grinned wickedly, slipping her arms into the robe and flicking her hair over the collar. "She went full Narcissa Malfoy on my wardrobe. Only let me keep two t-shirts."

"Fuck."

They started to make their way down to the Great Hall. Glancing over at Iris, he smirked happily. He'd messed her hair up quite a bit. He couldn't bring himself to tell her to smooth it out, though. The tousled curls looked natural enough. Only he would know they weren't.

"I'm curious," he said, distracting her so she wouldn't play with her hair. She had a bad habit of doing that. He wanted to be able to glance over at her during dinner, and know he was partially responsible for her appearance. "Does the young Potter know his godmother's heart bleeds green and silver, not red and gold?"

"It doesn't mean much to him right now," she shrugged. "I imagine, should he be sorted into Gryffindor, that may change."

"Does he know about…?"

"About us?" Iris filled in, smugly glancing his way. "Hard as it may be to believe, my sex life wasn't one of the first things I shared with my eleven year old godson."

"That's not quite what I meant, Lupin," he grumbled. "It hasn't come up," she answered honestly, this time. "You're his teacher too. I wouldn't tell him something like that without your permission."

"Thank you."

They walked quietly for a time, until Iris broke it, when they neared the Entrance Hall. "I am sorry. That it all got drudged up again in the articles this summer."

"It wasn't your-"

"There you two are!" Minerva exclaimed, hurrying over to them. "The train arrived at Hogsmeade Station ten minutes ago. Students should be arriving shortly."
"We'll get into the Great Hall straight away," Iris blushed, like they were kids again, being reprimanded by the Deputy Headmistress.

"Good." Minerva started to walk back across the Entrance Hall, before spinning round again. "Oh, Iris, dear?" she cried, placing a gentle hand on her arm. "I was hoping you might sit near me this evening. It's been so long since I've seen you."

"Of course, Professor," Iris agreed, conspicuously sending him an apologetic look. "I'd love to."

"Minerva please, dear," the older woman corrected with a light smile. "We're colleagues now, after all."

"Right. That's going to take some getting used to."

"It took Severus some time too," Minerva acknowledged, tilting her head his way. "I will see you both inside."

Keeping close together, they quickly moved into the Great Hall. "Why do I feel like we've been caught redhanded by the Head of Gryffindor House?" Iris hissed, leaning well into his personal space, once they were out of earshot.

"You look flush."

Iris practically snorted at that. "You're good, but not that good." He raised an eyebrow in disagreement. He hadn't yet failed to reduce the stoic, now former, Auror to a complete puddle. "Seems to me, it's more likely that package in your, now, rather tight pants that's got us in trouble," she teased, before stopping short, the back of her hand slamming into his chest. "God, Remus is right."

He stopped alongside her, but otherwise remained silent, urging her to continue.

"All we talk about lately is sex," she elaborated. She wasn't wrong. Or, rather, Remus wasn't wrong. "Are we even capable of having a normal, non-argumentative conversation anymore?"

"Perhaps we should make the effort?" he suggested. Because, fighting with her was exhausting, and he didn't want sex to be the only thing they agreed on. They'd been through too much to keep on like that.

"All right," she nodded. "Agreed."

Before he could say anything further, loud voices and laughter started bouncing off the walls, as students shuffled into the Hall. "I'll see you after the Feast," Iris promised, and they parted ways to move round opposite ends of the Head Table. Iris took the open seat two down from the Headmaster's chair, knowing Minerva always sat beside Albus. The only open seat left for him was at the far end - next to Quirrell of all people.

Reluctantly, he slipped into the seat beside Quirrell, who's robes even smelled like garlic. He glanced longingly down the table. He never should have let them leave her office.

He caught Iris' eye, and she immediately turned away, hiding a wide grin behind her hand. Reaching out with his mind, he searched the chaos of thoughts in the Great Hall for a familiar set of mental barriers. Finally sensing his attempted invasion, her occulmency shield gave way to allow him further inside.

Stop laughing, he growled.
Need any extra garlic down that end? he heard Iris snicker.

Before he could counter, he felt himself being forcibly thrown out of her mind, so sharply he nearly collapsed backwards against his chair. Once he'd recovered from the shock, he looked over to find Albus had taken his seat and engaged Iris in conversation over Minerva's empty chair. That made sense. There were few people more skilled at legilimency than Albus. One needed the strongest occulmency shield they could muster to keep him out. Even still, the man always seemed to know everything.

The doors to the Great Hall opened, quieting the room. Minerva walked in first, carrying the sorting hat and stool. The young first years filed in nervously behind her. It felt like a lifetime ago, when he and Iris were in their shoes.

His heart nearly jolted, eyes landing on the splitting image of James Potter. Iris hadn't been exaggerating when she said there were strong similarities. It was jarring, almost like Potter had been pulled straight out of 1971.

Minerva quickly got them all lined up along the steps leading to the staff table. The young Potter stood alongside the ginger-haired boy he'd walked in with, presumably the Weasleys' youngest son. She placed the stool and hat in front of their wide, terrified eyes, and pulled out her scroll of names. Everyone in the Hall's attention rested on the old hat, and it burst out into its annual song.

He started to zone out, as the song droned on and the first few students were sorted into Houses. Quirrell was prattling on in his ear about vampires, making him long to be literally anywhere else.

"Longbottom, Neville," he vaguely heard Minerva call through his fog, dragging him back to the sorting. He raised a hand to silence Quirrell, who somehow didn't realize he hadn't been listening to a word the man stuttered since he'd sat down. He watched the slightly chubby first year trip his way up to the stool. He'd forgotten the Longbottoms' son would be starting this year.

Concerned, he leaned around Quirrell, so he could see Iris. She sat completely rigid in her seat, staring off into space. Obviously, taking in Harry had occupied so much of her time, it hadn't occurred to her either that Anne and Frank's son was the same age. He wished, now even more than before, that he was sitting beside her, knowing her mind was surely conjuring up some horrible memories.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted, after some time.

As if sensing his gaze, Iris looked down the table at him. He could visibly see the cascade of emotions swelling up inside her, a tiny hint of water pooling in the corners of her eyes. Just as he was about to reach out through legilimency, Albus seemed to recognize how difficult the moment must be for Iris. The Headmaster leaned over Minerva's chair to place a hand on Iris' and whisper something in her ear. Whatever he said drew a small smile to her face, and she appeared to relax by the time his godson's name was called.

"Malfoy, Draco." His platinum blonde godson confidently strolled up to the stool. Curiously, Draco seemed to look for Iris among the staff, opposed to him. Iris tapped her snake necklace, with a small wink, and the boy smirked up at her. He hadn't realized they'd met. It must have been this summer sometime. Lucius mentioned in passing that Narcissa had been spending a lot of time with Iris.

The hat barely even touched Draco's head, when it cried out, "SLYTHERIN!" He'd expected as much, but was still pleased his godson would be in his House.
Not too long after Draco, Minerva was calling, "Potter, Harry."

Hushed whispers broke out, all throughout the Hall, as the young Potter apprehensively walked toward the stool. Despite his outward appearance, the boy looked remarkably like his mother in that moment. Lily, too, had looked about to vomit, when the sorting hat was placed on her head.

The boy made eye contact with his godmother, who mouthed for him to breathe. Minerva placed the hat on top of his messy black hair. The hat seemed to take a long while to decide, reminiscent of Iris' own sorting. Unlike with his godmother, however, the hat soon shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Iris clapped enthusiastically, as the boy ran towards the cheering Gryffindor table, but her shoulders sagged ever so slightly. All three of her godsons had now been sorted into her rival House.

After a number of other first years, they'd finally dwindled their way down to the final two. "Weasley, Ron." The nervous looking ginger also got some encouragement from his Aunt Iris, and soon joined all the Weasleys before him in Gryffindor.

With the sorting of Blaise Zabini into Slytherin House, Albus stood, silencing the Hall, and declared the Feast begin.

"Harry looks happy," McGonagall observed, as the dinner plates cleared and dessert materialized in its place." Albus tells me he's been staying with you and Remus this summer."

She followed McGonagall's - Minerva's, she corrected - gaze down to the Gryffindor table, where Harry and Ron were digging into the towers of ice cream and assortment of pies and puddings. She smiled, watching him nearly choke on his pumpkin juice from laughter at something George said. "Honestly, Remus and I have been enjoying it almost as much as Harry has."

"It's lovely you've finally gotten to spend time with him," the older woman said genuinely, choosing a piece of pumpkin tart. "I never did like those retched muggles he went to live with. I tried to make a case for giving custody to you from the start."

"I-I didn't realize that. Thank you." The Head of Gryffindor House had been her biggest supporter, during her seven years at Hogwarts, and she'd been quick to recommend her when the Auror Office had come looking for recruits. But, knowing the woman thought her capable of raising Harry enough to challenge Albus on it? She owed Minerva even more than she thought.

"We're not allowed to have favorite students, of course," the older woman carried on. "But, if we were, I doubt there's a professor in this school who wouldn't consider the Lupin twins towards the very top."

"Remus, sure. But, I was just a-"

"If you say you were just a Slytherin, I will be forced to remind you of the many, many instances I awarded my rival house points for your hard work and fierce determination."

"I remember," she chuckled. She'd lost count of how often Minerva had reminded her of that. "I don't think I ever thanked you enough for the recommendation you made to the Auror Office."

"You did, but it was my pleasure," the older woman assured, reaching over to squeeze her hand. "I couldn't be prouder of what you've accomplished."

"It's almost fitting, being back here now," she mused, eyes sweeping across the familiar Hall. "I
think the last time I stayed in one place, for more than a few months, was Hogwarts.

Even when she and Severus had shared a flat - before the Dark Mark incident - the War and their jobs sent them all over. They'd both been gone for stretches lasting anywhere from a few days to a few weeks at a time.

"How are you doing, Iris?" Minerva broached cautiously, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I wanted to come to the Hospital with Albus, but he advised against it."

"He was probably correct, as always." She hadn't been particularly pleasant to be around during those weeks. "Kingsley had only just been to see me, so it was all still raw. I was, regrettably, rather short with Albus."

"I'm sure it hardly bothered him," Minerva assured, with a wave of her hand.

"Having Harry this summer has truly been a godsend," she admitted, gaze finding her youngest godson, once more. He'd really been a shining light for her this summer. "That, and avoiding the continuous memoriam The Daily Prophet seemed to be running about my time as an Auror."

Seriously, one would think she died. "I'm fairly certain Remus even temporarily canceled our subscription, so I wouldn't be tempted to read it."

"That sounds like Remus," Minerva acknowledged. She'd always been fond of Remus too. "Most of the articles were quite flattering."

"They always are." Or, at least, they started that way. "And yet, it still doesn't seem to matter how many dark witches or wizards I sent to Azkaban. They will never report on my achievements, without simultaneously reminding everyone that I'm also the Auror who fell in love with a Death Eater, and failed to recognize her brother-in-law was plotting the murder of her own godson."

The worst of it was, she didn't disagree with them. For all her talent, she clearly had blindspots.

She'd failed Lily and James. She'd failed Harry. She would carry the weight of that failure for the rest of her life.

"I don't care what the newspapers say," Minerva cut in sharply, clear distain for The Prophet's opinions. "No one saw Black for what he was."

There was that. She certainly hadn't been the only one Sirius had fooled. Her brother-in-law was cunning. Even Albus, with his extraordinary skill at legilimency, hadn't seen Sirius' betrayal coming.

She always felt a little guilty bringing up Sirius around Minerva. The transfiguration professor always had a soft spot for Sirius during his time at Hogwarts. She'd been most distressed to learn where his true loyalties had lied.

"How is your brother these days?" the older woman asked, moving onto brighter topics.

"Remus is doing really well," she told his former Head of House. She knew Minerva worried about him, particularly with his depression during those first few years after the War. "You should visit the bookshop someday. You'd hardly recognize it from when we first started out. The place is thriving."

"I imagine it must be. Those Clean-Sweeps you two bought the Weasley twins aren't cheap," Minerva assessed, though she looked quite pleased to have her two beaters so well equipped. "As Head of Gryffindor, I must thank you. They're the fastest beaters on the pitch."

"Be grateful Molly named me their godmother," she teased. "As a proud Slytherin, I'd hardly be seen offering Gryffindor such blatant support, otherwise."
"Disappointed Harry ended up there as well?"

"A little, but not surprised," she admitted. "He's got so much of his father in him - the more mature post-sixth year James, thankfully."

"Let's hope it stays that way. I'm not sure I can handle another early-Hogwarts James Potter."

She laughed. They'd all be doomed, if Harry ended up like his mischief-making father during his prime. James and the Marauders had been the terrors of Hogwarts, until James finally straightened himself out towards the end of sixth year. They had Sirius' horrible prank and Lily to thank for that character development. She'd prefer Harry never fall so far he needed one of his friends to nearly arrange another student's murder, in order to snap him back to reality.

"Remus will be thrilled with the sorting, of course," she said, shifting her thoughts. She'd rather not dwell on that nightmare of a night - when James had found her on Prefect duty to tell her what Sirius had done. They'd only just made it to the Shack in time. "I'll have to send him an owl, after the Feast."

"Do give him my best," Minerva requested, as the dessert dishes vanished, signaling the Feast was wrapping up. "It's been far too long since I've seen him, as well."

She was about to agree, when she felt the sense of dark tentacles gliding over her skull and tightening their hold. _Severus_, she determined, recognizing the familiar tug on her occlumency shield. He used a distinct knock, of sorts, so she'd always know it was him.

Lowering her mental walls to let him in, she heard his stern monotone flutter through her mind. _I need to talk to you when the Feast is over._

What's wrong?

She didn't get an answer, though, as Albus rose from his chair, the noisy Hall silencing immediately. The Headmaster delivered a few brief announcements, and then it was time for the school song. It was almost embarrassing that, all these years later, she still remembered the words.

To no surprise, her mischievous twin godsons were the last to finish the song, having apparently determined a slow funeral march tune was necessary. Any other day, and she'd be proud, laughing along with the rest of the Hall. But, Severus had her worried. He'd sounded even more serious than usual.

Finally the students were dismissed, filing out of the Hall to head to their respective dormitories. She bid goodnight to Minerva, as the Head of Gryffindor House stated she had work to finish in her office.

When the coast seemed clear enough, she hurried out of the Great Hall, jumping a bit when she rounded a corner to find Severus waiting for her. He was the only person that always seemed to manage to sneak up on her.

"Come with me," he ordered, starting toward the dungeon stairs.

"My office is closer," she reminded, but followed him nonetheless.

"To easily overheard there," he countered, the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach growing tenfold.

"If McGonagall saw us heading down here…." That would be the last thing they needed, after
nearly being caught by the Deputy Headmistress before the Feast. It wasn't so much that fraternization was forbidden among the staff, but it was literally Day One. Classes hadn't even begun yet. They needed to show some restraint.

"That's unimportant," he cut in, leading her through his office and into his private chambers.

"What's going on?" she asked, once he'd closed the door behind them and spun to face her.

"Potter was clutching his scar earlier."

"What?" Her blood ran cold. First his wand shared a core with Voldemort's, and now his scar was hurting? These weren't just coincidences. "When?"

"During the Feast, when he looked over at Quirrell."

"Quirrell?" she couldn't help but laugh. That was absurd. "He can barely handle an encounter with a vampire, and you think he's suddenly in league with Voldemort supporters?"

She, thankfully, managed to restrain the small part of her tempted to ask: Are you sure he was looking at Quirrell? Remus was right. She needed to learn to let go.

"I thought you'd want to know is all," he defended sharply, unbuttoning his overcoat and tossing it onto a nearby chair.

"No, you're right. I do want to know," she sighed, exhausted and feeling like she had even more weight on her shoulders now. She stumbled over to his couch, collapsing into it, and running a hand over her tired eyes. "I'm sorry. It's just been a long evening."

He sat down beside her, arm draping across the back of the couch behind her, but not quite touching her.

"I know."

"I'll look into Quirrell," she promised, wanting him to know she truly appreciated him bringing concerns about Harry's well-being directly to her. "Kingsley should be able to find out where he went on sabbatical." After he finished laughing at her, that was. She had more than a few Ministry favors she could cash in on, if needed.

They sat there quietly for a while. Her, leaning her elbows on her knees, staring no where in particular. Him, with his arm not quite wrapped around her shoulders, staring only at her.

"Are you okay?" Severus eventually asked, filling the heavy silence. "Hearing Longbottom's name-"

"I wasn't expecting it, is all," she tried to brush off, despite knowing he'd never fall for that. He knew her too well, and he'd been the one to find the three of them that night. "Should have, of course. He and Harry were born only a day apart. Anne and Frank would be pleased to know he was sorted into Gryffindor." Both Aurors had been Gryffindor alums, after all.

Severus' arm finally ventured low enough that his fingers could rub soothing circles across her upper back. If he wasn't being so mindful of her more sensitive scars, she'd almost have thought it an unconscious reflex. They'd sat like this many a times, in the past twenty years.

"I've never been to see them," she confessed, voice thick. "All the times I've been in Saint Mungo's, and I could never bring myself to visit their ward."

"It wasn't your fault."

Of course it was. She should have known they were walking into a trap. The signs had been there.
She just hadn't seen them. "I was there."

"Being tortured right alongside them."

"Yet, I'm here, perfectly fine and getting to watch their son sorted into Gryffindor, while they're-" she trailed off. Ten years later, and she could still hear their screams from the floor above, as she lay frozen like stone at the mercy of Barty Crouch Junior. She'd fought so hard to break free - to get to Anne and Frank - but she'd failed. Some days, it felt like all she'd done during the War was fail people. "How is that fair?"

"It's not."

"I was maid of honor at her wedding." More of an elopement, really - her and Fabion serving as witnesses with Alastor performing the quick, spontaneous ceremony. "She was going to be a bridesmaid at ours."

"It's always the best of us that suffer the most, isn't it?" she whispered, wiping her eyes a bit. Anne, Frank, Lily, Marlene. They'd been the best of the whole lot of them. "Of the three of us, if anyone should have lost their minds or died that day, it should have been-"

"Don't," Severus interjected fiercely. She shot up, eyes snapping to his intense, storming black ones. He leaned his forehead against hers, holding her close. "Don't ever finish that sentence in front of me."

His lips brushed against hers lightly, before he slowly begun to deepen the kiss. He kept it passionate, but controlled. Far different from the heated, lust-filled snogs they'd shared in recent years. She could hardly remember the last time they'd shared such a simple, but powerful, kiss like this, with the full weight of their feelings for one another being poured into it.

She pulled back reluctantly, needing to breathe. "I should go," she sighed, wanting to do anything but that. "I have my sixth years first thing in the morning."

"It's still early," he protested, leaning back into the couch, and tugging her towards him. "Sit with me a little longer."

Relieved to not have to be alone right then, she curled her feet up on the couch and snuggled into him. Her arms wrapped around his waist, while his came around her shoulders to hold her tight against him. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, feeling his chin rest on top of her head.

"I've got you, Iris," he vowed softly, and he did. He always did - even when she'd hated him. She could spend the rest of her life in his arms, and be content to never move. Severus was the beginning of her story, and he'd be the ending too. She needed to find it in herself to let go of the past, so they could have a future.

Chapter End Notes

Heading to London on vacation in a week. Hoping to have the next chapter up before I leave, as all the dialogue is written. Good news is, six hours plane rides there and back should provide ample writing time. I get to do the Warner Brother's studio tour while I'm there, so I'll definitely be in the HP state of mind!
Thanks to everyone who's reading, subscribed, left kudos, and commented. You guys are awesome!
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

The first years have a Defense lesson. Iris passes along some advice. Remus turns his meddling onto Severus. Some truths come out, and Iris & Sev maybe get some of their shit together.

Chapter Notes

Hopefully the chapter length makes up for how long it took to get it to you. I apologize for any typos. I typed a lot of this up on my phone, while on an airplane. I read it like fifteen times to edit, but I'm sure I missed things.

There's a tiny bit of smut towards the end of this chapter, with some fluff coming up in the next.

Thanks for reading :)

"So, Professor Lupin is amazing." He glanced up from his sandwich to see Fred slip onto the bench across from him and Ron.

"Which we already knew." George popped up, out of seemingly no where, to join his twin brother. "Because she's our godmother and a badass Auror. But, like, as a teacher-

"Easily the best we've ever had," Fred finished, reaching across the table to grab sandwiches for him and George. He was starting to get used to the twins completing one another's thoughts, carrying on conversations like they were one person. Though, he still found his neck growing tired from trying to follow the continuous ping-pong match of words.

"We've only had a lecture on disarming," Ron mumbled through a mouthful of food. "What did you guys do?"

"Well, first class she just prattled on about boggarts," George groaned, like the twins seemed to do when discussing any lecture lesson. "Though," he amended. "She had a pretty wild anecdote about running into one on an op in Morocco."

"But, today," Fred started to exclaim, swallowing a large bit of sandwich in a gulp. "She actually brought a boggart into class, and we had a full-on proper practical Defense lesson."

He didn't know what a boggart was, but Ron's eyes practically bugged out of their sockets. "Wow! She let you practice on a real boggart?"

Whatever a boggart was, that lesson did sound amazing. The twins had told him and Ron a lot about classes this summer, namely that there hadn't been a Defense class where they'd used their wands in the two years they'd attended Hogwarts. Given Percy had been seated within hearing distance, and
didn't object, he suspected the statement might've been true for more than the past two years.

"Yep," Fred beamed, downing some pumpkin juice. "Not everyone was able to get a go, though. So, she said we'd finish next class."

"We have her this afternoon," Ron said, gesturing between them. "I wonder if we'll get to work on disarming?"

"Seemed to us like she was aiming for an alteration between lectures and practical lessons."

He didn't care much what they learned. He was just happy he'd get to see Iris. Catching time with his godmother, outside of their first lesson, had been challenging. One of them always had to get to another class, and first years had to be back in the Common Room so soon after dinner that he couldn't really stop by her office much either. They'd both have more free time on the weekends, he kept telling himself. He had Defense next, making up for the retched double potions he'd had this morning, and he could see Iris anytime he wanted tomorrow.

"I'm surprised they can sit at the same table," Fred mused, drawing him back to the conversation, which had apparently changed topic.

"Who?" he questioned, following the twins' gaze to the Staff Table.

"Professors Snape and Lupin," George filled in for him.

"Do they not like each other?" They certainly looked friendly enough. They'd been sitting next to each other, chatting quietly, since he and Ron came in for lunch. The Staff Table wasn't exactly crowded either. They could've easily sat on opposite ends.

He watched Snape lean over to whisper something in Iris' ear. She rolled her eyes in response, smiling over at him. He couldn't fathom what Snape, of all people, could possibly be saying that would make his godmother grin at him like that, though. Snape had been horrible to him in Potions that morning. He'd been doing nothing wrong, merely taking notes, and the Professor still thought it necessary to call him out on his minimal knowledge of the Wizarding World - in front of the entire class, including Malfoy. Iris couldn't possibly care for someone like Snape. She was probably just being polite. They were colleagues, after all.

"Well, no one's really sure anymore, are they?" Fred shrugged as an answer, returning to his lunch. "Oh wait, you probably wouldn't know!" he exclaimed suddenly, fork pausing midair. He looked curiously between the three Weasleys, who all seemed to know something he didn't.

"They used to be engaged," George explained, sounding surprised he hadn't heard about this before. "Years ago, after they graduated Hogwarts."

He choked on his juice. Ron had to whack him in the back a few times. He really shouldn't have taken a sip at that moment. "Ir-" he coughed, still clearing his airway. "I mean, Professor Lupin was going to marry Snape?"

"Willingly too," Fred nodded, seeming just as perplexed by the concept as he was. "Though, I suppose, they were probably different people back then - before everything," the twin admitted, tilting his head slightly in serious consideration. "Maybe he wasn't such a git."

"What happened?" Something obviously had, because Iris hadn't so much as mentioned knowing the Potions Master, the entire summer. Remus hadn't either.

Then again, there had been that one box of photographs. The box Remus stopped him from
opening, saying there were none of his parents in there. That it was just filled with some of Iris' old school friends - people he wouldn't know. He'd still been curious, wanting to know more about his godmother growing up, but Remus had insisted it would be a task for another day. A day that, conveniently, hadn't come.

"They wound up on opposite sides of The War, mate," George said sadly, giving him the feeling the two weren't the only ones to be divided by the infamous Wizarding War. "Practically destroyed Professor Lupin, the way people tell it."

If possible, he might dislike Snape even more. His godmother was amazing and kind, caring and generous. Anyone who couldn't see that didn't deserve her.

"We overheard Mum and Dad talking this summer. They're worried about them working together," Ron added, with the twins nodding in confirmation. "Said something about how Aunt- Professor Lupin got increasingly more reckless on her assignments, since finding out Snape joined up with You-Know-Who."

"Snape worked for Voldemort?" His jaw nearly dropped in shock. It wasn't that Snape didn't seem the type to stray down a dark path. He was the Head of Slytherin House, after all, and he seemed to favor people like Malfoy.

But, why would Professor Dumbledore hire a former Voldemort supporter? He'd seen the Headmaster conversing quite happily with Snape - Professor McGonagall too. It seemed unlikely either of them would do so with a former Death Eater.

Most of all, though, why was his godmother currently laughing with and touching the arm of a man who'd supported his parents' murderer, like they were the best of friends? Even if the two had been engaged before The War, surely Iris saw him for what he was now.

All three redheads flinched at his use of Voldemort's name. He kept forgetting the Weasleys preferred when he called him You-Know-Who. He thought it silly, but, he also knew Mrs. Weasley lost her two brothers in The War. He was trying to remember to be respectful, like Iris had advised.

"Yeah, for a bit. Then he turned spy for us," George answered, recovering first. "That's what The Prophet said when he was pardoned, anyway."

Well, that explained some things, like how Snape was allowed to work at Hogwarts. He still couldn't help but wonder if they'd got it right. He'd overheard Malfoy boasting about how close his family was to Professor Snape - that he didn't need to concern himself with his Potions grade, because his godfather wouldn't let him fail. The Malfoys were the wrong sort of purebloods. Could Snape really be on the good side, if he was that close to Draco's father?

"Most people think he turned to win Professor Lupin back," Fred continued, oblivious to his wandering thoughts. "But, she's been hunting dark wizards, all over the world, ever since. If she's seen Snape, it hasn't been for long. She was hardly ever in Britain, for more than a few months at a time."

"When they forced her on desk duty at the Ministry, or when she wound up in Saint Mungo's Hospital - which was far more frequent than Mum liked," George laughed, and he found himself grinning too. He could picture Mrs. Weasley lecturing Iris in a hospital room. It was just last week when she'd scolded both the Lupin twins into eating breakfast, with nothing more than a wave of her spatula and a stern tone.

"I got the impression Professor Lupin drives your Mum mental quite often," he chuckled,
remembering Mrs. Weasley's expression when they'd arrived home from Diagon Alley with arms full of purchases.

"Oh definitely," Ron grinned. "But, in a good way. Dad thinks she's great too, because she's half-blood and tells him all about muggles."

That was an understatement. He'd thought Mr. Weasley might burst from excitement at the Nintendo he'd been showing Ron how to play. Remus had forced Iris to explain to Mr. Weasley how it functioned, in revenge for the microwave.

"She bought Dad this really cool Ford Angila car for Christmas last year," Ron added. "I've never seen him so happy."

"He's been tinkering around with it ever since," Fred told him. "He keeps telling Mum he's just taking it apart to see how it functions. But, we've heard some pretty interesting sounds coming from the garage."

"We're fairly certain he's been adding some magical enhancements," George winked, and he had to agree. Knowing Mr. Weasley, that was very likely.

With that, they heard the bell ring, signaling the end of lunch period. Quickly gathering up their things, he and Ron parted ways with the twins to head towards the Defense classroom. They followed the herd of first year Gryffindor and Slytherin students inside, to find all the desks were gone, leaving a wide open space in front of Iris' desk.

"Shuffle in, everyone," Iris hollered, waving them in from where she was leaning against her desk. "You can put your bags in the corner. You will only need your wands today."

He shared a glance with Ron, as they tossed their backpacks in the corner of the room. "Wicked," they both grinned.

The whole class hurried to followed suit, dropping their bags in the growing pile and anxiously crowding around Iris' desk. Even Malfoy and the Slytherins looked interested in today's lesson.

Hands in her pockets, Iris waited patiently on the edge of her desk. He smirked a bit, noticing the black teacher robes, that she complained so much about over the summer, were currently decorating her chair. While his godmother seemed to accept the new wardrobe Malfoy's mother picked out for her, she hadn't been wearing her teacher robes much. In fact, he'd witnessed her shoot Professor Dumbledore a proudly defiant look when he'd noticed. Surprisingly, the Headmaster had merely chuckled to himself, and walked away with a shake of his head.

"Who recalls, from our last lesson, what the most common disarming spell is?" Iris asked, when the entire class settled in front of her.

Several hands shot up, including Hermione. His fellow Gryffindor nearly elbowed him to get her hand up first, bouncing on the balls of her feet. He, himself, kept his hand down. While he was fairly certain he knew the answer, he'd gotten his fill of being embarrassed in Potions this morning.

Iris' eyes skimmed the room, before calling on Dean Thomas.

"Expelliarmis," Dean answered.

"Very good," Iris acknowledged with a smile. "Five points to Gryffindor."

He sighed. He should have raised his hand. After losing two points for Gryffindor in Potions class,
he really needed to make it up to his House.

"Now, as we discussed, Expelliarmis is a fairly simple spell - possibly one of the easiest you'll learn during your seven years here," Iris recapped from their previous disarming lecture. "This is why I feel confident giving you lot some practice this early in the term."

"Despite its simplicity, Expelliarmis is an incredibly useful spell," Iris continued, pushing off her desk to walk about the room, as if taking mental notes on each of them. "Anyone want to hazard a guess why?"

"Yes, Millicent," Iris called out, pointing to a black-haired Slytherin girl who looked twice his size.

"If you can disarm your opponent of their wand, that would give you an advantage in a duel," the girl answered, sounding like she thought it obvious.

"It most certainly would. Five points to Slytherin," Iris nodded, and he noticed the Slytherin girl blink in surprise, before breaking into a proud smirk. Admittedly, he had noticed the Slytherin students didn't often get points from professors, aside from Snape and McGonagall. His godmother, at least, appeared to consider all four Houses equal.

"A spell's usefulness cannot be determined by the complexity of how it is cast alone," Iris said, drawing him back to the lesson, as she crossed in front of the huddled group of students again. "Expelliarmis has saved my life just as often as the highly advanced jinxes taught at the Auror Academy."

Iris finally paused in front of the group, one hand still in her pocket. "First, I'd like us all to practice the incantation," she instructed, quickly adding, "Without wands, please."

After several students returned their wands to their robes, Iris resumed her lesson. "Expel-li-arm-is," she pronounced, annunciating each syllable for them.

"Expelliarmis," they all repeated collectively.

"Good," Iris nodded. "Once more. Expelliarmis."

"Expelliarmis."

"All right, shall we have a demonstration?"

The class, himself included, nodded enthusiastically. Ron grinned over at him, looking as excited as he was.

"Okay then," Iris winked knowingly, scanning the group. "Neville, would you join me?"

"M-me?" Neville stuttered, nervously trying to hide behind Seamus and Dean. He felt a little bad for Neville, knowing what it felt like to be singled out in class. At least, Iris was doing so with a warm smile, unlike Professor Snape.

"Yes," Iris said, waving him forward. "Don't be shy. I'm not expecting miracles. It's only Week One."

Looking terrified, Neville reluctantly shuffled over to the spot Iris directed him to. She demonstrated a quick wrist flick, then had Neville repeat it several times. "Good," she pronounced eventually, when she was satisfied.
"Now, in a moment, Neville is going to try and disarm me," she started to explain, walking over to the other side of the room, a fair distance from Neville.

"Not to worry, Neville," Iris laughed, when the boy gulped. "I assure you, I'm quite resilient."

A chorus of laughter fluttered across the room. She was right, of course. After thirteen years working as an Auror, he doubted his godmother would be taken down by a chubby eleven year old, who barely knew any magic.

"I want you all to watch very closely, and be respectful," Iris stressed, sending a strict glance at all of them. He suspected, much like Professor McGonagall, Iris would not be a teacher one would want to cross. The rest of the class seemed to agree, straightening up a bit and watching the proceedings intensely. "Every one of you will be participating in a demonstration before the end of the school year. Treat Neville as you wish to be treated when it's your turn."

There was a collective agreement amongst the class. He highly doubted, however, that Malfoy and his group of friends would keep to their word.

"All right then, Neville, wand at the ready." Iris pulled her own wand out of her pocket, holding it out in front of her. With a shaky hand, Neville mirrored her pose. "Deep breath," she advised. "It's just class. Failure is allowed."

"Expelliarmis!" Neville squeaked, hiccuping a bit. Iris' hand flung backwards, but, sadly, her wand remained firmly in hand.

Neville's shoulders slumped, but Iris looked positively impressed. "Excellent job, Neville," she complimented, cutting off the quiet snickering coming from the Slytherin side with a look. "That was far beyond what I expected for your first attempt."

"Give it one more go," she told Neville, resuming her earlier position. "I think you're nearly there."

"Expelliarmis!" Neville cried with a little more conviction than his first attempt.

His eyes widened in awe, as he watched his godmother's blackthorn wand soar out of her hand and land on the floor behind her with a slight bounce. All the Gryffindors cheered, and he suddenly understood why Iris picked Neville out of the class. Neville had, thus far, had a rough first week, breaking his wrist in flying class and melting Seamus' caldron in Potions. If his proud, slightly stunned, glance over at him and Ron was anything to go by, Neville just got a massive confidence boost.

"Absolutely marvelous, Neville," Iris grinned, patting the boy's shoulder. Fred and George were right. Iris knew exactly what she was doing, and she was really good at it too. "Truly."

"You can go back to your classmates." Despite his success, Neville still looked relieved to hear that. "Ten points to Gryffindor."

While Iris bent down to retrieve her wand, Neville returned to the Gryffindor side, receiving a whole host of congratulatory claps on the back.

"It is important to remember that the demonstration you just saw was a one-sided duel," Iris said, returning to the front of the room and silencing the class. "While that will be our primary focus the next few weeks, keep in mind, you will rarely find yourself facing a dark witch or wizard who has no intention of defending themselves."

"For example, could I get another volunteer?" she requested, looking around the class once again.
"Someone from Slytherin, perhaps? I do like to distribute points evenly, when possible."

Hermione groaned beside him, looking thoroughly disappointed, when Iris called on Blaise. "Come on up and stand where Neville just was," Iris instructed the tall Slytherin boy. She then retook her place across the room. "Now, if this demonstration goes as planned, Blaise should be unsuccessful in his attempt to disarm me, as I intend to block him."

"This will be fun," he whispered to Ron, who agreed. Finally, they would get a glimpse into Iris' Auror side.

"Wand at the ready," she told Blaise.

"Expelliarmis!" Blaise tried, with a confident flick of his wrist. Like lightning, Iris moved her wand across her body, easily blocking Blaise's spell.

"Whoa!" Ron exclaimed, an echo of agreement throughout the classroom. It had happened so fast, if he'd blinked, he'd have missed it.

"Well done, and thank you," Iris said to Blaise, pocketing her wand. "Ten points to Slytherin."

"It will be some time before we reach defensive charms, but I think it's important to have a visual of what you're building to." Iris returned to leaning casually against her desk. He'd noticed Iris using various furniture and walls to support her weight often. He wondered if it had to do with the damaged nerves in her back that Remus told him about.

"It's a double period, so we still have plenty of time. Everyone choose a partner, and find some space to practice," she waved the class off. Excited, everyone moved to find a partner. He obviously chose Ron, and they moved to practice as far away from Malfoy as possible.

"I'll be around, if anyone runs into trouble," Iris called out, while the class paired up. "Don't get discouraged, if you're unsuccessful today. I expect you to be. We'll be working on this next week as well."

He stood across from Ron, wand at the ready, with his friend offering him a challenging wink. "Expelliarmis!"

The bell sounded, signaling the end of the period. She watched her students gather up their bags, eager to enjoy what was left of their Friday before dinner and curfew. "Don't forget your disarming essays are due next class," she hollered, as they started to pour out of the classroom.

Harry and Ron each offered her a wave on their way out. She'd learned from Hagrid that the boys were going down to his hut for tea before dinner. She was glad to hear Harry included Ron in his acceptance of Hagrid's invitation.

She rounded her desk to collect her own belongings. She still had work to do, but she found it easier to get things done in her office. She had everything in one place up there, instead of the constant up and down.

"Parvati, could you stay a minute?" she called out, noticing the young girl among the few stragglers still grabbing their bags. She'd been meaning to speak with her. Now seemed as good a time as any.

