Summary

Four years have passed since the Final Battle, and Harry is adjusting well. At least, he thinks he is. Things aren't perfect, and he’s become a recluse in the last year and a half, but he's happy. That is, until a nosebleed leads to a talk about family, and inspires an unshakable desire to belong.

Suddenly, Harry wants to come from somewhere, anywhere. He follows a trail way down to the last house on Spinner’s End—a lost child, unsure of what he’ll find.

Notes

Harry remembers blood exists.
"Ginny, no!"

Harry fell against the counter in side-splitting laughter. Breakfast sizzled in the pan beside him. Ginny grinned widely, cheeks dimpling, as Harry clutched his side, wheezing.

"I'm not wrong! Ron flies on jealousy, point blank period. He holds on to his broom," she ranted, clutching an imaginary broom, "like it'll run off with the ground if he doesn't stop it," she snarked over his shoulder.

Harry choked and took the pan off the stove before he burned the eggs. She wasn't wrong, he'd just never heard it said that way.

"If he named his broom 'Hermione' and the ground 'any wizard ever,' he'd fly so high, he'd be the first wizard on the moon."

The pair had recently begun their time of domestic bliss in the ever-charming Grimmauld Place. Two months earlier, Ginny decided she needed a break from public living, and joined her beau in shared solitude. Prophet hounds and Welsh paparazzi swarmed the Burrow during the World Cup. When her preferring cinnamon toothpaste over mint made the news, she kissed her folks goodbye and fled in the dead of night.

"He thinks we'd forget her masters day, when he went after that German alchemist. What man trees another man?! They had to float him down! Absolutely bonkers, Ron is!"

"H-he's," Harry gasped, wiping away a tear. He pulled off a shaky Hermione impression, and said, voice high and trembling, "He's p-p-passionate! He's, he's a protector!"

"He's a prat!" They erupted into giggles over toast that'd ages ago gone cold.

The constant harassment barely slowed at the Burrow, even now boasting a staff of round-the-clock lurkers for the off-season. Her parents hadn't a moment of rest since she was scouted the year before. Doubly so since she was recognized in June as the 2001 Quidditch League rookie of the year. She'd brought the Harpies to the knock-outs over the Welsh nationals. Harry and the Weasleys had stood by decked in her team colors, screaming themselves hoarse.

But this was on top of being the "girl of the Boy-Who-Lived," "World Cup star hopeful," the alleged mentee of the team's piratical captain Gwenog Jones, and Witch Weekly's "Hottest Harpy."

One night, Ginny vented to the point of a few, frustrated tears that she couldn't breathe. It should be great, she complained, to have all that recognition. But the witch felt claustrophobic and watched and measured constantly.

Harry understood completely, and suggested she needed a place of her own, preferably one with hulking great gargoyles and wrought-iron gates where the hexes had hexes. He loved that she packed her things that night and moved in. With some new wards and Harry's willpower, Number Twelve remained a veritable cloister. Other Order members passed through occasionally, but they were largely left on their own.

Usually dark and fairly quiet, save for a few suspicious knocks in the night, it was a fair place to land for a star player and a savior on sabbatical.

"You're laughing because you know I'm right! I'm right, dammit!" Harry had his back to the table
she sat on, but broke again at her pointed titters. "Of all my brothers you could've chosen, you picked him! If it wasn't for me, Harry, I'd entirely doubt your taste in Weasleys."

"Oi!," he objected with a sigh. He turned off the flame before he burned the whole house down. The eggs already had a healthy crunch to them. Merlin, he'd never prove he can cook at this rate.

"Knock it off, cork it! Every morning it's like this! Please, I'm begging you! I'll never look at Ron again without losing it!"

Now Ginny laughed maniacally, the spirit of Fred Weasley jumping out of her. She dissolved into giggles when he turned to her, flushed and faux-betrayed.

The two had brought light and warmth into Grimmauld Place. Harry felt it was Ginny's doing, with her life of coming up where family dressed the windows and covered the floors.

Even though Arthur soothed and Molly tutted, saying she could always come home, the couple fared rather well two months in. He watched her laugh herself tomato red. Another bit of loneliness flaked off of his freshly exhumed core. It had been a lot, haunting his own house, rattling his own cage. Sometimes he passed into Sirius' bitter restlessness wandering the halls. Ginny dissolved all that.

He needed her. If Molly Weasley was a lit hearth, Ginny was a campfire. She'd set up in any room, roaring and steady, a boon to survivors navigating the wild. Some nights, overcome with sharing a bed with her for the first time, he'd press his hands flat against her stomach and feel her shiver.

God, he loved her—which was why he heard static when he properly saw her face, smeared with bright, red blood.

Harry missed the bleeding at first because her face was already red. But then he rushed to her, grabbing her by the shoulders. She stared at him dizzily, high from humor.

"Heh, wh—what's up, what's wrong?" she asked, moving from jovial to concerned. Blood dribbled from her nose, over her mouth and onto her sleep shirt—an old Spiderman t-shirt she wore because she liked the colors.

As he got closer, he smelled the tang of copper and his stomach turned.

"You're bleeding!" This he might have shouted, as she flinched and pushed him off. She didn't like being manhandled.

"What are y—oh, shite," it was on her teeth. She ran her tongue along her top lip and cursed again. "Yeah, no, calm down," his girlfriend waved him away dismissively and pinched her nose.

She pointed past him to the counter with the other hand, bouncing impatiently. "This is bloody embarrassing. Hand me that rag?"

"But, what's happening! Are you okay!?" Harry was panicking. He knew he was, but couldn't control it. He'd only seen her bleed during a team practice, or after a game of Wizarding Wheezes—or during the battle. This came out of nowhere.

He couldn't get over the smell. He thought about her tasting it and heaved.

"The rag, Harry, please. It's getting all over my hands."

He nodded, left, and came back with the hand towel he used to wipe down the pans. The whiff of
cooked egg and grease didn't sit well over the smell of blood, but at least it centered him. It was breakfast, on a Monday morning. These were breakfast smells.

His palms sweat as he braced himself on her thighs and took a deep breath through his mouth. Ginny watched him, showing him the eggy rag.

"Can you clean it?," she asked in a nasally voice, still holding her nose. Her fingers were, in fact, becoming sticky with red, but if he squinted, it looked like paint.

His hands felt weak as he pulled his wand from his back pocket. Harry tugged the rag toward him by the corner and muttered a cleaning charm. Harry shot a little wide and cleaned the hand holding it, too. He looked at the clean and familiar calluses, and leveled out even more.

"Just breathe," Ginny coached, thanking him. She put the cloth to her face.

"Yeah...er, yeah, I'm sorry, just, are you okay?," he replied, bringing a hand up to her cheek. This she allowed, although she flushed terribly. "Can I…?"

"Yeah, go ahead," she gave him the rag, looking up while he brought it up to her face. "Careful. It'll stop soon, just—yeah, just hold it while I can clean myself up."

Harry wiggled the wand still in his hand, now held alongside the rag. Ginny ignored him while she charmed away the blood from everywhere but the nose, which continued to bleed. He figured he'd better get to it and pinched it closed while she worked. It took a couple tries to clean the shirt, as blood rarely picked up in one go.

He swallowed thickly, feeling the rag give into wetness. The nosebleed had started soaking through the cotton cloth.

"Ginny…," he said, with a tone of tense warning.

"Yeah, I know, I got it. You're doing good, just breathe through it."

He pulled in air and held it, managing the first half of breathing and losing it in the second. His chest felt tight and his stomach swirled down to his socks. Harry put his wand away, not fully trusting himself with it. Something had to be wrong, and he didn't want to make it worse.

"It's fine, I know you don't like blood, c'mere."

His girlfriend took the rag from him and pushed him to arm's length. Once her fingers left his chest, he sprung back and held her freckled face in both hands. She answered with an exasperated huff.

"I'm fine, Harry."

"You're bleeding. A lot."

"Yes, and I'm fine. It's just a nosebleed, I won't die," she paused then, seeing him turn grey. "I take it back. That was bad word choice. Forgot I said that, or anything. Okay? I never said 'die.'"

"Okay, will do. Forgetting."

Harry didn't succeed, and so worked to suppress his now salient concern that Ginny Weasley, his girlfriend, his partner, the light of his life, was dying.

He knew it was just a nosebleed, and on an inaccessible plane of good sense, he knew she was probably fine. But sudden nosebleeds, and blood in general, colored most of Harry's most terrifying
experiences. And now that he was safe, largely sane, and blindingly happy, terror cut stronger and faster than it ever had before.

"Harry, you're smushing me," and he had been. He had mashed Ginny's annoyed face between his sweaty, shaking hands. She looked rather puggish, actually.

"I love you, but this feels disgusting. Please let me go."

"I…," he tried. Nope, he couldn't. "I don't think I can, sorry."

Ginny sighed, propped the elbow of her rag holding arm onto his shoulder, and resigned herself to being clammily cradled. She levitated the plate of eggs to her lap, and summoned a fork from an out-of-sight drawer. With her free hand, she crunched down on the eggs with stubborn determination.

Harry readjusted to give her room to eat, pausing when she made eye contact. Anxious green gave way to stoic brown.

"Should I explain?," she asked through a mouthful.

"When you get a chance, yeah."

"So, it runs in your family?"

They moved upstairs after she convinced Harry to settle for holding hands. Her nose bled itself dry, at which point she led him upstairs complaining about the need for a shower. Harry relaxed to the shower going and Ginny humming tunelessly.

The water squeaked off, and he repeated his question through the door. He was answered by the door opening to his girlfriend's athletic silhouette, cloaked in cinnamon scented steam. Lengths of copper hair were raked back from her face and clung to the skin of her freckle-painted neck and shoulders.

Whatever wobbliness he had left was replaced by the feeling of home.

"Yeah," Ginny shrugged, wrapping herself in a giant, embroidered towel. The fair hair on her legs was damp and soapy, having escaped a proper rinse. Ginny always rushed washing, a holdover from training camp, Hogwarts, and seven kids to a bathroom at the Burrow.

"Why didn't I know about this?," he asked, lying on the bed with his chin on his fist. Harry watched her notice her soapy legs and bend down to dry them.

Being so close to her still threw him. It wasn't like his time in the tent, being within spitting distance of Ron and Hermione. He reeled at wanting to know a person this way and then just, doing it. Being allowed that close came with realizing how much he desired closeness. And the wanting, it came as a shock every time, without fail.

Ginny answered him with another shrug. "We all get them—the kids, I mean. Mum says it's from her side, although according to her, once she got pregnant with Bill, her nose stopped bleeding, 'like most everything else.'"

They both cringed at the imagery. Harry could practically hear Molly's unabashed, "Oh, pish, you!" Bravely, he forged on.
"Did she ever tell you why it happens? I've never seen Ron or George carry on like that. Was a faucet, basically!"

Ginny, who had begun drying her hair, dropped her gaze. Regretfully, he felt the name coming.

"Fred had them a lot," she said, matter-of-factly. She was looking at the bath rug, but seemed otherwise unfazed by talk of her late brother. Ginny was the only Weasley to manage that.

"George said once that it's how they came up with the Skiving Snackboxes. That's why they started with Nosebleed Nougats, then the spewing and fever stuff. Fred kept getting sent down to Pomfrey to get cleaned up, and it was pretty much the only time he didn't lose points while conscious and upright."

Harry coughed, and then let out a quiet chuckle. Ginny smiled, looking up again. It was going on four years since the end of, well, everything, and despite the hurts they all harbored, they were healing. People were getting easier to remember. He couldn't ask for much more.

"Anyway, Mum explained a few times when we were little," Ginny finished. "S'no biggie."

Harry sat up from his prone position, swinging his feet onto the floor. She walked out of the bathroom, head tilted to one side like she was listening to old, half-remembered stories. He reached out, wanting to touch her hair.

She got close to the bed, towel hitting the bedspread. There she grinned, and batted his hands away.

"That's enough touching from you today," and she plopped next to him on the bed. Its ancient springs groaned in protest.

She used his wand to float over underwear from the dresser. It only made it halfway, of course, before losing its will and fluttering to the floor in a swan song of striped cotton.

Harry nearly didn't blush while picking them up and handing them to her. Apparently, this was charming enough to earn him a peck on the lips.

"Ahem," he pulled on his fringe, thinking it might be time for a shower himself.

Sharing looks with Ginny and feeling a bit boyish, he ducked into the bathroom with a nervous grin. The Harpy star hopeful looked decidedly as if 'no touching' did not apply to her. And well, he had his virtue to protect.

"Harry Potter, running away from his girlfriend," he was teased through the quickly closing door.

"So, what did your mother say about you all gushing rivers from your noses? After it being genetic and before the bit about her, erm, cycles?"

"Crafty, mood-killing bastard," came from the bedroom. Then a sigh. "You won't slip away forever!"

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled, searching the bathroom for his things.

The ensuite bath for the bedroom they'd chosen was all dark olive tile, a white porcelain clawfoot tub, and tarnished silver fixtures. Harry pulled his shower caddy from a wet nook in the wall, frowning at the muddy green tile, still thinking it ugly.
They had attempted to redo the bathroom in blues, yellows, and golds to no avail. Eventually, it reverted back to the green. The only color that took was red, but the Gryffindor scarlet they chose curdled to a clotted, scab brown. So, they figured it was best to leave the decor be.

He found his shave kit, his toothbrush, and was banging around for a new bar of soap, when he caught his reflection in the mirror.

The mirror was why they'd picked this room specifically. The mirrors in Grimmauld Place were a tricky business. Here there was no ghoulish version of himself reflecting in it, grey-skinned and rotting, or a ghost standing behind him, cursing his name. The mirror wasn't even enchanted to talk, or in the spirit of Number Twelve, hurl obscenities until he cursed it or fled in tears. It was a coveted find.

They found one Baroque framed mirror in the attic that showed maddening visions of one's own death and whispered that it was the user's fault. That one had been turned to face the wall and kicked until it broke, as therapy.

Meanwhile, this mirror simply did its job, reflecting what it saw: a Slytherin bathroom, a large white tub, and Harry. But as he took in his own reflection, turning his head to and from the vanity lights, he felt bereft.

Harry examined his bright green eyes, his mother's eyes, and reached up to muss his hair, dark as pitch and wild like his father's. He took in his short nose, his full mouth, his faded scar, all jagged and shiny. He palmed his chin and dragged the hand across the jaw.

Harry knew he resembled his parents, and their parents. He had seen pictures, the mirror of Erised, their actual ghosts, and he knew from those things that they were family. Not perfectly similar like people said, but definitely related.

Unwittingly, he started feeling out the nuances of his face while Ginny spoke on through the door. She had remembered some of the stories from her mother's side, the Prewetts, about nosebleeds.

"My dad's side, the Weasleys, gave us the red hair and the freckles, but my mum's side, the Prewetts, had lots of children, twins mostly. The story is, y'know, pureblood families don't tend to have a lot of kids, probably from years of cousins boffing each other."

"Chri—Ginny!" Harry turned from his reflection to gape at the bathroom door.

"What, I don't do it. That's families like the Malfoys. They're pretty sickly, and then the Crabbes and Goyles are thick, and the Blacks are absolutely nutters, although that could be the Dark magic.

"But even the Longbottoms, who have been Light for generations, rarely have multiple children. No judgement, it's just how it is. And like Neville, he isn't very magically strong except for in Herbology, which is like a family gift."

Harry heard her pause and the shuffling of fabric as she pulled a fresh shirt over her head.

"So, the Prewetts stick out quite a bit for being...let's say, prolific. And the in-joke is that, in order to push out that many kids, we're 'spread thin.' Like, if you notice, except for mum, none of us have very much spare anything."

He agreed that all of Ginny's brothers were tall and thin, except for Charlie who stoutly took after his mum. And Ginny herself, while toned from flying, was naturally very up-and-down. Harry folded his arms, unsure if he'd realized how versed she was on other families. Perhaps it was a pureblood thing, to know other people's bloodlines.
Harry wrestled with an urge to ask about the Potters. Ginny couldn't be his access to everything, but maybe...

"Hey, do you know if, er," he trailed off. No, he couldn't put that on her. "Yeah, you're all skinny."

Harry returned to his self-examination, settling around his chest. In the center of it was the thick, ropey knot of the Killing Curse scar. It didn't hurt, but was always cool to the touch. He moved on.

"But since when does being thin cause bleeding?"

"You know when you transfigure your socks bigger and bigger to fit," she sounded closer to the door, then farther away, "until they get too thin and your toes poke through? It's like that, but instead of toes, it's nose skin. It's really thin so it bleeds. We also bruise pretty spectacularly. I don't know if you've ever noticed."

He'd noticed bruising before, on her and her siblings after catching a Bludger to the back. But a sneaky Bludger could bruise anyone black and blue. This meant nothing in a world with bruise balm and dittany. He hadn't thought anything of it.

"Hermione might know a term for that," Harry suggested. "Since her parents are doctors."

"Teeth doctors, I thought?"

Harry shrugged and remembered she couldn't see him. He gave up staring at himself for now and finally prepared his bath, forgoing a shower. He had the sudden urge to soak instead of stand. He felt an awareness of his body, and how his arms hung, and how his joints slotted together, that he'd rather lose in the weightlessness of the water.

"That's...something," he offered, wincing at awkward he sounded. A right poet, he was. The rush of cold water from the tap covered his mistake. He shouted, "Thanks for telling me! I had no idea about that family stuff."

" Didn't your family ever—ah, damn. Sorry, Harry."

Harry jumped, surprised. She usually didn't slip like that, forgetting he hadn't anyone to tell him about himself. Yes, he had the Dursleys, in the loosest definitions of "had," what with them being well and truly estranged. Ginny, more than anyone, stayed on his wavelength.

Maybe it was the door between them. Or maybe she just couldn't be perfect. It really was a lot to expect. Anyone could get so caught up in their own type of normal that they forgot someone else's. Hermione and Ron did it constantly, and they knew more about him than anyone alive. Even more than Ginny, as they were with him when half of his life happened.

Most likely, Harry knew, it was just that he was difficult to relate to. A piece of him here and there might resonate with someone else. He, Ron, and Hermione shared many pieces. He and Ginny shared the rest. But no whole person had quite managed to resonate with all of him. Hell, he'd died before. No one living could understand that.

Harry fell quiet for so long, he jumped when Ginny knocked.

"Can I come in?", she asked. They both knew the door wasn't locked, but he appreciated that she asked permission.

"Yeah, sure, but I'm about to take a bath," he replied, looking apologetically into her face as the door eased open. She looked a bit repentant as well, until her eyes flicked down to his chest and
back up again. It was almost imperceptible. And like that, her patient, unwavering self was back.

"Let's take a bath together," she declared, undressing. He blinked, blushed, and began to protest.

"You're already clean!," he stated, pushing her from the room. Her shirt fell, and he tripped over it, and his chest ran along her back, skin to skin, as they fell in a jumbled heap on the floor.

The private chaos of tangled limbs, stolen kisses, and breathless, side-stitching laughter pushed his thoughts, formless but deep, from his mind. The morning powered on, despite Harry once being exhausted. However, it failed to remove the dense singleness in his spirit.

A want weighed on him, created a gravity in his gut. Harry didn't know if his parents had nosebleeds. His body was a mess of unknown parts from isolate places. It was his to share and to touch with and to have touched, but something about not knowing it completely made him feel separate from himself.

Harry took the afternoon to rest. Ginny dozed against him, her palm over the scar on his chest.

He glared at the ceiling for nearly an hour, so angry he could cry. After all his years of wanting, realizing he was still unsatisfied—despite everything he had—made him furious. He squeezed Ginny to his side, so tightly she grumbled and rolled over. He held the curve of her hip, furious again at how she somehow wasn't enough.

He decided then, with the steely certainty he had for these things, that he would do what he needed to be happy. Harry would find his family, or at least what was left of them. After everything he’d been through, he deserved to feel complete.
Regrets and Gratitude

Chapter Summary

Lucius Malfoy experiences a new emotion. Narcissa accepts time alone.

May 2nd, 1998: Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade

The smell drifting down from the ceiling put Lucius ill at ease. It carried notes of mold and open flesh from the second floor, suggesting true horror lingering above. Behind him, Narcissa hissed, "We have to go," for the fifth time since following him into the abandoned house. She was right, of course.

"Quiet, woman," he returned in hushed tones, scanning the dark foyer for a proper staircase. Early afternoon light leaked through the boarded windows, illuminating more dust than anything else. He squinted, waving her away. "I told you to wait outside with Draco."

He was scoffed at and given an exaggerated eye roll that he felt more than saw in the dim. She slid in so they walked arm-in-arm, pointedly linked. Her shoulders were stiff with a tension between fear and outrage, a balance he knew that tilted towards the latter the more he dismissed her.

It had been a long year for their family. Lucius suspected he had a scant few hours left before the woman's Slytherin brain devised of life without him as opposed to with. She was a Black, after all, who once held the lady Zabini in high esteem, as if whispers of murder were just breezes passing through the trees. And this, in her happier days.

"This is ridiculous," his wife spoke in low tones, trampling a loose board underfoot. The pureblood woman inhaled clouds of yet more dust, and hacked viciously. "Honestly, Lucius!"