Looking nervous, Parvati reluctantly parted ways from her friend Lavender, shyly walking up to her desk. "You're not in trouble, I promise," she assured the girl, as the last of the class fled through the
door. "I just wanted to see how you were doing?"

"Professor?"

"I'm a twin," she informed the girl. It was fairly common knowledge, but her first years were only eleven. Most of them probably hadn't heard of her before the start of term. She didn't know too many eleven year olds who read The Daily Prophet on a regular basis, after all. "My brother and I were in different Houses too."

She smiled at the girl's obvious surprise. "You were?"

"He was a Gryffindor, and I was a Slytherin," she nodded, and nothing about that had been easy. "I know it's hard, being separated for the first time in your life."

She remembered it had been right around the end of the first week, when the weight of the separation started to take its toll. It was nearly twenty years ago, to the day, Professor McGonagall had given her a similar pep talk. She found it nice to be in a position to pay that forward a bit.

"It's confusing, because I miss her, but I don't think I'd like Ravenclaw very much," Parvati admitted with a sigh, shuffling her feet awkwardly and staring at the floor.

She sat lightly on the arm of her chair, drawing up one foot onto the seat for support. "You are exactly where you are meant to be." She hadn't witnessed the sorting hat steer anyone wrong thus far. She had a feeling the Patil twins were both going to be just fine.

"I would have done terrible in Gryffindor," she laughed, thinking that was probably an understatement. Professor McGonagall had been right, in some ways. Her success and growth had come from the people she'd spent time with, more than Slytherin House itself. They'd taught her skills she hadn't even known she'd needed.

Narcissa taught her poise and grace, or at least enough to fake it. She'd never have survived certain Ministry events without embarrassing herself, if she'd never met her best friend. Rosier and Avery built up her strength and taught her how to fight. She'd spent countless hours working with them, and she'd never have graduated from the Auror Academy in half the time without them. As terrible as Lucius was, she'd learned possibly more from him than anyone, and he'd introduced her to a whole host of future Death Eaters. Getting to know them before The War had certainly helped with catching them afterwards. She'd known how they thought, and how to manipulate them.

She knew now, with the exception of Narcissa, they'd only done all that in the hopes that Severus would convince her to join them. That her love for her fiancé would win out over her moral integrity. Or, at the very least, that she wouldn't chose people like James Potter and Sirius Black over her Slytherin family. There were days she wondered, if she'd never met Lily on the train that day, would she still be on the right side of Azkaban's walls? Giving up a life with Severus for the greater good had been a lot harder choice than she'd care to admit.

Shaking off the past, she focused her full attention back on Parvati. Her past was already written. This was about helping her student. "The sorting hat may be old, but it knows what it's doing. This is an opportunity for you both to learn who you are as individuals, and it will only make your bond as twins that much stronger."

"You think so?" Parvati asked hopefully.

"I know so," she confirmed. She and Remus had always been close, but they'd really found their footing when they finally realized they were allowed to like different things. "My brother and I still
share a flat. He is still my shoulder to cry on, someone to vent to, and the first person I run to when I have news to share. He's my person, and I'm his. I have no doubt it will be the same for you and Padma."

"Thanks, Professor Lupin," Parvati said genuinely, looking like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

"Of course," she smiled, missing a time when her problems could be solved so easily. "If you or your sister ever need anything, my door is always open."

"Tell Lavender too," she added quickly, before winking. "I give more than just twin advice."

Parvati grinned, then took off, likely hurrying to meet up with Lavender. Those two girls had practically been inseparable since the sorting. She'd been happy to see Padma and a few of her Ravenclaw friends joining the two occasionally, throughout the week, as well.

She ventured upstairs to her office. She'd got through a decent amount of paperwork, and had just moved onto Harry's broom order, when she noticed Severus leaning against her doorframe.

He smirked when she looked up, telling her he'd been there longer than she'd hoped. "Planning on trying out for quidditch?" he teased, noticing the broom order form, as he took a seat.

"You're hilarious," she replied, rolling her eyes. "It's for Harry."

"Potter?" he questioned, brows furrowing in confusion. He obviously hadn't heard the news. "First years aren't allowed broomsticks."

"I know. Which is why we didn't get one this summer," she nodded, picking up her quill to finish filling out the form. "But, apparently, an exception can be made if the first year makes the quidditch team."

"Potter's the new Gryffindor seeker?" He sounded surprised, and she couldn't blame him. Not only was Harry a first year, who'd had one flying lesson in his life, but he'd only learned what quidditch even was a month before. She and James had both been fair flyers, well ahead of their class, but she'd only been allowed to train with the Slytherin team her first year and James had only started on the reserve team their second year.

"That's what McGonagall tells me," she shrugged. She honestly couldn't ever remember seeing the Deputy Headmistress so excited. It had been a very strange experience. She was still recovering. "Caught a remembrall from a fifty-foot dive."

Severus raised an eyebrow, seeming impressed. Charlie Weasley had been a damn good seeker - might have been able to go pro, if he'd had the interest. She'd seen her second eldest nephew play several times, during his years at Hogwarts, but she wasn't sure even he could've done that.

"A Nimbus 2000?" Severus observed, leaning over a bit to read the form. "Remus' bookstore must be doing well."

"He just sold two extremely rare first editions for a small fortune, thankfully." She certainly hadn't factored a Nimbus into their budget for the month; however, when she'd suggested they could get Harry a Clean Sweep Seven like the twins, Remus insisted they could swing it. "Though, there will probably still be tears when I sign this withdrawal authorization."

"Didn't Potter inherit the family fortune?"
"He did. He bought his own school supplies."

"And you didn't buy him anything all summer?" he mocked with a half smirk.

"Just some proper clothes, a Chudley Cannons jersey, a - Okay, I see your point," she admitted with a slight chuckle. She knew a losing battle when she saw one. "But, we bought the most up to date model broomstick for the twins, when they made the team last year. It's only fair we do the same for Harry."

"I'm not criticizing," he assured. "They're lucky to have you."

"Well, Remus is gay and I'm me," she stated absently, filing in the final few lines on the form. "Harry and the Weasleys are probably the closest either of us is going to get to having nieces and nephews to spoil."

"It's not too late," he said quietly, and her quill slowed at his surprising change in tone. "I always thought you'd make a great mother."

She froze, a cold shiver running down her spine. Despite what she'd indicated to Remus, she'd never been able to bring herself to tell Severus the truth. He deserved to know, though, and Remus had raised a valid point the other day. This was never going to work, if she didn't start being honest.

"I'm sorry," Severus was quick to apologize, sensing her discomfort. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, it's fine," she reassured, flicking her wand to shut the office door. Just because he deserved to know, didn't mean the rest of the school did. "I should have told you this long ago. I meant to. It's just-"

When her voice cracked a bit, he reached across the desk to take her hand in his. That small gesture, somehow, gave her the strength she needed to continue. "After that night with Crouch and Bellatrix… the Healers said there was too much damage." She paused for a deep breath. "I can't have children, Sev."

She breathed more easily now, finally free of the heavy weight, which had been suffocating her since that night. She watched him carefully to gage his reaction. They hadn't talked much about children, during their engagement, with The War on and the future uncertain. Her mother had though, nearly every time they saw her. Severus had always smiled, a rare occurrence, giving her an indication that he'd considered the possibility.

Admittedly, she had envisioned that life too. It was hard not to, with her mother practically painting a picture of it with her words. There were certainly still other options available to them, if they so chose. She just wasn't confident they'd ever get to that point in their relationship again.

Severus sat there in a stunned silence, for a moment, before his features softened. "Iris…" he started in a whisper, running his thumb up and down their joined hands.

"The news didn't bother me as much as if I'd gotten it a few years prior." She was slipping into half-truths again, and she could practically see Remus' disappointed look in her mind. Because the news had still been painful, even if it would've hurt more had they still been engaged at the time. "There was only ever one person I would've wanted to have children with, and our engagement was over by then," she shrugged, trying to sound more confident than she felt. She doubted she succeeded. Severus could always see right through her. "A few days later, I got promoted to the International Auror Team, and family life was out of the question anyway."
Not being able to stand his knowing x-ray vision any longer, she pulled her hand free from his, and quickly signed the Quality Quidditch Supplies order form. "The point is, if you're looking for that down the road, I'm not the one," she informed him, grabbing the form and standing. "Now, I need to get this broom order out, so Harry will have it in time for practice."

"Iris-" she heard Severus try again, but she was already out the door.

He glanced up curiously from his ledger, at the sound of the fireplace. Molly wasn't due for work until later that afternoon.

"Severus, this is a nice surprise," he greeted, when his friend came around from the backroom. He hadn't expected to see him as often, now that Iris was back and teaching at Hogwarts. "Don't tell me Iris has you fleeing the Castle already." It had only been a week since the start-of-term, but if anyone could manage to do something stupid in that short amount of time, it was his twin sister.

"You'll be pleased. We managed a full conversation without an argument or sex."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," he laughed, closing the ledger and moving onto unpacking a box of new inventory. It wasn't uncommon for Severus to stop by. He, frankly, did so often, and he never objected to him continuing to work while they talked.

"It wasn't entirely pleasant," Severus admitted. He cringed, slightly disappointed. He really thought he'd been making headway with his sister on the Severus front. "The Longbottoms' son is a first year."

Oh shit. He'd completely forgotten about Neville. "She didn't know, did she?" he asked rhetorically, knowing the answer. "Of course she didn't. She's been so preoccupied with Harry and pretending she's genuinely okay with this career change. It wouldn't have even occurred to her."

"I thought I managed to taper the flurry of emotions she had following his sorting, but yesterday…" his friend trailed off, seeming unusually distant. He continued to sort through the recent shipment, knowing Severus would continue when he was ready. He'd been like this when Iris had taken off unannounced, back in February. "She told me she can't have children," Severus finished eventually.

He paused in his unpacking. "You didn't know?" The silence filling the bookstore told him all he needed to know. "Right," he nodded, placing the book in his hand down on the counter. "Molly's due to take over the shop for the afternoon. Let me just floo and see if she can come a bit early. I think you could use a walk."

Situating Severus, who appeared to be in his own stoic little world, in the seat behind the counter, he headed into the backroom to floo Molly. Being the incredible woman she was, Molly was quick to arrive, with Ginny in tow. He could tell she wasn't thrilled to see Severus next to him, but greeted his friend warmly regardless. Molly had never quite forgiven the man for breaking Iris' heart during The War. He doubted she'd be pleased to know she was covering the rest of his shift so he could give Severus the needed advice to win his sister back.

"Thanks again, Molly."

"It's no trouble," Molly brushed off, already moving behind the counter to get to work. "Ginny had been asking if it was time to go for the past hour, anyway. She wants the next book in the series you started her on."

"Ah, so you liked it then, Gin?" he grinned down at his niece.
After dropping the boys off at Platform Nine and Three Quarters, Ginny had started to cry, realizing she would be the only Weasley kid left at The Burrow. To make her feel better, he'd ventured over to the muggle side of the shop and grabbed a copy of *The Magician's Nephew*. Iris had been obsessed with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, when she'd been Ginny's age, and Ginny liked anything her Aunt Iris did.

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, launching into a description of everything that happened in the book. He listened attentively, reminded so very much of his sister. He hadn't even needed to read the books to know the plot. Iris spent half their childhood jabbering away about it.

"Tell Blake I said to give you *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* next," he instructed. Blake knew the muggle side better than anyone, and he adored Ginny.

"Thanks, Uncle Remus!"

"I'll be back before closing," he told Molly, who waved him off again, as she worked through sorting the books he'd left strewed all across the counter.

He and Severus strolled out of the shop and set off down the cobblestone alleyway. There was another exit to London down the road, more conspicuous than the one in his office.

"*The Chronicles of Narnia*?" Severus commented, obviously picking up on his conversation with Ginny. "Iris used to like that series, didn't she?"

He snorted. That was an understatement. Her patronus was a lion, after all. It certainly wasn't because she secretly loved Gryffindor. No, he'd bet all the money in their vault, it was because she'd loved Aslan's character so damn much.

"Mum bought them for her," he confirmed, with a nod. "She offered to lend Ginny her copies, but the pages are so tattered from over-reading, I'm not sure you could open one without breaking the spine." He'd actually had to move her collection out of the office, when he'd set up Harry's room. A few pages had fallen out of one. He'd shoved them back in as best he could, and decided not to mention it to her. He valued his life. Let her think she'd broke it, next time she went to read them. "Can't recall if her first crush was Peter or Prince Caspian, but it was definitely someone in those books."

"Iris would fall in love with a storybook character," Severus chuckled, rolling his eyes.

"I said crush, Severus," he corrected, deciding meddling seemed to have worked well enough on Iris. Perhaps, it was time to shift his focus to Severus. "My sister's only ever been in love with one person."

"There's a cafe up ahead," he announced, pointing down the street, before Severus could object to the change in conversation. "It has an outdoor patio. I think we could both do with some sunlight."

"You are looking nearly as pale as me," Severus frowned, glancing him up and down. "I brought you some more potions - for the full moon."

"Thank you," he said genuinely, with a light hand on the man's shoulder. He seriously didn't know what he'd have done, if they hadn't put their differences aside and struck up a friendship. "It's more appreciated than you know."

"Wolfsbane would be better."

"The cost of wolfsbane monthly would put me out of business," he reminded, yet again. Severus
had been like a parrot about Wolfsbane, ever since the recipe became available to the public. It was pointless for it to even be offered, really. Most werewolves were far less well-off than him, and he doubted many of them had a qualified brewer on standby. If he couldn't swing it without going bankrupt, could any of them?

No, he could manage with Severus' potions and his current arrangements. Once Iris' Ministry job built their savings up enough, they'd sold their father's old cottage and bought a cabin deep in the woods. The acreage was plenty large enough for the wolf to roam happily, and the edge of their land had the strongest wards possible to keep any humans out. He hardly even woke with any self-inflicted wounds anymore.

"Maybe in an ideal world, I could manage both. But, in this one, your potions are a godsend on recovery days."

They walked a little ways more in silence, until they came up to the cafe he'd been directing them towards. "Table for two?" the hostess asked, when they reached her. He glanced over at Severus quickly, noticing, with relief, his friend had thought to dress in muggle clothing today. He must have known they'd go out for lunch eventually. It had become something of a tradition for them.

"On the patio, if you can?"

"This way," the hostess smiled, grabbing two menus and leading them to a lovely table in the shade.

The waitress was over quickly to take their order. It was early afternoon, but late for lunch, so there wasn't much of a crowd. That was good, because they had a serious talk ahead of them.

"So, my sister lied to me," he started, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands in his lap. It was best to jump right into it, before another topic could be brought up. Severus would have less of a chance to deflect that way. He'd learned the best approaches over the years. "I shouldn't be surprised, even if it's the first time I know of that it's happened."

Severus' brows furrowed, as the man sent him a confused look.

"She said she told you," he elaborated. "Well, she promised me she would anyway."

"Why me?"

*Why him?* Sometimes his friend was just asking to be whacked upside the head. "Because she wasn't dealing with it - any of it - and I knew the only person who had a chance of getting through to her was you."

"Maybe before," Severus scoffed in disagreement. "We weren't exactly playing happy family by that point in our lives."

He glanced up at the sky, asking his mother for strength. Maybe, if he were lucky, her muggle belief in God wasn't entirely misplaced, and she was looking down, just as frustrated with Iris and Severus as he was.

"Perhaps not, but there was once a time you two were so sickeningly adorable, you made Lily and James look indifferent to one another." At school, seeing how perfect they were together, had made the teenage boy in him want to gag. When he'd become interested in Sirius, however, he'd started wanting to be them.

Their food was delivered a moment later, and he scowled at the sky. *Now wasn't the time for an interruption, Mother. I was making headway.*
To his surprise, when the waitress left, Severus didn't immediately change the topic. "She only ever mentioned kids once," his friend admitted, shocking him further. He thought, for certain, it would take more than that to get Severus to start talking. His friend must really need this. "Something about hoping they had my eyes."

"They're her favorite color."

"Her favorite color's green."

"It used to be," he shrugged. Because, it had been, once upon a time. He suspected the change occurred somewhere between their second and third year. It wasn't just onyx either, Iris had been quick to correct him once. No, it was they very specific shade of onyx that could only be found in Severus' eyes. He clearly hadn't spent as much time staring into the man's eyes as his sister, because he couldn't spot the difference.

"She can pretend all she wants, but I know the news hit her harder than she admits," he recounted. "All Mum ever talked about, her last few years, was when were you two going to get married and give her beautiful black-haired grandbabies. She didn't care about Dark Lords or Wizarding Wars."

"Your mother always thought too much of me," Severus tried to brush off, but he knew better. Severus had loved their mother just as much as he and Iris had. Even after, what Iris referred to as, the Dark Mark Incident, Severus had continued to stop in to visit and check on their Mum. He hadn't learned that until years later, when they were friends; so, thankfully, he hadn't put a stop to it. Not that their mother would've allowed him to, anyway. She loved Severus like her second son.

Severus had even been there to hold Iris' hand at the funeral, despite The Marauders' presence. Their four angry stares likely made him more than uncomfortable, but he still stayed till the bitter end.

"Your father, on the other hand-" He cut Severus off right there.

"My father's opinion is not one to judge your self worth on," he reminded, not that Severus needed it. He spent enough time at the Lupin residence growing up, to know that fact well. "If she wasn't so bloody Catholic, Mum probably would've divorced him by the time we were seven."

"Sometimes I wish she had," Severus sighed. "She deserved better."

"He wasn't always like that, but yeah, she did." Truthfully, Lyall been a decent father, right up to the night he'd been bitten. In fact, Iris had been his precious little girl, with him wrapped completely around her finger. Then, that night happened, and she was suddenly taking the brunt of their father's frustrations.

"That's why Mum was so happy Iris found you. You were her second son - far more than Sirius ever was."

He had to pause for minute, like anytime Sirius' was mentioned. He managed to recover faster than normal, though, and resumed the important topic at hand - Severus and Iris. It wasn't too late for them. "Iris would always roll her eyes at Mum's comments - always needing to put on her tough, tomboy Auror front - but, I remember, she used to have this small smile that told me Mum wasn't the only one who could picture that life for the two of you."

"We were different people back then."

"Godric, you two are completely obtuse," he groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. "I feel like I have the same conversation over and over again, with the both of you."
"You really think my sister isn't still in love with you?" he exclaimed exasperatedly, earning himself a few curious looks from the tables nearby. Mindful of how close they were sitting to other patrons, he lowered his voice. Just because they were in the Muggle World, didn't mean a witch or wizard couldn't be nearby. He doubted it would help much, if he accidentally got their personal business published in The Prophet. "She still wears the engagement ring - not on her left hand, sure, but on her right or around her neck. I know you've seen it."

Severus nodded.

"Well, I've watched her try and take it off. It's been over a decade, and if she even tries to take it off for a day, it's like she can't even breathe." Godric, he'd thought they would need to go straight to the hospital, the first time it happened.

"Iris made it perfectly clear, long ago, that part of our lives was over."

"I didn't say she wasn't equally an idiot. She is my sister, after all." The two really were made for each other - the stubbornness alone. "She hasn't been the same since that night. Between the torture and losing Anne and Frank - she took that position with the International Team and ran from everything."

"I don't need you to tell me about that night," Severus snapped harshly, but he didn't take offense. It wasn't a topic either of them liked to dwell on. "There isn't a day that goes by I don't still see that image of her drowning in her own blood."

"I know. You should never have had to find her like that. They should have sent Moody sooner."

"They were down three Aurors already."

"I know how much it hurts you when she leaves," he smiled sadly, after they'd sat there quietly for a bit. "It hurts me too. But, sometimes, I think it hurts her more to try and stay."

"I haven't exactly made it easy for her to," Severus admitted honestly. "I push her away. Tell her she deserves better."

"She doesn't want better."

"My reputation, to this day, continues to drag her name through the mud. I'm a stain on what should be a spotless record."

"I've known my sister literally since before we were born," he started. "I can't think of a single moment in my life where she's ever been concerned about what people think."

He knew that was Severus' biggest concern - what everyone would say about Iris, if she rekindled her relationship with a former Death Eater. Iris was one of the most well known Aurors in Britain. The papers followed her every move, like she were some celebrity. While working at Hogwarts would likely allot her some privacy, major gossip like that would still be headline news. The papers already had a field day over the fact that they were both at Hogwarts now.

Iris, on the other hand, couldn't be bothered by what the papers wrote about her. She only cared when they started bringing Severus into an article supposed to be about her. He'd had to cancel their subscription to The Prophet this summer, so she wouldn't find out what they were writing. She surely would've burst into The Prophet's headquarters and raged at the first person she saw, by the second or third article.

"I can offer her nothing," Severus protested further, always quick to put himself down. "Pardoned
Death Eater aside, I'm just the Dungeon Bat of Hogwarts now."

"You're the love of her life is what you are," he reminded, trying hard not to roll his eyes. "Whether you ever get over beating down on yourself or not, that isn't going to change."

Severus glared at him, but he could see a hint of a smirk developing. "You're as stubborn as your sister. It's incredibly frustrating."

"Well, we are twins," he laughed, leaning back in his seat, now that they were done eating. "She's been in love with you since the train, you know?"

"We were eleven."

"I'm not saying it was some grandiose love affair, way back when," he sighed, unable to stop the eye roll this time. "But, I'd never heard her mention Slytherin once, before we met you. It certainly wasn't me she was looking at, when the sorting hat shouted her House, either."

Severus stared at him for a while, before he saw a flicker of something behind his friend's eyes that indicated he might have finally made his point. "Consider this lunch on me, Lupin."

"About time."

He felt the wind blow by, the timing so eerily perfect, he got the strange feeling it was his mother agreeing with him.

[[]]

He sat on her couch, mostly in the dark, with a single candle lit beside him so he could read today's issue of The Daily Prophet. At the click of the door's lock, he carefully folded his paper, and placed it on the table beside him. He, then, crossed his right leg over his left, folded his hands in his lap, and waited patiently.

He watched Iris slip inside her chambers, completely oblivious to his presence. Her lack of awareness, when it came to him, had always been what frustrated him most. If he'd ever truly had ill intentions towards her, she'd have been dead.

Once she'd shut the door, she immediately kicked off her heels, tossing them into a corner. With a heavy sigh, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

The small amount of candlelight in the room cascaded enough of a glow to notice a rather vibrant, knee-length, crimson dress. He hadn't seen that one before. Iris didn't often wear the color, associating it too much with Gryffindor House. Though, he'd admit, the deep red certainly was flattering. He could feel himself growing hard already.

"You look nice."

He smirked, when she nearly jumped out of her skin. "Bloody hell, Sev!" she shrieked, clutching both the wall and her heart. "How'd you even get in here?" she grumbled, once her breathing evened out.

"You never changed your wards," he shrugged, eyes following her, as she walked around the room, lighting each of the remaining candles with waves of her hand. "You still use the same ones from the start of The War."

They'd had many arguments over that fact. He'd specifically instructed her to change them, once she'd discovered his Dark Mark. Out of stubbornness or defiance, she, of course, hadn't. A fact he was still most displeased about.
"Yes, well, changing them would take far too much effort, and they're impenetrable, save for one minor exception," she protested, taking out her earrings and tossing them on top of his paper.

"You didn't even change them during The War. That was foolish."

"Maybe I wanted you to find me," she challenged, crossing her arms and glaring his way.

Well, he'd certainly found her - on more than one occasion. Despite his annoyance, her blatant disregard for her own safety had certainly simplified passing information to her. That wasn't even touching on what might have happened, if he hadn't been able to enter her flat, the night he'd found her with that shard of glass in her hand.

Not wishing to dwell on that memory, he shifted the conversation back to where he wanted it.

"You're wearing a dress."

"How observant," she muttered, with a roll of her eyes, settling on the couch beside him. "I did realize that when I got dressed earlier."

"Who is he?"

"There are other reasons people dress up, Severus."

He simply glared at her in response. He wasn't in the mood for her sass. Talking with Remus had given him the confidence boost he needed to reclaim what was his. He intended to follow through on that, even if she hadn't yet picked up on his change in demeanor.

"He's just some bloke Molly forced me to have dinner with tonight." That explained the dress.

Molly Weasley clearly had a hand in picking it out. The color was bold, like Iris' personality, but not particularly her style. Given the fairly conservative nature, he could rule out Narcissa. She tended to dress Iris in plunging necklines and open backs. "She's afraid of upsetting Remus, now that he's finally doing well, so her match-making efforts are entirely focused on me."

*Because she wants to keep you as far away from me as possible.* That was no matter, though. He had a plan, and he'd bulldoze straight through any insignificant man he needed to, in order to achieve it.

"And?" he probed, when she didn't elaborate further. "How was it?"

"It was lovely, Severus. Best night of my life," Iris snapped, voice dripping with sarcasm. "We're getting married tomorrow; you should come."

He chuckled deep in his throat, quite pleased. "It's barely 8:30."

"It was an early dinner," she tried to defend, with minimal success. "Molly told him I might have early morning staff meetings."

*On a Sunday morning?* "Your hair is still immaculate, and your lipstick isn't even a little bit smudged," he observed casually. "If he wants to tame you, he's going about it in entirely the wrong way."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she exclaimed, leaping from the couch. A fire in her eyes, she started pacing angrily about the room. "You're actually fucking enjoying the fact that my life's finally gone to enough shit that I'm permanently stuck in Britain, can never be an Auror again, and am being forced to go out on the most boring dates with every single male Molly Weasley knows."
"I can't deny I'm enjoying seeing you outside of a hospital bed, for the first time in years."

"No one said you had to visit, Severus." He needed to hurry this along, because the way she kept growling his name was sending a rush of blood straight down to his, already straining, crotch.

"But," he corrected, grinning inwardly, as the candlelight reflected off a familiar emerald on her right hand. It would seem, she even went as far as wearing their engagement ring on dates with other men. "I can't say I'm enjoying the image of you at dinner with some Hufflepuff, who wouldn't know how to properly take care of you if it hit him on the head."

She ceased her pacing, spinning his way suspiciously. "How'd you know he was a Hufflepuff?"

"Because," he smirked, rising from the couch and stalking towards her like a predator moving in for the kill. A surprisingly apt metaphor, the more he thought on it. "A Gryffindor would have been brave enough." He started backing her towards the wall. "And a Ravenclaw smart enough." Her back hit the wall, and he boxed her in with his arms. "To, at least, kiss you when you look like that."

"Maybe he was a Slytherin," she countered unconsciously licking her bottom lip.

"If he was a Slytherin, you wouldn't have come home tonight." He pressed against her, to punctuate his words, one arm curling around her waist to bring them closer and provide support.

"Guess I'll have to ask Molly to find some of them," she breathed, and he could hear the considerable strain.

Forehead resting against hers, their breath intermingled. "I don't think you need her help with that."

The floodgates suddenly lifted, as his lips crashed against hers bruisingly. His fingers tangled aggressively in her hair, pulling her even closer to him. Her back slammed hard against the wall, but, he'd, thankfully, somehow managed to keep a protective hand over her more sensitive scarring. He didn't want the night ending right here.

"Sev," she groaned, as he moved lower, staking claim to her neck. She best hope Narcissa thought to include a scarf or two in that new wardrobe of hers, or breakfast in the Great Hall tomorrow would be incredible awkward for her. If she thought Minerva suspicious of them before, he'd make sure there was even more reason for her to be.

"Oh Merlin, we shouldn't be doing this." He paused briefly, before continuing. It was a feeble, non-committed protest, he noted, not a serious one. He insured he could distinguish the difference, early in their relationship. He could be intense, but he'd never willingly hurt her.

"Give me one good reason why not." He worked at the bottom of her dress next, bunching it up near her hips to provide himself better access. Her knees buckled a bit, and he quickly raised a hand to steady her.

"I have about a hund-" Without warning, he inserted one finger, forcing the remainder of her sentence out in a whimper. "-red."

"Fuck," she moaned, clinging tight to his shoulders, as he added a second digit.

Enjoying himself, he slowed his pace, fingers ultimately reaching a standstill deep inside her. "You were saying something?"

"Don't you dare stop," she huffed in frustration, and he resumed his movements with a deep, throaty laugh. "The job's bloody cursed anyway," she managed to heave out, breath hitching a bit when he
moved to continue his attack on that one, particularly sensitive, spot at the base of her neck. "I'll likely be the first ousted for fucking the Potions Master, though."

"Like it's ever been you..." he grunted, nearly sliding both fingers out completely, before expertly plunging back in with a third. "fucking me."

"It could be, if you weren't so bloody dominating all the time."

"Never heard a complaint from you before."

"I didn't say I had an issue." With a wry grin, he flicked her clit with his thumb, in just the right way, to send her cascading over the edge. After all these years, he'd become quite apt in the art of making Iris Lupin crumble on command.

Onyx orbs clashed with emerald, soaking up the perfect sight of Iris completely surrendering herself to him. As far as he knew, he was the only man on the planet to witness Iris Lupin in such a state. He tried to never take for granted how precious a gift that was - for her to trust him, for her to want him.

She slumped unceremoniously against his chest. He certainly hoped Molly Weasley hadn't borrowed that dress from anyone. He could feel the cum dripping down Iris' thighs, sticking to the hem of her dress and leaking onto his trousers a bit. He tried not to look too pleased with himself. The night was still young.

"I think you've done enough talking," he grumbled deeply, brushing sweaty locks of brown out of her face and continuing to slowly ease her down from her high.

When she seemed to find her footing again, bearing some of her own weight, she glanced up at him with a wicked grin. "Whatever you say... sir."

"Bedroom," he roared, pushing her laughing form in the general direction. "Now."

Her eyes were just starting to flutter shut, when she felt his chest vibrate under her cheek. "Your godson hates me."

"What did you do?" she smiled, keeping her eyes closed and snuggling further into his chest. She could care about Harry's dislike for Severus in the morning. Right now, she just wanted to fall asleep to the sound of his heartbeat, limbs tangled with his.

"I didn't do anything," he protested, fingertips drawing lazy circles across her bare back.

"Wait. Let me guess," she mused, shifting a bit, so she could rest her chin on her hand and glance up at him. "You asked him a series of random questions, he couldn't possibly know the answer to, on his first day."

He stretched leaning back against the headboard, forearm behind his head. "I wouldn't say they were impossible."

"Sev," she admonished, chuckling despite herself. She probably shouldn't find the torment of her godson this amusing. "He's only known he's a wizard for a month."

"He wasn't paying attention in class."
Rolling her eyes, she settled back down on his chest, curling into his side even more. "I honestly don't know which of you to be more annoyed with then."

"Might I suggest the one who hasn't spent the past hour satisfying you to no end."

He looked awfully pleased with himself, and, she'd grudgingly admit, he had every right to be. The man was certainly skilled, with an, honestly, unfair level of stamina and mastery of self-control. Sex with Severus was always both a physical and emotional roller coaster. He could seamlessly transition from intense to tender and back again, insuring to leave every inch of skin feeling used, but also worshiped.

Despite popular belief, Severus felt things deeply - more than anyone she'd ever met. Sex was more than physical for him. It was about the emotional connection. She always felt like the most important person in the world, when with him. He wanted her, and cared for her, more than anyone she'd ever known - even during the years she'd kept him at arms length.

"I'm sure I could be persuaded," she teased, lightly dragging her nails down his side, eliciting a deep growl. "Your godson loves me, by the way," she added for good measure.

"Of course he does," Severus acknowledged. "You're a Slytherin goddess, and, arguably, his mother's best friend."

"She and Remus are never going to let me hear the end of this, you know?" she groaned, burying her face in his chest. "We didn't even last a week." Salazar, she could picture their smug faces already.

"Technically, that could be considered an improvement."

Her head tilted back in laughter, eyes sparkling up at him. His lips twitched upward in a proud smirk. She couldn't help sliding up his chest and kissing him deeply, at the sight, until she drew a moan from the stoic dominant.

Satisfied, she offered him a cheeky wink, before situating her head on his shoulder. His arms shifted to circle around her, drawing her closer to him. She closed her eyes, quiet for a while, before she couldn't hold it in any longer. "I'm tired, Sev."

"Means I did my job."

"I'm being serious," she laughed, backhanding him as best she could with the limited range of motion their current position allotted her arms. "I'm tired of running away all the time." It was, honestly, exhausting, and, if the past month or so taught her anything, she didn't want to miss out on her life anymore.

He repositioned them, so they were lying side-by-side. He slipped one leg between hers, and pulled her flush against his chest, leaving just enough space to look her in the eyes. "So don't," he whispered, as if it were that easy. "Just stay."

"I don't want to hurt you again." A tiny bit of water started building in the corners of her eyes. She may have pretended to be okay with her actions, but, in reality, she'd hated herself everyday she'd been away. He deserved better than she'd given him, these past few years.

"You won't," he assured, running a soothing hand through her tangled hair. "Not the way I hurt you."

"It was Albus, wasn't it?"
He froze in her arms, pulling back slightly in shock. "He knew you were close friends with Lucius, and got along with Avery and Rosier," she continued before she could lose her nerve. "He asked you to maintain those friendships, knowing your potions skills and relationship with me would be very appealing to Voldemort."

"Sirius was the spy in The Order. You were the spy for The Order," she punctuated, looking away, ashamed she hadn't realized it before now.

He tilted her chin up to meet his confused eyes. "How long have you known?"

"It took a lot longer than the former Auror in me would like to admit, to work it all out." Truthfully, it'd taken an embarrassing amount of time to piece everything together. She'd, frankly, spent so much time running away, she hadn't stopped to dwell on the fact that nothing about Severus being a Death Eater made sense. That was, until Remus pointed out one very simple fact. Severus wasn't Sirius.

_He was never really a Death Eater._ Something about Remus' words had clicked in her brain, like she'd finally found the missing piece to a puzzle she'd abandoned ages ago. Even if it hadn't been quite what he'd meant, her brother had been right. Severus had never been a real Death Eater. Her finding his Dark Mark hadn't been what spurred him back to the good side. He'd been playing spy for them all along.

"I think, in some ways, believing the lie was easier," she admitted guiltily. Because, it hurt that he allowed her to think he'd betrayed her - let her throw away eleven years of their lives - _for Albus._

"I couldn't tell you the truth. I wanted to." This time _he_ was the one turning away, voice thick with a heavy pain. "Salazar, that day I found you, with that shattered piece of glass. When you almost-" He sat up abruptly, spinning away from her and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

Recovering from her, rather abrupt, tumble off his chest, she tossed the sheets aside and slid in behind him. "Hey," she breathed quietly, gently turning his head towards her. "Look at me, Sev."

Nodding, he moved back against the headboard. He tugged her into his lap, and she burrowed in, relishing his body heat in the cold room.

"I wanted to tell you, everyday, for thirteen years. Albus insisted-

"I know," she cut in, cupping his cheek. She knew a thing or two about doing something, simply because Albus asked. "I don't want you to keep apologizing for that." She'd been forcing him to do that for far too long. And, as it turned out, he hadn't even really done what she'd accused him of in the first place.

"He's not gone, Iris. I may have to do it all again, one day."

"I know that too." That was why Albus still had him keeping the secret from her. The Headmaster likely wouldn't be thrilled to hear she'd figured it out either. Particularly given, she had the stronger influence over Severus. "I can't promise how agreeable I'll be, when the time comes, though."

He grinned sadly, with a shake of his head, probably able to guess just how agreeable she'd likely be. "So, where do we go from here?"

She thought for a long moment. Though, when it finally came to her, she didn't know how the answer hadn't been obvious. They would do exactly what everyone had been telling them to do, since The War ended. "We start over." No more lies. No more half-truths. They would do it right this time.
"Start over?"

"Not completely," she amended, placing a hand on his bare chest. "We'd never be able to give this up long enough to completely rewind the clock." She wasn't delusional. "Just go on a date with me, Sev. Unless, of course, there's someone else now? I've been gone a while."

Merlin, she hoped not. Surely, Remus would've mentioned if Severus were interested in another woman. It wasn't as if she thought he was actually with someone else. Severus wasn't a cheater. But, if there was someone who could make him happy, with far less baggage, could she really stand in the way?

"There's never been anyone else," he reassured, linking their hands and raising the back of hers to his lips. "But, you could have anyone."

"It's only ever been you."

"Not the Hufflepuff?"

"I swear, I will straight up punch you."

Snorting at her threat, he encouraged her to lie back down and get some sleep. He was right, of course. They may not have classes tomorrow, but they still needed to be awake enough to insure the students stayed out of trouble. She'd nearly drifted off, when she heard him call her name. "Iris?"

"Hmm," she hummed sleepily.

"I should have asked years ago, but the dominant thing."

"Sev, I was just kidding. You know I love it. I've told you I want it like a thousand times." Needed it, really. She'd been taking care of Remus since they were children. She'd been Lead Auror on the International Team. She'd been a master of interrogation. She was constantly the one making decisions. She needed one aspect of her life where someone else did the thinking for her, and there was no safer place to surrender that control, than in Severus' arms. If she fell, he'd always be standing right behind her.

"I know you did before - before everything with Crouch and the Lestranges," he started cautiously. "But, I just need to be sure you'd tell me if it wasn't okay anymore."

Her eyes shot open, suddenly wide awake. She sat up, leaning over him, so she could look him dead in the eye. If he really didn't realize how much she trusted him, they were going to rectify that right now. "I've never had to think twice about it. I've always known I'm safe with you, Severus Snape."

The fact that he was lying there worrying about it, showed that trust wasn't misplaced. "Someone else, maybe I'd feel different. But not with you. Never with you."

He reached up, weaving his fingers through her hair. His eyes bore into hers, as if searching for something. He must have found it, whatever it was. Because, with a possessive growl, he surged up to kiss her hungrily, flipping them over, all thoughts of sleep forgotten.
Flashbacks - Various Years

Chapter Summary

An introduction into Iris and Severus' experiences in pureblood society. The Flashbacks are from varying years, and are just beginning glimpses into this world. These flashbacks are largely focused on Iris, as she's going to be the one reflecting on these moments the most in the upcoming chapters. The story will delve more into this world as the series progresses, particularly Severus' experience in it as that's quite relevant to his time as a Death Eater.

Chapter Notes

Hope to have the next present day chapter up soon! There's just one section that needs more work, but I think having these flashbacks written out now will help.

Thanks to everyone for reading, leaving kudos, commenting, etc. : )

December 1972

She winced as Narcissa pulled hard at her hair. She tried not to groan. Narcissa only just started, and she'd said the updo she had planned would take roughly a half hour.

"I think I'm going to weave some holly into your braids," Narcissa mused, after a while, reaching around to show her the thin string of twisted branches in her hand. She appeared to have magically altered the coloring to a sort of ivory, and plucked all the leaves off. A touch of white glitter had been sprayed on top of the the berries, almost like snow.

"Okay," she agreed. Narcissa knew best. She'd never attended a Yuletide celebration much less one hosted by the British Aristocracy. "Are you sure it's a good idea for me to come?"

She didn't know much about the Aristocracy, beyond what she'd learned in History of Magic, but her father had thrown a fit when he'd learned her mother told Narcissa she could attend. When Remus asked if he'd been invited, her father had tossed a glass at the wall, stating that no child of his would be allowed to associate with "those disgusting, entitled elitists." Her mother had sent her father to the cottage for that, telling him not to return till after the Holiday. She'd then let Remus down gently, on his lack of an invitation, and insured her that Lucius and Narcissa were very much looking forward to having her and that Severus would be attending as well.

She'd felt a little bit better, knowing Severus would be there. He was also a half-blood, from a poorer family. Plus, if Narcissa had gone so far as to meet with her mother to explain what she was being invited to, maybe she wouldn't be that out of place.

Centuries old, the Pureblood Aristocracy was once a strong, powerful institution, comprised of thousands of pureblood wizarding families throughout the globe. As the Wizarding World begun intermarrying with muggles, the Aristocracy started to dwindle down in size and power. Devoted to
maintaining pure bloodlines, any family who allowed a marriage to someone not completely pure of blood were exiled from the society - their Lord and Heir rings destroyed.

While, in recent decades, some pureblood families had come to permit marriages to half-bloods, the British Aristocracy had still declined to a mere twenty-eight. Well, twenty-five, really. The Prewetts and the Weasleys had broken off from the Aristocracy, relinquishing their titles and seats in the Wizengamot, over a hundred years ago. The Longbottoms followed suit about thirty years later. The Longbottoms and the Prewetts' fortunes and reputations hadn't been quite as negatively affected by the split as the Weasleys' had, though.

From what she could remember, as the number of pureblood families abated, their tight hold on the Ministry of Magic begun to loosen. This had given way to the more democratic and accepting Ministry of Magic, and by extension wizarding society, that she'd grown up knowing.

The British Aristocracy was, now, more of a wealthy, elitist class within wizarding society, who primarily associated only with each other and clung to the old ways. Each family held title to large, expansive estates and seemingly endless fortunes, passed down from generation to generation through powerful, magically enchanted Lord and Heir rings. The majority of the Aristocracy didn't have careers, instead opting to use their fortunes to fund and support various political and charitable endeavors. If she'd heard Professor Binns correctly, each family was still guaranteed a seat in the Wizengamot, typically the only form of political office the Aristocracy chose to hold, believing they could achieve more behind the scenes. The seats were typically held by each family's highest ranking male. Though, the Aristocracy would allow a woman to hold the seat, if there were no males left in the family - something becoming more common with the limited number of purebloods left in Britain to provide approved marriages.

It all seemed overly complicated to her. Her only real reference was the muggle royal family, and she'd only experienced what her mother called condescending chauvinism in the muggle world. But, she was still excited to attend the party. Narcissa told her stories about the elaborately decorated ballrooms, the endless buffets of food, the elegant dancing, and more. She'd also been sure to remind her that the Aristocracy still held a lot of respect and influence at the Ministry, with the Lords, Ladies, Heirs, and Heiresses that would be in attendance having substantial networks of connections. She suspected it was really the amount of galleons in their vaults keeping them relevant. Still, if she could impress some of the Lords, this evening, they might be inclined to help her in her pursuit to be an Auror.

"Of course it is, Dear," Narcissa assured her, absentmindedly waving off her concerns while she concentrated on finishing her hair. "Lucius wouldn't have invited you, if he didn't think you'd be welcome."

"He invited me, because you and Severus asked him to," she countered, trying not to roll her eyes. Narcissa would be able to see that in the mirror.

"Lucius invited you, because he wanted to," Narcissa corrected. "He wants you there." She supposed that could be true. Each Aristocracy family took turns hosting the Yuletide celebration, and this year it would be held at Malfoy Manor. It was possible he'd put her on the guest list himself. Lucius did call her his little sister, after all. She'd, admittedly, quite missed his watchful, if not slightly overprotective, presence at Hogwarts this year. James Potter and Sirius Black had bothered her and Severus far less, when he'd been at school.

"No one else is going to," she sighed, because there were still plenty of pureblood families who considered even half-bloods to be a disgrace to magic. That wasn't even delving into her family's associations and lack of wealth. "I'm a half-blood from a family of Gryffindors."
"Iris Lupin," Narcissa scolded, tying off the end of a braid and glancing at her in the mirror. "If you were like your Gryffindor family, you would be in Gryffindor. You made a choice to forge your own path. Everyone at this party is going to respect that, and love you for it."

*Love* might be a strong word, but she had to trust Narcissa on this. With her middle sister disowned, and Bellatrix newly married to Rodolphus Lestrange, Narcissa was her family's heiress. Not the Black family Heiress, Narcissa had explained, though she hadn't quite wrapped her head around that one yet. Did that make Sirius the Black family Heir? He didn't wear a ring, but he was older than Regulus.

She was still trying to map out the Black family tree in her head, when Narcissa declared her hair complete. Glancing up, she assessed Narcissa's work in the mirror, hardly recognizing herself with the web of fancy braiding and light makeup. She imagined, once she put on the dress Narcissa chose, she would look every bit the part her friend wanted her to play. She wondered if Severus was getting the same treatment from Lucius.

"Now," Narcissa drew out, coming round to stand before her, hands on her hips. "Do you remember everything I told you about interacting with the Lords and Ladies in attendance?"

She gulped. That had been a rather extensive list, and her mind had, honestly, started to wander about halfway through. Aristocracy protocol was complex and boring. She'd known Narcissa wouldn't appreciate her yawning during her speech, so she'd started running through quidditch plays in her head to stay awake.

Trying to remember as much as she could, she started to list the rules out. "Stand up straight." She had a tendency to slouch. "Curtsey at my ankles, with my head bowed." That one had required a lot of practice. Severus had nearly fallen off the common room couch, laughing, the time Narcissa made her do it in heels. He'd earned *quite* the glare from the older girl, for that. "Always address them as Lord or Lady." That was probably the easiest one. "Only speak to them when spoken to." She didn't really understand that one, but Severus, Narcissa, and Lucius were really the only people she planned on talking to anyway. Rosier and Avery's parents were in the Aristocracy, so maybe she'd spend some time with them, as well.

"And?" Narcissa stressed, when she didn't continue. She seemed to be looking for something specific.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, after a minute of racking her brain. "Leave my usual attitude at the door." Narcissa had *emphasized* that one, making Severus snicker again. He'd been careful to do so more quietly that time, though, so Narcissa hadn't caught him.

"That's my girl," Narcissa smiled, disappearing into her closet and pulling out a conservative, knee-length gown that matched her holly hairpiece perfectly. "Time to change into your dress, Dear. Lucius' mother is anxious to meet you."

She kept a careful hand on Iris' shoulder, as they stepped into the fireplace to floo to Malfoy Manor. Mrs. Lupin has been kind enough to allow them to get ready in her home. She hadn't wanted to risk doing so at the Black Manor. Her parents both considered the centuries old rules of blood purity to be written in stone and unbending. While they seemed indifferent enough to her mentoring a young half-blood girl, after Andromeda's betrayal, she didn't want to blatantly disrespect them by bringing Iris into their home.

The fireplace spit them out into one of Malfoy Manor's many sitting rooms, tastefully decorated in
emerald green, silver, and black - the colors of the Malfoy family crest. Lady Malfoy had an artistic eye for decorum and decor. She had been working to soak up all she could from the impressive woman, wanting to be able to maintain and grow the ancient elegance of Malfoy Manor when she was its Lady.

Pleased to note Lady Malfoy wasn't yet waiting for them, she took advantage of the alone time to brush some soot off the hem of Iris' dress. "Perfect," she assessed, with one final adjustment to the holly woven into her hair.

Iris grinned brightly, spinning to show off. She laughed, despite herself, glad to see Iris looking more confident in her heels than the month prior.

Her smile faltered a bit, realizing how much Iris reminded her of Andromeda. Dromeda had been kind and playful too. She remembered her older sister having such a fiery spirit, when they were girls. She would sneak into her room at night and read her stories from children's books her parents would never have approved of. She still didn't know where Andromeda had managed to acquire them from.

Her sister used to be of such carefree nature, running about the Black Manor grounds, climbing trees, and jumping in puddles when it rained. She was always coming back for dinner covered in dirt and mud. It had driven mother mental, but, being young, she'd found Dromeda's behavior funny. She used to idolize her middle sister, following her wherever she went. Andromeda had taught her how to play and have fun. For those few years, she even thought she might've known what it meant to be a child.

As Andromeda grew older, though, that youthful light started to dim from her eyes. She began arguing with their parents, loud screaming matches echoing through the quiet halls of Black Manor. Everything came to head, when Dromeda met that muggleborn Tonks boy. She started staying at school over holiday breaks and at friends' during the summer, doing all she could to never return to Black Manor. She'd been left with only Bella, who wasn't known for fun. By her first year of Hogwarts, Bella wouldn't even let her speak to Dromeda, despite the three of them all being in Slytherin House together. The wedge between her and Andromeda grew so great that, even after Bella graduated, it was nearly insurmountable. The night Dromeda announced her engagement to the Tonks boy, and her parents officially disowned her, was the last time she'd seen her sister.

"I feel like I'm in Narnia," Iris exhaled in amazement, taking in the room with wide eyes.

She didn't know what Narnia was, but a fierce protectiveness stirred deep inside of her. The innocent wonder in the young girl's eyes made a small part of her want to push her back into the fireplace, before Lady Malfoy arrived and the Aristocracy got the chance to rip the light from Iris' eyes too.

The door swung open, before she could say anything, and Lady Antoinette Malfoy elegantly swept into the room. Lady Malfoy was breathtakingly beautiful, hailing from a powerful French pureblood family. Though, she often wondered if there might be traces of Veela in her heritage. Her appearance was mesmerizing, with crystal blue eyes and long white-gold waves. This evening her hair was immaculately pinned up, and her sparkling midnight gown complimented her ivory skin and oceanic eyes perfectly. The woman was everything she wanted to be.

"Apologies for keeping you girls waiting," she smiled in her rich musical tone. "I was just getting Lucius and Severus situated in ze drawing room with Abraxas and Lord Prince."

She floated across the room to kiss her on both cheeks in greeting. "Lovely to see you, My Dear."
"You as well, Lady Malfoy," she responded in kind, but the older woman was already glancing over her shoulder.

"Zis must be Iris."

She stiffened slightly, realizing there was no turning back now. Lady Malfoy was Iris' first test. Stepping aside, she gently encouraged Iris to come forward.

Iris started shuffling forward, but quickly remembered to pick up her feet. She stood with her back as straight as she could, and curtsied at her ankles perfectly. She'd clearly been practicing. "Lady Malfoy," Iris greeted, head bowed carefully. "You have a lovely home."

"Oh, Narcissa," she breathed, smiling at her. "She's absolutely divine."

"Iris, Dear," Lady Malfoy addressed, with a hand to Iris' shoulder. "Some of ze other Hogwarts students are in ze sitting room down ze hall. I am sure Severus will join you zere shortly."

"Thank you, My Lady," Iris said, bowing her head, and gracefully slipping out of the room.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, a sense of pride welling up inside her. Iris was performing brilliantly, far exceeding her expectations.

"She'll likely spend most of the evening with Severus," she predicted, watching the girl's exit. Those two were inseparable at Hogwarts, and she'd noticed Severus had begun spending a lot of time at the Lupin residence outside of school. "I'll have to tell him to be sure she doesn't play with her hair too much. She's always doing that."

"She will be fine, Narcissa," Lady Malfoy assured confidently, despite only just meeting the girl. "When I left, Severus was doing quite remarkably with Lord Prince. Abraxas is most pleased. Incredibly lucky zat ze boy to sit next to Lucius at ze feast his final year happened to be Lord Prince's grandson."

"Yes," she responded positively, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in her gut that the timing was too ideal for luck to have anything to do with it. If all went well, this would, ultimately, prove a positive change for Severus, given his family. "Very much so."

None of this had been her intention, when she'd originally suggested to Lucius that, maybe, the kids should attend Yuletide this year. They'd been in the midst of dinner, the Saturday in November that Lucius had come to watch Iris' first quidditch match, when it occurred to her that nearly all of Iris and Severus' Slytherin House friends were children of the Aristocracy. The prior Yule had been at the Lestrange Estate, and they'd only just been getting to know the kids, so their attendance had been out of the question. This year, however, with Yuletide being at Malfoy Manor, she'd gotten the outlandish notion that, perhaps, their two mentees could enjoy the celebration with their friends.

She hadn't been thinking. Not really, anyway. Or she'd have remembered who they were, rather what they were. She couldn't simply bring two half-blood children to Yuletide, with no preparation or explanation. So, she'd quickly recanted, deeming the idea ridiculous. Lucius had other plans, though, seeing a potential opportunity to impress his father.

Lord Prince was the Head of one of the most ancient and noble pureblood Houses. He was aging, and of ailing health. Since his wife passed, he'd largely been alone, having disowned his daughter for marrying a muggle. No one, not even Lord Prince himself, had known he had a grandson, until the boy sat next to Lucius at the start-of-term feast last year.

Lucius' father, in particular, had been very interested in this information. Lord Abraxas Malfoy was
cold and calculating, a snake personified. Lucius had given him the opportunity to seize even more power, and he was taking it.

Lord Prince currently had no Heir. Following his passing, his Lord and Heir rings would be returned to Gringotts, taking any chance to claim the Prince family fortune away and leaving the Prince Estate to rot. However, by luck, the Prince family happened to be one of those whom had grown more tolerant of half-blood marriages, in order to curtail the risk of insanity that people said plagued certain members of her family.

If Severus could impress his grandfather enough, the Lord Prince might be inclined to name him Heir, in a few years time. Lord Malfoy was counting on it, in fact, as he believed Lucius' mentoring of the boy would gain them his unquestionable trust and allegiance. The Malfoys would, therefore, hold great influence over the Prince Heir and future Lord.

In honesty, she wasn't entirely certain how she felt about that, and she was still trying to work out what their plan for Iris was - why Lord Malfoy was interested in her. A marriage seemed most likely. Even with marriages to half-blood witches and wizards becoming more common in the Aristocracy, naming a half-blood Heir was certainly not. Few pureblood Houses would have interest in joining their House with one headed by a half-blood Lord.

She suspected Lord Malfoy feared this might cause Lord Prince to hesitate in naming Severus his Heir; instead choosing to allow the Prince family to die with him, rather than run the risk no suitable wife could be found for Severus and their family dying out anyway, with the half-blood boy of his disgraced daughter at the helm.

Lord Malfoy likely saw potential in Iris, as no one would bat an eye at a half-blood marrying another half-blood. Even the Blacks and the Lestranges would consider the 'filthy half-bloods' deserving of one another, pleased a pureblood wasn't forced to degrade themselves by marrying either one.

She'd, perhaps mistakenly, mentioned to Lady Malfoy how adorable the small childlike crushes the two were developing for one another were - that she imagined they would be contemplating marriage by their graduation. Lady Malfoy had clearly conveyed that prediction to her husband, who must think Iris could be trained up, and introduced well enough into their society, to play a crucial role in his plans.

She never wanted this. She'd simply wanted Iris to enjoy a Yuletide celebration, not be pulled into the epicenter of some elaborate plot she knew nothing about. What concerned her most of all, though, was a year ago, she wouldn't have batted an eye at this. Power grabs like this were common place in the Aristocracy. They happened all the time. She'd grown up in this world, she believed in blood purity, and she'd been promised to Lucius since they were small. This move Lord Malfoy intended to make would strengthen her future House and family. She should be happy, offering to do all she could to service their plans further.

A year ago, she might have been too, but a year ago she hadn't really known Iris Lupin. Iris was fiery and independent. If the Malfoys believed they could control her, they would be in for a surprise. Iris would play along for a time, if she asked her to and told her it would help Severus, but, eventually, even her grip on the girl would break. Or, perhaps, she'd end up releasing it herself. Something had reawakened inside her, the day that stubborn eleven year old, from a family of Gryffindors, slid in next to her at the Slytherin table. Iris was a child of the real world, and, at twelve, she was already crashing straight through any limits the world attempted to place on her. Iris knew how to forge her own path, like Andromeda had. She found herself drawn to that.

She'd lost Dromeda under the pressing weight of the Aristocracy. She didn't intend to lose Iris too. She would let her go, before she let that happen.
December 1974

He checked his watch a third time, wondering what was taking so long. Narcissa usually had Iris here by now. He supposed Remus and the other Mauraders could be holding them up. He wouldn't put it past Black and Potter to make it difficult for Iris to attend the annual Yuletide celebration hosted by the British Pureblood Aristocracy. Even still, the party was in full swing. They should be here by now.

Just as he raised his wrist to check the time again, he caught sight of familiar chocolate curls. His jaw nearly dropped, as his eyes ran over the knee-length green lace dress. With a slightly lower dip in the neckline than prior years, the dress hugged Iris like it was made for her, while still being modest enough for a fourteen year old. Narcissa outdid herself tonight. Short of a tiara decorating the elegant side bun Narcissa had woven her hair into, Iris looked every bit a royal princess. She would make the perfect future Lady Prince, if he could ever work up the courage to actually tell her how he felt.

"Ah, so you finally noticed, then?" Lucius' voice called out, popping up beside him and clapping him on the shoulder. "About time, my friend. Narcissa will be pleased."

"Noticed what?" He couldn't fathom what the older boy was talking about. Unless he knew. But, Lucius couldn't possibly know. He'd been working tirelessly to insure he kept is feelings for Iris well hidden.

"That Iris is a girl."

"I know Iris is a girl." Lucius was being ridiculous. He'd probably gone and drank one too many glasses of firewhisky, while waiting for Narcissa.

"No, I mean, you've finally noticed Iris is a girl," Lucius stressed, with a deep chuckle. He blushed, awkwardly kicking some non-existent dirt with his shoe. Obviously, he hadn't hidden his feelings well enough. He certainly hoped Iris didn't know.

"Do we need to have a talk?" Lucius commented, misinterpreting his silence. "I know your family situation is not ideal."

"I know what sex is," he grumbled, blushing that much more, as he glanced around the room to insure no one overheard them.

"Good," his friend nodded, sounding overly smug for some reason. "It's Yuletide, after all, and The Slughorns love to decorate with mistletoe. Spend enough time with Iris this evening, and you two are bound to wander under some."

He gulped nervously, though Lucius didn't seem to notice. His friend smiled, hitting him lightly on the back. "Glad you'll know what to do when that happens."

With a confident swish of his deep emerald robes, the Heir Malfoy started to walk away. "Wait!" he called, halting his friend's exit. Lucius wandered back over to his side with a knowing smirk.

His friend glanced his way expectantly, clearly having some idea why he'd called him back over. "You don't think I'm going to have to kiss Iris tonight, do you?"

He wasn't nearly prepared enough. He'd read about a dozen books on various courting rituals, but he still had about a dozen more on a table in his grandfather's library. He still hadn't determined the
His grandfather had offered to draw up a marriage contract and present it to her parents, as was customary in many pureblood families. He was fairly certain Iris wouldn't like that very much, even if it would save him from having to suffer her rejection personally.

He'd even gone as far as to ask Mrs. Lupin for advice. She'd just laughed in that amused, non-condescending manner she always did, when she thought he was overthinking things. *You don't need a courting ritual, Severus. Just tell Iris how you feel. That's all she needs,* Mrs. Lupin told him, but that couldn't be right. Iris deserved the world. When he courted her, it had to be as perfect as she was.

"That, my friend, is up to you," Lucius winked, making kissing Iris for the first time sound a whole lot easier than it was. "I will say, from experience, women don't often appreciate being abandoned under the mistletoe."

He tugged at the collar of the tux-style dress robes Lucius had picked out for him. He was starting to sweat. Was it stifling in the crowded ballroom, or was it just him? He couldn't leave Iris under the mistletoe. She'd think he didn't want her. But, he couldn't just kiss her either. It wasn't that simple. "Lucius, I can't," he squeaked quietly, wishing the ground would open up and swallow him whole. "I don't-" he started to mumble, quickly glancing around to insure they were alone. "I don't know how."

He glanced at the ground, blushing from embarrassment. He would be turning fifteen next month, and he still hadn't kissed a girl. He wished he had Black's confidence, able to go around Hogwarts wooing anyone with a pulse. There was only one girl he wanted to impress, and he couldn't seem to find the courage to even try holding her hand.

It wasn't like Iris would laugh at him, like the rest of the school surely would. They'd been friends since the train, and they were each other's anchor as they both tried to navigate this pureblood world Narcissa and Lucius pulled them into. Even if claiming his Heir title helped him blend in a tad more, they were both equally fish-out-of-water among these people. They lived two lives, and he'd never have survived this long without her.

So, if there was one thing he could be certain of, it was that. Iris would never laugh at him. She could still say no, though, and probably would. Iris was stunning, and the boys at school were all starting to notice - even the Gryffindors. She could have her pick, and it wouldn't be the lowly son of Tobias and Eileen Snape. He may be an Heir and future Lord in the Pureblood Aristocracy, but, in the real world, he was just *Snivellus.*

No, Iris would surely reject him, with every bit of the elegance and grace she did everything. It would prove Black and Potter right about him. Hopefully, he would still get to keep her as a friend. When all was said and done, that would be better than nothing.

"That, we can fix," Lucius grinned, seeming unperturbed by his lack of experience. He glanced up at his friend, trying not to seem too hopeful. Maybe Iris would, at least, let him kiss her once or twice, if he could build up some skill. "So long as you want to?"

"Of course I want to!" he exclaimed, looking at Lucius like he had ten heads. This was *Iris* they were talking about. "Iris is-"

"Beautiful?" Lucius suggested, but that didn't sound right. Iris was so much more than her looks.

"Perfect," he decided, nodding to himself. That seemed apt enough to capture everything.

His eyes narrowed. He should have known it was Narcissa who figured him out. She always seemed to know what he was thinking. It wouldn't surprise him in the slightest to learn she knew about the courting books as well.

"What if Iris isn't, though?"

To his surprise, Lucius laughed even louder at that, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Oh, my friend, you have so much to learn."

Keeping an arm around his shoulders, Lucius guided him across the ballroom, expertly weaving them around the crowds of minglers and dancers. The parties hosted at Slughorn Estate were always elaborate and heavily attended. The Slughorns spared no expense and were incredibly accepting of half-bloods, making their guest lists quite extensive.

Lucius led him towards the bar, where an alluring woman, maybe a year or so younger than Narcissa, was flirtatiously entertaining a rather large audience. A herd of boys, and some significantly older men, surrounded her, practically drooling, as they pretended to hang on her every word. He suspected none of them gave much care to what she was saying, more interested in what the thin, backless gown was doing a poor job of concealing. He felt out of place already.

Lucius, on the other hand, hardly seemed to take note of the gathering of admirers. He simply brushed them out of his way, tugging him up to the woman. With a snake-like smile, she eyed him up and down. Licking her lips, she waved her hand to dismiss all the other men around them.

"Severus, this is my dear cousin Anya Romanoff," Lucius introduced, gripping his shoulders and positioning him in front of her like he was a gift. He tried not to step back behind Lucius, under her predatory gaze. She must be Lucius' cousin on his mother's side. The late Lady Malfoy had relatives throughout Eastern Europe. He was fairly certain Lucius' Aunt had married a Romanian Lord. This must be their daughter and heiress, judging by her ring.

"Anya, the newly named Heir Prince is hoping to catch our young Iris Lupin under the mistletoe this evening," Lucius began explaining to his cousin. He tried not to blush, standing as straight as possible and attempting to embody the persona of a British Heir. "He could use a bit of practice beforehand."

He nearly choked on his own saliva, head whipping to glare at his friend. Was Lucius out of his mind? This was not what he meant when he'd asked his friend for help.

The Romanian Heiress laughed, twisting a piece of her long, jet-black hair around her finger. He gulped as she stalked closer to him. He, supposed, he could see what had those other men so mesmerized. Anya gave off an otherworldly appearance, almost gliding across the floor. Her floor-length, silver silk gown billowed against her body like running water, with each elegant and fluid movement she made.

"You're a handsome young thing, aren't you?" she purred, running a finger down his dress robes. "Sure you only want to practice kissing?"

Eyes widening, he glanced back at Lucius, pleading wordlessly to be saved. "Down, dear cousin," Lucius chuckled, removing her hand from his chest. "The Lord Prince, himself, has approved of Miss Lupin for his Heir. Let's not defile Heir Prince quite yet."

Ignoring his cousin's pout, Lucius turned his way and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Anya can
teach you anything you wish to know, my friend."

With that, Lucius disappeared, leaving him alone with the terrifyingly gleeful Romanian Heiress. Taking him by the hand, she pulled his frozen form along behind her. "Come now, Heir Prince," she smirked, leading him into an adjoining, unoccupied room, slowly closing the door to the rest of the party.

"Now," she hummed in a slow sultry manner, striding towards him. "Shall we begin?"

"Uh--" he stuttered, shuffling away from her advancing form.

"No need to be shy," she grinned wickedly, laughing as he backed into and awkwardly dodged furniture to keep a distance between them. "Every boy fantasizes about this moment."

He certainly had dreams similar to this. But, this was all wrong. This wasn't how those fantasies were supposed to play out. In his dreams, it was always Iris advancing on him. Well, admittedly, he would prefer to be the one advancing on her. But, no matter the scenario, it was supposed to be Iris, not Lucius' cousin.

You're doing this for Iris, his brain reminded him, as his back hit the wall. Because, she deserves someone who knows what they're doing.

"You must really like this girl," Anya breathed, running a hand through his hair. "I inherited some of my mother's Veela heritage. I've never met someone who could resist so strongly."

"Iris is--" he started, only to be silenced by a finger to his lips.

"Shh…" Anya hushed. "I'm sure she's lovely. She'll appreciate the skill you're acquiring to please her." That didn't sound like Iris, but he allowed the older girl to press her impeccably painted red lips hard against his.

"Severus, there you are!" a familiar voice called out, barely a second later. Instinctively, he pushed a put-out Anya away from him to see Narcissa standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, looking displeased. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Anya," Narcissa said, turning to the Romanian. He cringed. He knew that tone. Narcissa only used that overly polite tone with people she didn't like. "Be a dear, and give us the room."

For the first time all evening, he found himself hoping Anya would stay. Narcissa looked poised to kill. Being alone with his surrogate sister right now might actually be more dangerous than Lucius' predatory cousin.

Anya scowled at her future cousin-in-law, but ultimately followed through on Narcissa's request. After Anya vanished through the doorway, Narcissa closed the door hard behind her.

"Narcissa, it wasn't-" he started trying to explain, when she spun back around. Salazar, he hoped she wouldn't tell Iris!

"Relax, Severus," Narcissa assured, raising a hand to stop him. She seemed far less angry than a minute ago. "Lucius told me everything."

Oh. That made sense. He finally breathed a sigh of relief, gratefully thanking Narcissa for the rescue.

"I love him dearly, but Lucius really isn't one to go for girl advice."
"I'm starting to realize that," he sighed, still feeling like he hadn't a clue how to impress Iris.

"Come sit with me," Narcissa instructed, wandering over to one of the couches he'd crashed into earlier, and patting the seat beside her. He joined her, feeling more at ease than he had all evening. He should've talked to Narcissa from the start. She always knew what to do.

As if putting words to his thoughts, Narcissa reminded him, "It just so happens, being one of them, I have a fairly good idea regarding what women want. So, why don't you tell me what's bothering you?"

"I want to kiss Iris," he admitted, less embarrassed than he'd been with Lucius. Narcissa was like Iris. She wouldn't laugh at him.

"About time," she smiled, nudging him playfully. "Have you tried telling Iris that?"

"That's what Mrs. Lupin told me to do too." Perhaps, he should've given that option more thought. "But, I've been reading up on traditional courting rituals, and-"

"I'm going to stop you right there, Severus," Narcissa interrupted kindly, placing a gentle hand on his arm. "You know Iris as well, if not better, than I. So, I mean this in as loving a way possible: in what world do you think Iris Lupin would appreciate a courting ritual? It's like pulling feathers off a hippogriff to get that girl to wear something other than a t-shirt."

He smirked at Narcissa's huff of frustration. Iris certainly didn't make it easy for their socialite friend to dress her appropriately to blend in with the Pureblood Aristocracy. He remembered their first ever party, when they were twelve, Narcissa had tasked him with insuring Iris didn't play with her hair all evening. It proved harder than he'd anticipated.

That being said… "Iris deserves the best, and it's traditional for an Heir to court his future Lady."

"Severus, Iris isn't traditional or, quite frankly, ladylike," she laughed. "She didn't grow up in this old aristocracy. Like you, she grew up in the new, evolving Wizarding World - where a half-blood girl can be just as powerful as a pureblood male."

"Iris is never going to be an aristocratic Lady, who sits in a corner with the other women, ankles crossed and a plastic smile, while her Lord husband does the important talk," Narcissa reminded, not that he needed it. He knew Iris wasn't that girl, and he didn't want her to be. He wasn't like the other Lords either. When he and Iris left whatever event the Aristocracy was holding, and shed their elegant hair and fancy clothes, they fell right back into ordinary life. Finally, we're back in the real world, they'd laugh, relieved to be able to slouch, speak normally, wear comfortable clothes, laugh loudly, and smile because they wanted to.

"She can do it, and does do it, because we ask her to," Narcissa added. "But, one day, she's going to decide she can't just be seen and not heard. She'll spread her wings and fly far away from the Aristocracy, and, admittedly, probably be the better for it. That's the version of Iris you need to focus on courting, because that's the version you'll end up marrying."

He could hear the sadness in Narcissa's voice. He knew the older girl cared for Iris deeply, even if they were completely different people. Iris would always feel the pull toward the 'real' world, though, while Narcissa would always be tied to this one. In the back of their minds, both girls knew it. They just didn't want to admit it to themselves, or each other. He was still trying to figure out where he belonged.

"She wants that life for you too," he said quietly. Narcissa was strong willed and strong minded. Iris
wanted her to live in a world where she was free to express that.

"She's the best of all of us," Narcissa acknowledged, with a small half-smile. "But, I've made my choice."

"I know." Narcissa wasn't Andromeda. She was never going to betray her heritage, her beliefs, or her family.

"We've gotten very far off topic, haven't we?" Narcissa chuckled, sounding more like herself again.

He grinned at her, before remembering he still hadn't solved his problem. "Narcissa," he hesitated, but knew he could trust her. "I don't know how to kiss."

"Good," Narcissa laughed. He blinked, not having expected her to say that. "You're barely fifteen. You're not supposed to be an expert, Severus. Iris is going to be just as clueless. It will be awkward at first, but you'll learn together."

"So, I don't have to kiss other girls before her?" he asked, just to be certain. "Because, I really don't want to."

"I would advise against it," Narcissa winked. "Doesn't sound like a method Iris would approve of, does it?"

"Not at all."

Laughing, she stood and held out her hand. "Come on. Lucius is distracting her, but, if we leave them too long, he'll find a way to muck it up."

\[
\]

Patting a nervous Severus on the shoulder, he left the kid to Anya, who he'd known would be more than happy to show him the basics. Chuckling to himself, he went searching for Narcissa, when she suddenly popped up beside him. He frowned at her fake, annoyed smile, as she passed him a glass of champagne. "What is Severus doing with Anya?" she questioned through her teeth.

"He wanted to learn how to kiss," he defended, accepting the glass. "Before he begins courting Iris."

She turned towards him, placing a light hand on his arm, but he could see the sheer frustration behind her eyes. She was masking, what was apparently, an argument from any wandering eyes. "And you couldn't just kiss the boy yourself?" she growled. "You just had to introduce him to your piranha of a cousin?"

"Relax, dear," he assured his fiancé, as he smiled and raised his glass to McNair, who was walking by. "I laid out the ground-rules for her. Besides, he's a tad on the young side, even for her."

Narcissa didn't look any calmer, though. Salazar, he didn't understand women. "What do you think happens when Iris wonders how Severus is so skilled at barely fifteen?" she glared, hiding a frown by drinking from her champagne fluke. "Is she going to be thrilled to hear he's been snogging other women for practice?"

"I'm sure Iris will-" he started, before pausing to really think. Shit, he cursed internally, the lightbulb going off in his head. Iris was definitely the type of girl who'd rather Severus be inexperienced than have kissed another girl, however casual and meaningless it might have been. "I have to find Severus," he breathed, frantically looking about the ballroom for where Anya had taken him.
"You've done enough damage," Narcissa corrected, halting him with a hand to his arm. "Distract Iris. I will find Severus."

Nodding, he watched her walk off. His eyes searched the room for Iris, finding her sitting in a corner studying the movements of those on the dance floor. He and Narcissa had been giving Iris proper dance lessons recently, and she'd been performing quite well. Severus, on the other hand, had stepped on Iris' foot once, during their first lesson, and declared himself incapable of dancing.

He placed his champagne fluke on a nearby table, and made his way over to her. "Severus still on his anti-dancing crusade?"

Laughing, Iris tore her eyes off of the various dancing couples to look up at him. "I actually haven't seen him all evening, but I'm sure he is."

"His loss," he shrugged, because Iris clearly longed to be out there and someone was bound to notice. Deciding he'd mucked their courting up enough already, he felt it prudent to intervene, before Severus came back to witness her dancing with someone else.

Bowing slightly, he offered her his hand. "My fiancé appears to have vanished this evening, as well. Do your surrogate brother the honor of joining him on the dance floor?"

Smiling, amusement dancing across her eyes, Iris took hold of his hand. "Of course."

He led her onto the dance floor, sweeping her into his arms. He kept their dance to a simple, classic waltz. She was still learning. She'd been a fairly apt student, thus far, however. She'd be progressing to more complex dances, before he knew it.

"You look beautiful tonight, Iris," he told her, feeling like time was getting away from him. His surrogate sister was blossoming into a young woman, and Narcissa was starting to adjust her wardrobe and hair styles to reflect as such. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. "You're growing up fast."

"I'm not a child anymore." Always defiant, she was. There was no keeping Iris Lupin in a box. He both admired her for it, and desperately wished he could change that. Iris grew more outspoken, the older she got. He felt like he was constantly holding his breath, praying she didn't speak out against a Lord or Lady.

"I'd keep you a child forever, if I had my way." It'd been easier to insure she followed the rules, when she was younger, and he missed her youthful admiration of him. She still loved him like a brother, of course. He expected that would never change.