"Narcissa, you can at any time go and wait outside, like I've told you. You're of no help to me in here."

"Haven't we done enough?," she continued, as if he hadn't spoken. He clenched his teeth, irritated. "Haven't you satisfied your damned curiosity enough for all of us? There's always something else, always one more sick little shadow to poke at," her tone chilled, turning the damp May in the shed absolutely wintery.

"I'm ready to return to what is left of home, Lucius. My patience is wearing thin."

He spared a measuring glance at her profile. Her angled face was pale and drawn, framed with pale flyaway hair. Months of sleeplessness pooled beneath all their eyes, but the deep purple bags sat like bruises under her morning blue ones, bringing out the black in her wide, vacuumous pupils.

Lucius suppressed a grimace. In addition to the frayed, black robes they all still wore, and the immediate smell of dried blood, Narcissa resembled her sister—the mad, slaughtered one. The man accepted the need for caution.

"We'll only be a moment," he proclaimed, giving her cold hand on his forearm a decisive pat. She didn't respond. She simply turned her dogged expression to his and scowled.
Lucius cleared his throat, and judged the haunted house a more salvageable cause than convincing his wife of his good intentions. Then, with no little distaste, he realized fallen debris had blocked the way upstairs.

The shattering blasts from the fight must have rippled as far out as the outskirts of Hogsmeade. A large beam, cracking with mold, had collapsed onto the stairs. He reached into his robes for his wand, faltering when he felt the handle of the replacement wand. Sharp with clarity, he remembered the fate of the centuries old Malfoy heirloom. Relinquished, mocked and lost in battle.

He breathed through the sting of having been well and truly scavenged by his escapades. He assumed it was regret that had finally come for him these past days and nights. It hit suddenly and with a penchant to linger.

Of course, he didn't care for the feeling, so let it arrest him without comment. It often manifested as little more than a non sequitur silence, a distant look, a word floundering on the tip of a dry and tarnished tongue.

"I, well," he said brilliantly, taking in the beam. He flinched as, with a sigh and shake of the house, it was banished from the stairs.

Lucius looked down in time to see Narcissa tuck her wand back into her sleeve. Then she looked ahead, jaw tight with reproach, and waved him forward. He nearly refused to thank her—he wasn't a damn Squib—but he remembered where pride got him and moved them along with a practical nod.

He thought he might should feel regret for Narcissa's state as well as his own and that of their son. Generally, he did. However, as they climbed the crushed stairs, and Narcissa's arm slipped from the crook of his own, regret fell behind apprehension.

His wife gathered the skirts of her robes and overtook him. As she stepped out onto second floor landing, she cast her blue, imperious gaze down on him, paused on the stair.

He straightened to his full height under her perusal, and glimpsed her fine walking boots under the hem of her robes. They were her sturdiest and still impractical, heeled and of opalescent dragonhide with onyx buttons, stained with forest mud and leaves.

He'd paid a mint for them to be custom made by her favorite cordwainer in Versailles. Now, they were ruined.

"Well," she prompted, irked.

She opened her arms, swanlike in the dilapidated surrounds, and asked, "is this what you wanted? Yes, this is much preferred to leaving gods-awful Scotland with our criminal son before Dumbledore's people can think to hunt him down. Yes, this! Standing in this disgusting house with the putrid ghosts! Gathering dust! A lovely break from sanity, this is!"

She dropped her arms and spun away from him, disgusted. He managed to say, "Now, Narcissa, really," before she whipped up a hand for silence. Lucius walked up to make her face him when, almost wistfully, her head listed to the side and her expression contorted into a rictus of horror.

"Merlin help us," she breathed. She stood, peering into the room at the end of the hall. As he came closer and placed a ringed hand on her shoulder, he felt her wilt. "I'm so tired of this, Lucius."

Lucius turned to see what had gripped her so, and recoiled. There he sat, torn open and mouth slack, staring sightlessly at them from the floor. His unblinking black eyes were like holes in his
sallow face.

One hand lie open on the ground, palm up like a beggar's, black grime caked under the yellow nails.

"Please," Narcissa begged, sounding very near the end of her rope, "let's just go."

There were few moments in life where Lucius Malfoy remembered heeding his wife's self-appointed role as his conscience. He'd indulged her when it came to trifling matters like curtains, or with Draco's schooling. However, she tended to disagree with him on pivotal points in his more serious ventures.

And, in reaction, he tended to ignore her.

But to continue like this was ill-advised by his malnourished nascent conscience to his much-abused ego.

Draco never argued with him like Narcissa did, he lamented. And she had done more today than in all the prior years of marriage. Granted, this was not without excellent reason, he saw in retrospect. But, had he tried, he worried that the only words he'd find to explain this particular detour might sound like "compulsion."

Which, given the master they had barely outlived not an hour before, was not a concept he delighted in bringing up. Again.

But he had to try and make sense of why, instead of fleeing persecution, they were stopped in the Shrieking Shack, witnessing Severus Snape's remains. Of course, there was no spin he could give their situation to make it palatable. At this point, he hoped just trying might stave off a violent hexing. He despained at the thought of Narcissa leaving him to rot with their late ally.

So, for the first time, Lucius Malfoy engaged in a real, if spectacularly subpar, bit of honestly.

"I am...sorry," he said, turning his wife into his chest. He hadn't expected for Narcissa to push off of him. She whirled around, stabbing a finger toward the body.

He had meant to block her view of it, figuring it was one corpse too much. Instead, she demanded he look. Merlin, it was hideous to see what had been made of their only friend.

"Damn your late apologies," she spat. "Look at this, Lucius! Look at that-that thing! Why are we here!?"

"To bury him," he replied, squeezing his eyes shut. The constant dull ache he nursed in his body blossomed into a true pain. His head throbbed and his joints ground in their sockets, like he was made of stone. "Gods, I wanted to bury him. I'd been the one to send him here when the Dark Lord called."

"Of course you did." The disdain in her voice could cut glass.

"Please," he hissed, now begging himself. "Narcissa, I had no idea he'd be killed! He was in favor, more than all of us! We all expected him to be honored, not-," he gestured to the room, covering his mouth and nose.

The smell of open wounds clogged the hallway now as he walked down it, spurred forth by his own admissions. Soon he was standing over the body, not sure where to look. His skin crawled to see the open neck, still moist. His chest hurt as he stepped over that damned open hand. He was
disgusted both by the body and his reaction to it. He felt sick.

He'd never grieved for anyone, or regretted death and dying, and perhaps this was where the line was drawn between himself and better people. Potter had mentioned some hard tapped, driving regret of Severus'. So told, it had, against all proof to the contrary, suggested the man capable of a puling sort of love.

Lucius only knew him capable of honor, first on suspicious and then with evidence. Draco was alive because of him, but he held no delusions that this was a labor of love. He was bound to the task, coerced at best. Still, he had done it.

Oh, he was an evil man, like the rest of them, but a friend surely. And Lucius had sent him to be killed. Of all the dark and damnable deeds in his life, this one rancored.

"I could walk away," he went on to his strange audience. He spoke to Narcissa, to himself, to Severus, and to the powers that measured souls and knew his lacking.

"Dumbledore's people would take care of this. Potter, at least, would give another inane speech about loyalty and sacrifice." These were both proper pureblood values, of course, but Lucius would never give that brat such a credit. "But Severus despised Potter and his ilk, regardless of his feelings about some chit from school. And if I leave it to them-"

"Fine."

He looked at Narcissa and was surprised to see her right next to him, close enough to brush shoulders. He didn't, because he could tell after a moment that she hadn't gotten nearer for him.

His wife stood staring down at the body, like he had been. Her expression was cool, despite the trembling in her shoulders. She then went a step farther than she had, kneeling in the mess on the floor and bending over. Slowly, she took the ebony wand left, forgotten, by the torn man's side.

Her cheek came inches from the gash in the neck as she picked up the wand from the floor. She then pressed it into the other, empty hand, curling stiff fingers around it.

Narcissa ended by leaning back on her heels, staring into the dead man's face. Her eyes shone in the meager light, but she didn't cry. Good breeding and a proper education rid her of that habit decades prior. She hadn't cried since Draco was born.

"We owe him Draco's life," she reasoned, "perhaps even our own. We will bring him with us and bury him overseas, where no one can desecrate the grave."

Then, an intake of breath. She glanced up at Lucius and parted her lips around some new question. She looked flushed, from which he knew it was nothing of the vitriol she had before. He held her gaze, privately relieved that this had been worth explaining.

Of course, now she was gasping. Lucius saw her shoulders shake. He assumed she must have finally noticed the neck wound in the dark. Thinking it might be easier to move the body with more light, he nodded his thanks when a soft, blue-white glow lifted the room.

And it was in this brighter space that he realized Narcissa wasn't gasping. She was staring at him, breathless, hands folded and white-knuckled in her lap. Those hands were also without a wand, making him ask the quite terrifying question of who had cast the Lumos.

He was unfortunate enough to realize it wasn't him, nor was it his wife, given her obvious panic.
"Lucius, for Merlin's sake, please tell me he's dead," demanded Narcissa in a harsh whisper.

He knew what she meant. On one hand, he would be glad to not have the regret of Severus' death on his fledgling conscience. It seemed too weak to carry that weight for a lifetime, if he were being honest with himself.

On the other, begging hand, they only had a couple of hours ahead of Dumbledore's people to leave Britain. They had to steal away to the Manor, gather what valuables and funds left unravaged by war, and disappear.

Escaping while toting Severus' body was morbid, but doable. Once it was cremated and buried in a discreet plot, it would cease being of concern. This was the opposite scenario to moving with a living Severus Snape himself.

A fugitive family did not simply leave the country with Severus Snape, murderer of Albus Dumbledore, the black dragon of Hogwarts whose hoard was the children of magical Britain, the bane of the Light and reported traitor to the Dark. Harboring him would likely win them no allies and many enemies.

But, if they left him behind, he would go up for trial and, at best, be sent to die in Azkaban. At worst, he would be set free and open to any loyalists among the surviving Death Eaters.

Perhaps Severus would meet with some good fortune, he thought. He might be rewarded for his contributions to the Light, and end up with a pardon and an Order of Merlin for his troubles. He and Narcissa, even Draco, could send him well wishes via owl post and keep up with him in the papers.

Contrary to that were the facts of the horrific tear in the man's throat and his abandonment in a ruined room of a haunted house. These things did not portray a fortunate man, thus discouraging all of Lucius' desperate fantasies.

"What we do rests on if he's actually alive...against all odds...and common sense," he surrendered. Narcissa huffed and pointed to the new source of light.

In Severus' frozen hand, the tip of his wand shone bright white. Grimacing, Lucius freed his own wand and revealed more of Severus' face. The man still stared sightlessly into the middle distance, but the quiet gasping Lucius had thought was Narcissa was actually coming from the sucking wound. Their friend was breathing shallowly from his new hole.

"Gods," he said incredulous, leaning in closer. "Only you, you impossible berk."

"He must be paralyzed," returned Narcissa. She was already spelling away filth from his robes and transfiguring a blanket out of a nearby shred of drape. "I'm no mediwitch, Lucius. He needs help."

"Ah, so we are taking him with us," he probed. He received a glare for the effort and was snapped at to make himself useful. He did so by sending a message outside to Draco, via Patronus.

"Prepare to leave," it went, "We have a fourth."

They still managed to escape Scotland after the Dark Lord's defeat, while both armies were numb with shock. They have been graced with all three Malfoys having survived the final battle, and with a fourth person in tow, returned to the Manor to dig up their emergency portkey. Unfortunately, they met the consequences of their detour not long after Apparating home.
What Order members that could be spared led a ragtag group of Aurors to the former Death Eater stronghold. Lucius had been arrested for crimes against Muggle and magical kind, as had Draco.

Narcissa, who despite everything had not been Marked, was arrested and released same day on an "anonymous tip" that she had changed loyalties in the final confrontation. While not technically true—her loyalty was always to her son—Narcissa sent a note of thanks to the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice while under house arrest, awaiting her family's trials.

She appreciated the help.

She shared, rather subtly, that a certain person of interest may have survived the final battle. She lamented, with great aplomb, that this person was too tragically injured to serve trail. And she admitted, with full truthfulness, that she didn't trust the Ministry in its hobbled state to offer this person due justice. She carefully avoided mention that her husband was one party to have hobbled it.

Still she managed to talk the most politically potent boy of this era to lend her two great powers: potions and privacy.

When the Aurors did their snooping, Narcissa had a door that need not be opened. When Narcissa complained of her ailments—commonly her stiff neck, her breathlessness, her poor appetite, and her fatigue—she was sent Ministry standard potions and creams to address the hurts. These routinely went to Severus.

She couldn't ask for much by way of pain potions, as these were monitored closely to avoid overdose. For this, she pitied her secret guest his quiet agony.

Still weeks rolled into months, and enough of the Ministry clung on to transition Kingsley Shacklebolt into a seat as Minister of Magic. Trials came and went, and her family didn't come home. After Draco's sentencing, she suffered the indignity of adorning the Daily Prophet's front page.

The paper had photographs of her shedding wordless tears from four or five different angles. One paparazzo captured her hunched outside of the hearing with her head in her hands.

She was glad, then, for having to stay inside. Narcissa cloistered Severus away in an adjoined suite to her sitting rooms. She had the house elves tend to his food and hygiene, while she sat nearby and read on ways to expedite the healing. Of course, the Aurors had seized the majority of the Malfoy libraries, but it had been far from her first raid.

She managed to hide a few choice texts that she used, with some cross referencing and practice, to fully close the man's wound.

It was three months before his limbs loosened from their petrification. Mobility returned in small ways from the feet up. There was a first toe twitched, then a first finger wiggled. Then, over the course of a few days, Severus began to thaw.

He moved his neck first, and howled for what turned out as half the night. She left, unable to stand it after an hour. She spent the rest of that time scribbling new notes: to Potter, to her arrest monitor, to Shacklebolt, to Lucius. Drafting countless iterations for each note, she threw them away unsent. She didn't know what to ask for, really, and instead, waited out the screaming and fell into a fitful sleep.

Narcissa returned the next morning to see Severus lift his arms and touch shaking fingers to scar on
his neck. The suite was done in mostly warm woods and cream, so he looked the oddest accent. He sat up in the middle of the wide, white bed, all sallow skin and greasy black hair and thick, brown scars.

She felt she did rather well there, all things considered. The scars were neat and shiny, running in three dark cords from right under his jaw to down across his collarbone. The man's hair had grown down his back during his stay and mostly covered them. In fact, he had to continue brushing hair aside to investigate his skin.

Narcissa sighed, letting go of a breath held for what felt like years. Severus pushed the first, rough word out of his mangled throat.

"Mirror," Severus rattled. It sounded more like "m'r," but she filtered that through reason. He wanted to see how he looked. If how he must have felt and obviously sounded were his only clues, any person would worry.

She conjured a hand mirror and found a seat on an eggshell and gold tasseled chaise lounge. Narcissa then reclined, plucking nonexistent fluff off of her cerulean robes, so as to watch him from under her lashes.

Severus lost his grip on the mirror once before snatching it from the duvet with a grunt. He then went over his features, his sunless complexion and chapped everything.

"The elves made sure you were fed and hydrated," Narcissa explained unprompted.

Severus put the mirror down and stared at her. She nodded in acknowledgement, her way of saying welcome back. No need to carry on about it. "They also charmed you clean and changed your clothes and linens as needed."

"How?" She blinked and then saw the mirror lift in an aborted gesture at his neck.

"How did you heal?," she clarified. Severus inclined his head once, and grimaced, rubbing his neck. Narcissa conjured a ministry potion for the stiffness and was rudely snorted at and waved off. She put it on the bed anyway. Yes, they were rubbish potions, but it was all she had.

"I healed you," she pointed at the small table sitting at the end of her chaise. It held books about healing and a couple about poisoning. She looked back and smiled at the open scepticism on his face.

"I can read, Severus, and remember that I had Draco at home. I know some things about staunching blood and knitting flesh, if only how it's supposed to look."

"Hm," he seemed to drop the point. He focused on her, willfully ignoring the potion on the bed and looking at the rest of the room. Narcissa realized, given some of his tension and the nature of his attack, that he might be trying to parse her agenda.

"Voldemort is dead," she said, proud of herself for not catching on the name. Severus continued to stare, face unchanged. "Draco is in Azkaban, as is Lucius, although Draco has a lesser sentence as we could prove coercion for most of it. Some Death Eaters escaped, which is why it's best that you stay here."

She thought he said, "How?," again but heard when he repeated himself that he was asking, "Who?"

"Who knows about you? Or who escaped?"
She got another inclination of the head, and a wince. He would take the damn potion or go spare refusing it, honestly.

"Lucius, Draco, and I all know that you survived. I can't account for who they might have told, but I hinted at it to one Harry Potter." She rolled her eyes at the resultant groans and swears. Severus' voice became clearer when trying to curse.

"Relax, he hasn't been to see you, and hasn't mentioned it since offering to help. To be crystal clear, it is quite obvious to me that the boy, as appreciative as he is of your service, deeply dislikes you. Once I suggested that you would prefer anonymity to glory, he agreed to a few terms and seemed happy to call you as dead."

She then figured he wanted an answer to both questions. She summoned another item to a tray on his bedside table and sat up, hands folded.

"As for who escaped," she said quietly. Severus stopped his ranting to listen. "I only know of who was free as they've been captured. Most of the Death Eaters died in the war, and of the ones still alive and still free, I believe very few are interested in avenging their master's death upon you."

Narcissa gestured to the large envelope she had summoned. "In there is a list of who I believe is still at large. It is charmed to update every time I edit the master copy."

"There is also," she went on, "a small amount of money, new identification papers, and a portkey to Riga. The house there is already purchased through a third party."

"L'tvia?"

"Karkaroff had people and planned to hide under an alias in Riga before the Dark Lord's return. I hear he enjoyed the architecture. Lucius found his connections after Karkaroff died and hired them to our cause."

Severus made no moves to pick up the envelope. He simply continued to level her with his heavy, hippogriff gaze. Narcissa sighed, eyes drifting skyward. She was exhausted by the men she knew never thanking her. She could come to look forward to a life alone.

Still, she pulled back her sleeves to show the tracking spells there cast: two bands of crawling, fluorescent green runes marching across her skin. From his raised eyebrows, she knew she made her point. Her location and her every spell were watched.

"I'll be staying in England, to await my family's release. You can take Lucius' share and leave, unfollowed, once you're able to walk," she paused, delicately, "and talk, if you can stand to wait longer. It might behoove you to start your time there fully capable, or as close to it as you can get."

Narcissa didn't stay to wait for an answer. She knew what it would be.

Over the course of the following months, as summer withered into fall, Severus recovered. Regular food and rest, alongside walking the suite, then the corridors, then the gardens continued to improve his mobility. By September, he managed a long-legged stride that, while more contemplative than before, smacked of his habitual stalk.

With time, Narcissa's complaints to her designated Healer were treated with vitality draughts and Dreamless sleep. The greater energy gave him space to push himself. By November, he easily eluded the Aurors on their surprise inspections. He could slip from the libraries to his suite without a sound. He could even outpace Narcissa on walking conversations through the manor.
He soon spoke in full sentences, read at near his normal pace, and so began a cursory study in new languages.

Narcissa watched him, on one evening in late December. He paced the library, his most frequent haunt, and practiced glamour charms in rough Latvian, occasionally stopping to check himself in a floating mirror.

She knew then that she'd be alone for the rest of winter, and did not regret that.

"I suppose I should say thank you," said Severus on the first day of the new year. They had been sitting in her tea room, eating and talking Baltic politics. The thanks was announced and never given.

Narcissa only hummed, "Yes, I suppose you should," over her cup of tea. The elves were instructed to clear his room exactly one week following. She then patted herself on the back for guessing correctly. The room sat vacant for less than day before it was washed and stripped of evidence.

The man, healed for weeks now, held out as long as he could. But he couldn't stand the sentimentality spending his birthday in their routine. It would come to feel like living there, and she quite agreed that even the thought was too much.

She would return to her desk, nonetheless, and write him a letter, thanking him for his company.
In Poor Company

Chapter Summary

A visit between old friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 20th, 2002: Azkaban, North Sea

After his one-year sentence for conspiracy under duress, Draco Malfoy returned to the island twice a year. He climbed aboard an unmanned dingy on the English shore, escorted by two Aurors: one at his fore and one at his flank, both with wands trained to his head.

"Hands out and in your lap," recited the Auror behind him, shoving him down into his seat. Draco looked down his nose at the fist gripping the shoulder of his cloak.

"Got something to say, do ya," egged on the man in front of him. Draco wrinkled his nose in distaste before settling into the ride, looking out toward the sea. His escort paused for an excited breath, hoping for trouble. When nothing happened, one spat over the side of the boat, disgusted.

"Alright, then, get a move on," the other Auror groused. He knocked twice on the boat's side and they pushed off into the rocky shallows.

Between them, the Aurors watched Draco's every move. Conversely, he simply sat with hands folded in his lap, grey gaze cast far over the Auror's shoulder, slim cloak-wrapped body bracing against the cutting, salty wind.

He looked exactly like his father when still and pale as marble. If Draco so much as twitched in a suspicious fashion, as determined by the Aurors after the fact, then he would be Stunned and returned to his overseeing officer. He would be described as unruly—or worse, accused of attempting escape—and denied another trip off British soil.

Well, in a worst case scenario, the Ministry would allow him one more journey to Azkaban. His visit to his father would last indefinitely, and with the exception of his mother, he wouldn't be missed.

Thus it remained in the disgraced scion's best interest to spend the boat ride in cold silence. As the convoy rocked across the choppy, grey waters, he stayed looking ahead for the prison rock to appear from the fog like the last fang in a wicked smile of welcome. He lifted a hand to comb back his white-blond hair, stoking the Aurors' attentions.

"Home sweet home, yeah?," leered the squat, balding Auror in front of him. It was always the two of them—one potato-shaped and the other thin in a hungry way—who tended his visits. Both claimed to have lost someone to Snatchers, on which Draco never commented.

"Oi, are you deaf? I'm talking to you," the potato pushed on.

As per usual, Draco didn't respond. He concentrated on the storm scarred guard towers looming
ahead of them, backlit by the silver disk of sun behind the clouds. His pointed features were empty of any expression except, perhaps, a frown creasing around his mouth.

The Auror ground out, "Scum," but did nothing else about being ignored.

The summer visit was always quiet and uneventful. At winter solstice, although the trip over the ocean was bollock-freezingly frigid, a barb or two usually stuck under the young ex-con's skin. He would sputter or squirm, flushing red with indignity. But in summer, Malfoy gave as much as the rock under Azkaban.

Finally, the old, enchanted boat dragged them onto the hoary beach. From there, it was a short hike up the sandy bank to the security gates. Rolling his eyes, Draco lifted his arms to have wands waved over his person.

"Nothing," declared the gatekeeper, a dark skinned woman bundled to the chin in navy guard robes. She then gestured at the Aurors. "Badges, please."

The escorting Aurors scoffed and showed their identification. She nodded slowly, eyeing him as he turned away, practically bored by the proceedings. "Visiting?"

The skinny Auror grunted back, "Malfoy."

"Go on then. You know the way."

Draco then found himself crowded in on both sides by wanded wizards. They prodded him to keep a brisk pace through the iron gates and, soon, he was entering the prison fortress. The lashing of the waves on the shore was swallowed by Azkaban's magic suppressing stone. The guards shivered, each tightening his grip on Draco's arm.

Eerie quiet fell over them, pushed at by distant metallic clangs echoing through the walls. Aside from the occasional guard, Azkaban was sepulchral. Shadows of passing seagulls flew across the long, slit windows. From outside, the clammy afternoon sliced the corridors into shapes of powerful dark and meager light.

The party, even Draco, became aggravated by the stifling quality of the air. He hunched over, curling inward as the Aurors marched him up four, five, six stories, growing more restless the higher they went. By the time they reached the seventh floor checkpoint, his jaw was tight from biting his own tongue.

Well, the Aurors were hardly whispering endearments.

"Bloody Death Eater," swore the rangy one into his ear. Draco scowled and leaned away, only to be shook. "Stop moving! They never should've let you outta here. This is where you lot belong. This fucking miserable place-"

"Hold!" Another guard half-rose from his post outside of a private door. Then, recognizing Draco, he shook his head and dropped back into his seat. "Oh, just you. Yeah, he's been askin' for ya."

Draco jerked his head into some semblance of a nod, eyes on his shoes. Both Aurors and the guard couldn't help a smirk at seeing him so timid.

"Whaaat? Aren't ya glad to see Daddy again?," laughed the potato. All the officers chuckled nastily, one pushing him forward as the guard opened the solid, metal door.

They were in the new section of Azkaban now, only added since the end of the last war. It housed
informants, former Death Eaters who flipped for trial, even Knockturn Alley thieves with the misfortune of notable clients. All such criminals spent their sentences in single occupant cells, floors above those who would enjoy a bit of recreational sport with their entrails. This way those who spilled their guts, so to speak, could avoid further spilling by gangs of anxious volunteers.

The metal door slammed behind him, gone being the days of the iron bars. The illusion of total privacy was, of course, shattered by the raucous laughter of the men outside.

The two men in the cell shared a look of joint loathing.

"The Ministry continues to keep beasts in their employ," commented Lucius Malfoy. He had arranged himself in a disaffected sprawl on one of two cushionless wooden chairs.

"I do hope they weren't too much of a bother."

The ex-politician looked like a new Sickle in an old coin purse. He wore the roughly hemmed, black and white striped prisoner's uniform. A patch on his chest reading "L. MALFOY" in neat, black stitching. Despite the clothes, he appeared to form: well fed and smarmy, with his clean, pale hair and skin surrendering nothing to middle age.

If anything, prison suited him. Not as much as greasing greedy palms, but far more than fear and servitude.

Draco skulked past him and lowered himself onto the edge of the bed, "I'd be shocked if they were ever less than odious. The Ministry is quite fond of its menagerie of fools."

Lucius hummed in agreement and watched, half-appalled, as the man who wore his son began to change.

Severus unclasped and shed his cloak, revealing all black wool clothing underneath. Able to blame the chill of the seabreeze for his thick attire, he patted himself down for his contraband. He flicked a lock of darkening hair from his face as it poured from his scalp like oil. He rolled back his shoulders as his spine stretched to his natural height. As he grimaced in discomfort, he pulled letters and small packages from the pockets of his waistcoat.

He had one gray eye and one black set in a half-tan face when he handed Lucius these items. Had his friend been a lesser man, he would've shuddered.

"This is utterly grotesque, I hope you know," Lucius counseled, staring fixedly in near obvious fascination.

"Yeth," replied his companion, lisping as his tongue reformed beside his shifting teeth, "tho you thay every time you thee it." When it settled, Severus tested his letters, "Stop staring."

"I shan't," he admitted plainly. "Your stomach-turning strangeness is the only entertainment I have and I refuse to give it up."

"Please, I'm blushing."

To the casual observer, the man was at best politely interested. Severus, however, having known him for decades, knew that Lucius would have the shift photographed if he hadn't thought it gauche.

Polyjuice was his favorite potion, save for odorless poisons and liquid luck. Severus' long-lasting variation on it was unpublished, and would continue to be so as long as he needed it to sneak into
maximum security prisons.

"Here," Severus piled the delivered goods on the bed, not bothering to move them to the small, round table Lucius sat at beside him. "Products for your ridiculous preening."

"It's called hygiene, old boy," Lucius manfully ignored Severus picking filth from his fingernails. "You might have heard of it."

"There is food and overpriced sweets from Draco," the potions master continued, pretending not to have heard him, "as well as a few of his 'more sensitive' letters. I've read them and you needn't bother, as he's only fawning over that Greengrass girl and complaining of his mother's disapproval."

"Anything from Narcissa?" Something about his tone seemed off, in that it was too casual. Severus looked at him over his fingers, then back down.

"No, just Draco. She only writes to me around once a month, and even then it's about inane topics like the gardens at the manor. If there was anything more pertinent she wanted you to know, it isn't through me."

There was a measured silence that had him look up again. Lucius was watching him, face oddly blank.


Lucius kept on with his unabashed observation of him. Severus felt the pureblood's decision not to say something in particular when the response came, "I forget sometimes that you were raised in an unfortunate context. You never learned flower language, did you?"

"Beyond what pertains to potions, what use would I have for the meaning of daffodils?"

"Girlish whimsy. Narcissa would write secret notes using flower language, in our Hogwarts days. Can you imagine."

He could and silently kicked himself for not realizing. Severus had until then considered Narcissa's regular missives as like a canary singing in the coalmine. If they stopped, something was wrong. Now, he would have to review all of her past letters for coded messages.

It was quite sneaky, actually. She wrote him essays about leaf shine and weeds as if he were a landscaper. The manor properties were immense, hosting three botanical parks, an oasis for the peacocks, and a topiary hedge maze. And Narcissa curated an image of blissful solitude, her days spent wandering over the sprawling property.

So, why would anyone intercepting her letters question a lady hermit for discussing her blooms? One could assume she was doting. Especially with her only child publicly courting, drawing him away from home, all she seemed to have were her hobbies.

"Damn," he huffed. He expected to regret his respect for her and kept being disappointed. Recovering himself, "But Draco, yes. The little fool's twisted himself into knots over this girl."

"Astoria Greengrass, honestly," sighed Lucius, exasperated. At the mention of the young couple, he went so far as to rub his temple with two, manicured fingers. The subject of Narcissa's letters had passed. "I raised him better than to consort with families who hold with their...values."

"What, is it that they dislike war or dislike bigotry?"
"I didn't see them at Hogwarts. Do tell, how strongly can one feel dislike when it comes from half a country away? I promise you, not very. Since when did vague censure stop anything more than, than awful dress sense and a wandering hand? Never."

Severus rolled his eyes, peering up at where the walls met the ceiling. One could see where the room was grown instead of built, as there was no mortar or seam.

"Their values kept them out of prison, if memory serves," supplied Severus, now plucking at the quilt on the bed. It was the same one from last year, which was strange, since Narcissa tended to keep her husband in new things. "Meanwhile, here you are, divine with purpose, primping with off-brand Sleekeazy."

Lucius side-eyed him sourly. "I paid you for sérum de soie liquide."

Severus answered his sour look with a sneer, offended by the frivolity in these requests. "You're lucky I didn't give you dish soap."

This was shrugged off.

How very French, Severus thought, snorting. His decorum slips more every visit.

"Back to the point: the Greengrasses were worse than the 'great heroes' of the Light," he said this with an honest jeer. This surprised Severus a bit. Lucius came to life on this topic more than that of hair care which, anyone could understand, was shocking given the man's priorities.

"They didn't even fight in the war. They simply sat on the sidelines while better families fought around them."

"Yours, of course, being a better family," said with no little sarcasm. His tone did not go unnoticed.

"I liked you better when you at least feigned good sense," Lucius said, turning on him. "Now that you've gone native, your Muggle sensibilities are bleeding through, staining all your better judgments."

He made the word 'Muggle' ooze vitriol. Severus held up his hands in mock surrender. Who was he to talk, really? He hadn't even the excuse of family values to explain his damning of himself to the Dark. All he had were resentments, unanswered wishes, and friends like Lucius Malfoy, to whom he roughly owed his life.

The former spy deigned to move from the bed to the table with said friend. It was in doing this that he noticed the opened letter by the vase of conjured roses. Knowing the letter wouldn't be out if he wasn't intended to read it, Severus pinched it between his middle fingers and slid it closer. Running his eyes over the handwriting-Narcissa's-and the family crest-House of Black-he was now duly shocked by the message.

He didn't show it when he slid the letter back. He just leaned back in his seat, hands on the table, waiting for Lucius to speak.

The man turned up his nose at the missive. Severus looked into his face, reading it for anything volatile. If he had to, he'd describe what he saw as affronted, at first glance, and at second, resigned. This was a long time coming, he realized. Crossing his arms over his stomach, he let the moment happen.

"She…," Lucius blinked rapidly and cleared his throat. "Narcissa wishes...to divorce me."
Severus inclined his head, having read the letter. It was awfully formal, although he supposed these things were. It was a legal parting, after all. He had only wished that his parents had divorced all those years ago, but of course never saw it happen. And so, he didn't quite expect such a personal change to come couched in jargon.

"What will you do," Severus asked, honestly curious.

His first guess would be that Lucius would challenge the divorce. The argument would be that it isn't the "done thing." Proper, pureblood marriages like theirs didn't end so much as dissolve into disinterest and mutual loathing that ate at them until one succumbed to the toxicity of it and the other was gifted with the reprieve of mourning.

"She can have her divorce," was the reply. Lucius said this while looking at his nails, as though discussing the weather. Severus could hear the irritated tap of his foot on the floor, though, and felt grubby with pity.

This was harder to witness than the man's incarceration, and both were on some level deserved. His teachings did lead Draco into a life of rejection and ridicule. For the creature that loved him most in the world, he supposed this was unforgivable.

Severus made the effort anyway, to state the marriage's case. He was there, the issue was in front of them, and by his next visit, the topic will have had a year to harden.

"You've been married through two wars. Not to mention, you've been together, since you were teenagers-since I was a child, even. You won't fight it? Refuse the filing?"

"It would make her unhappy." Lucius was now looking at Severus' stained nails with open objection.

"Stop it," he muttered, folding his hands into his arms. "And? So what if she's unhappy. That never stopped you before."

Lucius' head tilted back, hands coming up to his face. It took Severus a moment to understand what was happening, as he had never seen it before. When Lucius dragged his hands down his face and groaned, Severus realized the man was showing remorse.

"Ah," Severus noted, bemused. "That matters now, for some reason."

"You keep a very low opinion of me, Severus," the tortured man explained to the ceiling, "and quite frankly, it is becoming hurtful."

This time he pointed with his finger to say, "And again-"

"Yes, and again, it didn't used to matter, but now it does!" Lucius stood and began pacing the room. It was a rather short walk from the slit window to the door, beyond which the guards still chatted loudly.

There was a guffaw, and a thud, and Lucius raked a hand through his sheet of platinum hair and growled, "Agh, I hate this damned place! There is nothing to do here but sit and stew in, in feelings."

"Feelings" was pronounced like "Muggles," with an extra syllable of disdain. Whenever Severus had been described for his way with insults, he privately felt he had learned from some of the best. First, from his bastard of a father, may he rot in Hell. And then, Lucius, who as of that moment had rotted in several hells and found the one of regrets to burn hottest.
"I don't know how you do it, Snape," ranted Lucius, roaming again from the door to the wall. Severus lifted an eyebrow questioningly. Lucius looked at him, seeing his confusion, and threw out, "Guilt! How can you handle feeling endless guilt without contemplating ending it all!?"

Severus brought up his shoulders and glared, feeling attacked.

"Dying didn't stick, so I try not to think on it."

There, he kept to the positive. Narcissa would be proud.

"Besides, what do you think prison is for, Lucius," he rebutted, "if not for people who've committed terrible wrongs to lose themselves to guilt?"

In truth, Severus had no advice on how to survive guilt, as he barely did so himself. He hoped banking on Gryffindorish fantasies of justice might balm Lucius' existential aches. Then they could stop carrying on about feelings.

"Oh, please, prison isn't for the guilty!" Lucius began pacing side to side, from the table to the bed, chin planted on his balled fist.

The man was a hub of restless energy. It made his skin itch.

"Then tell me, Lucius, who is prison for?"

"Don't be naive! Prison is for people without connections."

Severus laughed, having heard this take once before after escaping prison himself. Twenty years ago, the argument made sense, as without Dumbledore, Severus would've been dodging Dementors with Black and the Lestranges. Now, though, watching a once confidante of the Minister of Magic run ruts into the floor of his twelve by twelve foot cell, that take was hilarious.

"I am being sincere, Severus, don't take me for a joke. Prison has never been for people with friends in high places. It's a hole for poor people and lunatics."

Severus was deeply glad for this new block of Azkaban. It seemed the inmate population most at risk were those with more cunning than friends.

"Sorry to tell you, but you don't have anymore friends in high places," Severus grinned sadistically and pointed to himself. He might still have been stinging from the comment about ending it all. His dissatisfaction with his own life was a sore spot that needn't be poked.

Fortunately, his last statement drained Lucius of his agitation. His pacing slowed to saunter that carried the prisoner from a far corner to his bed. Carefully placing his goods on the floor, Lucius climbed onto his quilt, lied down, and turned to the wall.

Severus peeked at him over his shoulder, then turned his full body in the chair. His friend let loose a gusty sigh and deflated, sinking into the mattress.

Most people guessed correctly that Draco's theatrics came from his father. Severus' had as well, to speak on it. Lucius Malfoy had a flair for the dramatic rivaled only by Albus Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort himself. Except where one had phoenixes and the other snakes, Lucius had the empty, mournful cry of the peacock.

"You're a bad friend," floated up from the quilt.
"You knew that when you saved me," he shot back.

"Take care of her for me." This time, Severus thought before speaking. It was a courtesy he spared as the woman they spoke of did, literally, nurse him back to health.

"She can take care of herself," he said. "And then some."

After that, they were silent for a while, listening to the brutes crack each other up in the hall.

The visit trailed until the end of the hour, wherein they swung between chatter and shared silence. Lucius brooded, and for the most part, Severus ignored him. Eventually realizing he wouldn't find the attention he wanted in Severus bloody Snape, he gave up.

Conversation moved to his life after death. He shared little, not wanting to blather on about the details of himself, for fear of sounding pathetic. He had spent so long living low to the ground that he'd made a home of it.

And while Lucius had more empathy for that now more than ever in his life, he was still the highborn son of an ancient house. Severus was still Severus, and whatever that entailed, it could do without close examination.

"Have you met anyone to distract yourself with? A warm body, some pitiable woman to bear you troubled little tikes? Could you have had children without telling me, you beast? Do they dissect their pets for fun?"

Severus felt his eye twitch, sensing their visit was at an end. Lucius had recovered from despondency and thrown himself into irksome probing. This made it easy to say goodbye until next summer.

It did not help that Severus had, in fact, experimented with intimacy. There were no successful relationships—not that he wished to pursue any. However, occasionally, suffering with night terrors made him crave company. He needed a body to share his bed. He wanted to fill the quiet of his dark room with another person's breathing. Sex rarely served him, but brought with it some relief from loneliness. He was skin starved, to his mortification.

The potions master really would end it all if he had to admit to his sad weakness. At forty-two years old, he might even be in search of affection. And affection was horrifying to want when one didn't readily have it.

"Don't be crass, Lucius, it's unbecoming."

"Oh! So there is a woman!"

"Idiot."

"Am I wrong? A man, then?" There were some of those, as well.

Severus stood up, digging through his pocket for his flask. "It is time I take my leave."

"Scared you off, have I? A pity, I do so enjoy our time together."

"Piss off," Severus spat back, locating his flask. He knocked back a swig of extra-thick Polyjuice, and also found a small, linen sachet. The brew finally hit his stomach and his skin began to bubble. The bag weighed down his hand, heavy with galleons. He dropped it onto the counterpane next to
Lucius' open hand, and turned to the door, weathering the seconds of his transformation.  

A hand landed on his shoulder, giving him a firm pet. Like Severus was some hissing house cat. "Don't leave in a huff. Or do, but don't insult yourself and alert the Ministry dogs."

There was a final joke told outside before the guard pounded on the door. "Times up!"

Lucius smirked. Severus could feel it raising the hairs on his neck.  

"We really ought to pay the guard more for your visits," Lucius said in low, conspiratorial tones. "He does a rather passable job at distracting the Aurors. They never hear a word."

He shrugged off Lucius' hand and into his cloak. Examining his reflection in the vase of roses, he judged himself a perfect copy of Draco Malfoy and went to the door.  

"Don't forget to write to your mother," Lucius called, as the officer came in. The prisoner then returned to his seat at his end table. Sitting, he ignored them all to consider the state of his cuticles.  

The guard searched the room as was protocol, and did a very good job of finding nothing. He then led "Draco" outside and handed him to the Aurors.

"Yeah, that's right," muttered the skinny one upon having hands around him. Severus' elbow was in a death grip, bent at an odd angle as he was led to the stairs.

"Leave your evil father in here to fester, so's you can pretend you're decent folk."

Severus tuned him out fairly well on the trip home. An hour of good laughs had put both guards in buoyant spirits, so they mostly left him to his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is being cross posted from the ongoing work on FFN, with minor edits. There are currently 21 chapters written, so this is going to update a lot at once before returning to a weekly/biweekly schedule. Thanks for following along!

Harry began his research at the best library in London. A library he happened to know needed caffeine to function.

He purchased his offerings of espresso and raspberry scones at the little coffee shop in Trafalgar Square. Charming them to stay warm, he walked the five minutes to Great Scotland Yard.

Checking that all was clear, Harry slid into the red telephone booth, careful not to spill hot coffee on himself.

Moving everything to his left hand, he dialed "62442."

The operator answered. He had actually met her once. It was at a Ministry gala he couldn't avoid, and she had found him hiding in the coat room. She'd given him her name, Rhonda, and a key to her hotel room, which he slid back into her pocket as she sashayed away.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," Rhonda greeted in an even, practiced tone. "Please state your name and business."

"Dudley Dursley, here to see Hermione Granger at the Magical Creatures' Consulate."

"Thank you. Visitor, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes."

"Yes, thank you," Harry replied. The silver badge clattered from the coin slot. The words "Dudley Dursley, Creature," were inscribed on it. Shrugging, he tried a few times to hook the badge onto his sweater one-handed. Eventually, he opted to stick it to the paper bag full of scones.

The box jolted as it began its descent. His knees nearly buckled. Harry rarely came to the Ministry if he could help it, and hoped to never get used to the ride down.

He stepped out into the Ministry atrium. Checking in with security at the front desk, Harry smiled blandly at the man's blatant suspicion. The older wizard squinted at his face, glamoured to be plain and unmemorable. He then squinted at his badge, saw the title "Creature," and with a descriptive scowl, gave him back his wand and waved him to the lifts.