He'd noticed recently, however, her fingers beginning to curl and her jaw starting to lock, anytime he spoke out against muggles and muggle-borns. Iris was beginning to form her own opinions, and they weren't what he'd hoped. He knew she was still close with that mudblood Ravenclaw girl. Severus was too. He and Narcissa hadn't been at Hogwarts long enough to stamp that out of them, it seemed.

"But, you are correct," he admitted, shaking his thoughts off. His sister wasn't a lost cause yet. They still had time. "We will need to start preparing you for your future career."

"As an Auror?" Iris half asked, half reminded.

"Of course," he sighed, knowing there was no changing the girl's mind. It had taken a while, and a great deal of Slytherin cunning, but he thought he might finally have a plan to convince the Aristocracy why an Auror in their ranks would be useful. It was currently the only office in The
Ministry that the Aristocracy didn't have connections in. If Iris could work her way up the ranks quickly, the Lords would certainly be interested in spearheading her career. She would have to work twice as hard as everyone else in her year, but she could manage it. He had no doubt.

"Whatever you want, Iris, the people in this room can help you get. You’ll be the star of the Auror Office." He just hoped she'd still be on their side when she got to that point.

"Thanks, Lucius," she smiled, rising on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

"Mind if I cut in?"

He and Iris paused in their dance at Narcissa's voice. As was customary, he bowed to Iris, who curtsied in return. He then pulled his beautiful fiancé to him, wrapping his arms round her so he could whisper in her ear. "How'd it go?"

"See for yourself," she told him, tilting her head to their right. Glancing over, he saw Severus leading Iris by the hand out into the garden.

"Finally."

She curtsied to Lucius, as Narcissa taught her, trying very hard not to wobble on the heels. Narcissa had her wearing three inch ones tonight, now that she was almost fifteen.

Stepping aside, she smiled, watching as Lucius kissed Narcissa on the hand and pull her into his arms. A hand on her shoulder tore her attention away from the dancing couple. "Sev!" she exclaimed. She hadn't seen him all evening.

"I'd love to," she nodded, not sure what was bringing about this change in him, but certainly not objecting.

He took hold of her hand, linking their fingers. "Is this okay?"

"It's perfect," she admitted, looking down to hide her blush. She should be more confident than this. She'd just told Lucius she wasn't a child, and she was acting like a stuttering first year, because the boy she liked took her hand. Severus was never going to be interested in her, if she couldn’t get herself together.

That was, if she even had a chance with Severus at all. He was an Heir now, and, with his grandfather's declining health, he'd be a Lord sooner than later. She'd always thought him handsome, but he was really growing into his looks. Lucius had obviously convinced him to wear his hair in a small bun, only a few stray tuffs arranged artistically in front of his ears. Having the long black strands pulled out of his face, really highlighted his deep, endless onyx eyes. His dark green silk shirt matched her dress perfectly, indicating Narcissa played a hand in his wardrobe too. Lucius even seemed to have allowed Severus to forgo a tie, opting to leave the top two buttons undone. He put all the other boys their age to shame in his sleek raven colored dress robes, and she'd noticed the girls they walked by starting to take note.
She was clearly setting herself up for heartbreak. Severus could have his pick of any Heiress in the Aristocracy. What would he want someone like her for? One of his school bullies was her brother. She didn't have any money. She didn't have any titles. She could never be a Lady. She'd be better off focusing entirely on training for the Auror Academy, and casting this childish crush to wayside.

"Are you cold?" Severus asked, panic in his voice. "You must be. I didn't think to grab your jacket." She'd been so caught up in her own head, she hadn't even realized they were outside. "Here take my cloak," he added, hurrying to slip his arms out of it.

"Oh, Sev, you don't have to-" she started to say, but he was already draping the cloak over her shoulders. She could smell his cologne from where he stood close behind her, running his hands down her arms to smooth the cloak out. "Thank you," she amended appreciatively, smiling at him over her shoulder.

He offered her his arm, and she slipped hers through to walk beside him. A gust of cool December air blew past them, making her grateful for his cloak. She still took the opportunity to huddle closer to him and rest her head on his shoulder, for warmth, as they continued to stroll along in a comfortable silence.

The gardens of Slughorn Estate were as extensive and elaborate as everything else the Slughorn family did, and, in the spring, there was rarely a more colorful sight to behold. It was winter, however, and a light snow and frost coated all the plants, trees, and walkways they passed through. Eventually they stumbled upon one of the three gazebos in the garden, which was decorated with floating fairy lights and sparkling garland.

Severus led her up the gazebo steps, quickly brushing off a bench, so they could sit for a bit. He sat close enough that their knees were touching, butterflies fluttering in her chest once more. Curiously, he reached up to brush, almost pat the top of her head. She hadn't been expecting that.

"Sorry," he apologized, chuckling a bit. "You have some snow in your hair."

"Oh!" she cried, reaching up to swat at the top of her head.

"Stop," Severus laughed, managing to grab her waving hand. He brought it down to rest in his lap, sandwiched between both his hands. "You look beautiful, Iris. Even with the snowy addition."

She blushed, when she met his eyes. God, the way he looked at her made her feel like she was special - like she could conquer the world. With a sudden surge of confidence, she took the plunge. She closed the small gap between them, and pressed her lips lightly against his. When she realized he wasn't kissing back, she pulled away from him sharply.

"I'm so sorry, Sev! I just thought-" she exclaimed, feeling like she just made the worst decision of her life. Of course, he didn't like her like that. She was just his best friend. His mate. He had just been being nice, telling her she looked pretty, as Lucius had when they were dancing. He probably saw her as a sister like Lucius did.

"It's Lily, isn't?" she asked rhetorically, jumping up and pacing about the gazebo. She could hear the snow crunching loudly under her aggressive, frustrated steps, but she didn't care. She knew he liked Lily. She'd told Marlene as much, but her friend had insisted she was being paranoid - that she was imagining things. "Of course it is. Merlin, I'm so stupid. I knew you liked her. I just felt like we were, maybe-"

Severus stood, trying to reach out to her, but she hardly noticed, too caught up in beating herself up. "Sirius was right," she growled, digging her fingers into her palms at the thought. "You were never
going to be interested in me, now that you're an Heir. I'm too abrasive and hot-tempered. I'm too vocal, have too strong of opinions. I can't dress myself appropriately without Narcissa, and I'm hopeless with my hair. I mean, I tried braiding it myself the other day... couldn't do it. What girl can't braid her hair?"

"I'm not cut out to be a Lady," she sighed, slumping back down on the bench and burying her face in her hands.

A few minutes passed, and she could still sense Severus' presence on the gazebo. "You don't have to stay, Sev," she mumbled through her hands. "This is embarrassing enough."

"Iris..." Severus started carefully, cautiously moving to sit next to her again. She felt his hand close around one of hers, pulling it away from her face so she was forced to look at his slightly amused half-smirk. He turned her hand over, frowning at the red half-moon marks her nails had left on her palm. Running his thumb over the marks, he lifted them to his lips and kissed them.

She opened her mouth to say something - what, she hadn't a clue. He cut her off with a hand on her cheek. She tried not to lean too hard into it. Looking directly into her eyes, he growled, "It hasn't been Lily since the train."

Surging forward, he tangled his fingers in her hair, unconcerned he was messing up Narcissa's hard work, and pressed his lips against hers with more force than she had. Recovering from her surprise that this was really happening, she slid closer, lips moving in response to his. They were both sloppy and inexperienced, but it was still perfect to her. It was better than anything she'd possibly imagined, and, something in her gut told her, it was the start of something far bigger.

**Easter 1976**

Flipping the radio on, she collapsed on top of her bed, deciding not to move for the rest of the day. Of course, she would need to get up and change her shirt before her mother got home from the market. *Most* of the blood wasn't hers, but her mother still wouldn't be pleased.

She hadn't been to the martial arts center down the road since Christmas holiday, and it showed. She'd managed some practice with Rosier, during the spring term, but obviously not enough. Over the course of the morning, she'd earned more bruises than she'd been hoping to. It was nothing a few healing potions from Madam Pomfrey, when she returned to school after the short holiday, wouldn't cure.

Her eyes barely closed for a minute, when she heard knocking coming from down the hall. "Bugger," she groaned, reaching out to pull her nearby desk chair close enough to help her stand. Remus must have forgot his key. He and Sirius had gone to some festival at the local park. They'd asked if she'd wanted to come along. She'd, naturally, declined; because, honestly, getting her ass handed to her by men twice her size had sounded far more appealing than spending the day with those two.

Finally making her way slowly down the hall to the front door, she swung it open in frustration. "You've got to start remembering your key, Rem-" she muttered, trailing off, when she noticed it was definitely not her brother on the other side of the door. "Narcissa!" she grinned, having not expected to see her friend till the end of term.

With a hiss, Narcissa reached out to grip her chin, tilting her head side to side. *Shit.* She'd forgotten about the black eye and split lip. Narcissa was going to *murder* her. She promised her she'd stop
"You've been muggle dueling again," Narcissa frowned, releasing her chin and brushing passed her into the kitchen.

"It's just sparring at the local gym," she protested, hurrying after her older sister. "For practice."

"It's uncivilized, is what it is," Narcissa scowled. Something was bothering her. She knew Narcissa wasn't thrilled with the sparring and wanted her to stop, but she didn't normally get this angry about it. "You're a witch. You have a wand. That's the only defense you need."

"They teach muggle dueling at the Academy," she couldn't help but point out.

"They teach it as a means of last resort," Narcissa countered, digging through a kitchen drawer. She pulled out a cloth and wet it under the sink. Narcissa then sat her down and started working to clean the blood off her lip. "Next you'll be telling me you went back to that, what's it called?"

"Firing range," she mumbled. "And that was one time."

"One time too many. You could've been hurt." Narcissa rubbed her lip with the cloth a few more times, then deposited it into the sink. She assessed her work, a final time, thumbing at her black eye a bit, before deeming it as good as it would get with out potions. "Now, come," she instructed, waving her out of the chair. "We're going to have to clean you up, if you're coming to the party this evening."

Oh fuck, she mumbled to herself. That was why Narcissa was here. She and Lucius were hosting a gala for the Easter holiday. She should've been home and getting ready hours ago. No wonder Narcissa was furious. "I forgot that was tonight," she admitted, shoulders sagging slightly. She hated to let Narcissa down, after everything her friend had done for her. "I'm sorry."

Narcissa fumbled slightly with her expensive handbag. "Perhaps," she started, with some hesitation. "It might be best, if you stayed home from this one."

"Why?" she questioned, brows furrowing. Narcissa was usually the one insisting she attend these events. That it would bad, particularly for Severus, if she didn't. "We can clean the bruises up with a simple healing potion."

She watched her friend sigh, striding back into the kitchen. "It's not that," she said a moment later, placing her handbag back on the table. "It's just- there's someone who's recently emerged into the Aristocracy, while you've been away at school. He's been meeting with the Lords, conducting speeches, and lecturing to the children," Narcissa explained. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to be around him."

"Is this the mysterious Dark Lord people keep whispering about at school?"

"So, word's made it around school, then?" Narcissa nodded to herself, sounding unsurprised. Many of their friends in Slytherin House were the children of Lords and Ladies in the Aristocracy. They received frequent updates on the happenings in the pureblood society, where as she and Severus typically got their information thirdhand after the fact.

Narcissa pulled a chair over and sat down. Her friend patted the seat beside her, and she joined her. "Iris, listen to me," she insisted, in a tone she hadn't heard Narcissa use in a long time. She almost sounded afraid. "If you come tonight, this man is going to say terrible things about muggles, and you can't react. You have to promise me."
"Narcissa, everyone at these parties says terrible things about muggles," she laughed, not seeing what the big deal was. "I haven't lost my head yet."

There certainly had been plenty of times she wanted to. Bitting her tongue was growing more challenging by the month. Years ago, the slurs and outlandish political proposals were primarily restricted to members of the Black and Lestrange family, with occasional murmurs of agreement or support from the rest of the room. But lately, the entire Aristocracy was growing more and more vocal, with loud cries to take action. She suspected it had to do with the power and influence of the Aristocracy falling to the wayside. The number of muggleborns gaining high ranking positions within the Ministry was rising each year. On top of that, the new Minister of Magic had recently approved a law declaring members of the Wizengamot must be elected by the public, and highest ranking positions were to be appointed from its members by the Chief Warlock. No longer would the Heads of the remaining pureblood families hold automatic seats. Yuletide had been an explosion of outrage, and she could barely go five minutes without hearing the word mudblood or worse.

"Yes," Narcissa acknowledged, because her friend wasn't oblivious to how much self-restraint she'd needed to survive the past few galas. "But, this man has actual plans, Iris. Horrible plans. Plans my sister would approve of."

"Oh," she breathed, gripping the seat of her chair to keep her hands from shaking. If Bellatrix approved of this Dark Lord, his plans were even worse than the typical Black or Lestrange family proposals, which usually involved the culling of muggleborns. So, that alone was concerning. "Is Severus still going?"

"I believe he is. He's Lord now. It's safer for him to attend than not." It was even more important for Severus to appear to share the values and beliefs of the other purebloods, than it was for her. As a half-blood, with no blood ties to any pureblood family, her opinions were largely of little interest to them. Frankly, most preferred she simply stand there and look pretty. She had no voice in the Aristocracy, and, even if she married Severus, she would only be the wife of a Lord, never a Lady. Since claiming his Heir title, Severus had largely managed to get by without compromising himself or his friendship with Lily. So long as he appeared to silently agree with the pureblood mantra and never spoke out against a Lord's proposal, the majority of the Aristocracy had deemed him unimportant, due to his half-blood status and his age. He was allowed to spend the majority of the evenings with her, Rosier, Avery, and the other Hogwarts students around their age, either talking, dancing, or playing drinking games.

But, since his grandfather's passing in February, Severus was the newly named Lord Prince, which meant the other Lords could overlook him no longer. He would be required to attend meetings, voice his opinions on policies, speak out publicly against muggles and muggleborns, and possibly worse, if the Aristocracy pledged their allegiance to this Dark Lord.

"I have to go then," she decided. She couldn't allow Severus to go through all that alone. She would stomach her pride and stand by his side, however much it killed her.

"Your stubbornness is going to get you killed one day," Narcissa snapped, rising from her chair quickly. Her friend's heels clicked hard against the floor, as she walked over to look out the window above the kitchen sink. "You're sixteen. It isn't your responsibility to protect us all."

"Someone has to. You're getting pulled in deeper and deeper. You and Severus both."

"I made my choice, when I married Lucius."

"I know, and I respect that. Lucius is like an older brother to me. I love him too," she admitted.
Half the reason she was still a part of this pureblood society was because so many of the people she cared about were right in the thick of it. "The talk and proposal of laws is fine. I may not agree with it, but it's democracy." It made her want to vomit, and she prayed none of it ever came to pass, but it was due process. "The rumors about what this Dark Lord is proposing, though - Narcissa, you don't want to be a part of that."

Narcissa was better than that. Her friend may believe in blood purity wholeheartedly, but death to all muggles and enslavement of muggleborns? Narcissa would never approve of that.

"This- this is why you should stay home," Narcissa exclaimed, finally spinning away from the window. "The occlumency I've taught you will protect your thoughts, but It can't stop your actions."

"Iris, dear, you are a good person," Narcissa sighed, anguish laced in her voice. She wiped a stray tear from her eye, knowing what her friend was really saying. Get out while you still can. Get out before they figure you out. Get out before you're forced to do something you can't live with. "You are always going to be a good person, and you are always going to do the right thing - even at the expense of yourself. It will be the death of you, if you aren't careful."

It would be. She knew it would be. But, Narcissa had made her choice, and now she was making her own. "Better me than Severus."

"You aren't supposed to be here," he growled under his breath, moving to stand beside her and place a protective hand on her lower back.

He'd just been discussing a few matters of importance with Lucius and Rosier, in one of Malfoy Manor's many sitting rooms. Avery wasn't a Lord yet, and, therefore, hadn't been allowed to join them. They'd been interrupted by Narcissa, about a half-hour into the party. She'd swept into the room, her heavily beaded cream, satin gown rippling perfectly as she walked. Ever the host, she'd adjusted her light brown fur shawl, and kissed each one of them on the cheek in greeting. When she'd informed him Iris arrived with her, he practically flew from the room. He caught sight of her long chocolate curls dancing off the back of her glistening knee-length gown, as she stood beside the dance floor, bopping her head lightly to the music. Ordinarily, the image would invoke a multitude of pleasant and, admittedly, rather primal urges deep within him - urges he had to work hard to bury and not act on. Tonight, however, anger bubbled in the pit of his stomach.

"Sending Narcissa to do your dirty work now?" she snapped through a plastic smile, tilting her head back slightly so she appeared like she was laughing. Narcissa taught her how to tactfully hold a public argument well. "That's low, Severus."

"I thought you didn't want to come anymore, anyway?" he countered, sliding his hand further to rest on her right hip, and kissing her on the cheek. Lucius taught him well too.

She'd just been ranting the other day, for nearly an hour, that she was tired of smiling and laughing with people who considered Lily a mudblood and her mother unworthy of existence. It wasn't like he disagreed with her either. It made him sick to his stomach, every single time.

Life outside the Aristocracy was easier, better even, but it was too dangerous for him to back out now. He'd accepted the title of Lord Prince, and he'd promised Professor Dumbledore he'd see this through.

Iris wasn't part of that plan, though. The Headmaster wanted her exclusively focused on preparing
for, and accelerating her way through, the Auror Academy. He hadn't elaborated any further than that, but surely the Headmaster had valid reasons.

"You're here, so I'm here." Salazar, she was stubborn. Beautiful and intelligent. Perfect in virtually every way. But, exceedingly and frustratingly stubborn.

"It's dangerous. Your occlumency shield can't falter, even for a second." It wasn't that Iris didn't have a strong shield. She was exceptionally talented at occlumency, according to Narcissa. He was simply better. Iris' thoughts about him were apparently so strong, she occasionally struggled to conceal them. It was both incredibly arousing and worrisome. While young, they would already do anything for each other. A fact that would be better kept secret from this Dark Lord.

"I can take care of myself, Severus."

"With your muggle dueling skills?"

"I'm going to kill Narcissa," she cursed, squeezing the glass in her hand so hard he was surprised it didn't break. "I can't believe she told you."

"You were supposed to stop."

"I'm getting better," she tried to defend, turning towards him a bit. The action forced his hand to slide off her hip, returning it to her back. He knew she'd done so on purpose. Her way of maintaining distance without any onlookers realizing she was pushing him away. "I won two of my three matches today."

She said that like it was a good thing. "And had how many bruises to show for it?" Narcissa had mentioned needing several healing potions to take care of them all, which meant Iris had been in rougher shape than she was admitting to. "Honestly, men hitting women. It's disgusting." He shook his head, swallowing bile at the mere thought.

"This woman is capable of hitting back."

Oh, that changes everything then, doesn't it? he glowered to himself, smart enough not to voice that out loud. He could see her facade slipping, ever so slightly. He should pull back, before they caused a scene. Narcissa and Lucius were hosting, and the Dark Lord was present. They couldn't risk embarrassing them. Still… "You promised me you would stop going."

She knew what his father was like - how he'd treated his mother. She knew how much seeing her covered in preventable bruises and injuries bothered him. She knew it ate away at him that someone hit her, even if she was a willing participant. "Practicing with Rosier and Avery is one thing, but-"

"Is this how it's going to be?" she spat, slipping out of his grasp completely this time. Shit. He'd gone too far. Fury danced across her eyes, the rest of the ballroom forgotten. Narcissa was going to kill him. "You're a Lord now, so you get to dictate everything I can and cannot do?"

"Iris, that's not what this is about, and you know that." He saw her anger start to deflate, likely, finally, remembering the reason she promised she'd stop muggle dueling in the first place.

She was just leaning back into him, when they heard an unfamiliar voice ring out behind them. "Not fighting, I hope?"

Both turning round, they came face to face with an imposing man in Slytherin green robes. His short black hair was neatly parted, giving off an air of class and sophistication. He had handsome features and clever, dark eyes, which roamed over the two of them curiously - almost as if they were a
mystery he was attempting to solve. His exact age was difficult to determine. He looked younger than Lucius' father had been, though he knew the two attended Hogwarts together.

"Lord Slytherin," Iris greeted, recovering enough to offer the man a curtsey.

"My Lord," he followed in tandem, bowing to his fellow Lord.

When he rose again, he returned his hand to the small of Iris' back - both an instinctual, protective motion and a sign that any fight they were having was over. He thought he saw the Dark Lord's lips twitch into a brief smirk, at the gesture.

"I am pleased to see you were both able to attend this evening," the Dark Lord stated in an almost musical drawl. He could see why the wizard's speeches and lectures were drawing so many people into his web. He held a surprising command of his words. While he didn't doubt the man capable of murder, he feared his words would prove a more powerful weapon. That would be tough to fight. "Lucius has told me much about you both. I've found myself anxious for the opportunity to meet you."

"Miss Lupin," he said, turning to address Iris exclusively, making his stomach roll. "I hoped you might sit with me a bit."

He could feel the muscles in Iris' back tense, nearly undetectable, and stroked his thumb along her spine reassuringly. "It would be an honor, My Lord."

"Wonderful," the Dark Lord smiled, though the expression didn't seem to suit his sharp features. "I look forward to speaking with you later this evening, Lord Prince," the man added with a hand to his shoulder.

"I, as well, My Lord," he responded, bowing his head.

He watched the Dark Lord lead Iris to a small seating area on the outskirts of the ballroom, using every bit of the occlumency Narcissa taught him to mask his sheer terror. This was exactly what he feared would happen. It was why he'd wanted her to stay home.

For a while, the two simply talked quietly. Iris appeared to be keeping to the typical short responses low level women in the Aristocracy were taught to use when in conversation with a powerful Lord. This was exactly what he feared would happen. It was why he'd wanted her to stay home.

For a while, the two simply talked quietly. Iris appeared to be keeping to the typical short responses low level women in the Aristocracy were taught to use when in conversation with a powerful Lord. This was exactly what he feared would happen. It was why he'd wanted her to stay home.

When he saw the Dark Lord reach out to grip Iris' chin and search her eyes, he couldn't watch any longer. What was the Dark Lord looking for? He needed to find Narcissa.

He grabbed a glass off a servant's tray, not caring what it contained. He simply needed a prop. Setting off in search of his sister, he found her on the opposite side of the ballroom, pretending to drink from her champagne fluke while really watching Iris and the Dark Lord's interactions with concern.

"We need to get her out of there," he whispered into his glass. He took a sip, trying hard not to choke when he realized it was firewhisky. How did Lucius drink this swill all the time?

"There's nothing we can do," Narcissa sighed, leaning near his ear and pointing to the dance floor, like she was commenting on some of the dancers.

Not seeming able to form any further words, they both stood together silently. They continued drinking from their glasses, and pretended to watch all the ongoings in the room.
"Stop looking nervous," Lucius hissed, casually sweeping in front of them, so it would seem like they were talking with him. "He'll start to get suspicious, if you're both over here acting concerned that they're talking."

"Lucius, Iris is-" he started, only to be cut off by his friend.

"Doing fine," Lucius assured. "I wandered by them, within earshot, and she's handling herself well. Stop worrying."

Suddenly, a loud, roaring laugh cut through the ballroom. Lucius spun around in shock. He and Narcissa stepped forward, on either side of Lucius, so they could see what was happening. Their jaws all nearly dropped, at the sight of the Dark Lord chuckling deeply at something Iris must have said.

"Is he…?" Narcissa sputtered.

"I've never heard him laugh before," Lucius blinked, barely able to process what they were witnessing.

"Well, it appears, we've all been underestimating her," Narcissa assessed, sounding mildly impressed. "If this is anything to go by, she'll excel at any undercover work she's assigned at the Auror Office."

His heart pounded in his chest. This wasn't good. If Iris impressed the Dark Lord too much, it could compromise his assignment from Professor Dumbledore. He needed to work his way into the Dark Lord's inner circle. Being so close to Lucius and a potions prodigy gave him a leg up, but he would never succeed if he was competing with Iris for the spot.

"Do you think this means he's deemed her acceptable?" he heard Narcissa ask, dragging him back. He glanced up to see Iris curtsying to the Dark Lord, clearly being dismissed.

"Remains to be seen," Lucius admitted. "I think it's a good thing she still has two more years of schooling, before she's immersed in this world completely."

"Yes," Narcissa agreed. "That will allow me more time to build her occlumency skills that much further."

"No. It will give her two more years to come around," Lucius corrected, and his stomach dropped. He knew, eventually, his friend would grow tired of covering for Iris, but he'd hoped it wouldn't be this soon. "I love her dearly, but, sooner or later, she's going to have to make her choice."

She held onto Severus' small, inconspicuous reassurance, as Lord Slytherin led her through the crowded ballroom to two seats in a quiet corner. She remained standing, allowing the Lord to sit first, like any proper Lady would be expected to do.

One he was seated, he gestured to the open chair to his right. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, My Lord," she said gratefuly, keeping her head bowed slightly. She smoothed her dress down, while she took her seat, and crossed her ankles to the side so her knees stayed tightly together. Pureblood protocol was uncomfortable. She would give nearly anything to be sprawled out with Severus, in the Slytherin common room, and able to wear trousers. She knew better than to deviate, in any way, from the protocol Narcissa taught her. She had a feeling Lord Slytherin would be watching her movements closely.
"Lucius tells me you were appointed a Slytherin Prefect this year?"

"Yes, My Lord," she confirmed. She, of course, had been thrilled, upon receiving her pin this past summer. Remus had been named one of the Gryffindor Prefects, so, her mother had taken her, Severus, Remus, and Sirius out to dinner in celebration. A rarity for them, given they didn't have much money.

To everyone's shock, Severus hadn't been named a Prefect, despite having some of the best grades of any fifth year and being the least troublesome Slytherin. Instead, the pin had gone to Avery. Professor Slughorn, she'd learned later, had thought Severus and Rosier's Lord duties would occupy too much of their time for either to be named Prefect. The Headmaster had obviously agreed.

"I'm pleased to hear that," Lord Slytherin commented. "It means you're taking your studies seriously. I expect positive results on your upcoming O.W.L.s."

"Of course, My Lord." She had high expectations for herself, as well. She was expecting Outstandings in, at least, Defense, Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, and Astronomy. She would accept Exceeds Expectations in Herbology, History of Magic, and Ancient Runes. Admittedly, Arithmacy would likely only be an Acceptable. She should have taken Care of Magical Creatures. She was more suited for that type of class, but Lily convinced her they should take Arithmacy together.

"Professor Slughorn has assured me your potions exam should go swimmingly."

Slughorn said that about anyone in the Slug Club, even the ones who couldn't so much as tell the difference between a forgetfulness potion and the Draught of the Living Dead. She would take the compliment anyway, though. "I hope so, My Lord."

"Come here, child. Let me look at you," he requested. Insuring her occlumency shield was locked in place, she leaned closer, over the small end table separating their chairs. That appeared not to be sufficient enough for him. He reached out, gripping her chin, much like Narcissa had that afternoon. He tilted her head side-to-side, examining every inch. She got the strange feeling he could, somehow, see the bruising and cuts Narcissa managed to heal before the party.

"Ah, yes," he grinned, running a thumb along her bottom lip. Her toes curled inside her heels, but she otherwise managed to keep calm. Only Severus had ever touched her like that. It felt wrong for someone else to be doing so. She and Severus hadn't even shared a bed yet, though she hoped they might this summer. "Those are Slytherin eyes. A snake who survived growing up in a den of lions. You'll do nicely."

He finally released her, allowing her to sit back in her seat. She was careful to mask her internal relief.

"Your blood will no longer be an issue in the Aristocracy, Miss Lupin."

"My Lord?" she sputtered, completely unladylike. She'd never expected to hear those words from anyone in the Aristocracy, let alone this particular Lord.

"I, too, regrettably, am not entirely pure of blood," he informed, surprising her further. "We did not choose to whom we were born. All we can do now is strive towards the purification of the Wizarding World, so no other young witches or wizards suffer our retched fate."

A chill ran down her spine, because he'd somehow known the exact words she so desperately wished to hear. That she could belong in this world. That she wouldn't need to, one day, give
Lucius, Narcissa, and Severus up. That she could have everything.

People would listen to this man, she realized. Yes, there was a sense of deranged, unhinged, power-lust behind his dark eyes. But, outside of that, Lord Slytherin was charismatic and composed, clever and persuasive. Should he command any skill at public speaking, he would be able to attract followers through charm, as much as fear.

She hated everything this man stood for, but there was still a small part of her tempted to give in. If he could light that tiny flame inside her, he would be amassing an army in no time at all. The Wizarding World would need to establish a force twice as strong, if they were to have any hope of stopping him.

"Yes, of course, My Lord," she agreed quickly, not wanting him to grow suspicious of her prolonged silence. She needed to remember she was in the midst of a deadly sort of chess match.

"The Aristocracy's trained you well, I see," he chuckled. "Speak only when spoken to. Always use My Lord and My Lady. Better seen and not heard. Am I correct?"

"Yes, My Lord," she admitted, knowing it best to be honest in this situation. Truthfully, she was a bit curious to see where this was heading.

"You needn't be afraid to break those rules with me." He leaned over to trace a finger along her jawline, as he continued, "You don't strike me as a young woman who should ever be shut away in a cage. Do you think that of yourself?"

"No, My-" she breathed heavily, trying not to vomit at his touch, before amending her answer. 
"No."

"Much better," he praised. "Now, Lucius tells me you're interested in becoming an Auror. I'm intruged by that."

Likely because her job would largely involve hunting down half the people in this room. "You are?" she asked, feigning innocence.

"Very much so," he confirmed. "I haven't met many girls in the Aristocracy with aspirations beyond being a Lady to their future Lord husband. None, thus far, have any sort of interest in pursuing a career."

She could believe that. Nearly every girl around her age spent these events cozying up to any Heir who would give them attention. She'd had to sneer a few of them away from Severus, who was completely oblivious. They seemed to take no issue with the Aristocracy's archaic, devaluation of women, and appeared to have no desires beyond marrying into a wealthy pureblood family. It was almost more sickening to watch than the calls for pureblood supremacy.

"So, I'm curious," Lord Slytherin said, drawing her back. "Why an Auror?"

She tilted her head in thought, then shrugged. "Being a Lady is boring."

A crackle of booming laughter escaped the man's lips, earning them the attention of all nearby. His features hardly seemed equipped for laughter, appearing to contort in ways they were unfamiliar with. She found herself cracking a smile at the strange, rather disturbing, sight.

"You're an adventurous one, my child," Lord Slytherin assessed, face returning to its stoic, more normal, expression. "Good. I look forward to watching your career blossom."
January 1979

Her eyes danced across the grand ballroom of Malfoy Manor, feeling even more out of place than normal. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled every time someone walked by. Her meeting with Dumbledore left her paranoid, seeing hundreds of eyes trained on her when there were none.

She took a deep breath, calming herself, and smiled at Severus who was stumbling through a dance with Narcissa. She was being ridiculous. She had been playing this part since she turned twelve. She was a master of occlumency, and the Auror Academy's top recruit. She was half-blood and insignificant to the whole lot of them. No one was going to know she was a part of The Order. Even at a party honoring her engagement, she was being largely overlooked.

Narcissa pulled out all the stops tonight. The marble ballroom was lavishly decorated in Slytherin colors. She somehow managed to mimic the spell on the Great Hall, enchanting the ceiling above the ballroom to reflect the starry night sky. She spared no expense on the food and drinks, putting any Hogwarts feast to shame. Narcissa had a tendency to express her love through elegant parties, and this might be her largest display yet. It was a lovely testament to their longstanding friendship, making her stomach turn with guilt that she would prefer to be back at Lily's.

Lily had thrown her and Severus an engagement party, as well. Though, the stark contrast between the two was jarring. Lily's leaned towards a casual atmosphere at her and James' flat. There had been take away fish and chips, along with cartons upon cartons of gelato. Champagne had been drunk straight out of the bottle, while they rolled on the ground laughing at seemingly nothing. Gideon and Fabian thought they could out drink one another, with guests placing bets on each one. Subsequently, the two ended up passed out in a corner, fairly early in the evening. Alastor Moody, who she still couldn't believe had actually come, had to help Molly and Arthur drag the twins home at the end of the night. She, Lily, and Marlene, in their inebriated state, managed to convince themselves that they would make an E.P.I.C. girl band, resulting in some exceptionally off-key karaoke and wild dancing around James and Lily's living room. By this point, Severus and Remus had decided they'd never so much as met any of them.

Even James had fun, seeming surprisingly happy for her and Severus. He'd been trying very hard to be less of an ass to Severus, since the incident in sixth year. Neither of them truly expected Severus to forgive him, but her fiancé did work to try and tolerate being in the same room as his former bully. Lily appreciated it greatly, and returned the favor by planning the party on an evening Sirius was unavailable to join them.

A change in the music drew her back to Malfoy Manor. She walked around the dance floor a bit, nursing her champagne fluke. Her eyes met Lucius' from across the room, where he stood at the bar. Almost immediately, they both looked away. She wondered when they'd grown to resent one another. It was hard to pinpoint the exact moment, but she suspected it started the night she first met Voldemort.

The second the dark wizard's thumb brushed intimately, invasively along her lips, everything changed. It was like she'd only been seeing the world in black and white, and it suddenly burst into color. She'd seen the fascist lot of them for what they were.

The elegant updos and gowns made her want to crawl out of her skin. The fake smiles hurt her face. She wanted to vomit anytime she curtsied to a Lord. The words My Lord made her stomach turn, because why were they better than her?

Something inside her snapped. She didn't cower beneath them any longer. They wouldn't shut her
away in a cage. That had been the moment she decided to use every bit of Slytherin cunning inside her to play them, and she'd succeeded. They'd provided her the tools and the training to set her on the fast track at the Auror Academy. She would graduate in half the time, and, when she did, the Aristocracy would learn they hadn't created a spy. They'd created the greatest dark wizard hunter in history. She knew everything about them, and she would use that knowledge to take them all down. Everyone but Severus and Narcissa.

Tonight would be her final night in the Aristocracy. Dumbledore had requested her presence at Hogwarts a week prior, and he'd convinced her to join The Order - that she couldn't stay out of fight any longer. Voldemort was growing too powerful. He needed people with her skills and her connections.

She and Severus had initially decided to remain neutral, still caring about Lucius and Narcissa despite their misguided allegiances. She'd told Dumbledore as such - that her role as an Auror would be all she could offer. One didn't say no to Albus Dumbledore, though, and he'd known exactly what he needed for motivation. Severus was a Lord, he reminded her. He couldn't leave the Aristocracy and live. If she wanted to keep him safe, her best option was to aide in Voldemort's defeat.

So, she'd joined up, and she knew she had to leave the Aristocracy. It was safer that way. She couldn't risk slipping up and revealing her allegiance. If she was seen as a spy, they would kill Severus as punishment. She'd finally made her choice, and she needed to commit to it.

She suspected Narcissa knew. Her friend had been shooting her sorrowful glances all evening. In some ways, she suspected Narcissa had always known how this would end for them. You're a good person, Iris, she remembered her saying once. You're always going to do the right thing - even at the expense of yourself. For a while, she wasn't sure, however right it may be, that she'd be able to make the hard choice - to cut ties with the older brother and sister she never thought she'd have. But, in the end, Narcissa had been right. She was always right.

"You okay?" Severus' voice pulled her out of her thoughts. She smiled and leaned into his side, his presence relaxing her immediately.

"I am now," she laughed. "Ready to get out of here?" No one would miss them. They were young and newly engaged. No one would be surprised if they disappeared from their own party.

"Almost," he sighed, running an apologetic hand up and down her side. "I just need a minute. Yaxley asked to discuss a potions apprenticeship he wants to recommend me for."

"An apprenticeship?" she exclaimed, turning in his arms to face him. "Sev, that's brilliant! It's exactly what you've been looking for." She wished it wasn't Yaxley getting it for him, but, she supposed, they didn't have much choice.

"I know," he admitted, but still appeared unusually hesitant. "But, it would be for, at least, the entire year, and it involves a lot of travel - training with potions masters all over Europe. I'm just not sure it's the right time in our lives."

Her heart sank a bit, at the idea of Severus being away so much, but she made certain not to show it. This was an incredible opportunity for him, and he wouldn't take it, if he thought she wasn't one hundred percent on board. An apprenticeship like this could lend the experience needed for more advanced apprenticeships, research positions at The Ministry or Saint Mungo's, and even Potions Master at Hogwarts. The career possibilities would be endless for him. He had to accept.

"Sev, it's the perfect time," she assured, wrapping her arms around his waist. He'd been supporting
her through the Auror Academy. She could support him through this. "I'm still at the Academy, and it's long hours. It would be good for you to have something too."