"Level 4," the guard instructed Harry. There was no "Have a nice day," to follow. The guard just crossed his arms and watched him until he called the lift and stepped inside. Harry waved back with his free hand. The wave morphed into a bird proudly flipped once the lobby rose out of sight.

"Arsehole," he muttered, readjusting his grip on the coffee.

A few minutes in the Ministry already had him drained. It was like the building was a Dementor, sucking up any bit of happiness. Figuring Hermione wouldn't mind, Harry popped the lid off the espresso and stole a sip.
Just as he put the cup to his mouth, the lift jerked to a stop. He swore, as hot liquid splashed onto his chin. Not wanting to risk dropping the whole cup, he shoved the lid back on and hopped out onto Level 4. His lip burned. He ran a tongue over it, convinced the Ministry was out to get him. It obviously wouldn't have been the first, second, or even third time.

"It's a bloody conspiracy," he shared with the echoing corridor.

He looked around then, surprised to see it was empty. Since the war, Hermione had a hell of a time convincing anyone to make use of the junior embassy. Beings persecuted by the government since well before its fascist regime simply refused to believe a human could mean them any good. Even the plaque that hung above him still read, "Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

_I'll bring that up to Kingsley later_, Harry mused. _Hermione must be livid about that._

And Harry couldn't blame them for staying away. If he had been a creature, as his badge proclaimed, he would never step foot in this building. He was bloody human and wouldn't be there if not for his friend.

That being said, he knew that Hermione's schedule these days was bursting at the seams. According to Ron, the last couple of years were like third year all over again. She power-walked everywhere, always either writing a letter or reading one. She ran about day and night in a tornado of owls and Howlers. When touched, she practically vibrated with energy. Once, Harry swore she left a room so fast, she Splinched.

"She doesn't even sleep like a real person," Ron had bemoaned, worried and a mite impressed, "she just falls over on the couch, dead to the world. Uses the memos like a blanket.

"Harry, I came in the other night, and she was on the floor! 'Course I thought she'd really died this time, until I realized she was snoring. I screamed like a girl anyway and scared the shite out of both of us!"

"Excuse me, sir! Do you have an appointment?"

Harry walked up to the battered receptionist's desk, confused. This was new. Last time he'd came, there were only piles of books in the hallway, not the stone-faced brunette currently staring him down. But there she sat, in pleated, tan robes with a lavender, silk cravat tucked into the collar. She had an American accent, and sat pin-straight with a phone to her ear. When did the Ministry start keeping phones? The voice on the other end didn't speak so much as buzz indecipherably.

He opened his mouth to speak and the woman glared. Her perfectly made-up face didn't change a bit, but Harry knew when he was being glared at. He _sensed_ her biting displeasure. He swallowed and stepped back, shaking his head meekly. It suddenly felt like a rather bad idea to tell this woman that he was a walk-in. But he _was_ a walk-in he was.

She looked him up and down, then indicated a vacant chair with her eyes. They were a strange violet, brought out by the lavender silk, and jumped out from beneath her curled, chocolate bangs. She re-focused on him and Harry felt like the mouse reckoning the owl.

"If you don't have an appointment to see Miss Granger," she said as if cataloging a grave sin, "then you will have to wait until she is available. Please sit, Mr…"

"Dursley," Harry supplied, holding aloft his badged scones. "Dudley." As he spoke, he shuffled
over to the empty chair, preparing to wait.

"Oh." Harry froze mid-squat. The space around receptionist lightened considerably. He dragged in a breath, not having realized the heaviness of the air until it was gone. It had felt like being buried alive.

"Yes, Dudley Dursley, that's me," he repeated, rambling. "I'm sorry, I should've made an appointment-

"Yes, please keep that in mind for the future."

The receptionist then motioned to the door behind her with the phone's handset. On the door's window was printed, "Hermione Granger, Ministry Ambassador to Magical Residents, U.K."

"I have a standing instruction that should a Mister Dudley Dursley call on Miss Granger while she is away, that you be allowed to wait in Miss Granger's office for her return." The receptionist explained this like a warden might explain a governor's pardon. Harry nodded to show he understood.

"Please, while you wait, refrain from touching any books, objects, or documents, sentient or otherwise. If you require anything, such as food, water, blood, grave soil, or natural sunlight, please let me know and I will have it delivered to you."

"Thank you," he murmured, collecting himself and walking past. He was ignored in favor of the one-sided phone conversation.

While the woman listened silently at the receiver, he scanned the desk for a nameplate. All he found was a scrap of parchment with, "Do Not Eat: One (1) Dudley Dursley," penned in Hermione's rushed handwriting.

Harry hurried into Hermione's office and locked the door behind him.

He waited for nearly half an hour. The bored wizard slid down into one the armchairs across her wide, oak desk. Her office doubled as a library, with books stacked to the ceiling. He gave up trying to count the shelves, opting to twirl his wand in between his fingers, watching paper airplanes zoom in and out of the room.

Finally, the stout brick fireplace chimed and flashed bright green. He stood to greet his friend, hearing half a conversation tumble through the flames.

"Well, yes, I see your point, Mosag, truly, but-but, yes, alright, see eating people is the problem, you see, so I can hardly imagine it being the solution as well."

What the hell is this job, Harry thought, eyes wide. Why is everybody so hungry?

Hermione's voice became clearer, and with a cough of smoke and sparks, she came backing out of the fireplace, rump first. He stepped up to help her and yelped, leaping away as she walked through.

Nested in her familiar bush of brown curls was a baby Acromantula the size of a small dog. It peered at him with eight, round button eyes, and might've been less terrifying if not riding the back of his friend's head.

"Of course. I'll come back around next week to discuss our options," finished Hermione, spinning
around with a dizzy gasp. Harry surged forward, grabbing for her head. "Oh my-Harry! I didn't know you were coming, I would've been here sooner!"

She lit up and dove into his arms. He grunted as her forehead hit his chin and, using one hand to pat her back, plunged the other into her hair. He pulled off the hairy hitchhiker, all of its many legs scrambling for purchase. Spinning them back toward the fire, he hurled the spiderling into the Floo before it went out.

Heaving a sigh, he wrapped the oblivious witch into the tightest hug he could manage.

"How does Ron do it?," he panted, propping his chin on her head. "Hullo, Hermione, you bleeding maniac."

"What?" She pulled away, searching for the problem. She just saw the banked fire and her memos, swooping about, hoping to be acknowledged. "Oh, yes, I should've asked Janice to clean up. I could do it myself, but we've been so busy lately, what with the peace negotiations in the Forbidden Forest, and then the giants' federation-"

"That's the scary secretary's name? Janice?"

Hermione paused, smiled, and pat his cheek dearly.

"Harry, I love you like the brother I never had, but Janice is a treasure and I won't stand for you bad-mouthing her in my presence."

Harry jumped at the very distinct 'clack' of a phone being slammed onto its cradle. It was the only noise he'd heard come from the hallway in the half-hour he'd been waiting. He couldn't stifle his curiosity. Exactly what kind of phone call was fifty percent wordless vigilance?

A chill of awareness ran through him. He felt her through the door, daring him to speak poorly. His childhood with Aunt Petunia, school days under McGonagall, and animosity with Snape ingrained in him a sense for when to cast someone from his mind, lest he open the way to punishment.

"Lovely woman, Janice," he agreed. "Very professional, very keen dresser. Kind eyes."

Hermione suppressed a giggle and nudged him in the ribs. "Thank you, that's quite enough. What can I help you with?"

"Erm, just a bit of research, really. There's something I want to know more about, but am not too sure how to go about it."

Harry walked back to his chair and took a seat. He pointed to the desk, where he'd placed the coffee and scones. She perked up, making grabby hands at the paper bag. He leaned forward to grab it, affectionate as he handed it to her.

"Alright, Harry Potter," hummed the witch, "you've won yourself ten minutes of my time."

"Eat first, I'm not in a big rush." Harry may have cared a great deal about his new project, but he could see that Hermione wasn't kidding. She really only had ten minutes to spare for herself, nevermind him.

Instead of receiving him at her official-seeming desk, Hermione took the chair next to him. She scooted closer to eat, so much so that he could pick the forgotten quills and leaves from her hair while she chewed. The junior ambassador's desk became a perch for a rainbow of paper airplanes. The memos twitched antishly. He gave them the stink eye.
He let his best friend finish her raspberry scone and handed her another one. She scarfed it down and waved a wand for the espresso. It floated into her butter-slick hands.

"This is wonderful, Harry, thank you," she gushed, washing down the pastries with the coffee. Between the sugar and the caffeine, she would tear through the next few hours. Harry sent a silent apology to Ron for the possibly literal crash she'd suffer later tonight.

"So, first thing's first: what is it you want to research? And have you tried the Black libraries? I know they're kind of spooky, but the private archives of an old family like the Blacks are a great start."

Harry felt a twinge of guilt for not thinking to check Grimmauld Place. Seeing the bags under Hermione's eyes, he figured he should've tried to research on his own first, before running to her. Unlike him, she didn't spend her days at home, avoiding the world. She had things that needed doing.

He decided to just ask for research tips and nothing more.

"Well, I, er. I'll try there next, although I don't know if it'll help. I want to look up my family tree."

"Oh, Harry, of course! Oh, now I feel terrible for brushing you off. This is obviously worth more than ten minutes!" Her face turned soft and sympathetic, which made him a little sick. He hated when she did that. He wiped a smear of raspberry from her cheek with his sleeve.

"Yeah, it's not that big of a deal. I just figured it was about time, and I'm not doing anything else, so. If you have any tips for research, like the Black library thing, that's all I need. I know you're busy."

"Never too busy for this! Harry, it's your family! This matters! I'll clear my afternoon-"

"No," he cringed, holding her wrists. She flew out of her chair, about to call to Janice. Harry had so many objections to that. "No, Hermione, really, please don't make a huge fuss. I only need some book recommendations, or...like, if there's a Hogwarts: A History for magical families or something, that'd be great."

"So, you're not planning to look into any Muggle family?," she asked, tilting her head. "I mean, besides the Dursleys?"

Harry shrugged, letting her wrists go. "I'm not Muggle, why would I? I mean, if there are more Muggle relatives than the Dursleys, I'd gladly take them. But...okay, sit back down. Here's the thing.

"Yesterday, Ginny and I were in the kitchen, chatting, when Ginny caught a nosebleed-"

"Ron gets those all the time! I had no idea until we started living together that it was so common. I suppose it's genetic, if Ginny gets them, too."

"Yes! That! Exactly!"

Now Harry stood up, gesturing wildly. "Ginny said it was a family thing, from her mum's side! That they're all tall and thin and get nosebleeds because there are so many of them and they have to, like, ration parts or something. I want that—well, I mean," he flagged, embarrassed by his own enthusiasm, "I want to know if I can have that."

"Nosebleeds?"
"Yes, what? No, but kind of. Genetics, inherited family...stuff."

Well, now he felt like a kid asking for a hug. He wandered over to the desk and flicked the wing of an airplane. It flapped at him and took off.

"I want to see if I can fit in like that, with someone else. A lot of someones, even. That's all." He gave up fiddling with the memos. "There's a way to look into that, right?"

Hermione whirled past him. He turned, stunned, just in time to see her zip up a metal, spiral staircase behind him. It lead up a short way to a balcony of more leather-spined books.

Imagining she had a text in mind for him, it baffled Harry to see her forego the shelves for the wall behind them. She tapped on the wood paneling beside them. To his shock, the paneling slid open and let her in. Craning his neck to see, Harry glimpsed a scarred hand welcome her before the panel swung shut.

"Okay…," he said, wandering to the stairs himself. "The hell…?"

The door to the secret room cracked open again, this time revealing Hermione. The witch looked down at him with painful excitement. Her eyes were glossy from unshed tears as she waved him up.

He sighed and nearly told her to forget the whole thing. This was more hassle than it was worth if it made her cry.

"Honestly, Hermione, now it feels kinda-"

"Come on up, Harry, he can help you," Hermione said over him, then slipping away again.

"Who?," Harry asked the air.

He climbed the stairs and walked up to the secret panel. The door was left ajar for him to step through. Harry did so reluctantly, and entered an extension of the office.

More books, these bound in fabric, reached up to the ceiling. They fluttered from shelf to shelf like flocking birds, some diving to bother scrolls rolling across the floor. Instead of a large oak desk, there were two smaller desks of lighter wood. Both were painted with stains from exploded ink bottles and plastered with memos, spelled to stick to the tops and sides like post-its. The memos fluttered like pinned butterflies but seemed otherwise not to mind.

Above both desks hung a copper plaque, reading "Creature Heritage Office" in large, block letters. Under that seemed to be the same line in different languages, including one that just resembled claw marks. As he got closer, the sign dinged and announced, "Welcome to the Creature Heritage Office," in Hermione's brightest chirrup. He could hear the smile in her recorded voice and immediately felt more at ease.

Run ragged as she was, the witch obviously loved her job.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry swung around, recognizing the genial voice, "Remus!"

Remus Lupin stood smiling by Hermione, next to the open door. He had a book under his arm and both hands in the pockets of his nut-brown robes. Except for a noticeable lack of patches and frays, and hair that was now more grey than brown, he looked just as he had teaching at Hogwarts.
Actually, it seemed as though life hadn't treated the battered werewolf this well since then. His cheeks were flush and full, his complexion healthy.

The last Harry saw him, several months ago now, he lived with Teddy and his grandmother. He did little apart from mind his son and offer Harry watered down welcomes when he came to visit. The widower mostly stayed in his rooms, refusing food, mourning his late wife. The Tonks household was such a grim place without Ted or Tonks to bring out its good nature. Harry assumed years ago that he'd never see Remus recover.

And yet, here the man was, a little beaten but working and strong with purpose. Harry looked from his old professor to his best friend, and back, suddenly very proud of them both. Hermione accused him of having a "saving people thing," but she wasn't a stitch different.

Harry came forward and accepted Remus' one-armed embrace. They were now a comparable height. Harry was possibly even a bit taller. As they parted, Remus seemed abashed but beaming. He let the book he held fly off to frame Harry's face in his hands.

It was a move he'd expect from Molly Weasley, but Harry supposed having a four year old would change some things. Remus' fear of breaking people simply didn't apply to his child. Teddy Lupin was made of rubber and a cuddle bug at that. One couldn't care for him without losing some of his hesitation to touch.

"Goodness, look how you've grown! You look so much like James now, Harry, Sirius would've, ugh. Merlin, look at me..." the werewolf huffed, blinking something away.

Harry choked up a little himself. Remus felt solid against him, nothing like the ghost of a man haunting Teddy's play room. His eyes were bright and alert. He had gained weight about his middle and the hands holding Harry's face were warm and dry. It all loosened a knot in his chest, one that hurt when he thought about broken things. The relief was a bit overwhelming.

"It's good to see you," he grinned self-consciously. Remus pat his cheek, eyes wet, and let him go, suggesting they sit. With a sniffle, the younger wizard took a seat by the nearest desk. The copper nameplate said it belonged to Remus. Harry stroked it, emotional all over again.

"God, I'm turning into Hermione," he thought. He then figured that was far from a bad thing to be.

"Yes, you too, Harry. Of course, you too," replied Remus, summoning a tea service for everyone. Harry declined, far from hungry. Hermione scrubbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and shoved a crustless cheese sandwich in his hand anyway.

"So, Hermione says I might be of some service?" This was after a few minutes of hydrating and catching up.

"Harry," the aforementioned witch explained, "Remus works a lot with creature-human families. It's not quite what you're asking for, unless the Potters have some creature heritage you wish to look into? But it's not terribly far off. He specializes in family trees."

"You want to look into your own heritage?," Remus asked, taken aback. "Hermione didn't say, I'm sorry if I'm behind. Of course, I'll do what I can to help."

Harry shook his head, taking a bite of the cheese sandwich. He then realized he was ravenous, and ended up eating the whole thing. Hermione handed him another with a self-satisfied smirk.

"It's fine. It's just this whim that got ahold of me out of nowhere," Harry swallowed his second
sandwich and was handed a cup of breakfast blend. "Well—er, cheers—well, maybe not out of nowhere. I've always wanted to know more about my parents. I grew up without them so I suppose I always will.

"I know now that most of what I was told by the Dursleys were lies, and I've gotten a bit more clued in since then. But, things feel like they've settled and are coming together, you know? It feels like the time to really get into it. I want to know more about who I am."

Hermione grabbed his leg in a show of support. He smiled indulgently when he saw more tears streaming down her face. "Goodness, girl, control yourself!"

"I can't h-help it!," she hiccupped, wiping her face. "I'm just s-s-so glad things are okay a-again! Ignore me!"

Remus chuckled and rubbed her shoulder. "You're a good person, Hermione."

She sobbed her thanks and excused herself from the room. Harry watched her go with amused empathy. The witch probably needed a good cry.

Remus addressed Harry, smiling fondly, "She does a lot for other people. I keep trying to convince her to take time off, but there's always someone needing something. Between Ministry officials and the influx of new cases, if not for Janice, she'd never take a breath."

"Is that why you started working here?"

The werewolf affirmed, "Yes, the reworking of this department is still in progress, but it's too huge a project for one person. And of course, support for the program is limited. After all the abuses in the last war, Kingsley fired the entire department and opened a bid for the funding. Hermione stepped in and suggested a consulate for the magical residents who've been victimized. To access their legal rights."

"The Wizengamot couldn't have liked that."

"They were extremely opposed. I believe the alternative was to funnel the extra money into the DMLE to hunt down creatures sympathetic to Voldemort's cause."

Harry blanched at Remus' knowing look. "The werewolves…"

Remus hmmed. "And the giants, but yes. That's actually how I got involved. I'd come to the Ministry to ask after Teddy's legal situation, given that he was born with a werewolf parent. Kingsley pointed me to Level 4," the older man grimaced, "after convincing me that no, he wasn't sending me to be arrested. That Magical Control had been gutted, and it was just one witch now, one Hermione Granger.

"Hells, she was buried under inquiries. I think she had a cry next to the arrest records as there was a bit of mascara on my file. I offered to help her organize, of course, and mentioned Teddy. She then goes 'you would know, wouldn't you!' and dashes off to write a letter. Next thing I know, I work for the Ministry."

Harry looked around again. He took in the books, the plaque, the sounds of Hermione happy-crying downstairs. The young wizard was glad to start his family search here, among friends.

"So, you can help me," he said. This wasn't a question. He felt the rightness in his bones. "Where do we start?"
"It depends a bit on how prepared you are. The vast majority of family research is documentation and, unfortunately, you might be at a disadvantage."

Harry balked. "How come? The Potters are old, aren't they? There should be plenty of documents."

"Yes, yes, let me rephrase: you, personally, may be at a disadvantage, Harry. Have you ever seen your birth certificate?"

He doubted Aunt Petunia took care of it, if it was in her care. He wouldn't be surprised if she'd put it through a shredder. "No, not really."

"See, James and Lily were already in hiding when you were born. It was an at-home birth that neither Sirius nor myself were present to witness. Many children born during the First War, and even the Second are born without Ministry registered certificates," Remus gave him a raised eyebrow, "I'm sure you can imagine why."

"The Ministry couldn't be trusted. So, what about everyone in my year? It can't be that none of them have birth certificates. That'd be ridiculous."

"I'm sure most do. Muggleborn and halfblood children would have the benefit of Muggle birth certificates, which are recognized by the Ministry of Magic as its beholden to the Muggle British government. We aren't completely sovereign in that way."

"And pureblood babies would be fine under Voldemort's Ministry," Harry concluded, "so there's no need to hide the births. So what, I'm just the odd one out?"

"I believe Augusta Longbottom applied for Neville's birth certificate after the war, since his parents were in hiding as well."

Good old Neville, always looking out for the team.

"It's another tragedy of war," Lupin continues. "Everyone is in fear for their lives, so there isn't time to write things down. And what is recorded is often destroyed, in an effort to either to help or hurt. I see cases where people lose their childhood homes because it was once too dangerous to prove it was rightfully theirs. You're not alone in this, Harry. It's woefully common."

Harry understood what Remus was saying, but it did nothing to soothe the ache of disappointment.

"The good news being that you're not a total loss. Far from it, in fact."

"How do you mean?"

Remus smiled. "Harry, the Potter vaults. There must exist enough proof of your birth to satisfy the bank, or else you wouldn't have access to them."

Harry grew hopeful, and then lost his steam. "Dumbledore probably vouched for me. He had my vault key for years. He probably convinced Gringotts to give me a pass."

"No, Harry." Remus said this with such deadpan certainty, it wrestled a small smile from the dejected wizard. "No wizard, not even one as influential as Albus Dumbledore, can convince the goblins to overlook proof of inheritance."

"It's what wizarding property culture is based on. New structures are rarely built or new land acquired, so everything owned must be either bought or inherited. If a person was simply given an ancient family's estate, without a proven right, on the word of a politician, pureblood society would
collapse."

"Huh, sounds like the bank is stronger than the Ministry."

Remus winked conspiratorially. "Don't tell the Wizengamot. We'll be in the next Goblin War by dawn."