_That, and I'll be traveling a lot, as well, for The Order._ She couldn't say that here, though. She, regrettably, hadn't even told him about her agreement with Dumbledore yet. It would be a conversation for the coming week. She'd made it quite clear to Dumbledore that she wouldn't lie to Severus, and he'd agreed.

"Neither of us are a part of The War," she carried on pretending for the moment. "We're keeping the focus on our careers. So, you needn't worry about that."

"And the wedding?"

Right. The wedding. Severus was a Lord, which meant their wedding would be an elaborate affair, even if she was deemed a traitorous, filthy half-blood.

"We haven't picked a date yet. Narcissa was thinking sometime this coming year, but I can tell her to push it back." Maybe by then, The War would be over. "This is your _dream_, Sev. We have the rest of our lives to get married." If she didn't die serving Dumbledore and The Order, that was.

"Salazar, I love you," he breathed, looking down at her in the way that made her feel like the most important woman on Earth.

"Oh, you do?" she couldn't help but tease, with a raised brow and half smirk.

"Mmm-hmm," he murmured against her lips, kissing her deeply. She moaned, trying to pull him closer, only for the tease to pull back with a laugh. "Let me just go speak with Yaxley. Then, we can escape, and I'll show you just how much."

Liking the sound of that, she released him. He stole one more quick kiss, before wandering off. Without him by her side, the walls of the ballroom felt like they were closing in and suffocating her.

Needing air, she darted, as gracefully as possible, onto the, thankfully, empty balcony. She leaned against the railing, trying to even out her breathing. The freezing January air sent a chill cascading down her spine, but she didn't care. Hypothermia was a risk she'd willingly take to spare herself another second in that room.

Just then, she heard the balcony door slide open, and she straightened up quickly. "Lady Prince," the slimy voice of Lord Voldemort greeted, as if he hadn't purposely followed her out here.

_It's a game, and you're still playing_, she reminded herself. She wasn't free yet.

Schooling her features, she shifted her weight so she was leaning against the balcony facing him. "Lord Slytherin."

His eyes roamed over her body with a disgusting hunger. She wasn't a child anymore, though. She met him head on, unintimidated, almost daring him to try something. "You've grown up," he commented, pleased. "You no longer trip over yourself to curtsey the second I walk into the room."

"I'm a fast study." He'd told her to forget the rules. She'd listened.

"I've noticed. You seem to be the only recruit, in your class, projected to graduate early."

He needed better sources. While that was technically correct, Gideon and Fabian would be on the same track as her, if they hadn't been spending so much time working for The Order. "To be fair,
recruits are meant to train at the Academy for three years. It's only because of The War, I'll be allowed to graduate so quickly."

"The War, yes," he mused, walking a bit closer. She held her ground, fighting the urge to run as far away as possible. "Fortunate that you trained so hard prior to entering the Academy."

"It certainly proved helpful," she agreed. "I greatly appreciate all the resources you offered to make it possible. They'll help me make you rue the day you offered them."

He moved close enough to trace a finger down her jawline. "Anything for my little snake who survived the lions' den." To her surprise, he didn't try to push further, instead moving back a few feet to lean over the balcony rail. She mirrored his pose and waited. "I'm told you're quite apt at the muggle dueling portion of your training?"

"I practiced a lot ahead of time."

"I'm curious," he said, when she didn't elaborate further. "What is the appeal?"

"Well, throwing a punch is a fairly satisfying way of taking out one's frustrations," she shrugged, but knew that answer wouldn't be sufficient enough on its own. "However, if I'm being completely honest, I mostly just enjoyed seeing the expression on the muggle boys' faces, when a girl half their size handed them their arse."

Voldemort's features contorted into their weird form of laughter, a booming crackle cutting through the crisp air. "You never cease to intrigue, Lady Prince."

"I'm not Lady Prince."

"Canceling the wedding already, are we?" She could taste the bile in her throat, at his teasing smirk. He wouldn't be the one smiling in the end.

"Of course not," she assured quickly, before he could get any ideas. "I just mean I'm not an Heiress, so I can never truly be a Lady."

"I told you once before, Lady Prince. Your blood is no longer an issue in the Aristocracy." He took two careful steps towards her, and she didn't miss the threat laced in his next words. "So long as you remain a dear friend, you'll be equal to everyone else here in every way."

She didn't tremble or step back. She wasn't afraid of him anymore. They'd all underestimated her, but they wouldn't any longer. She'd mastered their game, and she knew exactly what moves to make. "Not to worry, Lord Slytherin," she smiled. "I know who my friends are."
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Iris and Albus discuss Severus' time as a spy. Harry confronts Iris about her former engagement. Severus takes Iris on a "first date."

Chapter Notes

Warning: Some minor references to suicidal thoughts in Iris’ conversation with Albus. Skip down to Harry stopping by her office and then the fluffy first date, if you'd like to avoid that.

Hope you enjoy the fluff, after what's been quite a lot of angst. We shall return to some Philosopher's Stone plot in the next chapter.

She slammed her fist down on her desk hard in frustration, realizing she'd been rereading the same sentence of Lee Jordan's essay on boggarts for nearly ten minutes. She should have had these third year essays graded days ago. As they grew deeper into September, she was beginning to learn there were always more essays to grade, and, most days, trying to find a time where she or Severus didn't need to do exactly that was nearly impossible.

They'd hardly had a moment to themselves, since the first week, and she certainly hadn't the time to wrap her head around the fact that everything she thought she knew had been a lie. She'd known the truth for nearly two weeks now, and it was still driving her mad. She couldn't keep on like this. If she didn't take a second to process what she learned, she would lose whatever sanity she had left.

She pushed back from her desk, more aggressively than necessary, her chair clattering to the ground with a loud bang. Running a hand through her hair, she started pacing about her office. She'd honestly believed the lie - believed Severus had chose to bare his Dark Mark in true and complete service to Voldemort. She’d ended her engagement on that lie. She'd built a new life around that lie. She'd nearly died for that lie - more than once.

She wandered aimlessly in circles around her office, until a strange rattling sound brought her to a halt. Glancing over at the bookcase she just passed, she noticed a box rocking itself side-to-side like it contained a bludger.

Remus, she muttered, with a roll of her eyes, wondering how she missed it when she unpacked. Since moving into their flat, that very box had been collecting dust at the back of her closet. Her twin just couldn't stop meddling, could he? How he managed to get the box to vibrate, just as she'd been thinking of Sev, she hadn't a clue. Their mother would be proud.

Shaking her head, she pulled the box off the shelf, and found an open spot on her office floor. She would probably regret this, but, knowing Remus, he probably charmed it to rattle until she finally opened it.
She slid the lid off slowly, heart catching in her throat. With a shaky hand, she picked up the black overcoat lying on top. She unfolded the coat carefully, inhaling the familiar smell of potion fumes, Sev's favorite cologne, and something that was distinctly him. There was also a faint hint of her citrus shampoo. Severus would deny he used it, but she knew better.

She'd barely been conscious that night he found her, hardly able to open her eyes. It had been this very scent that told her Crouch was really gone - that she was safe. Despite the shattered bones in her wrist, she'd, somehow, managed to grasp his arm and beg him not to leave her.

She blacked out, after that, waking up in Saint Mungo's weeks later. The flashbacks had been paralyzing. They were so vivid, she scarcely remembered what aspects of that hospital stay were real and what had just been in her head. Everything around her triggered them. She remembered attacking a Healer, who'd been wearing the same aftershave as Crouch. Remus told her, for the first week, she'd screamed and thrashed violently anytime Severus tried to leave the room. Something that stunned everyone, given she'd wanted nothing to do with him since finding his Dark Mark. Albus, being the genius he was, eventually determined she was particularly sensitive to scents, and that Severus' was keeping the flashbacks at bay. Severus had quickly shed his overcoat, realizing what Albus was saying, and draped it over her shoulder's. She'd worn his coat for a month, able to bury her nose inside it whenever she needed reassurance.

Ultimately, she'd weaned herself off it. She returned to normal life, lost Harry's custody hearing, and, subsequently, leapt to accept the promotion to the International Auror Team. She never returned his overcoat, though. He likely didn't miss it. He had dozens just like it, and he hadn't asked for it back.

Folding the coat once more, she set it aside with care. Reaching into the box, her hand hit a Slytherin-colored photo album. She blew a layer of thick dust off the top. Opening it slowly, her breath hitched slightly. Even knowing what was coming, she still felt unprepared for the sight of her and Severus' smiling faces beaming up at her.

She could still remember the day this was taken like it was yesterday. The first Saturday in November, Steve, the Slytherin captain their first year, had the team practicing nonstop from dawn till dusk for their first match. Even though she was only a first year, and just unofficially training with the team, she'd still been required to be there all day too. Sev, Lily, and Marlene swung by the pitch to watch the final hour. Once Steve finally released them, she'd jumped on Severus' back, declaring herself too exhausted to walk. He'd carried her all the way to the Great Hall for dinner. Marlene thought it hysterical, and insisted on documenting the moment permanently.

She flipped through the next few pages quickly, chuckling with wet eyes at all the crazy antics the four of them got up to their first year. Life had been so simple back then, still, in some ways, able to be children. Merlin, she missed Lily and Marlene so much. Everyday without them physically hurt.

She nearly choked, turning to a photograph of her and Lucius from her second year. He'd come to see her first ever quidditch match. She stood tall in her Slytherin quidditch robes, holding her Cleansweep Six that Lucius and Narcissa bought her as an early Christmas present. Lucius was kneeling beside her, arm around her waist, and looking like a proud older brother. She wiped away a small tear that started to fall. Given they could hardly stand the sight of one another these days, it was often easy to forget how close they once were.

The album took a dramatic turn, after that, with the following page reflecting her first Yuletide celebration and her introduction into the wealthy, elitist Wizarding class known, at the time, as the British Aristocracy. She and Narcissa sat, backs straight and ankles crossed, in armchairs by the fireplace. Severus and Lucius stood, rigid and formal, behind them, a hand on their respective
chairs. The smiles staring back at her were frozen in place, lacking the natural feel of those that came before it. They hardly seemed the same people. If she didn't know better, she'd think her album got mixed with someone else's. Particularly, when she turned to a photograph of her, Severus, and Remus sitting cross-legged in front of her mother's Christmas tree, wearing their pajamas and tissue paper crowns.

Those pictures had been taken merely a day apart, reminding her of how often she'd felt like she was living a double life. It was maddening. There were days she didn't know which version of herself was the real one.

She chuckled to herself, turning to a photo of her leaping into the Quidditch stands and kissing Severus in front of the entire school. They hadn't spoken for over a week, before this was taken. She'd intervened to stop James and The Marauders from removing Severus' trousers in front of a host of laughing Gryffindors. Only, instead of things ending there, Sirius acted as if she'd given him a Christmas gift. Leaping into action, he'd quickly got his herd of followers laughing that Severus needed to be saved by his girlfriend. Embarrassed, Severus had snapped at her, a monumental fight ensuing later that evening in the Slytherin common room, where Severus accused her of conspiring with The Marauders. He'd convinced himself she was only dating him as a prank, so her brother and his friends could have a good laugh.

For a week it seemed Sirius might finally have succeeded at driving a wedge between them. After winning the Quidditch Cup, however, she'd caught sight of Severus in the stands, and decided enough was enough. She'd jumped the wall, grabbed his robes, and kissed him hard. She had wanted him to know her feelings were real, and she didn't give a damn who knew.

A few pages later, she reached their Hogwarts graduation. First was her, Lily, and Marlene in their robes, laughing with each other instead of looking at the camera. Then her and Remus sticking their tongues out. There was her and Severus alone, more into each other than her mother trying to get a decent photograph. Narcissa and Lucius had been there too, finally getting them to both look at the camera. They needed a photograph to show The Aristocracy, after all.

She found a couple of photos of her with Gideon and Fabian at the Auror Academy - probably the only time period all three of them actually wore their proper Auror robes. Moody hadn't been concerned with dress code, once they graduated, and they'd taken full advantage of that.

She paused, tears really starting to fall, at the image of the white gazebo, adjourned with floating fairy lights and garland. She fiddled with the platinum band on her right hand, twirling it around her finger, as she watched Severus kneel down, ring box in hand, on a loop. As if by fate, Yuletide in December 1978 was hosted by The Slughorns, allowing Severus to propose in the same location they shared their first kiss exactly four years prior.

Through watery eyes, she smiled at their official engagement photograph. Narcissa dressed them to the nines, as always, in complementary Slytherin colors. Her friend even borrowed a diamond and emerald encrusted hairpiece from her own collection, which perfectly matched her engagement ring, glistening up from where her hand rested on Severus' chest. She would probably never look that regal again in her life.

They'd taken that just before the engagement party Narcissa threw for them, so, she was unsurprised to turn the page and see her and Severus standing together in Malfoy Manor. They were completely absorbed in one another, champagne flutes in hand and Severus' arm around her. It was obvious they hadn't a clue the picture was being taken.

Her heart stopped, eyes catching a glimpse of a tall man with short black hair in the background, watching their interactions closely. She slammed the album shut, with a trembling hand, sliding
That party, announcing her engagement to the Lord Prince, had been the last time she set foot in that pureblood world. Albus had asked her to join The Order, and she’d known, however strong, her occlumency shield would never be strong enough to conceal that completely. It was safer for Severus to appear to have a wife not loyal to the cause, than one acting as a spy in their midst.

She knew now, the timing was too perfect. Albus had clearly chosen that specific moment to make his move. He brought her into The Order, abruptly severing her connection with the purebloods, so Voldemort would be even more interested in Severus and what he could offer the cause. He’d isolated her from that world, so she wouldn’t suspect anything, and to insure her reaction to finding Severus’ Dark Mark was every bit the explosion he needed it to be.

God, she wanted to hate him. He took everything from her. He destroyed her life. And yet, the Wizarding World was the better for it. Severus playing double agent kept The Ministry from falling into Voldemort’s hands. Voldemort disappeared. Remus was back on his feet and sober. Harry was alive and studying at Hogwarts. She’d spent a decade doing nothing but hunting and capturing dark wizards. People like the Lestranges and the Carrows were rotting away in Azkaban. The Aristocracy held virtually no power in the government now.

Somehow, in the midst of all the war and chaos, Dumbledore saw the way out. Sacrifice one marriage, and the world falls into place. Tear two people apart, at the proper moment, and the subsequent spiral would spur the Dark Lord’s downfall and set her on a crusade to track down every rogue Death Eater, not willing to rest until she’d found them all. Albus could always see the end, and use it to justify the means. She almost admired him for it.

The sound of her classroom door opening echoed from below. Cursing, she quickly tried to dry her eyes on her sleeves. She grabbed the photo album and Severus’ overcoat, scrambling to shove them back into the box and return it to its shelf.

Turning back around, she noticed a small sliver of rolled up parchment on the floor. It must have fallen out of the box in her haste. Curious, she unrolled it to read, stopping short at the words.

Don’t ever let me find you like that again. ~S

P.S. Change your Wards.

Feet hitting the steps leading to her office snapped her out of her stupor. Taking a calming breath, she opened her desk drawer and shoved the slip of parchment inside. She just managed to settle herself at her desk, appearing to have resumed her essay grading, in the nick of time.

Albus’ knuckles tapped lightly on her doorframe. She was almost certain he knew it unnecessary. She doubted she fooled him in the slightest that she’d been busy grading. The red rims around her eyes were probably a dead giveaway.

"You can come in, Albus," she assured, setting her, essentially unused, quill down. "I’m not going to hex you the second you walk through the door."

The Headmaster chuckled lightly, sweeping into the office and settling himself into a chair. She’d been expecting Albus would drop in eventually. She knew Severus informed him she’d learned the truth about his time as a spy. It was, honestly, a little surprising it took the Headmaster this long to seek her out.

"I must admit, I had anticipated a more volatile reaction," Albus said, as if sensing her thoughts. To
be fair, she was known to have a bit of a temper. "Or, at least, a visit to my office, at some point these past two weeks."

"Why? Because you're a manipulative bastard who plays chess with people's lives?" she teased with a smirk. "It's one of the qualities I've always envied of you."

He tilted his head curiously, forcing her to elaborate further. "Do you know how much simpler my life would’ve been, if I'd been capable of making decisions without getting bogged down in the sentimentality of who I hurt along the way?" Lucius would likely be in Azkaban, for one.

"It's not a gift I would ever wish upon you," Albus commented, unfazed by her earlier words. "Your heart has always been your strength."

Her smile fell, his words shattering her determination to let this all roll off her shoulders. "Severus was my strength," she snapped. "You took him away from me."

"That was never my intention."

_Bullshit._ "Of course it was," she laughed, though she was anything but amused. "Severus and I wanted no part in The War. We wanted to focus on our careers. We wanted to get married. We wanted to start a family." Her voice shook a little at the end, knowing they lost their chance at that long ago. "You knew we would do anything to protect each other, and you used that to get us to do what you wanted."

"Would you have stayed out of The War?" Albus countered, genuinely curious. "Allowed Lily, Remus, and Marlene to risk their lives, and never stepped in?"

Her jaw set, because she had no counterargument for that. Even if she'd turned Albus down initially, Marlene's murder would've fueled enough of a fire inside her to bring her to The Order's door.

They sat in silence for a time, with Albus seeming to be waiting for her. "How long?" she finally asked, staring at her office window. "How long was he lying to me?"

"You should ask Severus that."

"I'm asking you." She could ask Severus. He would likely tell her anything she wished to know, now that the secret was out. She didn't want to put that on him, though. She meant it when she told him she didn't want him to feel like he needed to keep apologizing. They were starting over, and that required wiping the slate clean of any past transgressions.

"I have no intention of faulting him for it any longer," she reassured. That was likely what Albus was concerned about. He cared for Severus, and, he seemed nearly as invested in meddling her and Severus back together as Remus. Albus wouldn't wish to drive the wedge further between them. "He acted on your orders. We all did."

"I first approached Severus when he accepted his Lordship," Albus eventually admitted, confirming her suspicions that the lies began significantly earlier than she'd initially believed. Severus became a Lord in 1976, when they were sixteen. Before she learned of his spy assignment from Albus, she'd estimated Severus joined up with the Death Eaters roughly around the time Yaxley secured him a potions apprenticeship in 1979. If he ever really been a potions apprenticeship to begin with, that was. Had he truly been traveling across Europe to train with Potions Masters, or had he been traveling on assignments from Voldemort? She wasn't entirely certain she wanted to know the answer to that one. If she started down that path, she would end up picking apart their entire relationship, attempting to determine
where the lies stopped. His feelings had always been real. That had to be enough for her, or they would never move forward.

"Voldemort was strengthening his forces and beginning to break into The Aristocracy." Albus' voice drew her back to the present, where he was, apparently, providing further explanation. "With their backing, his power would grow exponentially. Severus had the appeal and the title to earn a seat among Voldemort's closest confidants."

"That, however, isn't really what you wish to know," Albus pointed out, glancing at her knowingly over his spectacles.

She stood from her chair suddenly, its feet scraping loudly in the quiet office. Albus appeared unsurprised, merely watching her with an unnerving level of patience. Unable to handle his penetrating gaze, she walked a few paces towards the window, watching the Quidditch pitch below.

Eventually, she turned back around, lightly leaning against the wall, hands in her trouser pockets. "Why Severus?" she said, finally asking the question they both knew she really wanted to. "Voldemort was just as interested in me as he was Severus, if not more so."

She only stayed in The Aristocracy as long as she did to protect Severus. "My little snake who survived the lions' den, he used to call me," she recounted, tasting bile from the memory alone.

"It's true. You and Severus both held strong potential," Albus conceded. "But, Severus had the title."

He was lying. Well, omitting something, at least. "Voldemort declared me equal to the members of The Aristocracy." A detail such as that would never escape Albus Dumbledore. "He fully intended to name me Lady Prince, if I'd remained faithful. You know that."

"Very well," Albus sighed. "You would've made a strong, valuable spy in Voldemort's ranks. You caught his eye, he took interest in having an Auror in his pocket, and you had all the desired connections. You and Severus were equal in almost everything I needed, except for one, very critical, skill."

"Occlumency," she breathed, closing her eyes. It always seemed to come down to bloody occlumency.

"Exactly," Albus nodded. "You and Severus have the same weakness - each other. He simply masks it better."

"Narcissa used to say the same thing."

"Narcissa has always been more intelligent than the world cares to acknowledge."

"I must have told her that a thousand times," she sighed. One of her deepest regrets was not being able to free Narcissa from that pureblood world. "It was never enough."

"Love is a powerful motivator."

There's no denying that. She unconsciously clutched her left forearm, covering the bare patch of skin that always seemed to burn when she reflected on how close she almost came to willingly following Severus into the dark.

"Did you know that I would react as I did?" she asked the man across from her - the man she'd admired for so long. "That I would find his Dark Mark and truly believe he joined up?" The 'that I
wouldn't betray The Order and follow him down the rabbit hole?' remained unspoken, but something told her Albus heard anyway.

"You can never know for certain," Albus acknowledged, indicating he, too, hadn't known exactly which side she would end up on. "The best you can do is set events in motion, and hope the pieces fall into place."

Bloody hell. The Headmaster really did see them all as pieces on some global-scale chess board. "Was it all worth it?"

Albus fell silent for a long while, but she didn't relent. She truly wanted to know what he thought. Would he do it all over again? "In some aspects," Albus admitted, after a time, tilting his head in deep thought. "The Ministry stands strong. The War ended, and, for the time being, the world is free of Lord Voldemort."

She didn't like his use of for the time being, even if she knew he was right to. The Wizarding World hadn't seen the last of Lord Voldemort. One day, the Dark Lord would return, and Albus would send her and Severus right back into the thick of the fight. She would follow his orders. She knew not even this new knowledge would change that. Because, she had Harry to protect now.

"The effect my decisions had on you, however, was something I did not predict."

She froze, able to read between the lines. "Severus told you?" she whispered in disbelief, barely able to get the words out.

Pushing off the wall, she reached out, with a shaky hand, to grasp the back of her chair. She sat down, images of that night flashing before her eyes. Crying on the floor of her shower. Seeing the shattered pieces of a bottle she'd thrown at the wall strewn all over her bathroom floor. Picking one up, thinking how easy it would be. Severus suddenly appearing, almost the moment she'd raised the shard to her wrist. She blacked out after that, vague images of being wrapped in a towel and carried to bed. If she hadn't woken up to find his note, she might have thought it all a dream.

"He was quite upset, as one might expect," Albus said, defending Severus betraying her confidence. "He came to Hogwarts, pacing angrily about my office. He wanted to tell you everything. He was afraid, if he did not, it would be the start of a dangerous pattern."

"I was drunk," she objected, brushing off the absurd notion that it might have been more than that. Subconsciously, her eyes drifted to the drawer she'd shoved the small strip of parchment into, and she swore inwardly. She could practically see the words Don't ever let me find you like that again staring up at her through the thick wood.

"Beyond drunk, really," she added, shaking her head to regain focus. "So much so, I thought Severus being there was a hallucination. It was a brief, intoxicated, mistake. Hardly the beginning of a pattern."

"Conniving your way onto the Lestrange case the following day was happenstance then?"

Her nails dug into her palms hard, under her desk. "I was an Auror," she gritted out, struggling to maintain her composure. She needed to remember this was Albus Dumbledore. Despite everything, he was still her friend. He was also her boss now too. She would fall victim to the Defense Against the Dark Arts curse sooner than she'd like, if she wasn't careful. "I was doing my job."

Albus smiled that annoyingly innocent grin he used when he knew he had the upper-hand. "Rufus Scrimgeour did not want you anywhere near the Lestrange case," he reminded, not that she needed
it. She remembered Scrimgeour's reasoning quite well. "He thought you too close and too emotionally invested."

She had, frankly, agreed with Scrimgeour. That was until she'd wanted a way to hurt Severus, and knew the danger of the Lestrange case would serve as the perfect means to achieve that.

"Alastor disagreed," she attempted to counter, but, as always, Albus was prepared.

"Alastor wanted the Lestranges in Azkaban at any cost. You convinced him you could achieve that, and he convinced Rufus to let you try."

"That hardly makes me suicidal."

"Perhaps not," he amended, though his tone indicated he wasn't convinced. "However, subconsciously channeling your anger at Severus stopping you that evening into operations with the possibility for equally as deadly an outcome is concerning."

She couldn't help but laugh. Because, with all the responsibility resting on the great Albus Dumbledore's shoulders, he still appeared to have time to psychoanalyze his professors. And damn him for being right. "So, this job really is an intervention."

Albus cracked a small, pleased smile. "Hogwarts needed a good Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, and you make a strong addition to my staff," he explained, grinning like he wasn't at all concerned about her mental health. "If this job helps you regain some of what you lost during The War, I consider it an added bonus."

"Severus and I are back together," she confessed, in case Severus had left that detail out. They were keeping it quiet for the moment. "Well, going on a date," she corrected. "Hopefully, anyway. We haven't had time to plan one yet, but-"

"Relax, Iris," Albus interjected, raising a hand to stop her rambling. "There is no policy discouraging fraternization among the staff."

"Admittedly, it is not typically a concern," he added, which was a fair point. Much of the staff was older, married, or widowed. Few were at Hogwarts for anything more than to pursue a career they loved. "However, I'm quite pleased to hear you and Severus are pursuing a relationship beyond colleagues."

Of course he was. This job was an intervention of sorts, on more than one level. Merlin, if he and Remus ever joined forces, they would be the most meddlesome duo in the Wizarding World.

Albus rose to leave, and she nodded goodbye. She wanted him to know their friendship was still intact. She picked up her quill to resume her grading, only for Albus to pause at the door. Curious, she glanced up and waited for him to speak.

"I realize I never fully answered your earlier question."

"Had Severus not stopped you that night, it would not have been worth it. In very rare instances, one life is equally as valuable as the many, and I believe you still have more to do, Iris Lupin."

With that said, in true Albus Dumbledore form, he was gone, leaving her staring at the open door in a stunned silence.
He trudged into the Gryffindor common room after quidditch practice, and hurried up the stairs to his dormitory to change his robes. Normally, Wood had them practicing at the crack of dawn on the weekends, but Slytherin’s captain, Marcus Flint, caught on and booked the pitch for that time today. Wood had been forced to take the less than desirable, early afternoon slot, right after lunch. Luckily, most of them were careful not to eat too much. Only a few of the reserve players ended up getting sick during practice.

Changing back into his school robes, he gathered his bookbag and started heading to the library. Ron mentioned he was meeting Neville, Seamus, and Dean there to work on their potions essays, while he attended practice. Hopefully, they would still have enough work remaining that he could join them until it was time for dinner. He hadn't even begun his potions essay yet, and Professor Snape had not been impressed with his last one. He really needed to do better. Iris and Remus wouldn't be pleased if he flunked out of Hogwarts, and he didn't want to give them a reason to send him back to the Dursleys.

Thoughts of Snape, however, temporarily derailed his motivation. He quickly changed direction, and set off for the Defense Against the Dark Arts corridor. The past few Saturdays, Iris sat with him and the Weasleys for lunch at the Gryffindor table. They got some curious stares from the other students, who found it odd they were spending time with a teacher, but he didn't mind. It was his favorite time of the week. Last week, Hermione joined them, itching to impress Iris, and he noticed Lavender and Parvati sliding unusually close to their section of the table. Iris was growing quite popular.

She hadn't joined them today, though. In fact, he hadn't seen Iris all day. She was absent at both breakfast and lunch, making him curious. He hoped she was okay.

Reaching the Defense classroom, he grinned at the sight of her open office door. She must have just got caught up grading essays. He took the steps two at a time, slowing at the top to knock on her office door.

"Harry," she smiled brightly in greeting, glancing up from where she'd been aggressively scribbling edits with her quill. He hoped the essay didn't belong to anyone he knew. "This is a nice surprise."

She beckoned him inside, placing her quill down, and offering him a seat. Tossing his bag on the ground, he hopped into one of the chairs in front of her desk.

"I missed our lunch today, didn't I?" she groaned, glancing at the time on her wristwatch. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's been a long day."

"It's okay, Iris," he assured, noticing she looked tired. Her eyes were really red too, like she'd been crying. He wondered if it had to do with Snape. Ron said, just a few weeks back, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were concerned about them working together. Snape and Iris had been eating meals together regularly, since the start of term, and they seemed to be enjoying each other's company, but that could easily be a show. Aunt Petunia always pretended to like him in public, after all.

Snape best not be giving his godmother a hard time. He didn't know what he would do, if the potions professor was, but he would think of something. Surely, Fred, George, and Ron would help. "We had quidditch practice right after, so it was a short lunch anyway."

"Ah, I see Marcus started the age old tradition of stealing your rival House's training slots," Iris laughed knowingly. "How was practice?"

"Not bad," he shrugged. "I missed two of the golf balls, but Wood seemed happy with that."
"I've heard Oliver considers you to be almost as good as Charlie Weasley," Iris told him. "That's high praise."

He blushed. He hadn't met either of Ron's eldest brothers, but he heard much about them. Charlie graduated the year before. He'd been the most recent Gryffindor seeker, and Captain before Oliver Wood. He heard numerous people claim Charlie could have played professional quidditch, if he hadn't chosen to study dragons in Romania. It always felt strange to be compared to such an infamous Gryffindor player, when he hadn't played a game himself yet.

"Your father was quite the seeker too," Iris added, and he perked up at that. McGonagall mentioned his father played quidditch, but he didn't know much about his time on the team. "Had to be certain my keeper skills were on point, anytime we played Gryffindor, so we would be ahead enough to accommodate your father catching the snitch."

He smiled to himself, envisioning the inter-house rivalry between his father and godmother. He imagined them teasing one another mercilessly, trying to psych one another out before the game, then laughing about it after. He would have to ask Iris if she had any photos of them in their quidditch robes. Remus hadn't had any pictures of the two together. They were always separate, with their respective teammates, in the ones he'd seen.

Maybe they were in that box Remus hadn't allowed him to open - the box he suspected held photographs of Professor Snape. Speaking of which…. "Were you engaged to Professor Snape?"

Iris practically choked, coughing on seemingly nothing. "You-" she stuttered, still clearing her throat. "You heard about that?"

So, it was true. A part of him hoped it was the twins just having a laugh. "Fred and George told me."

She sighed, closing her eyes and rubbing her temple. "I didn't think about that," she muttered to herself. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should have told you before the start of school," she apologized. "It was a long time ago for me, and I hadn't the time to discuss with Professor Snape how he might feel about you knowing."

He supposed that was fair. Still, he couldn't wrap his head around the fact that, at any point in her life, Iris had been in love with Snape. He hadn't a good interaction with the man to date. Snape's black eyes were cold, devoid of any warmth. He embarrassed him and Neville in class regularly. He praised Malfoy, and overlooked Crabbe and Goyle's bullying. He didn't understand how Iris had ever loved him, much less why she still cared about his feelings.

"You were really going to marry him?"

Iris' eyes narrowed in a way he'd never seen before. "I really was."

He was toeing the line, but he couldn't help it. "But - he's the Head of Slytherin House!"

Iris chuckled, though she didn't sound all that amused. With a raised eyebrow and a stern half smile, she reminded, "I was in Slytherin too."

He knew that, of course, but it wasn't the same. Iris wasn't like other Slytherins. "You're different."

"I assure you, I'm really not," Iris corrected, voice sounding a bit heavy. He noticed her run a hand over her left forearm, which seemed strange to him. He didn't see a bruise or anything. "I had most of the same professors you do. Ask any of them, and I can guarantee, they'll tell you the same thing. The hat didn't make a mistake. I was sorted exactly where I was meant to be."
"There isn't a witch or wizard who went bad that wasn't in Slytherin, though." Surely, she couldn't be happy she'd been in Slytherin.

This time, however, Iris really did laugh. "I don't know who told you that, Harry, but it couldn't be further from the truth," Iris told him, contradicting everything Ron said. "I put just as many Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws away in Azkaban, as as I did Slytherins."

Oh. He hadn't thought about that before. Iris had been an Auror for years. She knew more about dark wizards than anyone. "Really?" he questioned, just to be sure.

Iris smiled at him, and he knew he was about to receive one of the Lupin Twins' many life lessons. "Harry, it is our choices that define who we really are, not our Houses."

He looked down sheepishly, playing with the hem of his Gryffindor robes. The sorting hat had wanted to put him in Slytherin, but he begged it not to. His and Voldemort's wands shared the same core. He didn't know what that meant, but he knew Iris was worried about it, even if she pretended not to be. He didn't want to be like the Malfoys or the Blacks. He wanted to be good, like his parents, the Weasleys, Remus, and Iris. He thought Slytherin would hinder that, but, perhaps, he'd been wrong. Iris was the best person he knew, and she appeared to be as proud a Slytherin as he ever met.

"I asked the sorting hat not to put me in Slytherin," he admitted guiltily.

Surprisingly, Iris leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs with a wide grin. "I asked it not to put me in Gryffindor."

His jaw dropped. "You did?"

"Harry, my father was in Gryffindor. He wasn't a very nice person, and neither were his friends. I didn't want that for myself," Iris explained, reminding him how he felt seeing Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle sitting at the Slytherin table.

"That, and," Iris continued, tilting her head in afterthought. "I met Professor Snape on the train to school. He was the first person who really saw me, aside from my mum. I don't know if that makes sense."

"It does," he nodded, even if he didn't understand how it was Snape who'd done so. "It's how I felt when I met you and Remus."

"You will always come first, Harry," Iris vowed, sounding more serious than he'd ever heard. "I promise you that."

"I know," he confirmed. He stood up and grabbed his bag. As much as he loved talking to Iris, he really needed to spend some time at the library before dinner.

He paused halfway to the door, and turned back. "Iris?"

"Yes, Harry?"

He was about to ask about Snape's involvement with Voldemort, but his eyes were drawn to the emerald ring she was unconsciously twirling around her finger. He'd seen that ring before, in some of the photos Remus showed him. Only, the ring had been on her other hand - her left hand - in those.

"Do you still love him?" he blurted out unexpectedly, realizing that had to be her engagement ring.
"Professor Snape?" he clarified, steadying his voice to sound more normal.

Iris fell quiet, fingers ceasing to play with her ring. "I'm not sure I can answer that right now, Harry," she said eventually. "What happened between Professor Snape and I was a long time ago. It was over before you were born."

"What I do know is," she added, tone changing to the stern one she used in Defense class. "I care about Professor Snape a lot, and he is a Hogwarts professor. So, however you feel about him, I expect you to treat him with the same respect you would any other teacher at this school."

"Yes, ma'am," he gulped, knowing better than to argue with her when she used that tone. She must have heard about him talking back in his first potions lesson. The look she gave him served as enough of a warning to tell him he best not do so again.

"Good," she nodded, seeming pleased by that response. "Now, go find Ron. It's nearly dinner."

With a small wave, he hurried down the steps from her office. He was so caught up in getting to the library in time to meet Ron and the others, he didn't notice Snape until he nearly crashed head on into the stern professor.

"Potter," he spat in greeting.

"Professor!" he exclaimed, moving carefully around the Potions Master. "What are you doing here?"

He cringed the second the words left his mouth. Snape wouldn't appreciate his questioning, and he'd just promised Iris he would be more respectful.

"Well, Potter," Snape quipped, eyes narrowing. "Given this is Professor Lupin's classroom, I would think it obvious I intend to see her."

He glared at the professor, but bit his tongue. Threatening Snape that he best not hurt his godmother would not go over well with the Potions Professor or Iris.

"I have to get to the library, Professor," he said instead, inching to the door. "Have a good afternoon." With that, he darted out the Defense classroom as quick as he could.

She watched Harry disappear from her office, listening to his feet patter down the stairs. After a minute, she picked her quill back up, and started to resume her third year essays. Realizing the entire afternoon flew by and she was still on Lee Jordan's essay, she let out a loud groan, head collapsing down on her desk.

"Bad time?"

Her head sprung up at the sound of his amused voice. "For you?" she grinned. "Never."

"What's bothering you?" he asked, surprisingly not helping himself to a seat like usual.

"It's nothing," she waved off. "My office just seems to be revolving door this afternoon. I've accomplished virtually nothing."

"What did Potter want?"

"Oh, that." She would have to tell him, of course. She supposed she should be grateful he hadn't
asked what *Albus* wanted. "My eldest godsons, apparently, eavesdrop on their parents more than I anticipated. Or, they developed an out-of-character habit of reading the Daily Prophet this summer."

"Potter heard about the engagement," Severus concluded, piecing together the information. "That explains the glare he gave me."

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I literally *just* spoke to him about being more respectful," she muttered in exasperation. "Maybe I need Remus to send me some parenting books."

"You don't," Severus assured. "You're doing fine. But, that's not why I'm here."

"Oh, it isn't?"

"Feel like getting out of the Castle?" he proposed, lips twitching into a half smirk, despite a valiant effort to try and maintain a straight face.