Harry finally felt as if he'd gotten somewhere. His project had taken a blow, but he was back on track. "So my next stop is Gringotts."

"Yes," Remus said with a clap. It reminded Harry of tutoring under him as a teenager. For the first time in a while, those memories didn't smart.

"Remus," said Harry.

"Hm?"

"Would you mind coming with me? To Gringotts? I feel like I could use your advice, since I'm clearly not sure what I'm doing."

The man's face warmed. The scars crisscrossing it curved to accommodate his smile.

"Of course."
And gold, while worth a lot, is far from everything.

Remus got his cloak from where it hung on his chair, and presented Harry the door. The young wizard took the lead, looking back to see if his older friend followed.

Remus winked and pointed to the copper plaque bobbing gently above them. With a wave of his wand, a banner unfurled underneath it, reading "Office Closed for Lunch. Please leave inquiries with the receptionist." Harry pitied those faceless inquirers and sent them his silent support.

Standing on the balcony overlooking the main office, he saw the top of Hermione's head as it bent over her wide desk. Her faded sniffles floated up to the second floor, interrupted once or twice by her dabbing at her eyes with a struggling memo. The panel that hid the heritage office slid shut, looking as plain as any wall should.

He heard the metal staircase hum, and turned to see Remus already halfway down it. Harry's eyebrows hit his hairline, taken aback by the man's decisiveness. By the time Harry followed him down the spiral, Remus was already at Hermione's desk, patting his heart-rent coworker on the back.

"Harry plans to take his investigation beyond our little corner of bureaucracy," the man informed her. He was answered by the witch blowing her nose into a paper airplane, ending the poor thing's life in a honking hail of snot.

"Er, yeah, Remus thinks Gringott's might have some clues," he offered. "Apparently I might not have a birth certificate, but the bank should have something I could use."

He moved around to talk to Hermione face-to-face. Her eyes were rubbed red and swollen, her cheeks a bit ruddy. Overall, though, she looked recovered, even refreshed. It seemed she'd had a rather therapeutic release.

"That's a sensible next step," Hermione approved, smiling something small but sturdy. "I'm sorry for-"

Harry waved her off. "It's fine, you needed it. Figure you might want to come with us? I know I just said it's fine, but it looks as if you could use the break. The job is running you ragged."

Hermione opened her mouth, undoubtedly to turn him down, when the fireplace which had just barely cooled, dinged announcing a fire call. It dinged again, and then twice more, increasing in speed and volume. He quickly realized that several fire calls were clamoring for attention, crowding the brick hearth until it sparked green.

The logs within began to rattle and smolder. Both Harry and Remus staggered backwards, the former with a trace of fear in his eyes, while Hermione simply whined in despair. With a shout of frustration, she whipped out her wand and flung a sizzling orange spell at the Floo.

It lit up like a firework and then fell quiet. Above it fluttered a delicate, white banner. It informed
all callers that the office was closed and asked, again, for inquiries to be left with the receptionist.

"God, yes, please take me with you," begged Hermione, practically running from her desk to the door with her name on it. "Let's try to be back in an hour, if we can. I'll tell-what, why is my office door locked?"

Harry smiled sheepishly and twitched his wand. The door unlocked it with a 'snck.'

"Janice," he explained. Hermione gave him a forbearing eye roll.


Harry shivered, but was the only one. Remus, who had taken the flank, turned to the receptionist in the hall and smiled with genuine warmth. He gave the cold woman his regards. Harry mimicked his manners, hoping to be spared her displeasure.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," Janice intoned, making eye contact with Harry as she said this, which he felt was simply her being unfair. "What can I take care of for you today?"

Is it because she can't eat me, he thought, staring directly into her freezing, jewel toned eyes, refusing to be bullied. If I gave her an ear to chew on, would she back off or would it just stir up her taste for people?

"Thank you, Janice, yes," Hermione answered, oblivious to Harry's ordeal, "We'll be going out for about an hour, Remus, Dudley and I. I was hoping you might nudge my afternoon appointments down and reschedule everything after 7 PM for tomorrow morning. Is that possible?"

"Of course," the receptionist replied with mild condemnation. Still, she looked to Harry as though this were his fault. Since it largely was, he conceded and looked away.

He heard shuffling and peeked back to see Janice pull a twine-tied journal from under the desk. It slammed down on the desk surface, shaking the phone off the hook. A droning monotone filled the hallway as they watched Janice untie the journal, lick her finger, and flip through it. The pages blurred as they flew past.

She stopped when she reached today's date, and with a neat, black quill, began violently striking through the entries.

"Perfect, Janice," Hermione encouraged, relief washing over her face. "You're my hero."

"Hm, yes," the receptionist murmured absently, slicing through 3 o'clock with a stinging spite.

A bell rang at the end of the hallway, signaling the arrival of the lift.

"Ah, there you are, girl! Glad to have caught you."

Janice's head came up with a snap. Hermione squawked and pushed Harry forward, cramming her body behind his.

"What the hell are you doing," he hissed over his shoulder, a wary eye on Janice next to him.

The other woman was coming to her feet like a monster rising out of the ocean. A distinct smell of rich vanilla bookbinding and ozone swirled about her. The receptionist leaning over her desk, drawing in a deep breath.

"Excuse me, sir! Do you have an appointment?"
Her voice flew down the long hall, hitting the Ministry official as he stepped off the elevator. The long-necked man, with gray hair on every part of his head and face except the crown, stood with mouth agape as the lift gates pinged closed behind him.

"I, well, no, I only wish to speak to Hermione Granger and I can see she's free," the man projected self-importance all down the hall. It turned to ash before the strength of Janice's pique.

"Miss Granger is quite occupied, sir, and thus unable to meet with you. You will need to make an appointment for when she is next available."

"But, but she's right here! I see her, hiding behind that gentleman!

"Granger, do be serious, it is about the budget for your department. Given the staff you keep," The Ministry official blustered through, making his way toward them.

Harry and Remus sandwiched Hermione between them while the witch whispered for them to run. Janice stepped fully from behind her desk, and cut quite a menacing figure, with fashionably styled robes capturing her terribly good looks and a hand held out to forestall the unwelcome man.

"Sir!," her voice slapped. Harry swore and hustled forward, Hermione clinging to his back. "Sir, I'm going to need you to calm down."

"What, I am calm! Miss Granger, really! I know this is unannounced, but I don't see how it matters. Surely you can't be that busy!"

The Ministry official sputtered while they hurried past him, reaching out a hand to stop them. Harry smacked it away and called for the lift. Remus came up between the rude official and Remus' former students, causing the man to recoil.

The werewolf reacted with a closed mouth grin. "My apologies, Sr. Chaucy, but we were just on our way out. Urgent business, you understand."

The balding wizard scoffed, incredulous.

"Sir," Janice continued, now marching down the hallway. The clack of her heels and the now suffocating smell of a thunderstorm covered their escape into the lift. "If you won't calm down, I'll have to call security!"

"I AM CALM!," the man bellowed. The man then choked at Janice's nearness. The escaping party were rising upwards before Harry could witness the man's fate. Imagining it to be gruesome, he looked, pale faced, to Remus and Hermione, to find the pair sporting matching grins.

"Always dependable, Janice," praised Remus, with a quiet chuckle. Hermione swiped a curl from her face and laughed with him.

"A saving grace, that woman," she agreed. "I couldn't do without her. Look!," she showed them her wristwatch, a regular Muggle one with a rose gold face.

"She saved us easily twenty minutes! No one can manage that blowhard Chaucy but her."

Then the witch realized what she had said and popped a hand over her mouth. "Don't tell anyone I said that," she whispered conspiratorially. "We shouldn't speak ill of the Ministry officials. It's not civil."

Remus reminded her that they were Ministry officials and Harry, a little punch drunk, insisted she
could speak ill of anyone she wanted. She had earned it. Hermione only giggled, giddy to be playing hooky with work, led them out into the lobby. Together, they headed to the Floos on the entry level, making for Diagon Alley.

Harry couldn't provide his key to the goblin clerk at Gringotts, since he hadn't expected a trip to the bank. Instead, he was made to answer his security questions. These included the name of his first love, "Ginny Weasley," and his childhood best friend, "Hedwig."

"You and Ron felt too predictable," he shrugged to his companions, growing warm around the ears. Hermione only smiled and tweaked his cheek. Remus hummed his understanding.

"Oh, shut up," Harry tossed back, embarrassed.

When Remus suggested that Harry meet with his account manager, they were led up a floor to the office of one Manager Redfang. Growing tired of offices, Harry bucked up and thanked the clerk for the showing them the way. Remus and Hermione also thanked the goblin. They each had a lip curled at them and were left to make their own introductions.

"Who is it," demanded a voice from within the office. Harry assumed it belonged to Redfang, and became twice-over tired of dangerous sounding people. After Janice, he didn't fail to notice that Redfang's voice sounded particularly toothy.

"Harry Potter," Harry answered, then seeing his friends shift expectantly beside him, "and erm, two guests. I've come to ask about my, er, my account?"

There was a pause and a disgusted sigh. "Come in, Mister Potter and...guests."

Harry shared a look with Hermione, who looked back wide-eyed and shrugged. Remus only motioned them forward, stiff in that way he reserved specially for banks.

Harry had noticed it one time when trying to set up a trust fund for Teddy with the boy's father in tow. He figured it was from years of poor fortune coming to haunt him. Similar to how Harry froze up around family gatherings: it was a dysfunction of the deficient.

They stepped into the office and were met with the account manager. Like her name suggested, she bared her teeth in a grimace of a smile, displaying rows of shiny, scarlet-capped fangs. Her robes, shoes and capelet all matched her smile, as did a punishing looking warhammer hung on the wall above her framed certificates.

As he came closer to shake the manager's heavily ringed hand, Harry found that both of her incisors were inlaid with gold.

If a goblin could be a Gryffindor, it would be Manager Redfang. Harry immediately understood why she was trusted with the Potter accounts. James Potter was a man of obvious tastes.

"Mister Potter, please sit," directed the goblin.

Three ornately carved, high-backed chairs were summoned for Harry and his friends to sit in. They did so: Hermione folding her hands on her crossed knees, Harry with forearms resting on his thighs, and Remus, tense, with arms crossed over his chest. Harry spared the werewolf a sympathetic glance, and went back to taking in the room.

There were other weapons on the walls, blades in leather studded sheaths made to look decorative. He didn't doubt that every one of them still worked for slashing and stabbing. For the second time
that day, he regretted leaving his house.

Redfang siddled back behind her desk and folded her clawed hands in front of her.

"What brings you here today?," she asked.

"I, well," he mulled over how much he wanted to share, and settled on the basic facts, "I want to know what's in my vaults."

"You're requesting an inventory of your estate," clarified Manager Redfang, snapping her fingers.

A roll of parchment appeared on the desk, as well as a dicta-quill poised upright, waiting for instructions. "A total inventory of assets in the Potter estate as willed to the surviving family head, Harry James Potter, current as of this date, August 20th, 2002."

The quill began scratching away at the parchment as Redfang spoke, and, quite impressively, kept scratching as the seconds ticked into minutes. Harry watched as the account manager snapped her fingers again and summoned a dusty tome, with warped, yellowed pages. They coughed, fanning away the smell of moldy, old paper.

Redfang hauled open the book, which Harry realized was a list of accounts, and ran a painted nail down the numbers of various vaults, reciting them aloud. With each number, the dicta-quill chittered and furiously scribbled more words. Hermione gasped, cottoning on that this was the overview of Harry's accounts. The list went on and on.

"Merlin," breathed Remus, seeming impressed despite himself.

Harry was mortified, wishing that he had known how arrogant this all would look before inviting his friends. He felt like a detestable show-off. And still, the quill kept writing.

The scroll of parchment extended itself when the quill ran out of space and started scratching into the desk. Redfang sucked her teeth and plucked the feather, getting it back on track. Mercifully, it slowed down and came to a full stop, keeling over, magic exhausted.

Redfang swept the used quill off the desk and into the rubbish bin, where it was swallowed with a measly belch.

"There," provided Redfang, running a gimlet eye over the list before letting the scroll roll shut. She handed it to Harry, who took it timidly. "Please look this over to insure that it is accurate."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face, despairing at the thought. He couldn't possibly read all that out to his friends, like the real Dudley Dursley might do, counting his presents at Christmas. The list was at least three feet long, besides, and he was sure to lose his voice if he tried.

"I'm," Harry cleared his throat. "I'm sure it's fine." He laid the scroll carefully in his lap and avoided touching it too much, lest he look greedy.

"Will there be anything else?" Redfang said this while returning to her book of accounts, as if already preparing for another meeting. Harry appreciated her inattention. Remus and Hermione were still horribly silent beside him, and Harry thrived off of the disregard.

"Yeah, actually," he started, hesitantly. Redfang looked up at him, baring more teeth in what she must've thought an accommodating way. "I was wondering if there was...erm..."
Harry swallowed nervously, and looked to Remus for a clue. The older man pulled a hand away from his mouth and shook himself, smiling ruefully. Harry cringed and wanted more than anything to be home, in bed, unconscious.

"Ask for the Potter genealogical records, a family tree or a family register," Remus helped. Harry pointed him to Redfang, who sat clicking her nails on her desk. The older man smiled in apology and continued on Harry's behalf.

"It would likely be held in a locked box, warded against anyone but a Potter relative. The Potters had a family affinity for transfiguration and enchantments, so the box might transform to protect itself."

"Really?" replied Harry. He had known his father was good at Transfiguration, but hadn't considered a family talent. He then felt a sudden, small panic at only ever being mediocre in McGonagall's class. The Headmistress must have been so disappointed in him.

"I believe I know what you're looking for," Redfang declared. She held up a finger for quiet, and snapped a third time. A new scrap of parchment and quill appeared, ready to write: "Vault 1185, Totalis sanguinem annales, pertinent ad Harry Potter."

Standing, Redfang motioned for them to do so as well. "Follow me, please."

The account manager led the way from her office down to the vaults, recruiting a cart operator at the front desk. As they rode the perilous tracks into the depths of Gringotts, Redfang explained in short, clear sentences that the vault needed blood to be opened. Hermione admitted to the idea sounding peripherally Dark, apologizing for anything she might imply about his family.

Remus explained, for the remainder of the ride, that "Dark" sometimes unfairly described magic that was old or rare. After two wars fought by ancient families and won on obscure knowledge, modern wizarding society attributed evil to any old, odd thing it failed to understand.

"I can't comfortably say if this habit is right or productive, especially in lawmaking," Remus concluded as they jerked to a stop. "But at minimum, I wouldn't judge the Potters. I know James refused to visit these vaults. He thought they were creepy. But that was only until Lily was pregnant, and he had a legacy to think about."

Harry absorbed this information in silence. His mind echoed back to the comment about Transfiguration. These were things that he felt might have sounded better coming from his father. He had very few instances where he felt the man could have given him guidance or input.

To be fair, for most of his life, James Potter was other people's memory. However, talk of unrealized family affinities, and creepy vaults passing from father to son, gave James Potter context.

As Harry stepped from the cart, lagging behind his friends, and looked up at the towering vault doors, he thought of a shared history older than just the generation before him. It was the same sense of loneliness and vertigo he felt hearing why Weasleys have nosebleeds.

Heritage formed in his mind as a great, sprawling thing that gave people ground anywhere in time. It meant something of Harry existed well before he was born and could continue to live, long after he died. In the dark, complicated bowels of Gringotts, Harry approached the family vault caped in desperate loneliness. His desire to find something of himself in all the world to connect him to someone, anyone, was almost more than he could stand.
Harry could stand quite a bit on principle.

So, when prompted, he stepped forward, and placed the palm of his hand on the vault's lock. It was made of wrought iron and forged into twists and coils around an impression in its center. This nook cradled Harry's hand perfectly. The perfect fit warmed something worried in his chest. And then the vault bit him.

"Ouch!," Harry yipped, more surprised then hurt.

He felt a drop of blood slide between his skin and the iron. With an ominous clunk, and a cascade of ticks and clicks, the lock unknotted itself. Its hold on the doors gave way, and the vault rolled open, exhaling stale, dry air.

"It is really, truly, without a doubt: a box," said Hermione, entering her office behind him. Harry blinked to moisten his eyeballs, sighing for the fifth time since their return.

Sure enough, in his vault, placed on a stone pedestal in the otherwise empty chamber, was a plain, wooden box. Remus had walked the entire perimeter of the room, checking seams and corners for more. Hermione had cast diagnostic spells on the box, expecting secret compartments or hidden traps.

Nothing of the sort revealed itself. It was a wooden box on a pedestal, without frills or pageantry. When Harry had lifted it, the box taking up only half the space in his arms, nothing changed. The box had no writing or pictures, and the pedestal toted a simple inscription: "To whom it may concern."

"Vault 1185 is a passable bit of magic coming from humans," Redfang had explained. "It changes itself to present its secrets in the form most accessible to the rightful knower. Very agreeable design. What good would a tapestry do you if you were blind? Or a book, if you were illiterate?"

"It's a merit to wizards that at least one family was capable of sense. Yes, it can stand to be a bit more lethal, but it's a step in the right direction."

"What do I do with it?," Harry asked in the now, trying to wrestle himself from his disappointment. A box? That was all? Not even one with his name on it?

If he let himself stay quiet, he would end up dragging himself home, leaving the box on his nightstand, and sliding under his covers never to resurface.

Remus trailed in behind Harry, with the inventory of his estate in hand. In the shock from visiting the vault, the older man had offered to review the list of Harry's assets for more information. Harry handed it over, numb, and watched the former professor peruse the entire list of holdings on the walk back.

He had found nothing about a register, or a tapestry, or an album of photographs with helpful dates and names. It only listed Vault 1185, the Potter genealogy.

"No choice but to open it, I suppose," Remus murmured, at a loss. "If the box has an extension charm-I know Hermione, that you didn't detect one-but if it does, it might have more information inside. I'm not sure how with a family as old as the Potters, but. Well."

Harry laid the box on the desk and stared down at it, saying nothing. He felt a hand at his elbow and faced Hermione.
"Do you want to stop here for today?," she probed, expression concerned. "This is probably a huge let down for you, Harry. It's okay if you want to take a break from all this, and open it when you're ready."

It helped, having his friend say how he felt. He was let down and did feel like stopping, wondering after this last hour if he'll ever truly be ready to tackle family things. This wasn't Ginny hearing stories from her mum, or even Sirius retelling adventures from his school days.

This was impersonal, painfully so. A plain, wooden box didn't care if he was disappointed. A stone vault didn't care if he was an orphan. The emotionless reality of that was hard to accept. He had expected the vault to feel like homecoming and all he got was a stupid box.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said, giving her a smile. He then ran his thumb along the lock in the front, a simple metal plate with a worn well in the center. It pricked him, and the box popped open.

A book took up most of the box. This was more like what he expected! The dark, wooden cover of the book was tooled expertly, soldered with an image of a large, sprawling tree with deep roots. The roots spread over the sides of the book, onto the spine. Green-gold letters were pressed into the wood, but had faded. He could only read the inlay the letters left behind, like a fossil:

**Potter et alia**

**Totalis sanguinem annales**

Harry squinted at the title, seeing it for Latin and only recognizing some words. His surname, of course, was familiar, as was something pertaining to blood.

"Oh, this looks right," breathed Hermione beside him. "This is great, Harry! A proper register!"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, still cautious. He reached into the box and gripped the book carefully, searching for anymore biting grooves. He hoped that the blood needed to open the box was enough to satisfy the book.

Remus stepped up and held out Harry's inventory. The younger man nodded again, glad to have it. The fog in his head was clearing a little, giving way to heart thumping excitement.

Maybe the bank was a worthwhile trip, after all. Harry didn't consciously hope for all his answers to be in one place, to leave this building having belonged to something. "Consciously," being the operative word.

Harry hefted the book into the crook of his arm and opened it. Already, there was an illustration of a tree like on the cover, only this one had names. Harry skimmed it, heart racing when he looked toward the bottom and found names he knew.

_Fleamont Potter, my grandfather, and alright, so this would be my…_

"What do you call your grandfather's brother?," Harry asked the room.

"Great uncle," Remus answered, staying where he was at Harry's side.

Unlike Hermione, who was reading avidly over Harry's other shoulder, he stood looking into Harry's face, watching calmly. "You'd be talking about your great uncle, Charlus, your grandfather Fleamont's younger brother. He married into the Black family, and had a child, although no one is sure what happened to him." At this, Remus sounded curious. "Does the book say?"
Harry followed the branch named "Charlus Potter," and saw it marry with Dorea Black. After that, he found the name "Prescott Potter," a boy born on February 8th, 1962, died on July 31st, 1963. There was no entry for another child, and then the mother died years after. Harry shared the morbid news, not happy to say that the baby died on his birthday.

"Hardly a year and a half," Hermione lamented. "Poor thing. And his mother only lived to her fifties. That's incredibly young for a witch, I wonder if she was ill."

Harry, not sure of what to say, skimmed down to his father's birthday. Compared to Harry's grandfather, who lived well into his eighties, and even Dorea Black, who lived till fifty-seven, James Potter's life was tragically short.

"Twenty-one," he said quietly, touching his father's name on the page. Harry had just turn twenty-two the month before. "I'm older than he was when he died."

He heard a sniffle and felt his hackles rise. "Hermione, don't."

She squeaked and hit him in the ribs. "That was Remus," she retorted, insulted on the man's behalf.

Harry winced. Right, this wasn't just him soothsaying the past, was it? Feeling like a berk, he looked to the werewolf, and saw the man pinch the bridge of his nose. One tear escaped and was quickly swept away.

"No, it's fine, I've had years to get used to it," Remus said by way of apology. "It was such a near thing, is all, and you getting older is exactly what James wanted. There's no truer thing in the world, Harry, please understand that."

"No, I get it," he said. He looked warily at Remus' teary smile and almost wished he hadn't said anything.

He was on page one of this book and it was already so hard. He couldn't imagine it would get any easier, either. Harry hadn't considered that so much of a family tree was about people you know, dying. He thought about taking a break, but did so while scanning for his name.

There it was, on the bottom branch: "Harry James Potter*, b. July 31st, 1980 - d. Ma...2...98."

"Yikes," he thought, alarmed. He inched his thumb across the page to cover the faded death date. That was too loaded a topic to dive into, amongst everything else.

He felt Hermione's searching gaze peel away the skin on the side of his face, but she mercifully said nothing in front of Remus. He deigned not to run into her alone, however, until he was ready to talk about it.

Harry squinted at his name again on the tree, around his thumb. He tried to rub away the mark above his last name but couldn't manage it.

"The book's dirty," he mumbled, annoyed. This was an ancient family heirloom, laying out his entire history before him, and it had a smudge.

Hermione leaned over the page, also examining that mark. "That's not-oh!" She gasped so harshly, it was like a shriek played backwards. Harry jumped. She was so animated in all of her emotions, he didn't always know how to cope.

"What," Harry asked, flustered. Hermione spun from him, to Remus, eventually dashing around Harry to bend the werewolf's ear. The older man frowned, as confused as Harry, to the point of
even sharing a bemused smile.

Then Hermione hissed up at him, "An asterisk!," and the man went grey. Remus stared at the witch, who stared back on the edge of panic, and then shuttered his expression, asking in the most sedated tone Harry had ever heard, if he could see the book.

Harry was so shaken by the force of Remus' reaction, he handed the family tree over without question. It was in doing so that his arm created a current of air, that ruffled loose paper in the box. With half an eye on Remus, reading the page with a furrowed brow, Harry dipped back into the box and pulled out a few documents.

Glancing down, he saw his name, this time handwritten instead of typed in the block letter print of the book. The writing was cramped and rushed, like the author was in a hurry.

**Attending Healer: CMW Merry Charing-Claire**

**Witness:** None

**Blooded Name:** Harry James Potter

**Blooded Mother:** Lily Potter nee Evans

**Blooded Father:** James Fleamont Potter

**Date and Time:** July 31st, 1980, 12:01 AM

May this child of the Sun who will walk in darkness know his Self to rise.

"I thought I didn't have a birth...certificate," Harry trailed off, looking to the other sheets of paper in his hand. One resembled what he thought was his birth certificate. It was such a pitifully contrasting document, if he hadn't wanted to cry reading it, he might have laughed.

**Attending Healer:** CMW Merry Charing-Claire

**Witness:** Eileen

**Given Name at Birth:** None

**Birth Mother:** Unknown

**Birth Father:** Unknown

**Date and Time:** July 30th, 1980, 10 AM

**Blooded Name:** Harry James Potter

May this child of the Sun who will walk in darkness know his Self to rise.

His ears were ringing. Someone touched him, but it felt far away. His brain tried to fit the two pages together to make sense, and when they connected, he fought to tear them apart. Instead of physically ripping the papers, he looked to the third page.

It was a rough sketch of a woman, trembling in his fist.

She had a round face and high cheekbones, a wide nose and full mouth. Her dark, almond-shaped
eyes stared sightlessly out of the page. Her hair was a mess of curls and cowlicks, like Harry's, and she had a small, dark beauty mark on her chin.

The portrait was from the shoulders up, showing a tattoo on the woman's neck: a sparrow, with an arrow through its wing, under which was inked, FLY ANYWAY.

Something about the woman was distinctly striking. There was a resignation to her when she looked out of the page, like life happened to her before she happened upon the world. An abortive wistfulness, the look on her face was distant, tired and sad.

She was just a sketch on paper, but was immediately alive to him, in a cupboard kind of way.

On the bottom, he found the same, cramped handwriting, only one line of it this time. These were the only notes on the subject.

*Answers to 'Grace,' likely a false name. Belligerent. Late 20s, early 30s. Northern, runaway*

"Harry, this mark...," Harry blinked slowly up at Remus, waiting for him to finish. The words failed the older man. When he looked to Hermione, she stood hip against her desk, eyes on the floor, speechless.

"Am I adopted?"
Chapter Summary

Remus and Severus have different and very long days.

He regretted his reaction almost immediately, but in Remus' defense, it was an exceptionally long day.

A prickle of anxiety had gripped the man's spine since leaving for the bank. He knew it well, of course, as the middle-aged werewolf had come up against enough unsympathetic loan officers to kill braver men.

It nearly killed him, having just recently been unable to afford food and shelter. Banks cared not for the downtrodden.

Luckily, Remus was blessed with Andromeda's grudging hospitality, and Hermione's glowing recommendation. He could share a home with his son. He now had the income for a monthly supply of Wolfsbane, with some Ministry assistance.

Thank Merlin for the mercy of witches.

Thus, he had spent the last hour operating on compassion and willpower, paying forward the kindness he owed. Besides, Harry needed him. Remus felt honest satisfaction in being present for the young man where he couldn't even a year earlier. The Potter family legacy? He wanted to help Harry find his place in it.

"Would you mind coming with me? To Gringotts?"

"Of course."

After all, what was a quick trip to the bank?

"An inventory of the Potter estate," indeed. The older man was no small bit curious when he offered to review the Potter fortune. His eyes had tripped down the parchment, growing wider to take it all in.

Manor houses, land, heirlooms, paintings, jewelry, gold-Christ, so much gold-were written out in looping, unassuming cursive. It was a prince's wish list. It was a poor man's wildest dream.

"James, you spoiled prick, you owned a small town in Caerphilly. Merlin's bloody balls, you'd never even been to Wales," Remus had laughed under his breath, a little slap-happy.

Forty minutes into their trip found him resigned to the facts of his world. James Potter had set Harry up for generations. The werewolf could live to a hundred and work till he sputtered and died, and still only provide Teddy with a sliver of a hair of Harry's fortune.

It was now even more of a mystery why, as a boy, the green-eyed wizard ran around in tatty shoes and clothes thrice his size. He'd had tents for shirts and belts you could wrap around him twice.
Remus’ robes had been mostly patches and even he was confused.

The answer was no clearer now, knowing that at twelve, Harry could buy Remus’ life. Why the shabbiness?

"Lily's sister has a fair bit to answer for," he mused on the lift ride back underground. This time Hermione had heard him, while Harry was lost in his thoughts. She looked back at him in the close space and nodded with troubling gravity.

His anxiety hadn't needed the fuel, but he persevered. He tucked away his louder thoughts and focused on staying calm for the group. He was the oldest, and couldn’t let himself succumb to his nerves and drift very far away, as was his habit. He was there with them, present in the adventure.

The rather plain wooden box had been opened. He watched Harry pull out a decently large, wood-paneled book. He saw the back of it, and noted the detailed roots travelling across the grain, running under the young wizard's palm.

Remus returned the Potter inventory and took a step back, perceiving the entirety of his charge.

"What do you call your grandfather's brother?" Remus figured that the first page of the book was the Potter family tree.

"Great uncle. You'd be talking about your great uncle, Charlus, your grandfather Fleamont's younger brother."

Remus had never met the man, but Sirius once gossiped that James' uncle had been disowned for marrying a Black. Remus thought to direct Harry to Andromeda if the young wizard wanted to know more.

If anything, it might present a choice piece of irony. The woman was disowned by the Blacks for "marrying down," only for the Potters to turn up their noses at the same family for the same reason. It was only that the Black's despised Muggles, and the Potters despised wizards who despised Muggles.

Remus needed a flow chart to parse the web of outraged relatives writing each other off. So much of heritage work was just keeping the grudges straight.

He had to admit, Harry was a mirror image of James with his head tucked in a book. His late friend wasn't so much of a reader, admittedly, but looking down put Harry's hair on display. Those round glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

Remus took in the younger man's hunched lankiness and smiled, knowing his was a body almost settled. He saw in how Harry walked that he had begun owning his height and reeling in his limbs. The growth spurt that had overtaken the teen was finally coming under the will of the man.

"Twenty one," Remus heard Harry murmur. The boy probably didn't realize he was speaking aloud. "I'm older than he was when he died."

Remus' breath hitched, and he was immediately embarrassed by himself. Merlin, he was going to cry.

_Dammit James_, he lamented, observing his late friend's son. James' death wasn't the man's fault, of course, but still, it ached.

Remus pinched his nose and tried to push back tears. This was ridiculous. It was as if all his old
hurts were flexing, testing the scar tissue sewing them shut. He apologized and tried to explain himself.

"No, I get it," Harry said to placate him, still holding himself closed and away from Remus. Right, the older man reigned in his emotions.

*I'll just accept that this is a rough day*, he swore to himself, pasting on a smile. *Old ghosts will wail. There's nothing else for it.*

His feelings were simply aggravated by the full moon two days away. The ride to the vault had played hell with his knees and his back. His bones already creaked with remembered breaking. His wrist bones had ground together where they were bent, holding up the scroll.

*I'm exhausted*, he reminded himself, from the frustrated corner of his mind that demanded rest.

But Remus, the greater mind, shushed his lesser grievances. He could hardly catch a coronary from entering a bank. And he hadn't. Instead, he walked away, fully intact. And so, he wouldn't fall apart from grief because his friends had died.

Not a single one was gone less than seven years.

*Even Dora's been gone for over four*, he thought resolutely. He was an adult. He could handle this.

He nearly believed himself, too, when Hermione dragged in a squealing gasp. He startled, agreeing with Harry's annoyed, "What." The witch came hurrying up to Remus, face a mask of panic. He wasn't excited to see panic, but was too focused on wrestling his ghosts to really mind it.

This left him woefully unprepared.

She waved for his ear, cupping her hand around some word pushing at the back of her teeth. He had no qualms behind bending down, though his lower back complained.

Remus shared a look with Harry and shrugged, half-smiling until he heard her hiss, "An asterisk!"

His stomach dropped to his shoes.

For a moment, Remus wasn't in the room. All he heard where he went was the sound of blood rushing in his ears, and draining to his feet.

He looked to Hermione, hoping he misheard. No, he saw the worry lining her forehead. It was an asterisk, and it could only be by one name.

*Not Harry*, he thought, reeling. He must have whispered it aloud, as he saw the young witch's expression crumble.

This wasn't the face he wanted to see. He recalled the last time he saw James Potter, and craved an explanation. Remus had been standing across the man's living room, keeping distance from the infant in the new father's arms, despite its father's earnest invitations.

"Go on, shake his chubby little hand! I'll take it personally if you don't. Look, he's adorable, he's waving at you! 'Hullo there, worry-wolf, I'm Harry and I can't wait to-.'"

"Oh, c'mon now, Moony. Get over here and coo at my damn baby! I'm begging you!"

*I have to calm down*, he coached himself. He looked at Harry and saw James, and made that enough.
"Might I see the book please, Harry?"

Harry handed it over warily, and then was distracted by something in the box. Remus balanced the book on his forearm and looked at the first page. Yes, it was a beautifully rendered family tree, with intricate leaves and delicate swirling bark. Each branch had a family crested placeholder for the name.

And there, right above "Harry James Potter*," was that asterisk, plain as day.

Remus froze, unsure of his next steps. He knew what an asterisk might mean, given his current line of work. He had a case on his desk now, in fact, involving a relative of such "special definition."

A muggleborn witch was abandoned by her family on the steps of the grand manor on the hill. The manor was rumored to be haunted by old vengeful spirits. However, it was actually inhabited by vampires who've held land in the area for centuries, the Familia Constantin.

The head of the Constantin adopted the human witch through an antiquated ritual, one that no longer fell under modern jurisprudence. Now, eighty years later, the old witch arrived to his office, wrinkled and white haired, asking what will become of her home.

Her vampire father and siblings had died in an uprising from the town. She'd outlived her adopted family, who had never turned her as were her wishes. She was now an old woman in danger of losing her home, as there existed no last will and testament, thanks to the shockingly short foresight of immortals.

Could Harry be like her? Remus stared at the asterisk, and thought on all the riches in the Potter vaults and on Harry as a child in ill-fitting shoes. Could he be left with nothing?

*That's impossible,* Remus thought to himself. *He has Potter blood. He opened the Potter vaults!*

Harry started saying something, but there was a shuffling of paper, and he trailed off. Remus busied himself with thoughts of the Constantin witch, imagining Harry in her place.

As it were, there remained too many missing elements. James had no reason to hide an adoption, if that was their intention from the start.

But Remus remembered Lily's pregnancy. He remembered her looking on enviously, nursing gillywater, while Sirius, Frank, and the Prewett twins drank themselves under the floorboards.

He pictured the night Lily and James had broken the news. They were terrified, but beaming, one of Lily's hands in James'. The other curved on her stomach, protecting it. Was that real? Was she really pregnant? Well, she had to be! If not, why the ruse?

And where would Harry have gotten Potter blood, if not from a Potter?

Remus pulled his head from the book, neck tense. Harry stood in front of him, shell-shocked, with pages of thin-edged paper clenched in his shaking fists. Remus held his gaze, thinking they were both in the same headspace.

Their feet couldn't hit the ground, being caught up in the rug pulled from under them.

"Harry, this mark…," Remus didn't know what to say.

He had to explain, but it was as if he'd never learned a word of English.
"Am I adopted?," Harry asked. Lost for words, the older man looked to his coworker.

Hermione looked up at him from her feet. She wore sensible shoes, for reasonable young women, so of course she would know what to say. She bit her lip and gestured at him, deferring to his expertise.

*Great,* he bemoaned, turning back to Harry. The younger wizard sprouted a look of such horrid pain, equal parts denial, betrayal, and outrage.

Remus had to say *something,* he knew it, he felt it in his creaky bones. If he said nothing, Harry would run, and they wouldn't see the boy again for Merlin knew how long. Remus couldn't let that happen.

He had to be strong. He had to be present. He had to be kind.

Remus shook the stone from his legs and, stiff kneed, came closer to his best friend's son. Because regardless of any mark on a page, Harry was James' son, Sirius' godson, Teddy's godfather, and Remus' young, scared ex-student. He couldn't leave the boy to tremble in silence, shaking himself to pieces.

"Harry," Remus said carefully, placing his hands on the young man's shoulders, "I'm...I'm here. Breathe, I'm right here. It's okay."

"No, it's not!," Harry spat back. His hands rushed up and Remus flinched, turning away.

He jerked back around, mortified, only to see Harry rip off his glasses to scrub at his leaking eyes. The young wizard didn't seem to notice Remus' reaction. The older man sighed, unsure of why he expected to be hit.

*Today needs to end soon,* said his exhausted inner voice. His conscience agreed, feeling the grip on his tongue loosen.

"I know, there has to be a mistake," Remus said, although he really shouldn't have.

He saw this kind of reaction all the time in Creature Heritage. People found out that they were half-goblin, quarter-Veela, or three-eighths merperson six days out of seven.

He was just suddenly *so tired,* and wanted this one thing not to be true. Just, not Harry, never Harry. The boy had weathered enough storms. Let him rest.

"This isn't what I wanted! This can't be right!" The werewolf pet Harry's shoulders, dragging his eyes back to the edges of his face. The feeling there was so real, Remus would do anything not to see it.

He tried to distract himself by returning the Potter register. The papers in Harry's fists were slammed onto the desk, creased but legible. He read the first line of two sheets.

*Merry Charing-Claire, that name...,* Remus chewed on the name for a second, then saw other key words. "Blooded," and "birth mother," fell in with his reflexive knowledge of chaos.

*A blood adoption would make sense,* Remus realized. He paused his absent patting of Harry's shoulder, and relaxed into his last reserve of grown-up instincts, his academic mind.

Said mind chugged through the numb shock and broken open memories, bringing him facts. Blood rituals were not unheard of in pureblood families without heirs. It made Harry a Potter by right,
Lily and James' son by blood.

It was perhaps a little Dark, more so than a family lock on a vault.

He looked to Harry fully now, armored with a fragile, clinical lens. He searched for outside traits that might have gone unaccounted for. Blood rituals weren't perfect. They were a strange, druid thing Remus had never witnessed, that involved invoking old family gods, appealing to one's ancestors, and trading blood for blood.

He couldn't imagine James in his Quidditch tees and Lily in her Muggle jeans and flats, going in for ancient blood rites.

But then he thought again of Lily's hand on her stomach, and the bright, endangered smile splitting her face. She had been aglow. She had loved the idea of being a mother. If something horrible had happened, and there was an opportunity to fix it...

Oh, Lily, Remus mourned. He was so very tired. His body hurt, and he needed sleep.

"So, what, I'm not really their son!?"

Remus came back to himself, and felt Harry shaking in his hand. He looked down at the younger man from high up in the clouds, where he'd stood with his thoughts. From there, he noticed some things for the first time.

Harry's eyes, the same vibrant, emerald green they'd always been, were shaped differently without his glasses. And while the shape of Harry's eyes were affected by the hard rubbing and puffiness, they were still fundamentally distinct.

They had Lily Potter's color, yes, and he would need a photograph to be sure, her eyes had been large, and round. Doe-like, if just for the size, which made her Patronus so spot on. James had teased her for that.

Remus let go of Harry's shoulder and brought his hand to his own, thudding chest. Harry's eyes were almond-shaped.

"Remus? Harry, are you alright?" The werewolf shuffled aside, letting Hermione lay hands on her friend.

His heart knocked against his ribs and he needed to steady himself. The werewolf stood back and looked for other little secrets. They were so subtle, but there: Harry had James' nose, but nobody's mouth; Lily's chin but a stranger's cheeks. His hair was wild, but curled where James' stood straight in all directions.

He took somewhat after his grandmother Euphemia, around his ears. His eyes were an enigma.

These were tiny differences. Overall, with the hair and the glasses, and without a doubt, his bright, green eyes, Harry looked enough like his parents to claim a relation. But like Remus knew, ancient adoptions weren't perfect.

Most of his resemblance was in his expressions. When he smiled, he looked like James. When he cried, no one came to mind.

Remus looked to the desk and found a sketch of a woman. She seemed strikingly familiar, although he couldn't place her. He picked up the sketch, and from his high-up place, held it up by Harry's face.
"Remus! I can't believe you'd-how insensitive!," Hermione huffed, appalled by his poor manners. His gaze flicked to hers and back, comparing the two faces. He found more points of similarity here than between Harry and his memories. Similar hair, same mouth, similar cheeks...same eyes. Remus read the line of text at the bottom of the sketch. Something clicked when he saw the name Grace. He suddenly heard Sirius' voice in his head.

"Oh, she's brilliant, Moony, look at her. I paid almost nothing for this poster, which is a crime, because have you ever seen a woman like this in all your sad, teenage life?"

"The Muggle contraption she's on is called a motorcycle, yeah? I asked Evans. No, I didn't show it to her, gods! James would flay me alive. Yes, I reckon I'd still be the most handsome of you lot, but it's the principle of the thing.

"Ugh, look at her tattoo, Moony, isn't it ace? I'm getting covered in tattoos as soon as I can sneak into London. Figure you wanna come with? You can get a full moon on your arse, and never be under-dressed again.

"Aw, don't be boring! Do it! You can get one like Gracie here, to cover up your-oops. Sorry..."

"You look like a lesbian pin-up girl," Remus blurted out, pointing from Harry to the woman in the sketch.

For a beat, both young witch and wizard looked at him, mouths agape. Hermione recovered first:

"Professor Lupin!," she squeaked, blushing up to the roots of her hair. Harry said nothing, just stared, gaping and puffy-eyed, absolutely stunned. Remus, tongue-tied, held the sketch out for Harry to take and made to apologize.

"I have no idea what came over me," he started, then, again, was caught up on the difference in his eyes. The same cloud feeling came over him, and he continued, "Gods, your birth mother had strong features. Good on her."

Yes, Remus regretted his words almost immediately. However, in his defense, it had been an obscenely long day.

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**August 20th 2002: Daugavpils, Latvia**

Severus despised the trip back from England with every fiber of his being. Existing as a man consumed by hatred, and factually guilty of murder, it wasn't much to say that if his commute were a man, he would beat him bloody and mutilate his corpse.

The time jumped two hours forward from England to Latvia, and this was felt near instantaneously via Portkey overseas. Upon arriving in Riga, and dry heaving in an alley, Severus had to run to catch the evening train to his haunt in Daugavpils, which lasted nearly three hours.