Brows furrowing, she glanced at her watch. "It's barely dinner time. Curfew isn't for a few hours."

It wasn't that professors were unable to leave the grounds. They were, if not on night duty; however, given there were so few of them, it was typically expected any off campus adventures be conducted after curfew. By that time, any staff members and Prefects on duty that evening would be monitoring the halls.

"The Headmaster won't mind," he shrugged, giving her the suspicious feeling he'd asked permission.

*Screw it,* she decided. *Albus owes me this.*

Seeing agreement in her eyes, Severus instructed, "Meet me outside the Entrance Hall in an hour. Dress casually."

Grinning mischievously, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her right leg over her left. "Why, Professor Snape," she teased, folding her hands and leaning on her armrest. "It almost sounds like you're asking me out on a date. What would the students say?"

"Say yes, Professor Lupin?" he suggested.

She chuckled, knowing three first years who'd likely say exactly that. It hadn't escaped her notice that Lavender and the Patil twins whispered giddily to each other, anytime she and Severus walked passed them. It was probably best she didn't bring that up, though. While she certainly didn't mind, Severus probably would.

They'd agreed to keep their relationship largely to themselves and a select group of people, for the time being. When they were certain it would progress towards a more permanent thing, they would need to have a discussion with Harry. Afterwards, it would become a collective decision as to when they informed the rest of the world - the school in particular. If she knew her boys at all, she'd be waiting a very long time for that to happen.

That being said, she and Severus were the two youngest professors at a boarding school full of hormonal teenagers. Their former engagement aside, they were bound to be the subject of a few rumors. She didn't know about Severus, but she fully intended on having some fun with that.

Laughing, she came around her desk and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Yes."

He wove his hands into her hair, kissing her deep and hard. "One hour, Professor," he muttered against her lips.
He met with his Slytherin Prefects, after leaving Iris' office. Four out of the six could be blithering idiots at times, so he wanted to insure the lot of them understood there would be serious consequences, should any Slytherin step a toe out of line while he was away from the Castle.

He didn't anticipate too many issues. Most of Slytherin House was deathly afraid of his wrath, and, as such, avoided trouble. The first years, however, were still learning, and Draco kept butting heads with Potter and Weasley. Plus, Flint was already playing mind games with the Gryffindor team. Tensions were brewing there too. It was best to keep his Prefects on high alert. He didn't want to be called back to Hogwarts in the middle of his date.

The meeting took longer than he hoped. His sixth year Prefects' attention spans rivaled Potter's in potions class. Thankfully, his seventh year Prefects took being the leaders of their House seriously, and his fifth year Prefects were so new to their roles, they were still terrified to disappoint him.

After he finally dismissed them, he flew from his office to his chambers. He had just enough time for a quick shower, before he needed to meet Iris. He should've told her two hours. She would've gone back to grading, if he gave her too much time, though, and they would never get out. He'd been trying to plan a date for weeks now. Work wasn't getting in the way this time.

Knowing he didn't have time to do much with his hair, he simply dried it with his wand and slipped into the black jeans and long-sleeved dress shirt he picked out. *Good enough,* he assessed in the mirror, waving his wand to smooth out the wrinkles. He would blend in just fine where they were going, and Iris liked him in jeans.

He used a less traveled staircase to make his way from the Dungeons to the Entrance Hall. The students should all be at dinner, but he would prefer to avoid any stragglers catching him in muggle clothing. There were enough rumors floating around about him and Iris. He didn't need to add fuel to the fire.

He found her waiting for him, in a light cotton sundress and flats, sitting on the steps just outside the Entrance Hall. He really did owe Narcissa an owl about Iris' new wardrobe - if only for the fact that Iris looked more relaxed and comfortable in her own skin than he'd seen since before The War.

She looked up, at the sound of his approaching footsteps, and smiled appreciatively. "Severus Snape in jeans?" she commented, raising an eyebrow. "I am a lucky woman."

"At least you acknowledge that," he smirked. Holding out a hand, he helped her off the steps. "You look beautiful," he added, kissing her cheek.

He offered her his arm, and she slipped hers through, while they walked across the grounds to the Hogwarts Gates. Once they were outside the Hogwarts grounds, Iris turned his way. "Are we going somewhere in the Muggle World?"

"Yes," he confirmed, careful to keep his stoic demeanor. He didn't want to give anything away. He thought hard on what the best option for their 'first date' might be, and was quite proud of his decision.

"Good," she nodded, beginning to unbutton and roll up the sleeves of his dress shirt. "Because, it's surprisingly warm out, and I'd like to go on a date with all of you."

When she finished rolling up his sleeves, she ran her fingers tenderly over his Dark Mark. She looked into his eyes, and he knew all was forgiven. She was serious about starting over, with full
acceptance of the good and the bad.

Offering his arm once more, she grasped it and he apparated them to their destination. He grinned inwardly, watching her eyes widen as she took in their new location.

"Are we where I think we are?" she smiled, glancing at the small fish and chip shack, with a gelato stand and miniature golf course.

"Your ideal first date - miniature golf, fish and chips, and gelato," he recounted, trying not to look too smug. "We were children and couldn't apparate on our original first date, so-" he added, gesturing at the sight before them.

"I told you that when we were like twelve," she breathed, looking stunned. "I can't believe you still remember."

"I may not have known exactly why back then. But, I knew well enough to know you were important to me, and I considered everything you said equally as important."

Despite his initial terror at asking Iris on a date, way back when, he'd since come to find he was actually quite good at romancing Iris Lupin. He hadn't needed to read all those courting books, after all. Remus claimed it was because he was essentially an Iris Lupin Encyclopedia. Marlene even once teased, if Dumbledore couldn't find, yet another, Defense Professor, he could teach a new class titled The Inner-Workings of Iris Lupin's Brain. He knew a few people who probably could've benefited from a class like that, namely Sirius Black.

He felt Iris link her fingers through his and start tugging him along. "Come on," she laughed, reminiscent of a much younger Iris. "Let's eat first."

Snorting, he allowed her to pull him towards the fish and chips shack. "Always thinking with your stomach, Lupin."

She glared at him over her shoulder in response. He simply smirked, enjoying her obvious annoyance, and navigated them up to the counter.

After placing their order, they found a small table in the corner. Given the nice weather, it was surprisingly not too crowded, but he still wanted some privacy. They hadn't been on a date in nearly eleven years. Sure, they'd had dinner on occasion, the days their casual sex hadn't ended in an argument, but nothing that would classify as an actual date.

To be completely honest, he felt unusually nervous. He needed to keep rubbing his sweaty palms on his jeans. So much more was riding on this first date, than the one they took in Hogsmeade at fifteen years old. The possibility of a future together largely depended on this date going well.

"How in Merlin's name did you find a place that had miniature golf, fish and chips, and gelato?" Iris asked, glancing about the restaurant.

"Your brother." Remus was more than eager to help him plan his date. Their next lunch would no doubt be largely comprised of Remus pestering him about how the date went, like they were still children.

"Of course." She slid her hand to the center of the table and he happily took it in his own. "I'm glad we're doing this. I really needed a night out."

He had a feeling that might be the case. While teaching at Hogwarts wasn't exactly a desk job, they still spent a significant amount of their time indoors. For thirteen years, Iris served as an
internationally renowned Auror. She was used to traveling all over the world, only spending time at a desk to file reports or plot out operations. After nearly a month at Hogwarts, he suspected Iris must be going stir crazy.

Their food was delivered to their table shortly thereafter. Unsurprisingly, Iris dove straight into her chips. "Someday, I'm going to have to teach you how to really golf," Iris mused, waving a chip at him. "Remus claims he isn't coordinated enough to come with."

"I forgot you knew how to golf." She didn't mention the topic often, associating the sport with her father. Iris didn't have many fond memories of Hyall Lupin, and this was no exception.

Even though he was a wizard, it was actually her father who taught Iris how to golf. There'd been a small course down the road from where the Lupins lived, following Remus' transformation. Hyall used to drag Iris there every Friday morning in the good weather, thinking taking up a muggle sport would help the family blend in and appear less suspicious. He remembered Iris complaining, many a times, that it was four hours a week of him criticizing every single move she made, with no buffer from Hope.

"I hated every bloody minute of it," Iris groaned. "Even when I did well, it was never good enough."

"Still," she sighed, biting into another chip. "After he died, I found myself trudging to a golf course, in some warped need to honor him."

He hadn't known that, actually. Hyall Lupin died after The War - well after their wedding was called off. By that point in their lives, he only saw Iris when she allowed him to. Regrettably, he imagined, he missed out on quite a lot.

"Amazingly, I found I didn't hate playing quite as much, when every swing wasn't being analyzed under a microscope."

"Are you any good?" he couldn't help but ask. He may have heard her vent about those Friday mornings on a regular basis, but he never actually saw her play. Hyall would have her up at dawn, long before he and Remus woke, and they would be back by lunch.

"Would've been better if I'd stuck with it," she shrugged, then grinned wickedly. "Though, I'm fairly certain I can kick your arse at miniature golf."

He raised an eyebrow, smirking a bit. "Oh, you think so, do you?"

"I like my chances." Her overconfidence was amusing. This would be fun.

"Shall we play then, Lupin?"

"Game on, Severus."

Smiling at each other, they quickly deposited their trash in a bin and made their way to the miniature golf course. He made the mistake of allowing Iris to gather the needed supplies, while he paid. As such, he ended up with a bright pink golf ball.

"Really, Lupin?" he said, rolling his eyes, as she passed him the eyesore.

"It fits your personality so well," she winked, quite proud of herself.

"Come here," he chuckled, shaking his head.
Leaning against the fence by the first hole, he pulled her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her waist. There was a bit of a line to start. She relaxed back against him, while they watched the family of four in front of them begin their game. He would need to remember to thank Remus for finding this place for him. Not only was the night going well so far, this course didn't have any frilly obstacles like so many others he'd seen. Instead, it appeared to be designed much like a real course, just in smaller form. Iris would like that.

Soon, it was their turn to play, and he reluctantly released Iris. "Ladies first."

"Watch and learn, Sev," she teased, lining up her shot. She sent the green golf ball rolling to a short enough distance that she was able to simply tap it in for a par.

"Not bad, Lupin," he observed.

"Not bad?" she exclaimed. "Let's see you do better then."

Deciding to have a bit of fun, he pretended to struggle with holding his club. After a few swings and misses, Iris rolled her eyes. "Let me help you."

Trudging over to him, she grabbed the club out of his hands. "You grip it like this," she demonstrated. "Come place your hands over mine."

Those were exactly the words he'd been hoping to hear. Coming up behind her, he slowly slid his hands down her bare arms, fingertips leaving goosebumps in their wake. His hands finally came to cover hers, and he pressed himself flush up against her.

He smirked, feeling her tense underneath him, her pulse quickening. "Is this right?"

"I hate you," she grumbled, realizing she walked right into his trap. Little did she know, he was only just beginning.

He chuckled, the vibrations going straight through her. She moaned, eyes closing, despite herself. He hadn't, however, thought this plan through completely, as he failed to anticipate her brushing her ass against his crotch the moment he started to swing.

Grunting at the contact, his hands slipped off hers mid-swing, sending the ball bouncing off the wall. After a few hard impacts, it landed quite a ways away from the hole. "It's on now, Lupin," he scowled, finishing the hole with a four.

He fumbled his way through the next couple holes, allowing her to take a sizable lead. "You're really showing me how it's done, Sev," she snickered, growing more cocky by the second. That was fine. He had her right where he wanted her.

"You don't think I can win?" he questioned innocently.

"Sev, you literally have double my score, right now," she laughed, checking the scorecard. "It's, admittedly, not impossible for you to come back from the deficit. Just highly unlikely."

If he continued on playing as he was, she would be correct. Too bad for her, he planned on stepping his game up.

"Care to wager?" he proposed. "Loser has to hold the other's detentions for a week." He hated proctoring detentions. He would pay someone to do it for him, if Dumbledore would let him. He even suggested adding it to his Prefects' duties, but the Headmaster shot his proposal down fairly quick.
Iris tilted her head in consideration, checking the scorecard once again. "Make it a month," she countered confidently. "I'm so behind on grading essays. I could use all the spare time I can get."

A month free of detentions? She didn't know what she was setting herself up for. He handed out a lot of detentions. He wasn't about to pass this opportunity over, though. "Deal," he agreed, grinning inwardly. Iris wouldn't know what hit her.

Dropping his ball at the start of the next hole, so excited he took over her slot of going first, he sank his shot right into the cup. Iris' jaw dropped, wiping the self-assured grin straight off her face. "A hole-in-one? But, you were just-" she sputtered, gesturing animatedly towards the earlier part of the course.

"Perhaps it was simply luck?" It was not, though, and he had his sights set on a month free of monitoring detentions.

"YOU HUSTLED ME?" she shrieked, watching him sink his thirteenth hole-in-one in a row. "You actually bloody hustled me! ON A DATE!"

"Technically, you assumed I didn't know how to play, before we even began." She set herself up for this, and he could see in her eyes she knew it was true.

"Of course I assumed that!" she still tried to protest, waving her arms about wildly. "When have you ever played miniature golf?"

"Lily took Marlene and I once, when you had an overnight at The Academy and James was away on a mission for The Order," he shrugged nonchalantly. "She needed a distraction. To all our surprise, I turned out to be a natural," he added, egging her frustrations on further. He couldn't wait to dole out his next detention.

"A natural?"

"Shot eighteen. Sunk eighteen," he commented casually, laughing at her stunned gaze. "It's all about controlling one's speed and utilizing the walls at the proper angle. I quite enjoy it."

He watched Iris mutter, what was surely a string of curses, under her breath, while she placed her ball down. "Need any help?" he teased. Even if she made this final shot in one, he still had her beat.

*If looks could kill.* That didn't deter him, though. He started to stalk towards her slowly, with a smirk.

"Don't you dare, Severus," she warned, dropping her club and backing away.

He sped up, seeing a hint of a smile cracking through her facade. She started to dart away, but he caught her quick enough. His arms circled her waist, lifting her off the ground and spinning her in a circle. The fact that they looked like a pair of lovesick teenagers hardly bothered him, because he hadn't heard her shriek with such a carefree laughter like that in a long time. No one they knew was there to see them, and he never needed to mask his feelings when he was alone with her.

"Still mad?" he asked innocently, pulling her close enough to whisper in her ear.

"No," she muttered reluctantly, when a second death glare resulted in no effect. He grew immune ages ago. "I concede that you win."
"Still," she smirked, turning the tables on him. "I hope your sex drive is significantly lower than it used to be."

"You're really going to withhold sex, because I beat you at miniature golf?"

"Of course not," she corrected, running a hand down his chest. "I have no intention of punishing myself, after all." He tried not to look too pleased at that. He really was very good.

"However," she added, slipping out of his arms and collecting their clubs. "You give out more detentions than the rest of the staff combined. So, if I'm to start covering the lot of them, then I'll have to spend the rest of this evening GRADING BLOODY ESSAYS!"

She started off to return their clubs, leaving him wondering what just happened. Were they still having gelato? He'd really been looking forward to that. "Hold on," he called after her with a snicker, unable to help himself. "Does this mean no goodnight kiss?"

"Fuck you, Severus," she hollered, flipping him off over her shoulder.

Maybe he should relent a little on the number of detentions. "No," he decided. He could tell she was only pretending to be annoyed, and this was a whole month free of detentions they were talking about. "Still worth it," he muttered to himself, hurrying to catch up with her.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Iris meets with Kingsley at the Ministry. Iris and Severus snag an hour to themselves. Halloween Feast. Albus' non-intervention might actually be working. Aunt Iris is none to pleased about her nephews fighting a troll.

Chapter Notes

Back to some philosopher's stone plot, with some smut intermingled. Next chapter, Rookwood is going to trial.

It felt strange being back at the Ministry, particularly given her last visit she officially resigned from the Auror Department. For so long, the polished dark wood floors and green tile walls of the Atrium were something of a homecoming. The glistening Fountain of Magical Brethren was often the first thing she saw after returning from an op - long before she found herself free to return to her flat.

Today, however, she returned as a visitor, startling a sleeping Eric Munch. The security guard gave her an odd look when she checked into the security stand. Though, admittedly, that might have more to do with the hoard of chattering teenagers lined up behind her, rather than momentarily forgetting she was no longer an employee.

Earlier in the month, she sent a request to the Minister of Magic's support staff about the possibility of allowing some of her upper-level students to tour the Ministry. Having spent a fair amount of his first year or so in office chasing dark wizards abroad, she didn't know Fudge well. For most of her tenure as an Auror, she served under Minister Bagnold. As such, she'd anticipated needing to reach out several times, before ultimately calling in a favor with Scrimgeour.

To her surprise, she actually received a response from Fudge's Junior Assistant almost straight away. Knowing her students would likely spend most of the day thinking about the Feast, and not their studies, she suggested Halloween. The Minister's office seemed more than happy to accommodate her choice, stating Fudge might even have time to meet with the students between meetings.

She'd like to think it meant Fudge valued the education of their youth, or, at the very least, felt the Ministry owed her for thirteen years of service. Unfortunately, she suspected he intended to utilize this visit as a campaign booster during his next election. That sounded more like the Cornelius Fudge she'd occasionally met during his time as Junior Minister. After all, his first act as Minister had been to demote Crouch to International Magical Cooperation, for minimal reason other than nearly beating him in the election.

After insuring none of her troublemakers were grouped together, she parted ways with her students in the Atrium, leaving them in the capable hands of the Minister's interns. Slipping down the nearby corridor, she hopped into a, thankfully, empty lift. She didn't feel like running into random former colleagues today. If she did, she'd have joined one of her students’ groups on the tour.
"Level Two: Department of Magical Law Enforcement," the cool lift voice announced, a short descent later.

Stepping off the lift, she walked down the hall and rounded the corner to the heavy oak doors of Auror Headquarters. Most of the cubicles she passed by were empty, with their occupants off on assignment or out of office for the holiday. She paused at her former cubicle, surprised to see the desk cluttered with office supplies and someone's personal belongings. She hadn't heard they found a replacement.

Shaking her head, she forced herself to move on toward the back offices. She taught at Hogwarts now, and the Auror Department was always hectic. She couldn't expect Scrimgeour to leave her position vacant in vigil forever.

Scrimgeour's office door was shut, with no light streaming through the glass. That was curious. She couldn't recall the last time Scrimgeour took a holiday. Work was the man's entire life.

Kingsley's office was one down, door wide open and inviting. From the doorway, she watched Kingsley file papers away in one of the many file cabinets behind his desk. Scrimgeour must be on one of his department-wide OCD clean desk binges again.

"Iris," he smiled warmly, glancing up from his filing when she knocked on the door. Shutting the cabinet drawer, he abandoned the stack of papers in his hand on the desk, and came round to give her a big hug.

"You look good," he assessed, looking her up and down like a fussing Molly Weasley. "Moving better than last I saw you."

"Remus made me walk everyday this summer." She would never admit it to her brother, but the forced physical therapy really did help. She tried to keep it up at Hogwarts, utilizing the endless string of corridors on days the weather didn't cooperate.

He beckoned her further into the office, before he stopped short with a confused look. "New outfit?"

"I've been told the leather jacket and jeans look isn't befitting of a Hogwarts Professor." It hadn't exactly been for an Auror either, but Narcissa was far scarier than Scrimgeour.

"I imagine Dumbledore's pleased you made the change," Kingsley laughed. "Have a seat," he offered, waving his wand to clear his files off the visitor chair.

"Thanks."

"So, tired of the academic life already?" he teased, taking his own seat.

"Not quite. Teaching's surprisingly growing on me."

"Teaching or a certain potions teacher?"

"Both," she grudgingly admitted under his knowing gaze. There would be no fooling Kingsley. They'd been friends far too long.

Kingsley practically beamed at that, and she tilted her head back in a groan. "Godric, you're right back in the thick of it with him, aren't you?"

"Kingsley."
"Don't try and deny it," he grinned, pointing across the desk at her. "The tough Iris Lupin, who left the Auror Department nearly four months ago, would never have admitted to a rekindled romance that easily."

"Plus, I know that smile," he added happily. He always liked Severus. "You're head over heels again."

"We've had one date outside the Castle, Kingsley," she said, rolling her eyes. "Don't go pulling out whatever flamboyant dress robes you have picked out for the wedding, just yet."

"You're no fun," he chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "Speaking of teaching, shouldn't you be at Hogwarts doing exactly that?"

"I arranged for my fifth through seventh years to spend the day touring the Ministry, in an effort to help with their career planning," she informed him, with a wave of her hand. One of the tour groups would probably be making their way around the Department of Magical Law Enforcement shortly. "They're off with some of Admin's very enthusiastic interns, which left me with some free time. Figured I'd sneak away and visit my favorite Deputy Department Head."

"That's the only thing bringing you back to these hallowed halls?"

"Fine," she grumbled. Truthfully, this trip wasn't just for the students' benefit. Since Severus rose his suspicions about Quirrell to her, she'd been looking for an excuse to visit the Ministry without raising any red flags in the Muggle Studies Professor's head. "I need your help."

"You've barely been at Hogwarts for two months. How have you managed to find trouble already?"

"I'm me."

"Fair point," Kingsley conceded, shaking his head with a smile. "What can I do?"

"I need travel records," she started, bracing for Kingsley's reaction. "For Quirinus Quirrell."

As expected, Kingsley chuckled deeply, a humorous glint in his eyes. "Quirrell?"

"I know how ridiculous it sounds, trust me." She had a similar reaction when Severus first approached her, but she couldn't deny Quirrell was acting odd - even more so than normal.

"You don't have to get involved, if you don't want to," she assured. "It could be nothing." Only, someone had broken into Gringotts, back in July, in an attempt to steal the philosopher's stone. She couldn't overlook that, simply because the vault was empty at the time. Someone was after the stone. She didn't know if Quirrell was really involved, but a sinking feeling in her gut told her the man was going out of his way to appear incapable. The stuttering and trembling, not to mention the unnatural attachment to garlic, all felt like an over-the-top diversion tactic.

"It's not nothing, if it brought you to my office," Kingsley said, sobering up quickly. "You don't chase rumors or conjecture. What do you have for evidence?"

"Nothing concrete." Her godson's scar hurting wouldn't exactly hold up at trial. She needed more, a lot more, before she could take this any further than soliciting help from some old friends. "Definitely nothing I could bring to Scrimgeour." She would need an absolutely solid case, if she had any hope of convincing the Head Auror to hear her out.

"If Quirrell was truly gone for the entirety of last year, he likely didn't file all his travel records with the British Ministry. It will take some time to track his movements."
"I suspected as much," she nodded. "The likelihood of that is even higher, if he had ill intentions for this supposed sabbatical. Just send me what you find as you get it. I'll piece everything together."

"You just can't give it up, can you?" He shook his head, likely unsurprised. She spent several years in Investigations and Analysis, prior to her promotion to International. Not to mention, unlike most, she hadn't chosen to resign or retire. One wrong move and everything she worked for just disappeared.

"Pretty sure it's engrained in all of our blood," she smirked, but it was more than that. "Even still, Harry's at Hogwarts now. If Quirrell's had any contact with Voldemort supporters, I need to know."

If possible, Kingsley looked more serious than she'd ever seen him. "I'll work as fast as I can," he promised.

"I owe you one," she said gratefully. He didn't know what his faith meant to her. "You're the only person who trusts me enough to go on nothing more than a hunch."

He leaned across the desk to place his hand on top of hers. "If I've learned anything working with you all these years, it's your hunches are usually about as good as fact."

"Thanks, Kings," she breathed, then pulled her hand back. "I should let you get back to work. You looked swamped." She could go bother Arthur until her students were done. He'd be thrilled.

"Wonder who's fault that is?"

"Alastor?" she grinned over her shoulder, as she headed to the door.

"He certainly always finds a way to add work," Kingsley winked, making her laugh.

She stopped at the doorway, catching another glimpse of her old cubicle. "The stuff on my old desk," she started, leaning against the doorframe and pointing that direction. "Who'd you hire?"

"Like you could be replaced that easily," he chuckled, coming over to join her in surveying the ongoings of the Aurors on duty that day. "No, we're utilizing some of the Academy recruits, on a rotating basis, to help out, until we can fill the position more permanently."

"Scrimgeour's being that picky?" She could understand being a little particular, but over three months had gone by. Someone already in the department was likely promoted to fill her spot on the International Squad, unless it hadn't gone to a British Auror. Either way, Scrimgeour should only be looking to hire a low to mid level Auror.

The current third-year recruits wouldn't graduate the Academy until the coming June, and they would still need to qualify, which did complicate matters. Finding someone licensed, with existing experience, was rare, but they'd managed before.

"There are a few Hit Wizards' resumes that show some promise. One of them might be able to breeze through the Academy, and they'd have more experience than any of the upcoming graduates." That was something to consider. It wouldn't be the first time they poached someone from the Hit Wizard Squad. Hit Wizards were highly trained, and their academy largely mimicked the Auror Academy, with a few less classes, as well as, looser entrance and graduation requirements. Every once in awhile, they came across a Hit Wizard who could've qualified for the Auror Academy, if the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol hadn't swiped them up first.

"We actually got an application from a former MACUSA Auror," Kingsley recalled, a moment later.
"Really?"

"His wife's a muggle," he elaborated. "Works for some international company, and recently got transferred to London."

"He sounds like the perfect candidate."

"I thought so too," Kingsley agreed, sounding exasperated. He and Scrimgeour were very different people. She knew Scrimgeour's, almost excessive, anal management style drove Kingsley up the wall. "I interviewed him, and really liked him - good personality, great experience. Set up an interview for him with Scrimgeour, and, well, jury's still out."

She frowned slightly, thinking back on the last time she saw Scrimgeour. She met him at the end of July to formerly resign from the Auror office. She and Scrimgeour always got on well enough. He was straight-forward and to the point. He never hesitated to tell her when she needed more evidence or if a mission plan was daft. She appreciated that about him.

There were times she drove him mental. Being a somewhat reckless, leather-jacket-wearing malcontent didn't always mesh with his uptight, three-piece-tailored-suit-wearing micromanagement style. She still liked to think he found that bit of her, at least, slightly amusing. He always seemed rather fond of her. On the rare occasion, she'd even managed to elicit a tiny, however brief, half-smirk out of the stoic Head Auror.

Scrimgeour wasn't one to get emotional. He didn't go out for a drink or attend any sort of social engagement that wasn't Ministry related. If he wasn't criticizing one's work, it meant he was pleased with their performance. Even with their decent working relationship, she couldn't recall a time in her thirteen years where she'd heard so much as a Good job, Lupin.

That was why her resignation meeting stuck out so much in her mind. Scrimgeour had been unusually complimentary. I want you to know how proud I am of you, Iris Lupin. You were a credit to this department and the Ministry as a whole. There were days those words still ran circles around her head, hardly believing they'd come out of Rufus Scrimgeour's mouth. But, it was the final look he gave her, guilty eyes trailing after her, as she left his office that startled her the most.

"Want me to talk to him?" she offered. If Scrimgeour was stalling hiring a replacement out of some unwarranted guilt over her injury, perhaps it was best she set him straight.

"No, it's fine," he waved her off. "He'll come around."

He snapped his fingers, a few seconds later. "There is something you could do for me, though."

"Of course. Anything you need." She certainly owed him. He was going out on a limb for her, looking into Quirrell.

She watched him curiously, as he walked back to shuffle through the scattered papers and files on his desk. "We recently received an application for next year's Academy class. It's Ted and Andromeda Tonk's daughter."

"Nymphadora?"

"You know her?" he exclaimed in surprise, shooting up from his desk with a file in hand.

"Not personally, but she was in the same year as Charlie Weasley. The two had quite the elaborate prank war, during their early Hogwarts years." Charlie had gone off, many a times, ranting about 'that Hufflepuff Tonks girl.' She took great amusement in watching him pace about The Burrow or
her flat, thinking their little "war" sounded fairly equivalent to primary school kids pulling on one another's pigtails. How Charlie managed to make Prefect after the number of detentions those two had, she hadn't a clue.

"Well, her application's more than a little late for the current Academy class, but she shows a lot of potential," he assessed, walking back over to her. "There's talk of a hiring freeze next year, so I'm considering admitting her early. She would only be a few months behind."

He passed her the file, with a photo the young applicant paper-clipped to the top. She smiled at the image of the rebellious girl, with bubblegum hair, she'd heard so much about. She liked her already. "I'd be interested in your opinion, if you wouldn't mind taking a look through her file? Maybe even meet with her, see what you think?"

"I'd be happy to," she agreed, tucking the file under her arm.

"Great," he said, with a hand to her shoulder. "Take care of yourself, and tell that boyfriend of yours I'll be keeping an eye on him."

"Bye, Kings," she whistled, waving the file at her friend as she walked away.

---

"So, Kingsley may know about us."

He glanced up from his desk to see Iris, arms crossed, leaning against the doorframe. His eyes narrowed suspiciously at her overly innocent look. "May?"

"Okay," she sighed. Blowing a tuff of hair out of her face, she pushed herself off the doorframe in full dramatic Iris Lupin fashion. "Does know about us."

"But," she added, dropping into a chair and kicking her feet up on her side of the desk. "For the record, I didn't expressly tell him."

He snorted. Knowing Iris, her face probably told Kingsley all he needed to know. "I thought you were supposed to be an occlumency expert."

"I am!" she defended, tossing her hands in the air. "I just happen to have one, small, weakness."

_Wonder who that is?_ he chuckled to himself, shifting his focus back to his grading.

She closed her eyes for a bit, while he finished scribbling some notes on the fifth year essay he'd been reading before she walked in. When several minutes ticked by with her saying nothing further, he grew curious. "How did Kingsley react?"

Grinning, she didn't even bother opening her eyes. "He'll probably have a wedding planned for us within a week."

"He'll be dueling Narcissa for that honor."

"No kidding," she whistled. "She's still pissed about the last one."

"Yes," he smirked, recalling the earful he received from his surrogate sister, upon her learning Iris broke off their engagement. "I do believe she's mentioned, on several occasions, that she had the absolutely perfect wedding planned, and we had the audacity to call it off."

"We wouldn't have enjoyed ourselves much. Pretty sure the guest list was bordering on three
he hundred plus."

He cringed, shuddering at the mere thought. He couldn't imagine reciting his vows in front of a crowd that large. "I would expect nothing less from a Malfoy affair." That's what their wedding would've been, after all. "How many did we actually know?"

"Not including Lucius and Narcissa, probably ten," she guessed with an amused shrug. Given The War and political climate at the time, he wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Lupin and many of their closest friends hadn't made the cut. Narcissa wouldn't have excluded them out of hatred or spite, of course. Her belief in blood purity never reached the same height as Lucius or Bellatrix. No, she likely would've secretly arranged for a second, more intimate, ceremony with all those unable to safely attend the first.

He moved onto his next set of essays, as Iris seemed content to lightly doze in her chair. She could use the extra rest. He noticed her tossing and turning in her sleep more than she used to. He was still working to determine if it was from nightmares or the injury to her back.

"How did your little field trip to the Ministry go?" he asked, after he ran out of ink making corrections on two more essays. For fifth years, taking their O.W.L.s at the end of June, the quality of the Draught of Peace essays he'd read thus far was atrocious. He hoped the Ministry trip went well. These students needed some serious motivation to pick up their grades, if any wished to make it into his N.E.W.T. class. He only accepted students who received an Outstanding for a reason. If they couldn't handle the course load, there was little point in wasting his and their classmates time, watching them flounder around.

"Fudge has a terrifyingly perky bunch of interns this year." From his minimal interaction with Ministry personnel, it certainly seemed like Fudge's hiring process largely focused on the people-pleasing aspect more than actual qualifications. He got talked into drinks with some people on the Ministry-Saint Mungo's joint potions research team, during Iris' Rookwood adventure. Most of the evening consisted of them grumbling about the latest batch of interns being more suited to market and sell potions than actually brew and study them. "From what I gathered, the Auror Department was a big hit, Arthur Weasley's stories were the most entertaining, the Department of Magical Creatures had a family of bowtruckles for them to look at, and Fudge's Undersecretary's office is full of cats. Though, to be honest, I'm not entirely sure if they meant real cats or something else."

"Overall," she concluded. "The kids still seemed excited by the end of the tour, so the Ministry might have some future employees in the mix."

"Good. Maybe the fifth year Slytherins won't gape at me like brainless fish, during our next bout of career counseling, then." Only one had any sort of idea what they might like to pursue, when they met two weeks back. If he could consider 'joining a band like The Weird Sisters' an actual idea. For a House supposed to be filled with ambitious personalities, he'd made little progress with any of them. Thankfully, his sixth and seventh years were starting to form some more realistic plans.

"All I promised was I would take them to the Ministry," Iris snorted, holding her hands up in defense. "I didn't say anything about being able to make them act less like teenagers."

"How grand it would be if you could." Some things, it seemed, were beyond magic. "Did you make any headway with Kingsley?"

"We could talk about that, and, admittedly, probably should," she shrugged off, surprising him. Disguised under chaperoning the Ministry field trip, Iris' primary objective for this visit was to acquire Kingsley's help with their Quirrell situation. He couldn't fathom why she wouldn't want to discuss that.
"However," Iris smirked, dropping her feet down to the floor. He watched her stalk around his desk, trailing a finger along the edge. "I haven't seen you all day." She leaned over him, placing her hands on the armrests of the chair he swiveled her way. "I have something else in mind," she grinned wickedly, before capturing his lips in a kiss.

He groaned into her mouth, meeting her head on, and pulling aggressively at her perfectly curled hair. "There's a Feast tonight," he reminded, when his brain finally kicked in.

Iris hardly concerned herself with his feeble protest, unbuttoning the first few buttons of his overcoat and dress shirt, so she could suck at the crook of his neck. "We still have an hour and a half." For a moment, the rational part of his brain considered pushing her away. They really needed to develop a solid plan to handle the Quirrell problem. They were getting deeper into the school year. If Quirrell truly was in league with former Death Eaters, or even just dark wizards in general, he would have his eyes set on the philosopher's stone. As the Muggle Studies professor, Quirrell wasn't a part of protecting the stone. He would likely make his first move soon to start learning what defenses were in place.

Her hand suddenly cupping him through his trousers sent any thoughts of stopping this flying from his mind. "Still want to talk about Quirrell?" she teased with a grin.

Growling, he lunged forward, crashing his lips against hers with a possessive hunger. Her mouth opened obediently, allowing his tongue entrance. He felt her knees buckle slightly, but she managed to recompose herself. We're playing the defiant game today, he assessed. Good. He could have fun with that.

His lips ripped from hers with a loud pop. He lightly gripped the base of her neck to keep her in place, admiring her lust-blown pupils. Pleased, he spun her round roughly. She flung her arms forward, splaying her hands out on the desk to keep her balance. He pressed himself against her back, hands snaking around her hips to slowly unbutton her trousers.

"Already so eager," he noted. "Been thinking about this all day, have you?"

He teased her already dripping slit, tracing slow circles, purposely avoiding the place she wanted him the most. Her hips bucked against his hand, forcing him to remove it with a tisk. "Oh no," he chuckled, laying her back against his chest so her head rested in the crook of his neck. "I think I feel like taking it a bit slow today. As you said, we have a whole hour and a half."

He carefully slid his hand back into her trousers, resuming his light circles. With each complete rotation, he gradually increased the pressure, dipping his finger in deeper each time. He tightened his hold on her waist, when he felt her slipping in his arms.

"Come for me, Iris," he ordered, finally flicking her clit. Her scream echoed loudly off his office walls, as she came. He hoped he remembered to soundproof his office, when the idea cropped up in his head earlier that week, or Slytherin House just got an earful. The older students would probably put two and two together, while the younger would likely think their potions professor was torturing their defense professor. Something that was, in it's own way, a fairly accurate description of what was occurring.

Her knees finally gave out, but he managed to catch her, inadvertently smearing cum across her silk blouse. "I'm afraid you're going to need a change of clothes for the Feast," he informed her, though he couldn't be certain it fully registered through her haze.
"This outfit cost more than I make in a week," she grumbled, apparently more aware of her surroundings than he thought. He would have to step this up a notch then.

"I look forward to listening to you fumble through explaining to Narcissa why you need a replacement." That would be a pleasure for another time, though. For now, they had a little more than an hour until the Feast, and he intended to make the most of it.

"To my chambers, Ms. Lupin," he commanded, urging her in the general direction. "I'm not done with you just yet."

"That's Professor Lupin to you," she countered, smirking over her shoulder proudly.

"For that, I'm going to make you beg for it this time."

"Shit," she muttered, cursing herself.