He spent the trip unable hold down anything. It was a stinking, bilious wash for both the dry chicken sandwich he wasted his money on, and the water from the tap in the train bathroom.

Not to mention, the conductor cared nothing for his disdain of public transportation. The sharp tick of the ticket punch bounced around his skull.
Severus’ only option thereafter was to wrap himself in his transfigured black coat and chase sleep. And sleep, like all things except misery, evaded him.

At ten at night, he stumbled from the train station, nauseated and night blind, wishing for death. He shambled to a nearby parking lot, and hunted down his dented trash can of a car. He finally found it, after ten minutes of crouching down to read license plates.

Severus stabbed his key into the door, unlocking the car and throwing his body in the driver’s seat.

He then spent a few minutes, panting, stomach roiling, head thrown back against the headrest.

He had a splitting headache from the Portkey hurtling him through time zones. He squeezed his eyes shut until he saw stars and blinked them open. It was fully dark in the lot, with only a few cars besides his own.

"Fuck," he growled, draping an arm over his eyes. Dry, stale breath coated his tongue, which he scraped off on his teeth. Severus gagged. His whole, dehydrated mouth tasted disgusting, and his head was throbbing.

He really shouldn't be driving, but also couldn't risk Apparition. Splinching himself would hardly improve his night, unless he lucked out and left his head behind. Severus slid his arm aside and looked around his car, noting the dishwater beige upholstery torn up to reveal the dark, yellow cushion. He considered spending the night there.

He had bought the banged up, black car incredibly used. It was still in use, in fact, when he'd approached the owner.

It had been parked under a bridge and Severus had offered the driver a couple hundred dollars—no, not for that—to take the vehicle off his hands, no questions asked. The disheveled and suspiciously stained man had scrambled out, hauled a foul smelling suitcase from the trunk, and tried to shake Severus' hand.

He was promptly rebuffed and took his payment, fading into the night.

Severus had spelled away all the nasty implications from the piece of junk and drove off. Given the condition he'd gotten it, he expected it to last him a year at best. That was four years ago.

Now, the old can rattled more than ran, but it still saved him walks in the rain, and might finally be his bed for the night.

Bringing back the seat, Severus spelled the interior warm and layered a few Notice-Me-Nots to protect him from curious visitors. Then rolling over, he closed his eyes and dared sleep closer, praying sleep was as bold as he was haggard.

The ex-spy dozed for a few hours in his car, before being stirred to partial wakefulness by chirping birds. Groggy, he tried to open his eyes and found he couldn't.

*Oh, damn,* he swore internally, having lost all ability to curse aloud. Not only had sleep been bold, but it had been spiteful.

He was bound by sleep paralysis. This wasn't unheard of after his long excursions. It was why, alongside being risky, exhausting, and expensive, he only did it once a year.

Severus tried to remain calm, berating himself.
I'm so bloody tired, I should've known, he chastised. Lucius Malfoy isn't worth all of this.

He tried not to panic, knowing it would only make his episode worse.

He put all his efforts into trying to move something, anything, before he was truly set upon by fear, as his body remembered his months trapped in the manor, unable to move, airways closing in the dead of night from a mortal terror no one knew to free him from, as he was unable to scream for night after night except for in a constant roar in his own mind—

Severus managed to wiggle a toe. The temporary paralysis lifted, relief spreading from his feet upwards. He drew in great gulps of stuffy air, fixing his fingers to roll down the windows and let more in. Sweating, he jammed the key into the ignition and twisted.

It was still dark when his dented 1995 Opel Astra peeled out of the parking lot. It glanced off the curb, and sped down the empty street. In the rush to lock himself into the safety of his apartment, Severus didn't take note of the lot he left behind.

He didn't see the robed figure approaching his car, growing nearer just as it flew off. From halfway down the road, he couldn't hear the figure curse, turn on his heel, and crack away.
Perseverance

Chapter Summary

Severus could use a smoke.

August 21st, 2002: Daugavpils, Latvia

The sun was still hours from rising on the street of Soviet bloc apartments when the black Astra pinged around the corner, black smoke spewing from its tailpipe. A stray cat missing a leg raised its hackles and fled into an alley, fearing for its other three. The car ricocheted off a lamp post before skidding along the curb, brakes squealing.

Severus cursed and wrestled the steering wheel into something between driving and flipping off the road. His car veered left, the right, then straddled the center line. With a final, dizzy nod, he pumped the brakes, causing the engine to backfire and crack across the lonesome pre-dawn. Eventually, he slowed, grip iron, forehead a mess of clinging hairs and sweat. Sat there, gripping the wheel, heart knocking against his ribs, the wizard accepted two very simple truths:

Firstly, and most prevalent, Severus Snape was an atrocious driver.

He should stop taking his own counsel about driving without a license. Getting away with it for several years had instilled in him a false confidence in his skills. Now he knew cars were just suicide machines for the subconsciously tormented.

Nobody could disagree if they, like him, had once bore witness to a window decal of a nuclear stick figure family with three twiggy brats and a dog, presented in broad daylight for all to see. Nothing about such a desperate car decoration suggested anything less than a driver compensating for their guilty craving of freedom in oblivion.

Thus evidenced, cars were for people with violence in their hearts for themselves and others. And just because this described Severus to a tee, he argued internally that this need not require him to ever step foot in one again.

Secondly, giving into a rare craving, Severus realized that he would kill for a cigarette. His stomach ached from thirty hours sans food, what with the outrageous travel and the thickness of new Polyjuice. He doubted his meager rest in the front seat would help him choke anything down. Smoking would satisfy his hunger pains until he was ready to eat.

With a queasy cramp in his upper abdomen, he knew a pain only nicotine could sooth.

"If it's not the snake or the Dementors, or the car or the cancer," Severus hissed, ears ringing, finally coming to a stop.

His car had hobbled into the parking garage tucked under the one apartment he called "house." He blew away a dark, stringy lock of hair.

Severus managed to unclench his hands enough to pat down his coat pockets. It kicked up a fine powder of sea salt, but revealed no crumpled, paper edges. He tsked, having hoped to run across a
forgotten pack hidden somewhere on his person.

"Of course," he commented, watching the rear view mirror for telltale shadows in the concrete garage. "Oh, come on, you nasty bastard, I know you've got something."

He couldn't recall the last time he bought cigarettes, though. Probably upwards of a year ago, when he discovered after most of the conscious, wizarding world that he had been pardoned for murder. He'd learned of this on his last visit to Azkaban, before the one currently dogging him.

"I'm surprised you've yet to resurrect yourself as Britain's premiere hero martyr. After Potter, of course," Lucius had teased, examining his eyebrows in a handheld mirror. He had then put it down to delight in the Severus' expression. "A posthumous Order of Merlin, First Class, for serving the greater good...my, aren't we special?"

Continuing to berate himself, Severus turned to rummage through the glove box. He swore he had half a pack left from then. They would be stale by now, and probably wouldn't even light properly. But he persisted, knowing the store was too far to walk while it was still dark out.

Then he thought he heard someone pull in behind him.

He froze. There was nothing but the clinking of pipes overhead and the buzz of the cool white fluorescents. However, the ex-spy swore he felt the air shift, like he was being watched. He breathed in the sticky stench of burnt rubber wafting through the open driver's side window. Severus then exhaled quietly, easing back upright to scan the parked cars for people.

No one. He was alone.

Looking back to the rear view mirror, he thought perhaps he'd see his neighbor, Demyan, whom he normally only tolerated under duress. He absently continued his search, while looking for a broad, stout man with an ill-advised undercut and a gold chain.

Severus' center console was full of used napkins and broken, dried up ditany stems. He came up empty-handed from it, momentarily distracted from the not-noise by his frustration.

He half mused about asking the dolt neighbor for a smoke. He thought this while confronted by the lack of the man's familiar stocky frame swaggering in from the dark street. Severus felt he could feign interest in Demyan's grossly modified sports car for a few minutes before begging off, returning to his apartment, and passing out on the floor.

But the garage stayed empty, except for him, and the buzzing quiet, and the standing hairs at the nape of his neck.

*Get inside,* ordered his instincts. It planted him fully in the moment. *Move now.*

He heeded that terrifying inner voice that spoke little in graven tones. Severus felt the weakness in his hands as he gripped the handle and eased his door open. He stepped out of the car, one leg after the other, hunching over to hide his face behind a curtain of dark, unwashed hair.

*Take the stairs,* said the veteran paranoia. *Get in your apartment. Activate the wards.*

The wizard slammed the car door shut, pressing the auto-lock on the key fob in his pocket. The resulting honk echoed in the garage.

An overhead light flickered but stayed lit. Severus strode purposely to the stairwell, bypassing the elevator entirely. His dark silhouette reflected dully in the brushed steel doors. He cursed
internally, wishing the doors were reflective enough to show him the open space at his back.

Luckily, the stairwell had corner mirrors for surveillance. He took them two floors and saw no one. He then doubted the security cameras in the stairwell worked at all, and so turned on his heel and Apparated.

He arrived at the floor below his, with the crack of displaced air carrying up to the roof entrance. Severus pushed through the service door, and strode down the corridor of locked apartments towards a large, window on the other side.

Throwing out his left hand, Severus caught his wand as it slid out his sleeve and spelled the window open. He had the brief thought that he might be overreacting. He then braced himself on the window sill and hopped out into the dark.

Both feet hit the fire escape with a ringing bang. Straightening his coat against the early morning, third-story wind, Severus gripped the rusting bannister and took the climb upwards.

"If it's not the snake, or Azkaban, or the trip, or the bloody car," he muttered as he headed toward the skin-tightening hum of his wards, "then I'll be damned if I'm killed by a shadow in a car park."

He waved his wand at his own window, relieved to feel his wards slide over him before allowing him into his space. Spinning around, he slammed the window shut and spelled closed the blinds. Navigating his unlit living room, Severus tucked his wand away and felt along the wall for the light switch.

A flip of it brought his apartment into view.

"Mmmrow."

"Hm," Severus took off his coat and hung it on the back of his armchair. Then he bent down, knees cracking, and offered his arm with a wince.

A blur of piebald skin and sparse fuzz ran onto his shoulders with light, nimble steps. A wrinkled head butted against his chin, rubbing against day old stubble. The wizard grunted, pushing the little head away, earning himself an affronted, rolling chirp. He turned to accept a glare from a pair of giant, golden-yellow eyes.

"Mmmrp," went the sphinx cat, huge gunmetal grey ears twisting toward him. Severus matched her unblinking stare with his own. His tired eyes betrayed him, twitching closed. The cat's rat-like tail lashed victoriously as he conceded this round, looking away to the kitchen. He pardoned himself by saying he'd had a long day, and would rally harder next time.

"Yes, food," was his answer to the second nudge. He flicked her nearest ear for pushiness. "Behave."

Severus' apartment was small, but not unfit for the single potions master. His living room, like his bedroom, was a collection of mismatched furniture, lost under piles of discarded cloaks and neglected laundry.

Several shapes and sizes of lamp were set up around the room, all lighting the room with a myriad of bright whites and warm glows. The concrete floor was covered by thick, navy blue area rug that resembled a night sky for all the tiny holes burned into it, showing the pale slab underneath.

The room's ability to sustain life was lost to surfaces covered in open books and tea-stained papers.
Ink had spilled on the low-crouching coffee table in front of the squashed, second hand couch, staining the pale wood red. Dusty, dirty cups formed colonies by forgotten sandwiches under the couch.

Severus kicked aside a bowl plastered with cold oatmeal as he walked through, blind to the chaos he hath wrought.

The only hope at order were the walls lined with cheap bookcases made of black vinyl and particle board. The dozens of shelves were reinforced with layers of enchantments, such that they glowed a faint cerulean.

This was to manage the crushing weight of hundreds of books, pamphlets, binders and journals, shoved mercilessly onto them and made to fit. These shelves, while not neat by any librarian's standards, were at least trashless and considerably dust free. This was thanks to how often books were yanked off and replaced, which served to inadvertently sweep the space.

Save for the very occasional charm, this was the only cleaning the apartment saw.

Severus walked into his kitchen, floating the cat's food bowl into the sink. He dumped out the old, hardened scraps and turned on the faucet, letting the water run over the dish while he searched his cabinets.

Luckier here than in his car, he found a can of chicken and the sandwich bag of dried herbs he kept for her. Pulling out the bowl with a bit of water still inside, he reached into the small plastic bag and threw in a sprinkle of herbs to soak.

His cat wound in and out of his legs as he worked. He pushed her away with his shoe, and, eyeing her as she licked her chops, upturned the can into the bowl. As per usual, this was too much temptation for the sphinx to take. She sprung over his foot and onto the counter. Ignoring his irritated hiss, she shoved her head into her bowl and tore into her dinner.

Severus gave her an exasperated tap on the side, and was disgusted by the visceral gulp of chicken into naked belly. He left the cat to eat.

Looking around, the introverted wizard felt a limp kick of energy at being home. He returned to the window and peered through the blinds, double checking that he hadn't been followed. A telltale easy breathing on the horizon denoted the onset of sunrise. He squinted through the unwashed slats, tired but not somnolent, and considered a start to his day.

"I meant to do something," he mumbled, scratching under his chin. Severus swayed, the long hours of the day before pouring into him. "Gods, what was it?"

I could try to sleep, he thought, giving his couch a once over. A shiver ran up his back, and he shook the thought away. No, not sleep, not today.

Surely exhausting himself further would make certain he'd awake paralyzed. But collapsing made the decision to sleep his body's problem and not his.

Recalling waking up in his car, clawing for purchase in his own rigid limbs, he turned instead to his remaining missives. On a desk moved into a corner, under a tall shadeless lamp, waited piles of potions orders needing his attention. Massaging a spasm under his eye, Severus sided with work over risking bed.

Soon after arriving in Latvia four years ago, Severus realized the Malfoys' high-fashion second life didn't suit him. He had gone stir crazy wandering the mini-mansion's listing, art-lined corridors.
The house in Riga only held clean lines and fine fabrics. It had settees he found impossible to touch with his potion stained hands. He sweated through the expensive, hand-stitched pillow shams and woke up tangled in the high thread count sheets. Large, impeccably decorated suites stood without occupants, opulent and barren. When he slept, the sweet smell of the gardens would drift through the sheer curtains, scenting his night terrors with magnolias.

The Malfoys' lifestyle, even in hiding, required a level of outside maintenance that Severus never understood. Even his time in Malfoy Manor had often been baffling, with so much grandeur at hand, to what? Enjoy privately? Show off to others?

This wasn't Severus' definition of a home. Granted, he doubted he had ever truly known a home. However, it couldn't be a place of such exorbitant frippery with no greater purpose than to be looked at and envied.

And at least the manor had company. He sat at his desk overflowing with letters, nudged its wobbly leg back into place, and started sorting. Bills to his left, potions requests to his right.

There were excessive luxuries at the manor, yes, with cold, untouchable, too-good-for-him spangles at all sides.

But there was also Narcissa, a woman he'd known since school. There were parlors Lucius once invited him into, for teas and private chats and commiserations about the school board or Dumbledore or such-and-such idiot or this-or-that law. As spacious as the manor became during his stay, and was revealed to have always been, there was life there.

The mansion in Riga had nothing. It was a gilded dollhouse, where a family was meant to be and wasn't. It served no purpose but to close him in, away from discovery. Severus lasted all of three weeks pacing trenches into the floors before breaking out.

With only a twinge of guilt at Narcissa's imagined outrage, he stripped the inside and sold it all, piecemeal, to buy a life somewhere else. He boarded the train to Daugavpils and rode it to the last stop, then spent hours walking until he felt the tether snap.

That day, the house in Riga faded from his mind as he watched an old aunt yell in Russian at a gaggle of shrieking children. Their harassed mother noticed him looking and called him names. An ostentatious car had roared past, horn blaring and slowing none as it barely missed the last troublesome brat, giving the little boy the scare of his short life.

This life suited Severus perfectly.

And so he used his ill-gotten funds to rent an apartment, buy some potions supplies, and fill a demand for painkillers and fungal ointments in the old witches' bazaar. He shipped some more prestigious orders back to Riga, and wrote to English journals under a pseudonym. He paid a private courier 200 lats a month to forward his mail from Riga.

He made due with what he had. This was the life he preferred, cramped and dirty, a box fit for him. In four years, he'd acquired steady repeat business, a few published articles, a horrid neighbor and a cat. This was fine.

Severus propped his chin on his fist, thoughts stirring. Thinking on the gardens in Riga had reminded him of something. He was struck again with the remembered shock of Lucius and Narcissa's divorce when the memory shifted to something else.

Lucius' incredulous look slipping into faint mockery...Narcissa's letters...
"Beyond what pertains to potions, what use would I have for the meaning of daffodils?"

"...whimsey. Narcissa would write secret notes in flower language...'gwarts days. Can you imagine."


Giving up his plan to work, Severus stood and dragged himself to his couch. Shoving aside a pile of shirts, he threw himself down and rolled his eyes at his letters from England. They were all written with Narcissa's personal letterhead, a silver narcissus bloom amid carbon-black vines.

He sifted through them looking for the most recent letter, and found one from last week. He relived reading this one and letting it drift from his hand, partially-read, bored by all the talk of gardens. He picked it up again now, and let his eyes run through the words for clues.

'Hello Dear Friend,' it began, 'As always, I must thank you for the superb advice you have given regarding the landscaping.

'The crows have being caught and caged by the groundskeepers, as has been that strange animal lost in the hedge maze.

'This is all thanks to your advice. I cannot fathom what my properties would look like without your help.

'Draco and I can now live more worry-free knowing that those dangerous creatures can no longer menace us during our walks through the gardens.

'Of course, we would love Lucius to be in a position to enjoy this feeling of freedom, but what can one do? These are the cards we are dealt.'

Severus quirked an eyebrow at this. "That's certainly one way of phrasing it," he quipped.

'If I could bother you for more advice? I believe there are still some weeds clinging to my summer blossoms. I cannot be sure, but I may have heard some rustling under the cypress trees.

'I cannot name the animal there, but it may be high time you call on us for a visit, and take a look yourself.

'Otherwise, I hope all is well. Draco sends his regards.

Best Wishes,

Narcissa'

And the letter ended with her name written with a flourish. This alerted something in Severus' otherwise bland perusal. She had become far less flamboyant with her signatures after years of solitude. The extra loops and curllicues were never her style, except maybe in girlhood, and even then this seemed more likely a call for intense scrutiny.

Severus cringed at her having to be so effusive to catch his attention. He had gotten much too comfortable in hiding. He leaned back and considered his bookcases, wondering which text might best help him decode her message.

His eyes ran over the titles until he noticed an herbal dictionary he used for testing new recipes. He knew the contents by heart, and dug through his brain for answers. It only helped but so much.
The only plant mentioned is cypress, which meant death, among other things. He focused on the start of the letter.

"Crows…," he pondered aloud, "strange animal...caged."

His mind conjured an image of Lucius in his striped uniform. Severus narrowed his eyes at the letter in his hand. The only sound for several seconds was his cat finishing her food and knocking the empty can to the floor.

"The Carrows...and Lestrange," he said. Severus summoned the Prophet he started having delivered since unwittingly being honored as a war hero. The headline from a week back announced "OUR DUTIFUL DEFENDERS: AMAZING AURORS CAPTURE THREE MORE DEATH EATERS IN CORNWALL."

"You're getting lazy, Severus," he said to himself, brow furrowed. "Pay attention."

He returned to the letter, with the embarrassing knowledge that he had ignored valuable information in favor of bunion cures. Because of course the Prophet, rag that it was, would report on a major development like the arrest of the last major Death Eaters at large.

But that was just the beginning of the letter. Narcissa's telling of dangerous whispers followed.

"Rustling under the cypress trees," recited the wizard. He lifted his wand to summon the herbal dictionary when he noticed the wand itself. Cypress wood.

His eyes flicked back to the letterhead, at the inlaid narcissus, blooming quietly. "I see...She means me."

If the other animals were Death Eaters, then…

'I cannot name the animal there, but it may be high time you call on us for a visit, and take a look yourself."

A knock broke the silence.

Severus stood up, careful not to make a sound, and pointed his wand at his front door. There wasn't a second knock, so much as a heavy, tunneling silence that made Severus feel every pumped of blood to his dizzy head, every roll of his stomach. Acid rose in his throat when he looked to the floor, and saw the shadow under his door dance manically. He felt his wards vibrate and then jolt.

'I'm caught, I'm dead," said his human mind.

He was overrun with the non-sound in the garage. He fucking knew there was someone there, and here he thought he'd be safe inside his wards, but he was wrong. He'd only served to corner himself.

Apparate!, snapped his hindbrain, pushing adrenaline through him so fast, his whole body shuddered.

He couldn't Apparate again, not so soon, not without Splinching, and his only Portkey would take him to Malfoy Manor, where he was sure to be followed. Every Death Eater still at large knew that property. If he appeared there suddenly, he could be walking into an ambush.

'She'd tried to warn me a week ago. I had a week's warning and I pissed it away," he lamented, feeling his wards jolt again.
His cat, hackles raised, scarpered from the kitchen, past the front door, and up his leg. He flinched as she hissed in his face, claws sinking into his shoulders. The terror that had locked down his limbs finally shattered.