Crossing the threshold into his chambers, he carefully locked the door behind him. Something, he realized, he probably should've thought to do back in his office. However eager they were, they needed to be more careful. He doubted the Headmaster would be pleased if a student walked in on them. And if Minerva did? He was fairly certain he might prove it possible to die of embarrassment, were his former transfiguration teacher to catch him with his hand down Iris' trousers.

He removed his shoes by the door, knowing his languid pace was driving an already impatient Iris mental. He had much better self-control than she did, and he loved testing how far he could push those limits.

His feet sank down into his carpet. It would be fairly soft on her knees, he noted, filing that information away for a later date. He was careful to always monitor the strain he placed on her back. That was one limit he had no intention of pushing, lest he exasperate her injury in any way.

Finally turning towards her, his straining cock twitched at the sight. With an anxious huff, Iris crossed her arms over her rumpled and stained blouse, which fell half-untucked from her unbuttoned trousers, and tapped her foot repeatedly as if to remind him of the time. Her tousled waves stuck out in odd directions. She looked well and truly fucked, while simultaneously asking to be again.

Brushing passed her into his bedroom, he settled himself against his headboard. He crossed his legs at his ankles casually, like they had all the time in the world, and looked at her expectantly. "You're a tad overdressed."

"Says the man wearing like fourteen layers," she mumbled, with a roll of her eyes. Nevertheless, her fingers made quick work of the buttons of her blouse, shrugging out of the sleeves to reveal a lacy black bra.

It took nearly all of his will power to stay put, as she stepped out of her trousers and chucked them over by her blouse. "You're perfect," he breathed, tugging her towards him when she joined him on the bed. "You know that?"

"Hardly," she protested, thumb unconsciously rubbing against a scar from a knife wound she received in Brazil six years ago.

He sighed, pulling her hand away from the scar and kissing the back of it. Hypocritical as it may be, given he didn't exactly have a flattering opinion of himself either, his one goal in life was to rid her of her constant self-deprecating attitude.

"You're going to fuck me slowly, until you can't stand the torment any longer," he decided, tracing
his fingertips along her spine. He was rewarded with a small shiver. "At which point, the only word that should leave your lips is 'please,' or you'll be attending the Feast unsatisfied. Understand?"

He heard her mutter a string of curses under her breath, and raised a brow. "What was that?"

"Yes," she huffed, before adding, "Sir." If possible, his cock strained against his trousers even more. With a quick wave of his wand, he rid himself of his clothes all together. He preferred to remove Iris' clothes meticulously, by his hand or her own, but had not such qualms about using magic to remove his.

He helped guide her hips down onto him, reveling in the smoky desire clouding her eyes. It never ceased to astound him how little he needed words to turn her on - how much she simply wanted him.

After a few sharp thrusts, he eased her into the slow, torturous pace he wanted. He moaned deep in his throat, gripping her hips hard enough to bruise, so he could maintain his composure. The sight of the powerful, deadly Auror Iris Lupin biting her lip to keep from crying out, as she rode his cock, would be enough to make any man crumble. He prided himself on being stronger than most, though.

Reaching up, he palmed at her breasts, thumb flicking a nipple. Her hips bucked aggressively in response. "Slower," he chastised, moving his hands back to her hips. She quivered in his arms, attempting to slow her pace once more.

With each antagonizingly slow roll, he could see her struggling to regain enough focus to maintain his desired pace. He wanted nothing more than to plunge up into her and give her what she wished for, but he'd laid out the rules when they started. She knew what she needed to do. So, he continued to correct her anytime she attempted to speed things up, and waited patiently for her to surrender.

"Oh God, Sev-" she stuttered, shaking so hard she could barely speak. "I-"

"I am neither the muggle God, nor looking to be called such," he smirked, slowly pulling himself out of her completely. "Tell me what you want, Iris. I told you how to get it, so let me hear you beg for it."

She sucked in air, as he rested his tip at her entrance. He waited, unmoving, until the word tumbled out of her in a whimper. "Please. I need you"

Flipping them over with a growl, he pinned her to the bed and plowed straight into her. A scream tore from her lips, tipping him over the edge. With a great effort, he reached down to flick her clit, insuring they plunged off that cliff together.

Coming down from his high, he carefully slid off her. Her back couldn't bare his full weight for long, and they weren't going straight to sleep. He didn't want her in too much pain for the Feast.

He swept her sweaty locks out of her face, smiling at her tired, pleasure-filled eyes. Reaching back, he grabbed a vial off his bedside table. "Drink this," he said softly, passing it to her. "It will take the edge off. We'll apply the pain lotion after you've showered."

"Together?" she grinned, downing the mild pain relief potion.

"We do that, we won't make it to the Feast."

She tilted her head to the side in consideration, before snuggling into him a bit. "We can be a little late."
Under a host of floating jack-o-lanterns and thousands of live, fluttering bats, she and Severus snuck into the Great Hall. They just barely missed Albus declaring the Feast begun. Only Minerva seemed to notice their tardiness, the older woman smiling into her goblet as they settled into the two open seats beside her.

"Nice of you two to join us this evening," she quipped.

"Having spent the whole day at the Ministry, I thought I could squeeze in some grading," she attempted to defend, though Minerva didn't look to be buying into it. "I lost track of time."

"Ah, and I imagine Severus came to find you," she chuckled, passing them the roast. "For a former Auror, you're a terrible liar." Pointing to Iris' shirt, she gleefully added, "And you missed a button."

"Shit," she swore, realizing Minerva was correct. Waving her hand discretely, she quickly rectified the situation. She then proceeded to elbow Severus in the ribs, for looking overly smug about her situation.

"I took a shower, before coming to the Feast."

"Oh, please," Sinestra hissed, leaning around Minerva to join in on the conversation. "You two aren't fooling anyone. I mean a broom cupboard last week? Really?"

She and Severus exchanged a confused look. They hadn't snuck into any broom cupboards since their school days.

"I wouldn't take Iris into a broom cupboard," Severus scoffed, leaning around her to train Sinestra with a hard glare. "I have class."

"There you have it," Sinestra grinned, banging the table in victory. "They're officially back together."

"Fuck," Severus muttered, realizing he'd fallen for the Astronomy professor's trap.

"Don't you look at me," she said, when he glowered her way. "You walked straight into that one." He didn't need to know she probably would've done the same, if he hadn't beaten her to it.

"We were done for the second you forgot to button your blouse."

"You could've mentioned it, before we got here."

"We're all very happy for you two," Minerva interrupted, stopping their bickering.


"You put in ten galleons?" Minerva questioned. Her jaw dropped, realizing what the two were discussing. Had someone switched her pumpkin juice for something stronger? This couldn't be real. "I only put in five."

"I thought for certain, with her background in law enforcement, they'd at least make it to Christmas before getting caught."

"You were betting on us?"

"Technically, we're still betting on you," Sinestra shrugged, sipping from her goblet. "I mean, there
are pools on everything. When you're going to actually go public. When you'll get engaged, well, re-engaged. When you'll get married. When-

"That's probably more than they needed to know, Aurora," Minerva cut in. "Let's just say, Poppy's made enough galleons to owe you both a drink, and leave it at that."

She blinked at the older woman, head spinning. "Is Albus in on this too?"

"Unfortunately," his soft voice joined in from beside Severus. "Having been made aware of your rekindled relationship, by the both of you, I was forced to withdraw."

"Unbelievable," she exclaimed, while Severus sat there looking bewildered beyond belief. "You all," she added, finger circling to gesture at all of them. "Are worse than the Auror Department, and that's saying something."

Their colleagues collectively grinned, clearly pleased with themselves, then moved onto other conversations. She reached over Severus to grab the bowl of mash potatoes, trying to forget the fact that her former teachers not only knew she and Severus were having sex, but were formulating bets on it too.

Catching sight of an empty chair down the opposite end of the table, she nearly dropped the bowl. "Quirrell isn't here," she hissed in Severus' ear, hand inadvertently grabbing his thigh to keep her balance and hold onto the dish.

She glanced over at Severus, when he didn't respond. He grunted, gesturing downward. Eyes widening, she realized it wasn't Severus' thigh she'd grabbed hold of. Before they could attract too much attention, he took her wrist and lifted it onto his actual thigh.

"Sorry," she whispered, blushing at the knowing smirk Minerva sent their way.

Ignoring, or not noticing Minerva, Severus reached for a pitcher of pumpkin juice as a means to gaze down the table at the empty chair. "The Headmaster said to keep an eye on him from a distance," he reminded quietly, mindful Albus was sitting next to him.

"Even if he's making a play for the stone as we speak?" With everyone at the Feast, Quirrell would have uninterrupted access to the third floor corridor. She doubted he would succeed in fighting passed all seven obstacles on his first attempt. He knew nothing of what enchantments lay in place below the trapped door, and this was Quirrell. Chances were good Hagrid's three headed dog would be sufficient to scare him off for a time. One encounter with a vampire had him stringing garlic up everywhere, after all. Still, it didn't hurt to follow him and get a better idea of what they were dealing with. Was Quirrell really the bumbling, timid idiot he pretended to be?

"Perhaps I should go after him alone," Severus suggested. "He won't see me as much of a threat. If he thinks you're onto him, he could spook and take more care to hide his intentions than he has been."

Her gut churned at the idea of sending him to the third floor alone. Quirrell wasn't the only one with minimal knowledge of the defenses set in place to protect the stone. Even those of them involved in its protection only knew the contents of their individual chambers. Part of the stone's defense was that no one person knew everything it took to retrieve it.

Unfortunately, however, Severus raised a valid point. Quirrell would be keeping a close eye on her movements. If he realized a former Auror was watching, he would cover his tracks, making it more difficult to assess his progress and determine his endgame.
"You're right," she sighed, reluctantly agreeing. "I'll cover for-

The doors to the Great Hall banged open, cutting her off. Quirrell burst inside, sprinting between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables towards the staff. "TROLL IN THE DUNGEON!" he gasped in terror. "TROLL IN THE DUNGEON!" She shared a stunned look with Severus and Minerva, rising from her seat with the rest of the staff. "Thought you ought to know," Quirrell breathed, then unceremoniously fainted in the middle of the Great Hall.

Panicked screams and chatter erupted throughout the Hall, with students leaping from their House tables and darting for the exit. "SILENCE!" Albus hollered, cutting through the noise of the Hall and shooting several purple firecrackers from his wand. Everyone screeched to a halt, silence cascading over the previously chaotic room.

"I must request that you all remain calm," Albus said, voice returning to normal. "Prefects will lead their Houses back to the dormitories. Teachers, if you would follow me to the Dungeons."

At first, she nodded and started to follow the trail of teachers. She stopped short, after a few steps, catching sight of Quirrell passed out in the middle of the floor. Something was off. She didn't know of any troll colonies in the immediate vicinity of the Hogwarts Grounds. Hagrid would know best, but he looked equally as dumbfounded as the rest of the staff. It was unlikely one just happened to wander into the school.

*He didn't stutter,* she realized, eyes finding Quirrell again. *He* brought the troll in. She'd been at the Ministry most of the day. It was the perfect opportunity for him to disappear from the grounds and lead a troll back with him.

She turned to Severus, who appeared to share her suspicions. "Go," she ordered, features hardening over with determination. "Head him off. I'll take care of Slytherin House."

With a quick glance at the departing staff, he reached out and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back, nodding as he snuck out the back door.

Shaking off her concerns, she took a breath and slipped back into Auror mode. "SLYTHERIN HOUSE!" she called, hurrying down to where the Slytherins were filing out of the Great Hall. They all stopped in their tracks, giving her their full attention. "Stay here in the Great Hall until the Dungeons are clear," she instructed, addressing the group. Skimming through the sea of terrified students, she finally found one of the seventh-year Prefects. "Jemma, you're in charge. Anyone steps out of line, they'll be dealing with me."

"Yes, Professor," she nodded, puffing her chest and ushering the other Slytherin students back to their dining table.

By the time she met the rest of the staff in the Dungeons, they were huddled around Albus with no troll in sight. Instead of joining the meeting, she wandered a few paces down the corridor, needing to think. What did letting a troll loose inside Hogwarts accomplish? They'd been halfway through dinner, before she even noticed Quirrell's absence from the Feast. He had free access to the third floor, with all of them gathered in the Great Hall, so why risk that? There was nothing guaranteeing Albus would send the entire staff to the Dungeons. He could've easily divided the staff, sending them to separate floors. So, what was Quirrell really up to?

*He's drawing us out.* "Shit," she breathed, kicking herself for not seeing it before. Quirrell already suspected someone was onto him. He was using the troll diversion to determine who it was. She needed to get to the third floor corridor, and find Severus before Quirrell spotted him.
"Iris?" Minerva's kind voice drew her from her thoughts, reminding her there was still a troll to find.

"Sorry," she smiled. Now wasn't the time to fill Minerva in on the Quirrell situation. "Just thinking."

Minerva wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and guided her back to where Albus was dishing out new orders to the staff. "Filius, would you be so kind as to go to the Great Hall and inform Slytherin House they may return to their dormitory? They shall finish the Feast there."

"Of course, Headmaster."

"The rest of us will divide into groups, and search the remainder of the Castle," he instructed, as Flitwick ventured off to the Great Hall. "Minerva, you and Iris will search the lower floors."

Making their way back up to the Entrance Hall, they suddenly heard a loud roar coming from the Grand Staircase across they way. Exchanging a glance with Minerva, she drew her wand and hurried across the Entrance Hall and up the steps to the first floor.

"Sev!" she exclaimed, nearly crashing into him as he stumbled down the stairs from the second floor. Gripping his shoulders to keep them both upright, she noticed blood seeping through a tear in his trouser leg. "Are you all right?"

"Oh my!" Minerva cried, catching up to her and assessing the deep gash on Severus' leg. "Severus, what happened?"

Before he could respond, they heard screaming, intermingled with loud crashes, coming from down the hallway. "We'll explain later."

Seeming to accept that, the Deputy Headmistress took off, hurrying passed the Defense Classroom at a surprising speed for her age. She hung back a bit, realizing Severus was limping slowly behind. She slipped his arm over her shoulder, helping to bare some of his weight. She contemplated depositing him in the Hospital Wing as they passed, but knew that was an argument she didn't have time to win. Severus willingly went to hospitals about as often as she did.

"What the hell happened?"

"That blasted dog," he grunted in her ear. "It's impossible to keep all three heads in sight."

"You're not going alone again. " She should've listened to her gut and went with him in the first place. "What happened with Quirrell?"

"Never saw him. He must have figured out I got there first."

"AH!" They looked up to see Quirrell come around the corner by the girls' bathroom, clutching his chest.

"Oh, Professor Quirrell, there you are!" Minerva greeted.

Severus pulled away from her suddenly. "Sev," she admonished. He shouldn't be standing on that leg.

"Not in front of him," he hissed, limping closer to Minerva and Quirrell. With a sigh, she moved to join them, smirking to herself when Quirrell hiccuped in terror under Severus' hard glare.

A floor shaking thump echoed from inside the girls' bathroom. Gripping her wand, she darted inside
to find Ron, Harry, and Hermione, covered in dust, standing around a nearly four meter tall mountain troll that appeared to be unconscious. "What in Salazar's name?" she exclaimed, bubbling with rage at the sight before her.

Minerva gasped loudly, running into the room behind her with Severus and Quirrell. Quirrell nearly fainted a second time, at the sight of the knocked out troll, but managed to stumble over and sit on the remains of a toilet.

"Explain yourselves. All of you," Minerva demanded, once she recovered, gesturing between the three sheepish-looking Gryffindors.

As angry as she was at her two nephews' foolishness, she took a step back and allowed Minerva to take the lead as their Head of House. While the kids stuttered through an obviously fabricated explanation, she knelt down beside the troll to insure it was truly unconscious.

The troll let out a groan in its sleep, sending Quirrell flying off the toilet. "P-p-perhaps we o-ought to go. It m-might wake up."

Ignoring Quirrell, Minerva continued to address her three Gryffindors. "Professor Dumbledore will be informed of what happened this evening. For now, if none of you are hurt, you should return to your dormitory. The students are finishing the Feast there."

Watching Minerva sweep her emerald robes and march from the room, she grasped part of a nearby stall to help pull herself off the ground. "Not so fast," she ordered to the three eleven year olds attempting to hastily shuffle out of the bathroom unnoticed. They froze at her stern tone, slowly spinning around with guilty looks. "You two," she started, pointing to Harry and Ron. "Report to my office first thing tomorrow morning. We are going to discuss this further."

"Yes, ma'am," her nephews mumbled in chorus, then slipped out of the room with Hermione. Quirrell took one more glance at the troll, and hurried from the bathroom after them.

"Albus was seriously going to make him the Defense Professor, if I hadn't accepted the post?" she snorted, watching Quirrell awkwardly running zig-zagged down the hall, clutching his turban tight to his head.

"A truly terrifying thought."

Hearing the strain in his voice, she turned back to Severus, who was struggling to stand on his injured leg. "You need to sit down," she advised, helping him onto the broken toilet Quirrell vacated. Ignoring her own pain, she walked in circles around the unconscious troll, trying to determine the best method to remove him from the Castle. "What in the bloody hell am I supposed to do with a mountain troll?"

"You are the Defense Professor," Severus reminded with a smirk. "Someone's feeling better. "Yes, but I was an Auror," she objected, gesturing wildly at the troll. "I didn't run a dark creature daycare center, or whatever they do in the Control of Magical Creatures Division."

"Technically, you share a flat with one."

Rolling her eyes, she pulled out her wand again and pointed it at the troll. "Reducio." She bent down to pick up the, now, pocket sized troll. Tilting her head to assess the tiny troll, she had to admit, at this size, it was kind of cute. "Do you think you can make it to my chambers on your own? They're closer than the Dungeons." She knew he wouldn't go to the Hospital Wing, even if
she dragged him there herself.

"I'm going to bring this guy down to Hagrid, for the time being," she explained, transfiguring some of the rubble in the bathroom into a small cage for the troll. "Hopefully, he can locate its tribe, so I can return it to its proper home. I'll help you clean your leg, as soon as I get back."

"I should be able to manage that on my own."

_Salazar, you're stubborn._ "Oh, my mistake," she said, holding her hands up. She grabbed the cage and headed for the door. "Here I was thinking you liked me on my knees," she grinned over her shoulder. If his moan was anything to go by, his stubborn arse would be in her quarters by the time she returned from Hagrid's.

Limping out of the bathroom, he hung back for a minute to admire the view of Iris, in her strappy tank-top, with the duvet pooling around her waist. She sat back against the headboard, reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose, eyes skimming through a file. He smiled, realizing how much he'd missed something as simple as finding Iris reading on her side of the bed. Just the fact that they had _sides_ again still amazed him.

Slipping under the covers beside her, he wrapped his arms around her waist. He kissed her bare shoulder, then rested his chin there so he could see what had her attention so captivated.

"Nymphadora Tonks?"

Iris moved her glasses to rest on the top of her head, turning to kiss him briefly. He met her halfway, running his hands up and down her arms. "She applied for the Auror Academy. Kingsley asked me to look into her a bit, and see what I think," she explained, settling back against his chest and returning her glasses to their proper place. "Anything you remember about her?"

"She and your nephew were an absolute nightmare together," he grumbled. Like many, he'd fallen victim to several of their failed pranks intended for each other. He would never forget the day the Hufflepuff tossed a Venomous Tentacula into his classroom. She, of course, claimed it an accident, but he hadn't felt guilty agreeing with Sprout that detention for the rest of her days at Hogwarts was a suitable punishment.

"I've heard stories," Iris grinned, giving him the distinct impression she knew about the Venomous Tentacula Incident of 1988. "I was hoping for something a little more academic."

"She made it into my N.E.W.T. level class, so she wasn't a complete dunderhead," he admitted, thumb tracing light circles on her stomach. "Didn't think much of wearing a proper uniform," he recalled. "Though, given how often you wore your Auror robes, I imagine that is not high on the priority list for incoming recruits."

"Very funny."

"Sprout was her Head of House. She'll likely be your best source of information."

He let her peruse through Tonk's file for a little while longer, before he broached the subject she'd been avoiding all day. "We haven't talked about what today is yet."

He felt her tense against him, and rubbed her back reassuringly. Sighing, she closed Tonk's file and set it aside on her bedside table. She placed her glasses on top of the file, running a hand through her hair. "What do you want me to say, Sev? That it's been ten years now, and I can still see their bodies clear as day? That it hurts as much as it did the day I found them? That every time I set foot
in Azkaban, I want to find Sirius' cell and strangle him to death?"

"We don't have to discuss it, if you don't want to." He tightened his hold on her waist slightly, just enough to keep her from pulling away, but not so much she would feel restrained. "We can talk more about our Quirrell situation or Nymphadora Tonks. Anything you want," he said, brushing a few stray strands of hair behind her ear. "I just wanted to offer. I know how hard this time of year is for you."

It was hard for all of them, really, but Iris in particular. She'd been the first to Godric's Hollow, after the Fidelius Charm broke. As relieved as he knew she was to find her godson alive, she'd still been forced to step over her best friend's body to get to him. The following day, she'd been on scene to arrest her brother-in-law for murder, sending Remus into a drunken spiral and leaving her to pick up the pieces on her own. She'd then delivered the minimal remains of Peter Pettigrew to his distraught and grieving mother. Nearly a week later, two of her friends were tortured into insanity, while she was forced to listen, helplessly, from a floor below.

"Albus gave me this job, because he thinks I need an intervention."

He hadn't expected her to say something bordering on the lines of an actual conversation. Since that night, Iris brushed off nearly every attempt he made to help share the burden of her trauma, always preferring he help her 'forget' rather than discuss it. He'd anticipated more of the same tonight.

"I'm sure he didn't-"

"He's right." He snapped his jaw shut, because that was the start of an actual conversation, and he wasn't about to stop it. "I don't talk. I internalize," she huffed, using his chest as a pillow. "Asha once called me a machine with no feeling. It was a fairly apt description."

"Asha - she's part of the International Auror Team you assembled?" He didn't know a lot about Iris' former team. Given he was their boss' ex-fiancé and a pardoned Death Eater, they were certainly never introduced. Most of what he did know came from the handful of Prophet clippings he'd acquired, over the years, to keep track of her and reassure himself she was as alive as Remus claimed.

For the first few years, following Iris' promotion to International, she'd worked under the Lead Auror at the time, Sasha Walkins. In 1986, Iris was promoted to replace him as Lead Auror by the International Confederation of Wizards, and allowed the opportunity to revamp the team. She'd made rather unconventional choices, which were initially deemed 'radical' and 'doomed to fail' by papers throughout the globe. A year later, those same papers were hailing the new International Team the most elite Auror force in the world.

Asha was the only teammate Iris ever mentioned to him personally, always with a deep fondness. A Prophet article a few years back made mention of Iris being rumored to have assaulted a suspect in custody. He almost tossed the article out, assuming it more slanderous gossip. Iris never openly broke protocol like that. It was only when he saw it reported the suspect had severely injured Asha during his arrest that he thought there might be some truth to it.

"She was one of my first hires," Iris confirmed, linking her fingers through the hand he had resting on her stomach. "We were always butting heads that first year. She got on much better with Marcus, my second-in-command."

"I trust she eventually came around to realizing how incredible you are?"

"The Maverick Incident was the turning point."
"Ah, that makes sense."

Andrew Maverick was the one Auror Iris kept from Walkins' team, having worked alongside him for five years. In a headline-making scandal, Maverick turned on the team, revealing himself to be a member of an underground supremacist group in America. Iris had shown up on his doorstep, following Maverick's arrest, limping heavily, with rope burns on her wrists and bruised ribs. He'd just barely managed to catch her, before she passed out in his arms, nearly the second he opened the door. He'd woken the next morning to her coughing up blood in his bathroom, refusing to go to Saint Mungo's or even tell him what happened. He'd then owled Remus, who'd picked her up with Arthur Weasley that afternoon. He only learned about Maverick's betrayal the next day, when the news hit the papers.

"None of us saw his betrayal coming. Though, looking back, he always did have a sort of young Gellert Grindelwald essence about him," she confessed. "Asha took it the hardest. She and Maverick were close. I'd assigned him to mentor her."

"Let me guess, you taught her how to harness all that fury into the fuel needed to take him down?" That was what Iris did best.

"I taught her to control her emotions - to focus on a single objective and let everything else wash away."

"Wise advice."

"Is it?" Iris questioned, sitting up in his arms. "That pain doesn't just disappear. All I did was teach her to turn it inward."

Whether an intervention was truly the Headmaster's intention or not, it would appear he was having some success at it. This was the most introspection he'd witnessed Iris undergo since The War ended. She might not be ready to reflect on Lily's death yet, but this was a start.

"Asha was just a kid when she first started out, barely cleared for combat field work," Iris continued, running a hand over her tired eyes. "You should see her now - thick black eyeliner, nose and lip rings, leather jackets. The only person I need to fear for now is whoever manages to get in her way. I've turned her into a younger version of myself."

"You have a lip ring I don't know about?" he grinned, envisioning the heart attack Narcissa would have if she ever found Iris dressed like that.

"Kidding," he laughed, holding his hands up in defense under her glare.

Running a hand up and down her spine, he felt her relax under his touch. "Is it really so bad to think she might have a little bit of you inside her? You've done a lot of good for this world, you know?"

"I do," she admitted, but glanced away from him. "It's just, some days, it feels like I walked into that cottage with Anne and Frank and a part of me never walked out. The only time I feel whole is when I'm with you."

His heart caught in his throat at that confession. "Hey," he breathed, guiding her eyes back to his. "We've been through a lot, and we've all, in one way or another, put off facing that. But, it isn't too late to start. I think, in the end, we're going to be okay."

"Yeah?"

"I feel whole with you too." He tugged her back to him, settling them down in a better position to
sleep. "Whatever happened with Maverick?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Marcus took him back to America to stand trial. He's spending the rest of his life in a MACUSA prison."

He knew all that, of course, having followed the Prophet's coverage of his trial. "Not quite what I was asking."

"Oh," she realized, a wide grin breaking out. "I bashed his face into a wall - possibly more than once."

"That's my girl," he smiled, stealing a quick kiss. "Get some sleep. You have two eleven year olds to tear into tomorrow morning."

Trudging along the first floor corridor, heads hanging low, they reached the Defense Classroom, surprised to find it shut. He exchanged a confused look with Ron, who tested the locked door. Iris told them to report to her office first thing this morning, hadn't she?

"Maybe she forgot?" Ron shrugged, looking hopeful.

No such luck, though. They weren't standing there for long, before they heard the aggressive click of her heels coming towards them from the Entrance Hall. With guilty looks, they turned to see Iris walking towards them, in dark jeans and a cardigan, with a steaming mug of tea in hand. She looked like she'd woken up late, wearing her glasses today, hair pinned up messily with a clip. He hoped she hadn't been up late plotting out a punishment for them.

"Inside," she ordered, pointing to the classroom door with the hand not holding her mug.

Nodding sadly, he shuffled into the classroom after Ron, hearing the lock un-click with a wave of Iris' hand. Iris led them up the stairs to her office, sipping her tea on the way. Her silence was unnerving. He couldn't gage how angry she was. Professor McGonagall had awarded them House Points, but Iris certainly didn't look like she was about to do the same.

"Have a seat, boys," she said, rounding her desk and setting her mug down.

They took their seats quickly, and waited for Iris to speak. "I'm, admittedly, new to teaching," she began, gazing at them over the brim of her glasses. "But, never did I imagine a pair of first years would disregard direct orders from the Headmaster and attempt to take on a fully-grown mountain troll alone."

"We're sorry, Iris," he mumbled, and Ron nodded like a bobble-head beside him. Now probably wasn't the ideal time to remind her they had, in fact, defeated said troll.

"Are you going to tell Mum?" Ron piped up quietly, looking terrified by the very thought.

Iris sat there quietly, in deep consideration, for a while. He could see Ron fidgeting uncomfortably in his seat. "No," she eventually decided. Ron's shoulders visibly sagged in relief. "Professor McGonagall is your Head of House, and she chose not to punish the both of you for your actions. As your teacher, I respect her authority."

"Look," Iris sighed, folding her hands, and resting her forearms on the desk to look at them more directly. "I realize you are both in a unique position of having a family member among the staff." His heart swelled, like it always did, when Iris referred to him as family. Aunt Petunia and Uncle
Vernon never called him family, especially not in public - unless, of course, they could use it to gain sympathy.

"In some ways, that isn't entirely fair," Iris admitted. "But, before I accepted the position, I told myself I would try to keep being your Aunt separate from being your teacher. So, if Professor McGonagall has chosen not to write to your mother, neither will I."

"Thanks, Aunt Iris!" Ron beamed. That didn't appear to be the reaction Iris was looking for, though. Both he and Ron gulped, when her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"However," Iris stressed with a pointed look. "I am still at least partially responsible for you," she said glancing at Ron. She then set her sights on him. "And, definitely responsible for you."

"Yes, ma'am." He needed to remember Iris wasn't officially his legal guardian yet. Professor Dumbledore was waiting until the end of the year, before he made a permanent decision. If he wasn't careful, he would find himself back at the Dursleys, only seeing Remus occasionally and Iris at school.

"Tell me what really happened," Iris requested, nursing her tea.

He glanced at Ron. Should they use the cover story Hermione established the night before to keep them out of trouble? "Well, Hermione-" he started to recount.

Iris cut him off with a sharp shake of her head. "Harry, I heard the story Hermione gave Professor McGonagall," Iris told him. "I also don't need to be a former Auror to know when an eleven year old is lying. So, what really happened?"

"It's my fault," Ron blurted out suddenly. "Hermione and I had a fight in Charms class. She was in the bathroom crying when the troll attacked."

"We were on our way back to Gryffindor Tower with everyone else, when we realized she wouldn't know about the troll," he picked up, adding onto what Ron started. "We went to warn her. We didn't know the troll would be there."

Iris blinked at them. "That's it?"

"Uh… yes?"

"Okay," she nodded, seeming to be talking more to herself than them. "What you did was admirable. Hermione could've been seriously injured," Iris conceded. "But, you have Prefects and Professors for a reason. If a situation similar to this should arise again, you need to inform one of us, not go off on your own. Part of our job is keeping you safe. Understand?"

They both agreed, realizing that probably would've made more sense than going after Hermione themselves. Percy could've found a professor and told them about Hermione for them. McGonagall was right. They survived their encounter with the troll mostly on luck. If its club hadn't come straight down on its head, they'd have been done for.

"Good. Now, I suggest you go to breakfast. If I remember correctly, you both have double potions this morning," Iris reminded with a wide grin, seeming to take a certain twisted pleasure in the fact that they had to spend the entire morning with Snape. She may not have planned it, but, it would seem, Iris was getting the punishment she wanted after all.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Rookwood's Trial

Chapter Notes

Apologies if there are more typos than usual. I head back to school tomorrow and wanted to get this posted while I had the time. It was fun researching and building off what we know of the Wizarding Judicial System. Hopefully, it seems to fit in with the brief trials we saw in the books.

I realized halfway through that I probably should have done a flashback of Rookwood's arrest before this chapter, but I decided not to delay getting this out. It's a major event, so, at some point, we definitely will get to see how that arrest went down. If not sooner, definitely by the Prisoner of Azkaban events, as Iris' time on the International Team will factor into that portion of the story.

Thanks to everyone for reading, subscribing, commenting, leaving kudos, etc.

He frowned, walking into Iris' quarters to find her sitting on the floor by her couch, scooping a large glob of white frosting from a tin. "Are you eating frosting out of the container?"

Startling at the sound of his voice, she jumped to hide the container behind her back. "No," she mumbled with a full mouth.

"What's wrong?" He initially came to see if she wanted to monitor Slytherin's quidditch practice with him. Their first game was scheduled for the following Saturday, and he could use her expertise to insure Flint had his team up to par. It would appear, however, Slytherin would get a reprieve from his critical eye this evening. Whatever was bothering Iris, if she'd resorted to eating straight frosting, it couldn't be good.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she lied stubbornly, swallowing the glob in her mouth.

He rolled his eyes. He knew her too well to fall for that. "You only do this when you're stressed."

"Fine," she grumbled, giving in and revealing the container from behind her back. "I have to go to London tomorrow. They've finally scheduled Rookwood's trial."

No wonder she was stressed. The last time she confronted Rookwood, he'd sent her to Saint Mungo's with a career ending injury. Testifying at his trial would not only force her to see him again, but require her to discuss the moment that ended her career in open court. She hadn't even done so with him in private yet.

"Surely they have him on enough charges, they don't need to drag you into it?" Rookwood was
accused of being a Death Eater, treason against the Ministry, torture of muggles and muggle-borns, violation of international borders, evading arrest, and probably murder too. The attempted murder of an Auror, while an offense worthy of a life-sentence, was likely the least of the Wizengamot's concerns. Conviction on any of the other charges would still earn him a lifetime in Azkaban.

"I'm the arresting Auror. I have to testify."

"Iris-"

"I'll be fine, Sev," she cut in defensively, brushing off his concerns. Another sign she was reaching her stress limit. "I've testified at dozens of trials just like this."

*None of those trials involved coming face-to-face with the man who ended your career.* Not to mention, she would likely be questioned on the decisions she made leading up to that final confrontation. He couldn't let her face that alone. Resignation or not, Iris was still a public figure. She couldn't snap defensively at the Wizengamot.

"I was thinking of visiting Remus this weekend." It wasn't entirely a lie. The thought had crossed his mind. He and Remus hadn't met for lunch in over a month. "I could come with you tomorrow, and we could stop into Mischief Managed afterward?" If the trial ran late into the afternoon, they could probably spend the night at her flat and make a weekend out of it. He would check with the Headmaster, but he doubted Dumbledore would take any issue with that.

"I'm perfectly capable of handling this on my own." He opened his mouth to object, because it wasn't that he didn't believe her capable. He just wanted her to know she didn't have to.

"But," she grinned, interrupting him. She held a hand out, and he helped her off the floor. "A weekend in London with you sounds very appealing," she finished, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"So, that's a yes?"

"It's a yes," she affirmed, snuggling into his chest. "Thank you, Sev."

He held her more tightly in his arms, and placed a kiss to her hair. "Always."

Stepping off the final step into the Level Ten corridor leading to the courtrooms, she felt her hand start to tremble. She pumped it in and out of a fist several times, trying to curb the nervous energy. *Control your emotions,* she reminded herself. *Focus on what's important, and let everything else fade into the background like white noise.*

She could handle that. She'd been doing that her whole life. It just happened to have been a whole lot simpler before she wound up on the wrong side of Rookwood's curse.

As an Auror, there'd always been another mission, another Death Eater to find. There hadn't been time for introspection. The decisions she made were almost always life or death. One wrong move, one poorly planed op, and innocent people could die. Emotions were a liability she couldn't allow to seep in.

But, she wasn't an Auror any longer. And, while teaching and grading certainly didn't provide copious amounts of free time, it also didn't exactly provide her the luxury of pushing the past to the side to dwell upon at a later time. It was no small wonder why Alastor jumped at the chance to Head the Auror Academy, just months after his own retirement.
Fingers linking through her own drew her out of her thoughts and back to the corridor outside of Courtroom Ten. "Breathe, Iris." She followed Severus' advice, realizing just how fast her heart was racing. "You're going to be okay. Just go in there, say your piece, and you never have to see him again."

"I know," she nodded. "You're right." Only she could feel her breathing quicken again. She couldn't do this. She couldn't testify feeling like this. If she did, Rookwood would win. Maybe not his trial. She was fairly certain he already lost that, when Investigations presented the evidence against him the previous day. But, he would win the satisfaction of knowing he got to her. That he got in her head, same as Crouch.

"You can do this, Iris," Severus encouraged, running a comforting hand up and down her spine. "I know you can."

He was right. She wasn't alone in this. He was here with her. With him, she could do anything. "Thank you for being here. I-

"You can make googly-eyes at your boyfriend later, Lupin," the gruff voice of Alastor Moody cut through the muted air. Like that, her features hardened back into place. Stepping back from Severus, she crossed her arms, glaring at the man roughly limping down the corridor towards them. "Would it kill you to look a little more injured," he spat, hardly sparing her more than a quick once over as he brushed past. "You're the cornerstone of this case." He slammed the courtroom door open with his walking staff, bursting into the trial room with a lack of decorum only Alastor could get away with.

Growling, Severus moved to follow him. She stopped him with a hand on his chest. "He's not worth it."

Nodding reluctantly, Severus turned back to her, cupping her cheek. "I'll be right here waiting for you when you're through."

She quickly kissed him, drawing the last bit of strength she could from his presence. He didn't have authorization to attend the trial, so this would be the last she'd see of him until her testimony was over. Then, with a deep, calming breath, she followed Alastor into the courtroom.

Walking out onto the mosaic tile floor, she took in the bustling Courtroom. Wizengamot members were chatting with one another, while tugging on their judicial robes and hats. Visitors and other Ministry employees, who'd come to witness the trial were climbing the open benches in search of seats. The press was already scribbling away on their parchments. The scene was so very familiar, and she was beginning to feel right at home.

You've done this a thousand times, she reminded herself, catching sight of the witness chair she'd spent many a days in.

"Iris!" she heard someone call out, interrupting her self-encouragement. She turned to see Amelia Bones walking towards her, the silver embroidered W shining brightly on the black judicial robes that signified Amelia as a high ranking Wizengamot official.

"Amelia," she smiled hugging her old friend affectionately.

"Are you wearing a suit?" Amelia teased. "With no tears in the knees of your trousers?"

"Merlin, you invest in a few new outfits and suddenly that's the only thing people notice about you." Amelia chuckled, with a shake of her head. "It's good to see you."
"You too." She'd, admittedly, let it go far too long without inviting Amelia out for dinner or drinks. Hopefully, her friend didn't realize she'd been at the Ministry just last week, and hadn't stopped by her office. She'd intended to, but got caught up talking to Arthur for several hours after leaving Kingsley's office. "Susan's doing well in school," she added, shifting to a topic she knew would distract Amelia. Susan was quiet and shy, but she still seemed to be fitting in well enough with her fellow first-year Hufflepuffs, Hannah Abbot and Justin Flechery in particular. She also noticed her sitting with Seamus Finnigan and Hermione Granger from time to time.

"She's written a handful of times. Seems to enjoy your class."

"She's an excellent Defense student, but I've heard she has a particular affinity for Herbology." She would have to suggest pairing Susan with Neville in class occasionally to Sprout, if the woman hadn't already thought of it. Neville was equally as shy, and also seemed to have a knack for the subject. She was fairly certain the first year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were in the same Herbology class. Maybe, with their shared interest, the two could help pull each other out of their shells.

"She does mention Herbology in her letters more often than not."

"Not a bad choice," she admitted, remembering there were a number of advertisements for plant related research positions in the Prophet this summer. "Plenty of job opportunities available in the field, these days."

She didn't hear Amelia's response, catching a flash of blonde from the corner of her eye. Her heart stopped for a moment, before she realized the long white-blonde hair belonged to Rita Skeeter, who was joining the other reporters on the press' bench. Her shoulders relaxed, but she still kept an eye out for the man she once considered a brother. She got so caught up in the idea of seeing Rookwood again that it completely slipped her mind Lucius might be here too. He never missed a Death Eater trial, pandering to the Wizengamot that he'd truly had been under the imperious curse and was equally as committed to seeing true Death Eaters sent to Azkaban as they were.

"If you're looking for Aurors Noah or Ward, they aren't here," Amelia told her, misinterpreting her scan of the bystander benches.

Her eyes snapped back to Amelia. "I thought they were scheduled to testify?"

"They were, but they were called out to Brazil two days ago," her friend explained. "Given you were Lead Auror at the time of Rookwood's arrest, and are free to testify, the Wizengamot didn't see the need to delay the trial any longer."

"No, I suppose… I wouldn't want that either." Investigations' had already delayed the trial for months, needing more time to compile the substantial amount of evidence gathered into something that could actually be presented in court. After finally getting the date for her testimony and psyching herself up for it, she'd probably have screamed if she'd received an owl delaying the trial further. She wanted to be done with Rookwood, and finally close that chapter of her life.

Amelia placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Iris. I'm sure you were looking forward to seeing them."

"I'll see them next time work brings them our way," she brushed off, with a wave of her hand, trying to ignore the pang in her chest. She hadn't seen either Marcus or Asha since blacking out in that final confrontation with Rookwood. If any of her team had visited Saint Mungo's it would've been during the weeks she'd been unconscious. By the time she'd woken enough to think coherently, the International Team had been deployed to West Africa. Seeing their names on the schedule to testify had made today feel a little less daunting. Apparently, she would be facing this alone. She was even
more grateful to Severus for tagging along. "For now, my focus is Rookwood."

"We'll try and make this as painless as possible," Amelia promised, likely sensing her internal thoughts. The woman didn't become the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for nothing. "Investigations presented quite a compelling case yesterday. I don't foresee anyone having too many questions for you."

"Small mercies," she smirked, before parting ways with her friend. The trial would be commencing soon. Amelia needed to take her seat with the Wizengamot and she needed to find her own seat. Climbing up a few benches, she found the spot Alastor claimed his own and grudgingly sat down next to him. It had a decent view of the entire courtroom, allowing them the ability to keep an eye on all the major players.

"Lucius isn't here," she hissed to the Senior Auror, when another scan of the courtroom confirmed his absence.

"Disappointed?"

She glanced up at ceiling in exasperation. She was clearly a glutton for punishment bringing this topic up with Alastor of all people.

"Surprised," she corrected, adopting a casual tone to show him he wouldn't get under her skin today. "It's not like him to miss a spectacle such as this."

"If it weren't for you, he'd have had a spectacle of his own."

"You aren't seriously still going on about that?" she objected, before lowering her voice. The proceedings were starting, and it would be best not to draw attention to themselves. This wasn't a conversation for reporter ears to overhear. Not to mention, thus far, the press hadn't caught wind of her and Alastor's strained relationship. It would be best to keep it that way, lest the frivolous gossip distract from the trial. That was no matter, though. She had plenty of experience in masking public arguments as casual conversation. Narcissa taught her well. "I didn't pardon him, in case you forgot?"

"No. You just provided the testimony that led to that," Alastor countered in a grumble. "Couldn't bare to see big brother handed over to the Dementors."

She took a deep breath to keep the smile on her face. "All I did was testify that he saved my life, which is the truth." If there was some truth to Alastor's point, as well, it was unimportant. Lucius was pardoned, and it hadn't been her decision. "It's not my fault the Wizengamot thought that a worthy enough reason to clear him of all charges."

"Dumbledore will rue the day he agreed to that, mark my words."

"Where's Kingsley?" she spat, because she couldn't sit with Alastor any longer. She thought, maybe, in a public courtroom he could manage to be civil, but she should've known better.

"Working. In case you've forgotten, he's down an Auror."

"You really expect me to believe, if Albus Dumbledore showed up at your hospital room and requested you come teach at Hogwarts, you'd have turned him down?" She was tired of him going off on her for accepting the post at Hogwarts, when she knew for a fact he would've done the same. "It wasn't my brain Rookwood took out of commission, Alastor. You know, as well as I, that when Albus has a request, whatever it is, we all fall in line."
Alastor barely grunted an acknowledge that she'd so much as spoken, so she returned her focus to the proceedings. Albus, in his role as Chief Warlock, was only just now yielding the floor to the Prosecutor to recap the evidence presented by Investigations for the Court. *Merlin, it's going to be a long day,* she groaned to herself. *And my primary source of company is about thrilling to talk to as a brick wall.*

*On second thought,* she considered, glancing over at Alastor once more. *I'm might prefer the wall.

"Of all the cases, you really had to send Moody to monitor the *Rookwood trial*?"

He paused in the casefile he was skimming through. He knew that voice. Sure enough, when he glanced up from the sea of paperwork Scrimgeour had him drowning under, he found, none other than, Severus Snape in his office doorway.

He really shouldn't be all that surprised. The Rookwood trial was no doubt looming over Iris like a dark cloud. If he'd taken a second to really think that through, he'd have known Snape wouldn't leave her to face all that stress on her own.

"Trust me, it was the last thing I wanted to do," he assured. Adding Alastor Moody to an already tense situation was a recipe for disaster. Factor in the most recent strain in Moody and Iris' friendship, and he'd be lucky to avoid a bloodbath breaking out in the middle of Court. "But, I'm swamped and Scrimgeour has meetings all morning. I don't need to tell you, Iris isn't exactly someone who can be replaced overnight. I've looked at dozens of candidates, and still haven't found one Scrimgeour and I can agree even comes close."

"For the record, I didn't tell her to accept the job at Hogwarts."

He snorted. "Oh, don't even try and pretend this isn't the best thing to happen to you in a decade."

"Didn't say it wasn't." That was probably the closest to an admission of feelings he would ever manage to pull out of Severus Snape.

"It's the best thing to happen to her too," he added, after a minute of Snape staring at him in that unnervingly stoic way of his. "Haven't seen her smile like she has been in years. I, honestly, wasn't entirely certain that part of her even existed anymore."

Iris hadn't been the same since The War. He couldn't entirely blame her for the change. After everything she'd been through, he imagined closing one's self off to the world had probably seemed like the only way to keep going. He was glad to see her working to open up more, and he knew a large part of that was thanks to the man standing in front of him.

"It's going to work this time."

"Are you asking me or telling me?" He liked Snape. His gut told him he was a good man at heart, even when other Aurors were in doubt. That didn't mean he didn't enjoy giving him a hard time, every once in a while, though. Iris was his best girl, after all. He had to make sure she was being well taken care of.

To the untrained eye, Snape would appear calm and unfazed by the question. He, however, had been an Auror long enough to notice the slight lip twinge. He suspected there was a lengthy debate going on in the man's head over which was the most appropriate answer to his question.

After a few more seconds of letting Snape sweat, he stood with a chuckle. "For what it's worth,
Snape, I think it will."

"Just, uh, try and avoid accidentally joining an extremist group this time, all right?" he added, clapping the man on his shoulder.

Snape nodded, looking slightly flabbergasted by his shoulder clap. "I should probably get back to the courtroom."

"Good idea," he smirked, moving back to rummage through a drawer of his desk. "Here. Take this," he told Snape, passing him a badge. "It'll get you inside the courtroom. If I'd known you were coming, I'd have put you on the approved list ahead of time." Iris would need him. Even without Moody's presence, she was under enough pressure. She deserved to have Snape with her.

"Thanks," Snape said, sounding genuinely grateful. "I'll try and make sure they don't murder one another in open court."

" Appreciate it."

He slipped in through the back door, so as to not disturb the proceedings. He noticed Iris sitting just a few sections over, with her jaw locked and crossed legs turning her away from Moody. It would appear they'd already been left alone too long.

Starting over towards them, he heard Iris being called to the stand. "The Wizengamot calls forward the next witness for the Prosecution - Professor Iris Lupin."

He caught her eye, as she started climbing down the stairs to the courtroom floor. She paused, tilting her head with a confused smile. He offered her a nod of support. She winked back, telling him 'I've got this,' then resumed her trek down to the witness chair.

"Kingsley sent you as supervision, I presume," Moody commented, as he slid into the spot Iris just vacated.

"He would prefer, should one of you murder the other, it not take place in front of the entire Wizengamot."

Moody chuckled, but otherwise said nothing. He glanced around the courtroom. The last time he'd set foot in this room, he'd been pardoned for his time as a Death Eater. While he was grateful to have received a pardon, it certainly wasn't a fond memory. Having to sit there silently, relying on Albus, Kingsley, and even Moody to keep him out of Azkaban, was excruciating. The whole time he'd wanted to scream that he wasn't a Death Eater - tell them it had all been a ruse of Albus creation. But, Voldemort wasn't gone and his cover needed to be maintained, so he remained quiet and would be known as a 'pardoned Death Eater' for the rest of his days.

He noticed Rookwood across the way, staring proudly at the back of the witness chair. His hand twitched for his wand, when he realized the bastard's direct eye-line led straight to the spot he knew Iris' scars to be, hidden underneath her suit. He wouldn't be smirking for long, not after sentencing, when the dementors showed up to take him away.

"Why is Fudge acting as Chief Warlock?" he asked Moody, realizing the Minister was directing the Wizengamot's questions to Iris and not Dumbledore.

"Dumbledore recused himself for this portion of the trial. Your girlfriend's on his payroll now, so he wants to avoid the appearance of any conflict," the Senior Auror explained gruffly, sounding
anything but pleased at this turn of events. "Barkin mad, if you ask me. Lupin spent six months chasing down the bastard, and one charge against him is her attempted murder. Her testimony is critical, and Fudge will surely find a way to fuck it up."

"Hasn't Fudge been a member of the Wizengamot since before he became Minister? He should have an understanding of how the proceedings work." It wasn't that he entirely disagreed with Moody's assessment. He would certainly prefer Dumbledore, or even Madam Bones, handle Iris' questioning. They would be sensitive to the difficulty of the subject matter, and only seek out the needed information. Still, Fudge had served on the Wizengamot long enough to know how to obtain witness testimony.

"There's a reason the Chief Warlock position isn't typically held by the Minister, Snape," Moody lectured, and he tried not to roll his eyes. He didn't need a second year History of Magic course right now. "He is first and foremost a politician. Everyone on that Court has their own agenda, but no one more so than the Minister himself."

Turning away from Moody, he focused on Iris, who was in the midst of providing a lengthy, detailed account of the six month manhunt, which led to the capture and arrest of Augustus Rookwood. She was poised and collected throughout her entire testimony, not so much as sparing a glance towards the man who'd ended her career.

"Thank you, Professor," the Minister acknowledged, when Iris finished her recap of events. He was proud of her. She looked and sounded as confident as ever. She handled herself brilliantly, like he knew she would. "I think we've heard all we needed to, and we have your report on file for further review. We appreciate your-"

"Hem-Hem," a squeaky fake cough interrupted the Minister's dismissal.

Fudge frowned, but politely turned to a toadish looking woman, with the bright pink collar of a jumper sticking out of her judicial robes. "Madam Undersecretary?"

"Minister," she smiled too sweetly in a disturbingly high pitched voice. "If I may, I have some additional questions for the witness."

"Additional…?" Fudge stuttered confused, before nodding his agreement. "Yes, of course, Madam Undersecretary. I yield the floor to you."

Fudge certainly appeared dumbfounded, at first glance; however, the timing was so oddly suspicious he couldn't help but feel this exchange was preplanned. "Is this typical?" He was no expert, but, from what he knew, Aurors filed excruciatingly long and detailed reports for every case opened and every arrest made. Short of a procedural deviation or evidence concerns, which were usually raised by the defendant's representative, Auror testimony was ordinarily more of a formality. The fact that Rookwood's representative hadn't requested the opportunity to cross-examine Iris indicated, to him anyway, that there wasn't much in Iris' report to be questioned.

"Not from the Undersecretary," Moody answered, confirming this was unusual. "But, I told you - everyone has an agenda, and Umbridge is as backstabbing as they come."

"Ms. Lupin," she started.

"Professor," he corrected in a mutter under his breath. Surprisingly, given his distain for Iris' career change, Moody grunted an agreement.

"If I might interrupt for a brief moment, Minister," Dumbledore cut in casually, with a raised finger.
"For the sake of the Court records, we should be referring to Professor Lupin by her proper title."

He grinned inwardly, at the Undersecretary's frozenly polite features twitching as if trying to keep frustration from visibly seeping in. Moody was right. Umbridge had an agenda. Only no one was playing along with her.

"Yes, that is correct," Fudge nodded, turning to address his Undersecretary. "Madam Undersecretary, if you could please address the witness as Professor Lupin going forward?"

"Of course, Minister. My apologies, Professor."

While he couldn't see her, he was fairly certain Iris was offering Umbridge a smile that would tell the toadish woman just where she could take her apology and shove it. "I'm still getting used to the title myself, Madam Undersecretary. It's of no concern."

"Thank you, Professor," Umbridge acknowledged. "Now, as I was saying, after reviewing several reports outlining the six months leading to the defendant's arrest, I happened to notice the owl requesting you report to the Ministry this past February was not sent to your home address?"

He leaned forward in his seat. He didn't need to attend trials on a regular basis to know this line of questioning wasn't normal.

"It was not," Iris confirmed. He could see her tilt her head slightly to the right. She was trying to gage where Umbridge was going with her questions. "I wasn't home at the time."

"Yes. I gathered that," Umbridge said with a plastic smile, practically gritting the words out through her teeth. "My question, Professor, is where were you?"

"Excuse me?" Iris exclaimed. While she kept a calm enough posture and body language, he could hear tension coating her words. This wouldn't end well for Umbridge. If he'd learned one thing in all the years he'd know her, it was you didn't challenge Iris unless you damn well knew you had a leg to stand on.

"Where were you at the time you reported for duty?"

"Forgive me, Madam Undersecretary, but I don't see how that's relevant." That was Iris code for: I'm giving you one last chance to walk away.

"I must second that notion, Minister," Madam Amelia Bones piped up, drawing all eyes in the room to her. "This Court does not typically concern itself with the whereabouts of its Aurors when off duty. They are entitled to the same privacy as any other Ministry employee."

"Please tell me she wasn't at your place," Moody grunted in his ear, so he didn't hear the rest of Madam Bones' objection.

"How is that relevant?" he defended, getting the feeling admitting to it wouldn't look good for either of them. While there were technically no rules against it, Iris continuing to associate with a Death Eater, pardoned or not, during her time as an Auror wouldn't be perceived in a positive light.

"It isn't," Moody admitted. "Though, if someone were determined enough, they could make the argument that it calls her objectivity into question."

"That's absurd." He shouldn't have come. He hadn't truly thought this through, only thinking of supporting Iris. Whatever agenda she had, Umbridge believed targeting his and Iris' relationship was a step to getting there. If Umbridge got too far in her questioning, his presence in the courtroom
could be damaging.

"Never said it wasn't."

"I would have to object, Minister," he heard Umbridge's grating voice cut off a Wizengamot member agreeing with Madam Bones' assessment. "Professor Lupin reported for duty in the wee hours of the morning. While I'm sure the Professor has a perfectly reasonable explanation for not being home at such an hour, I still find it prudent to have on record that the International Team's Lead Auror was not reporting for duty intoxicated from being at a pub all evening."

If it wasn't obvious Umbridge had it out for Iris before, the condescending tone her objection took made it abundantly clear. Rookwood's representative looked between the Wizengamot officials in shock. Given the evidence against his defendant, he suspected the man thought the case lost before it began. Rookwood, himself, was beaming, making his toes curl. All the reporters sat on the edge of their seats, quills poised and ready.

"The Undersecretary raises a valid point, Madam Bones," Fudge conceded. "The International Team is a very unique case. They must be ready to be called upon at a moment's notice, and sobriety potions are not always effective."

Madam Bones shot the witness chair a look, shaking her head inconspicuously, telling him Iris had been about to voice an objection of her own. It would seem some members of the Wizengamot were now catching onto Umbridge's agenda. "I would remind the court that, upon being appointed Lead Auror, Professor Lupin put policies in place to address those concerns," Madam Bones countered. "The International Team is required to be entirely sober, and each member, including Professor Lupin, are checked upon reporting to their Headquarters."

"Then, she should have no issue telling us where she was," Umbridge snapped, some frustration at being countermanded poking through.

When that sent the Wizengamot officials into another bout of arguing amongst themselves, he turned to Moody. "Why is she targeting Iris? She's retired."

Moody sighed beside him in exasperation. "Let me break it down for you, Professor," the Senior Auror started with a patronizing tone. "Lupin no longer works for the Ministry. Therefore, her reputation is no longer their reputation. If the current regime has issues with the International Team that they want to address, the former Lead Auror makes an excellent target."

"Best we can hope for is: whatever issues Fudge's Undersecretary has doesn't allow this bastard to walk," Moody muttered in a huff.

"The evidence against Rookwood is overwhelming," he reminded, trying not to roll his eyes at Moody's dramatics. "The Wizengamot isn't about to pardon him for some political agenda."

"Merlin, you sound just like your girlfriend."

"I consider that a compliment," he said, not letting the Senior Auror get under his skin. Like Iris said before Court, he wasn't worth it. "Though, it's one I'm entirely unworthy of."

"Yeah, you would," Moody snorted. "What you don't realize is Iris' biggest flaw has always been that she places to much value on justice. She believes guilt should be unquestionable. That innocence imprisoned is far more heinous than the guilty walking free."

"That's a flaw?"
"It's an idealism that doesn't lend well towards a system where the legislators are the same people doling out justice," Moody explained, admittedly making some sense. "Trials that appear before the Wizengamot are just as much political as they are judicial."

He never got a chance to respond, as Iris' voice cut through the bickering Wizengamot, apparently having decided she'd had enough of people talking for her. "I was at a man's house having sex." The entire courtroom instantly fell silent, all eyes snapping to her. His jaw dropped, and he noticed Moody's knuckles were white where he gripped his walking stick. Rita Skeeter looked like she'd just been handed a Christmas present. "That does occasionally happen, when you're voted Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelorette."

Laughter rippled through the Wizengamot's bench, and he suddenly realized Iris wasn't completely out of her mind. In fact, she knew exactly what she was doing.

She'd chosen her words very carefully. She was answering Umbridge's irrelevant and inappropriate questions, like a cooperative witness, while leaving out the ammunition the Undersecretary was looking for to carry this questioning further. While it may not seem like it, I was at a man's house was a drastically different answer than I was at Severus Snape's house. Unless Umbridge wanted to admit to all her peers, and the press, that she'd already known Iris had been at his house, there would be no follow up question. At least, not on this particular target.

Iris was still seated calmly in the witness chair, legs crossed, looking ready to take on any question Umbridge threw next. She was controlling the narrative, and, if she could keep that up, the only person who would be looking the part of a fool at the end of this would be the Undersecretary herself.

"Ah, Professor Lupin, this Court will surely miss your unique forms of testimony," Fudge commented.

"Apologies, Minister. Couldn't help myself," Iris grinned. "Obviously the Ministry has record of the address my owl was sent to. So, I would request, if the Court truly deems it relevant to know with whom I spent the evening, that they refer to the Ministry's property records outside of Court. I have students who read the Daily Prophet, and there are some aspects of my life I don't feel them pertinent to."

"I… I don't feel the court will find that information necessary," Fudge stuttered, appearing flustered that the topic of sex was still being discussed in his courtroom. "But, let the record reflect, I would, of course, honor such a request. Now, if that's everything, Madam Undersecretary?"

"Just a few additional matters, Minister." It hadn't reached the point of blatantly obvious, but he could tell Umbridge was irked her first attempt to discredit Iris had failed. She would really be gunning for Iris now. "Professor, at the time of the confrontation with Unspeakable Rookwood, you were with an Auror Shin Lang, who doesn't not appear to be a member of the International Team?"

So, Rookwood's still worthy of his Unspeakable title, but you couldn't remember to call Iris Professor?

"That is correct, Madam Undersecretary," Iris nodded, seeming unfazed at having to answer a question easily confirmed by her report. "Hitwizard Hunter Simmons was injured in an unrelated confrontation with Muggle authorities, while we were in Malaysia. I go into extensive detail, with regards to that incident in my report."

"Hitwizard Simmons' injuries were not life threatening, but were substantial enough I sent him back to Britain for medical treatment," she continued. "The Chinese Auror Office was kind enough to
lend us Auror Lang for the duration of the manhunt. Anyone here who's ever met Hunter probably knows that was certainly a *personality* upgrade."

There were murmurs of agreement, along with several chuckles, at Iris' last comment. The Wizengamot was still on her side. Umbridge, however, didn't seem ready to give up her ridiculous quest.

"You weren't concerned about introducing a new Auror into the team's dynamic, midway through a manhunt?"

"We've worked with Auror Lang on several occasions previously, as it's common for us to interact with and utilize Aurors of the country we're working in at the time," Iris answered, insuring to add, "Auror Lang's performance was exemplary for the entire time he was with us. My only regret is the operation continued for an additional three months, keeping Auror Lang away from his family and responsibilities much longer than anticipated."

"Your entire team wasn't with you at the time of Unspeakable Rookwood's arrest," Umbridge recounted, switching topics. Obviously she realized she was getting no where with the Auror Lang questions. "Remind me again why that was?"

"We had contradictory evidence pointing us to Unspeakable Rookwood being in several potential locations. Given the locations were so widespread, I made the decision to split the team and conquer them all concurrently."

"You don't feel that put you at a disadvantage?"

"We successfully apprehended Unspeakable Rookwood alive, and he's able to stand trial."

"At the cost of the International Team losing it's Lead Auror and the British Ministry losing one of its best."

He could see the tension returning to Iris' shoulders. She was reaching her tolerance limit for Umbridge's questioning. He'd been afraid something like this might happen - that someone would insinuate decisions she'd made might have contributed to the end of her career. Iris was not easy to beat in a duel. He should know. He was one of the few people who'd managed to do so.

"I have full confidence that, the newly appointed, Lead Auror Marcus Ward will be able to lead the International Team with as much success as I did."

"You do?" *Shit.* Umbridge may have just managed to turn the conversation back in her favor. Iris didn't react well to anyone questioning the competency or proficiency of her team. Her temper would begin to take hold, affecting her judgement and carefully crafted answers.

"I'm not certain I understand what you're asking, Madam Undersecretary?" Asking for clarification was good. It kept the focus on Umbridge, even if Iris hadn't asked it in the most *polite* tone.

"It's just that the International Team's members are very, shall we say, unconventional," Umbridge with a faux innocence. She knew exactly what she was doing. "Do you feel that not having as many combat-strong Aurors as previous teams contributed to the events that took place in Cairo last July?"

*Do not snap, Iris,* he prayed. If she went off on the Undersecretary that would be every paper's front page story tomorrow, not Rookwood's trial.

Iris took a slow, deep breath, then turned her attention to Fudge. "I'm sorry, Minister," she addressed
with a surprisingly calm demeanor. "I realize it's been nearly a year since I last testified before the Wizengamot. However, I'm not typically interrogated on personnel decisions I made five years prior, all of which were approved by both my Head Auror and the International Confederation of Wizards."

"You'll have to excuse my Undersecretary, Professor. This is her first criminal trial since being appointed to the Wizengamot. She's still getting her feet wet," Fudge apologized, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The Minister was, hopefully, putting an end to Umbridge's questioning. "I believe we've gathered all the relevant information we need from you for the sake of this trial. If no one else on the Court has any objection, we've taken up enough of Professor Lupin's time."

No one disagreed.

"The witness is relieved."

Across the desk from her, she noticed Scrimgeour pinching the bridge of his nose. They'd both been sitting in his office, for the better part of a half hour now, listening to Alastor go off on a tirade about her testimony that morning. Kingsley and Severus kept attempting to cut in and calm him down, with little success. She could tell Scrimgeour was growing weary of the yelling that had ensued between the three men since leaving the trial room.

"No, Shacklebolt," she heard Alastor growl, cutting off, yet another, one of Kingsley's attempts to placate him. "The issue is Rookwood could fucking walk, because Lupin couldn't keep her hand out of her former Death Eater of a fiancé's trousers."

"Talk about her like that again, and I'll-" Sev started to defend, stepping towards Alastor, only for Kingsley to hold him back.

"You're going to threaten an Auror, Snape?" Alastor snapped. "I'll-"

"Enough," Scrimgeour finally spoke up in his calm monotone, and all eyes flew to him. Like Albus, he rarely needed to raise his voice to be heard. "There is only one person in this room who's voice has the right to be at a headache-inducing volume right now, and it is not the three of you."

The boys all fell silent, Alastor grudgingly so.

"Thank you," Scrimgeour acknowledged. "Now, if you would be so kind as to all step out of my office, I would prefer to speak with Lupin alone."

Severus glanced over at her hesitantly. She nodded, telling him she would be fine, and he filed out of the office. Kingsley followed close behind, dragging Alastor by the coat along with him.

Once the door was firmly shut, Scrimgeour turned back to her with a sigh. "I would apologize for Alastor, but I fear you know him well enough to know my usual line that he won't repeat this behavior again is more of a hopeful wish than an actual promise."

"It's fine," she assured, knowing however hard it was to be Alastor's colleague and friend, it must be a thousand times more difficult to be his boss.

"For what it's worth, he's been like this with everyone," Scrimgeour added. "His paranoia seems to be growing by the day. I'm afraid he and I are going to have to discuss a more permanent retirement sooner than later."
"That will be a fun conversation." She didn't envy Scrimgeour one bit.

"Probably more fun than Court was for you this morning," he admitted. "The Undersecretary's questioning was entirely inappropriate for a criminal proceeding."

"The question I'm most curious about is whether she was acting alone or under the direction of the Minister." Fudge had seemed genuinely flustered by Umbridge's questioning; however, it was hard to imagine his Undersecretary going so off script, in front of the entire Wizengamot, without the Minister's approval. If Fudge did approve Umbridge's questioning, then there could be something bigger at play and her team could be right in the thick of it.

"As am I," Scrimgeour agreed. "I will be discussing the matter with the Minister in more detail, once the trial reaches a conclusion." That was good. Scrimgeour knew Fudge better than she did. He would be able to determine what, if any, agenda The Minister had, in regards to the International Auror Team.

"While I do not believe it requires further discussion, it would be beneficial to have all the facts," Scrimgeour continued. "So, pardon me for asking, but how long was it going on?"

She grinned. "It?" Was he, a grown man, really going to skirt around saying the word sex?

"Look at me like that all you want, Lupin," he countered, with a small half smirk. "This office is my personal oasis. We are not brining such a word into it."

"Fine," she laughed. "It started the night I lost Harry's custody hearing. It never evolved into anything more than what was discussed in Court until I began working at Hogwarts."

"As I expected," Scrimgeour nodded, sounding completely unsurprised.

"You knew?" she exclaimed, accidentally knocking his pencil cup a few inches to the left in her shock. She quickly fixed it, under his intense glare. Scrimgeour kept his office immaculate, and every item had a specific place. He did not appreciate people moving his things. "You knew this whole time?"

"I realize the Head Auror position is largely political desk work, but, to get here, I had to once be a proper Auror," he reminded with a pointed look.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"What my Aurors do off duty, and whom with, is of little concern to me unless it comes to affect their work," he explained. "Despite what the Undersecretary intended to imply, your objectivity and job performance were never negatively impacted, because you happened to still be in love with your former fiancé."

"I wouldn't say I was still in love with him." Sure, they were working their way back towards that now, but back then?

Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow skeptically. "I've been happily married for over twenty years, Lupin. I'm more than capable of recognizing the symptoms."

"Hold on," she practically choked. "You're married?"

He leaned back in his chair, wearing, perhaps, the largest smirk she'd ever seen on the man. "I must admit, this is a fun role reversal. Being the one to startle you speechless, for once."
"You never mentioned you were married."

"You never asked."

"All the times I asked if you had any weekend plans, and you said 'just reading a good book on my porch, Lupin,' you never once finished that sentence with 'at the home...I share...with my wife.'"

"If you must know, I married a lovely muggle, Berenice," Scrimgeour elaborated, still seeming to take great pleasure in her gaping at him like a fish. "Given the political climate when I started working for the Ministry, I elected to keep my personal life quiet and separate from my professional one. I suppose, even after The War, it became a habit I never thought to change."

"I'm sorry," she apologized, completely serious. "I know secrets like that can weigh on you. Even today, there's only so many people I can safely talk to about Remus."

"One day in the future, a child bitten by a werewolf will be seen as a victim not a monster," Scrimgeour sighed. "But, I fear, it won't be during our lifetime." He was probably right. The Wizarding World had come a long way, but their treatment of werewolves, half breeds, and magical creatures as a whole was still decades behind where it should be.

She fell quiet for a time, the heavy weight of the day finally catching up with her. "Did I make the wrong call?" she asked, a moment later, leaning forward in her seat to rub a hand over her eyes.

"What?"

"Was splitting up the team a bad call?" If she fucked up, Scrimgeour would know, and he wouldn't hesitate to tell her.

"Lupin, you have thirteen years of Auror experience, not to mention the additional schooling you received in the Academy," he started, looking bewildered that she felt the need to ask. "Are you really going to let a politician, with no concept of how this job works, make you second guess decisions you know to be right?"

"She's not the first person to question my personnel appointments," she countered. "The Confederation didn't want to approve my chosen team, and probably wouldn't have, if you hadn't gone to bat for me."

When she was appointed, the International Confederation of Wizards allowed her the opportunity to assemble her own team. Historically, most Lead Aurors of the International Team looked for and hired the most combat trained Aurors in the world. She took a different approach, scouring every Auror department on the map to find individuals with unique skill sets, in the hopes of creating a diversified team that could approach operations from all angles.

Finding Marcus, her second in command, had been a godsend. Not only was he remarkably gifted in dueling and combat, but he also studied both muggle and wizarding history as a hobby, making him invaluable at international relations. Asha was next. She attended Uagadou School of Magic in Uganda, which specialized in teaching wandless magic. Sasha started off his career as a Healer, before entering into the Russian Auror Academy, providing them medical expertise in the field. Aurelié and Jules were a pair of sibling and Beauxbatons graduates. Aurelié was nearly as skilled in Alchemy and Potions as Severus. Jules tinkered with muggle artifacts on a level that rivaled Arthur Weasley, and, over the years, had equipped the International Team with gear and tech combining both muggle and magical elements. His inventions helped make the team more efficient at their jobs, while also allowing them to operate in the muggle world without waving their wands about and drawing unwanted attention to themselves.
Rounding out her team, she'd chosen to keep Maverick, one of Walkin's hires, for his unmatched skill in combat - a decision she would come to regret. When Maverick turned on them all, nearly killing half her team in the process, she'd replaced him with Sven, a Drumstang graduate, who was also skilled in combat, but had a much warmer personality and a, surprisingly useful, passion for magizoology.

Despite doing exactly as asked, in completely revamping the International Team, the Confederation initially hadn't been impressed by her hiring decisions. If Scrimgeour hadn't backed her up and offered his full support, as Head Auror of one of the most well respected Auror departments in the world, her time as Lead Auror probably would've been very short lived.

"What people tend not to understand is the International Auror Team is a very different animal," Scrimgeour assessed. "You report, not to one government, but a Confederation comprised of representatives from every Wizarding Government in the world, who agree on virtually nothing. You have to know and abide by International Laws, both Muggle and Wizarding. You tend to operate more in the Muggle World than a typical Auror, which brings about a whole host of issues. On top of all that, you're handling the most complex, advanced, and dangerous cases of any Auror Department in the world."

"It takes a very unique group of individuals to navigate those murky waters, and you saw that in a way no one else ever had," he continued. "That unconventional thinking is why I approved your team. Frankly, it's why I admitted you to the Academy in the first place. It's why I assigned you to Investigations after you graduated. It's why, when the Confederation came looking for applicants for an opening on the International Team, the only name that came to mind was yours. It's why, nearly four months later, I'm still searching for a replacement. You can fit most Aurors in a neat little box, but with you? It's like you don't even know there's supposed to be a box."

She sat there speechless. She hadn't realized the unfathomable amount of faith he'd, apparently, always had in her. His opinion meant the world to her, having mentored her since her Academy days. She'd strived to be an Auror Scrimgeour could be proud of, soaking up all the knowledge and experience he had to offer and passing it along to her team. She hoped they would carry it forward.

Realizing there were no words to truly express how much the years she spent serving in his department meant to her, she thanked him in the best way she could. "If you can wait three years, I think I might have found someone to fill my shoes."

"That new recruit Kingsley has you looking into?"

"Nymphadora Tonks," she confirmed. "I'm still talking to a few people, but from what I gather, she'll probably be as much a headache as I was."

Scrimgeour chuckled at that. "I look forward to hearing more about her, then," he grinned. "For now, however, I suggest you go rescue Severus from Alastor."

She laughed, rising from her chair, before sobering up. "Thank you, Sir," she told him seriously. "For everything."

"The pleasure was mine, Lupin."

With a nod, she started towards his door. She'd just reached out to turn the handle, when Scrimgeour called out, "It wasn't your fault, you know?"

She froze. Were they really going to do this now? Hand shaking, she shoved it in her trouser pocket, and slowly turned back around. "I should have seen it coming."
"Both Anne and Frank were experienced Aurors, and neither had any personal connection to the Lestrange case," Scrimgeour objected sternly, with a shake of his head. "If there'd been warning signs, they would've seen them."

"I-"

"Some cases go south, and there's nothing you can do to stop it," he cut in, not giving her time to protest.

"Iris," he added, her jaw practically dropping at his use of her first name. "You are, unquestionably, one of the greatest Aurors to come through this office. I was honored to have you in my department, and there is no decision you made or order you gave that I wouldn't stand behind one hundred percent. Remember that for me."

"Yes, Sir."

"Are you still seeing that muggle doctor?"

She hesitated, before admitting, "It's been a while." On Scrimgeour's advisement, which was really more of an order, she saw a muggle psychologist a few times, after being tortured by Crouch. She spent her sessions pretending to be a police detective who'd been substantially wounded in a gunfight. She hadn't, however, been back to see him since joining the International Team.

"As someone who cares a lot about you, I think you should make another appointment."

"I'll consider it," she promised.

"Good," he nodded, seeming to accept that. "I don't want you to give the Rookwood Trial a second thought. You have more than earned the right to walk away and move on with your life."

Catching a glimpse of Severus waiting for her outside Scrimgeour's office, she smiled softly. "I think I'm starting to."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!