*RUN*, roared his gut.

There was an deafening bang and an explosion of red light. His front door crashed inwards, blown free of the frame. Boots stomped through the debris. A cloud of plaster dust hid the intruder, but also hid Severus as he backpedaled towards his window, muttering Latin, stringing ward after crumpling ward together in a catastrophic chain reaction.

"SNAPE," hollered a voice, in lightly accented English. Dark sleeved arms waved through the dust in a clumsy swirl. "TRAITOR!"

"Oh, thank Merlin, he's one of the stupid ones," he sighed, eternally grateful.

Severus twisted, cat yowling, and as the Apparition ripped him over an ocean, he activated the ward storm with a breathless final incantation. He was promptly blinded by the flash of burning white light that ushered him into the spinning dark.

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**August 21st, 2002: Cokeworth, Greater Manchester**

Severus arrived in the trees. His body untwisted in the brush as he fell, panting, face down in the dirt. His cat leaped off of his shoulders and into the bushes, shivering as she watched him writhe.

His wand arm burned from elbow to fingertip. He felt skinned raw, and clenched his jaw, keeping in a scream.

*Get up, get inside.*

He rolled over onto his back, pressing his burning arm into his stomach as if to physically stifle the pain. He tried to open his eyes but wasn't sure if he succeeded, as all he saw were black spots and starbursts.

His lungs wouldn't fill properly. He panicked, worried one might have collapsed.

*Get up! Get inside!* Severus levered himself on his side and heaved.

It was as if his body had no idea what the problem was, and so sent all of his reflexes into overdrive. He arched, muscles flexed to their extreme, and then buckled again in the mud the dirt made with his bleeding wounds.

*I'm bleeding,* was the first conscious thought that managed to weedle through the panic. *But I escaped.*

And he knew he had. On some level, this was a familiar experience, flailing in this dirt on a summer morning. His knee hit the ground and his teeth ground together in a way recognizable to his terrified rabbit brain.

Not unlike his cat, Severus belly crawled into the shade under the bushes. His breath hitched, once, at his arm grinding into the dirt. He found a place to curl up and sobbed a little, having returned to a place mentally that he had not visited since childhood.

Finally giving in, a mostly unconscious Severus turned to his habit as a boy. Before Lily, before
Hogwarts, when his father would have a go at him, he would crawl under the bushes, and ask the
dirt for help. Hurtling three times overseas within twenty four hours robbed the wizard of any
greater sense.

He only had left to him the tiny, pleading sense of magic that came in desperate times.

Like when he was a boy, there wasn't a spell he could think of to offer up his painful tiredness to be
cured. He only whispered, "Please stop...," into the dirt and, eventually, dropped into sleep.

Severus jerked awake hours later, covered in ferns. Everything in the undergrowth seemed hazy. He
blinked rapidly, trying to clear film from his eyes, but still failed to see in detail. He couldn't
focus his eyes and was thus surrounded by dark green blurs and vague blotches of sunlight.

A blob of grey and pale pink crept into view, purring loudly.

"You," he greeted his cat, reaching out a finger. She smelled it and turned, running out of the bush.

He dropped his hand and cursed, whipping it off the ground, taking some clinging green with it.
Severus squinted, staring at his own arm in the dim alcove. All he could gather was a mess of red,
pink, and dirty green. Severus figured this was the splinch and hoped that was the worst of it.

"Mroowww," called his cat from outside the bush.

"Shut it," he replied, slumped into the dirt, wondering if he had the energy to stand.

Severus tried to rouse himself by thinking he needed to clean his wound, to avoid infection. This
did nothing for him, as he lie dithering on the ground. For a while he just stayed down, listening to
cat purrs and tree leaves shushing in the wind. The afternoon was on its way to evening. The
injured man watched the little patches of light come into focus and redden as it turned to dusk.

'I cannot name the animal there, but it may be high time you call on us for a visit, and take a look
yourself.'

"Someone knows I'm alive," he said to the dirt. A fern leaf swayed and furled again around his
wound. His bleeding had slowed, exposing pink quick skin and raw edges. He peeled back the leaf
to examine the wound.

"Enough, time to get up." Severus plucked the fern from the ground to keep it on his exposed skin.
He then got his knees under him again, then his hands, and climbed, ever so slowly, to his feet.
"Merlin, I want to die."

He said this with one hand gripping his twinging back, and the other shooing his cat from his
muddy shoe. Severus dragged himself the few yards from the woods, to the house properties,
stopping just short of the backyard. Standing there, stomach in knots, limbs leaden, he took in his
old house.

Spinner's End held up surprisingly well to the bully of time, given that it had sat vacant for over
four years. As Severus made his way across the back yard, he noted the lack of graffiti, clean
sideboards, and an intact roof. He thought teen vandals would have besieged the house before now.
What with Severus not being particularly popular with the local delinquent fauna, he expected at
least one broken window.

As he opened the back door and walked inside, he figured his anti-Muggle measures must still
work. This would be ideal, as it would give him a foundation of magic to build on. He needed to
bring the whole abandoned affair up to the snuff of an Order safe house as soon as possible. Luckily he had the shattering of his personal wards to inspire him. He would make this place a fortress, given it was now the only place he had left.

Severus let the cat in and closed and locked the door behind him. That it had ever been unlocked for him to enter was insane. He couldn't remember having such a gross lack of judgment four years ago as he had now. Then again, his last year in this house had been a hectic one.

*I can’t believe I’m back to this,* he thought, ears ringing.

He had been ready to return to a ruin. Somehow, having his old haunt survive so well preserved, and him a sad wreck crawling back into it, hurt more than having nothing left at all. Maybe he would have been better off cutting his ties to England. Whoever found him in Daugavpils most likely followed the Malfoys’ mail. If there was no one to write him, he might have still had his peace.

Next he disappeared, he vowed to do so completely.

He sidled into the kitchen, testing the faucets. Water filled the sink, both to his relief and incredulity. Honestly, he hadn't paid a bill in four years. Surely the water should have been shut off already.

*At least it’s some consolation.* Severus winced as he peeled the fern from his wound and looked the gash over again. He Splinched two fingernails and a strip of skin that crossed from one side of his wrist to the opposite side of his elbow. There was dirt and small gravel ground in it that needed washing out.

Checking the water’s temperature, Severus then held his forearm under the faucet, rinsing out the stinging flesh. After most of a minute, he pulled it out and shut off the tap.

"Bandages," he murmured, conjuring a rag and holding it to the wound. Annoyingly, fresh, bright red blood began to stain the rag almost instantly. He scowled and headed for the bathroom.

Being a man evolved to ignore mess, Severus failed to notice the open, half-unpacked boxes lining the hallways on his single-minded mission to bandage his arm. One box here was marked "Laney's clothes," and another there read, "Toys for Bleppy."

In his time living in Spinner's End, there were often open packages or messy trunks left scattered about, for when he chose to return to them. So inundated with deep-running habits now newly resumed, he overlaid these generic items with his own things from the past. In that moment, it made these odd additions functionally invisible to him.

The disheveled man entered his bathroom and opened the mirrored cabinet, locating the roll of bandages. Holding one end down with his thumb, he began to wrap when he realized he'd forgotten a pad of cotton. Swearing, he dropped the bandage, flung open the cabinet for cotton, and flung it closed again.

It was in the rattling bathroom mirror that he saw it. A lurid pink bra hung from the shower rod behind him.

He stared at it in the mirror, dangling behind his own gaunt, sallow face gawking back at him, contrasting his shadowed visage smeared in blood, grease, and grit with waterlogged padding and feathery, gaping lace.

"Who—?" Severus slapped on the cotton pad, and started yanking the bandage around his arm.
Something was wrong. Several somethings were wrong, as the day’s theme, but something in that moment was fundamentally askew. There was more sense in a Death Eater hunting him down in Latvia than in a pink bra being present anywhere on Snape property. He must have Apparated to the wrong house in his confusion, and had to leave before he was noticed.

Severus hurried through the house, tripping over boxes as he headed for the back door. As he passed into the kitchen, however, he stopped.

He backtracked and stared at the wall, baffled. He didn't doubt that most houses in Cokeworth were built with the same basic floor plan, repeated ad nauseum. He could confuse any one with his. However, no other house on Spinner's End had his mother's portrait hanging up in the hallway.

It was a photo he normally kept put away, of his mother sitting with him, age two, posing in her lap. She didn't smile in the photo, of course, and neither did he, which he admitted looked rather glum on a toddler. However, it was one of the only Muggle photos she had ever surrendered to, enlarged and framed in a place of honor.

This was his house. He recognized the picture, and as he moved backwards through the house, recognized even more. He found his sturdy oak bookcases attended by all his texts. He found the same, cabbage rose upholstery couch, no longer spelled black to hide the pattern.

He found a few absurdly new things, like a television, hooked up to a Muggle gaming console he might have seen in an ad; and a beaten, nylon guitar case slouching against a shelf in the sitting room. But when he ended up outside in the street, gawking at the front porch, he'd be damned if it wasn't his house. At the end of Spinner's End, with new curtains and the same, scratched siding, was Severus' childhood home.

"Scuse me, are you lost?"

Severus spun around.

A few yards behind him stood an older woman, with wild black hair streaked with steely grey. She had curved, artistic features, with almond shaped eyes and a high cheekbones, a wide nose and full mouth. She wore a dark blue jumpsuit, and was carrying a cardboard box labeled, "From Lena."

"Lena, for fucks' sake, quit whining! Boy, get your mother outta my arse or it's both of your hides, you hear me?"

"I hate you, you ugly bastard!"

"Eileen, I'm warning you—c'mere!"

"Hullo? Do I know you from somewhere?" The woman came closer. Her hair was cropped short, revealing a faded neck tattoo of a sparrow shot through its forward wing. Beneath it read, "FLY ANYWAY."

He could just barely rip his tired, bleary, wishing-to-close-forever eyes from the box with his mother's name to the strange woman's face. She almost looked familiar, but he couldn't place her for the life of him. Instead, Severus scowled viciously, and pointed to his home.

"Now who exactly might you be and why are squatting in my house!?"

"Mum, you need help? Who's this bloke?"

This voice was a man's voice, coming down from above. When he looked over the woman's head,
he looked to the man unloading the gold station wagon parked tight to the curb.

Instead of a face, he saw a wide chest with a flaming skull emblazoned across it. Severus himself stood at six feet, even. It didn’t bode well that, when he looked up in search of a face, his eyes traveled about six more inches before he found one, frowning down at him. It was ferocious, framed by long, stringy, thin hair not unlike his own; thick, angry eyebrows furrowed in groves you could pinch a Sickle in, and skirted in a wild, scraggly beard touching his torn collar.

Save for the beard, Severus was struck dumb by how strongly this man resembled his father.

"Oi," the mountain of a man growled, dropping his many bags.

Severus took a fortifying breath, wondering at the profound depth of his misfortune. But then he remembered that he'd been through worse, had nowhere else to go, and had magic to defend himself. He steadied his breathing, and looked the massive man in the eye.

*If it wasn't the snake, or the car, or the Death Eater in my apartment, then it won't be a Muggle in bloody Cokeworth,* he rallied. He pulled up his chin and sneered:

"And who the fuck are you?"
Ginny explores empty houses.

August 20th, 2002: Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London

Ginny didn't know what to expect when Harry came home from the Ministry. The Chaser walked into Grimmauld Place that afternoon from a lengthy run, excited to see him.

She had caught a whiff of herself three miles in and gagged. Ginny then grinned viciously and spent the last minutes of her cool down itching to get home. She planned to pull her boy into a nose-hair-singeing embrace.

She was disappointed to find the house empty.

Easing the door shut behind her, sweat gluing her t-shirt to her back, she called out for her hermit boyfriend, expecting him to greet her airily. Thick quiet amplified the click of the door catching, and her exposed back and shoulders, once radiating heat, immediately cooled, skin turning cold and clammy.

"Harry," she called out again, arms down by her sides, shoulders tightening. No one responded.

"Alright, no need to be dramatic. So, Harry isn't home. He's not been home before."

That this had ever been the case was purely hypothetical. It should have been that Harry had once been gone when she came in. However, in the few months they had lived together, Ginny had yet to return to an empty house. Harry always drifted a room or two away, close enough to hear the door close.

With her high occupancy childhood, Ginny hadn't quite caught the hang of empty homes. Walking into a quiet house always made her feel lost. Like she was desperately missed somewhere else but couldn't know where.

She fought the urge to leave and come back when Harry was home. He was probably around the house but a little too far away to hear her.

"Upstairs," she declared, taking the stairs to the second floor two at a time. She spoke to herself like she would a nervous teammate:

"Boys nap, obviously. He must be asleep. Everyone is fine, Weasley, so stop freaking out."

Every morning she went out running and Harry puttered around until she returned. Then they ate breakfast, and Ginny showered. In lieu of lunch, Harry left in search of some new, dismal corner of the house. And when he inevitably found himself in a jam, Ginny hunted him down, knowing too many minutes of quiet meant life-threatening peril.

"He's probably stuck in a wardrobe or something."
They would wrestle some possessed curtain or deceitful bedsheet into submission, and she would crack a joke about it. Harry surreptitiously checked her for injuries until she waved him off, then they'd cook dinner, kiss, and go to bed.

Harry was fine—probably, most likely, odds-favored fine.

Ginny waited on the second floor landing, listening. There weren't any angry huffs or muffled curses, no scraping of animated furniture, or thump of shoes hitting the walls or floorboards.

"I hate this," she mumbled, eyes peeled and aimed at the second floor shadows.

Nothing moved, no one screamed. There was no awful dying smell besides her own armpits.

"Third floor, maybe he's on the third floor."

She took the next staircase at a sprint.

"Harry, are you okay?"

But again, there was nothing. Ginny stopped halfway up the stairs, letting the current of uncaring silence wash over her. She hoped for a treading clue of life anywhere in the house. But there wasn't one. Harry just wasn't home.

She went even higher up, toward the moldy attic.

Coughing up dust, she actively rejected memories of mildewed stone, slimy rat bones, and scales rasping over tiles. One of her anxiety dreams featured Ginny running through the hallways, much like she was now. Her small hand would be wrapped around a rooster's broken neck. The hems of her robe were always soaked and dripping, leaving behind a trail of freezing, stagnant smelling water to guide the monster chasing her, be it Tom, the Carrows, or the basilisk.

"Harry! You better be fine, or gods help you, we're done," she yelled, climbing the rest of the stairs.

She kept climbing until she was alone in the attic, surrounded by dirty heirlooms under moth-eaten tarps. But no Harry, only stillness.

"Where is he?"

Sometimes in those dreams, she was chasing someone, either Harry, or Fred, and while she pleaded in her mind for them to stay, to help her, only sick, wet hisses would pour from her mouth. And all they heard as they ran were her spitting hisses, the steady drip-drip of water from her robes and the crackling of the dead cockerel's neck bones as she squeezed tighter and chased them down the hall.

God, her nerves weren't this bad when she lived with her parents. She was blindsided by her own reaction to being alone.

"Maybe I should go see someone," she muttered, rubbing her nose. Her face tingled like it had gone numb. She may have been having a panic attack. "This is ridiculous."

But Harry had been so strange the morning before, turning inward like he sometimes did when something heavy was on his mind. She figured all her old stories about Weasleys and blood must have made him feel left out.

She waited for him to bring it up again all that evening, but he never did. And he didn't seem
angry, just distracted.

On some now-obvious level, she was worried. Had she hurt his feelings and he was being too
Harry to confront her? Unless she really needled him, he would rather pretend all was well than
just talk to her.

She could wait him out, of course. Silence between two people didn't bother her. But the
impenetrable nothing between herself and no one was too much.

The witch breathing harshly in the attic was too far away to hear the front door open. But soon, a
gentle silver light crept up from the end of the attic steps. She slumped in relief when she
recognized the silver stag for what it was.

"Ginny, are you home?," Harry's Patronus asked in an unsure voice. It warmed her to also hear his
nerves about a seemingly empty house.

Harry found more solace in loneliness than Ginny ever could, but clearly her presence mattered.
That soothed her some.

"A lot's happened today...too much, really. Please let me know when you'll be back."

"Asking for help, are we," she replied a bit sourly. The stag just nodded at her, message delivered,
and dissolved into sparkles and mist.

Ginny waited a beat, indulging in a deep, steadying breath. Harry wasn't dead, and he hadn't run
off. This wasn't Hogwarts. This was their home, in which everyone was reasonably safe and in
need of comforting.

"I'm going to hug the shite out of that boy," she swore to herself in the dark.

She then pounded through the house at a full tilt, and seeing Harry hover at the bottom of the
staircase, left the stairs in a flying leap. He yelled in shock, dropping something in a mad clatter to
catch her as she dove into him. Ginny, weighty with rambling limbs of lean muscle, toppled the tall
boy over and brought them both crashing down onto the unswept carpet.

"Wait!," the young wizard gasped. It was a little late for that, with him already wrapped up in
Ginny and the rug. "Please, I—argh!

"Just, let me up! Just, alright, just hold me for a second, I guess. Please, Ginny, just...hold me.
Today's been..."

Ginny, head lying on his chest, then scooted herself up to see his face. He looked drained. His
premature frown lines creased around his mouth. His eyes were bloodshot, like he'd scrubbed at
them, and at some point he had shoved his glasses onto his nose hard enough to scratch the bridge
of it.

She levered off of him and sat back on her heels, unhappy, her heart finally coming down from its
frantic thud. Something was wrong. But he was at least safe, physically, so whatever it was, she
could handle.

"What happened?," she prompted.

Ginny chose not to ask where he'd been, figuring she really didn't want to discourage him from
going out. Maybe he should go out more, even though she easily understood why he didn't.
"Are you okay, Harry?" His face flushed, savaged by emotion.

His eyes shone, red-rimmed and irritated, and his teeth gnawed at his lower lip. Ginny came closer again, sensing him fight to keep whatever it was inside. She planted her hands on either side of his head, keeping his gaze.

"Talk to me."

"...Yeah, yeah okay. I mean, I'm not okay. I just mean, er, I'll talk."

"Merlin, that was fast," she couldn't help but quip, "Is it that bad?"

Harry turned his head into her arm. She felt his damp, stuttered breath on her wrist. He had been crying.

"Yeah," he croaked.

She bent down to kiss his cheek and watched his face screw up again. She hesitated.

"What?"

"Ginny."

"Yes?"

"You're so perfect and so very beautiful," Harry continued. She hummed in agreement, waiting for the "but." "But please hop off of me. You reek."

"Huh-uh, impossible. Girls don't stink. See?" She twined her fingers into his, smiling sweetly. She was honestly glad he was home.

Then she stretched their arms well above their heads, and smothered him in her armpit.

She cackled evilly, letting her boyfriend flail underneath her. She privately considered it her revenge for making her worry.

Harry's foot connected with whatever he dropped. She heard a muted thump of wood on wood on carpet and twisted her body to see what it was.

The witch, while holding down her boyfriend, noticed a winding scroll that unfurled partway down the hallway, covered in clean cursive letters. Beside it was a box of red ochre wood with gold corners, fallen over on the antique olive rug.

"What's that?," she asked, eyebrows raised. It seemed old and expensive.

She rose with Harry's chest when he sighed. He sounded less upset, if not fabulously recovered, as he answered.

"That's my day," he said but didn't clarify. "C'mon. Stink all you want, but let's go upstairs. I need a lie down."

Minutes later, after hearing the words "Potter family vault," Ginny stopped him to take a shower and prepare herself. So, he had taken the old family stories to heart. And done some research on the Potters. He must have felt left out after all.
The young woman stared into the mirror while drying her hair. A quintessential Weasley stared back at her.

If she were honest, she liked having such a strong family resemblance. She didn't think it necessary to hate her freckles or her hair or her pallor when she did alright.

She thought she looked well. So did most of wizarding Britain, hence her going into hiding. And Ginny always knew who she was, being a personality unto herself while, undeniably, a Weasley.

Ginny tried to understand what it might feel like to be the odd one out. She tried to imagine being the one that never fit. She had a year of true isolation to draw from, but since then, she rarely felt like she didn't belong.

She had brothers coming out of her ears, and once she opened up, she had little issue attracting friends. She forged bonds at school that couldn't be shaken, and now worked with an amazing team of strong-headed women who took her under their wing.

Ginny, at heart, knew she was in good company.

That fueled why she felt drawn to people like Harry and Luna, even Hermione. There was a certain quality to the odd-ones-out, the kids in corners who read and stared out of windows. They lingered on the edge of crowds, distinct and curious.

She loved to fit in next to them.

Ginny stopped touching her hair, irritated. Harry just owning his specialness would be nice. Instead he constantly tried to fade into the background, like him just existing caused others trouble.

She loved Harry for the same distinctiveness that isolated him. Even if she tried to fit with him, in some ways she just couldn't. She didn't look like him, and she wasn't ready for children, being young and at the start of a promising career. So she couldn't give him the family he wanted. She wouldn't make him more Potters, not yet. Neither of them were ready for that.

So, they had the box. One he looked sick about opening, but wouldn't let out of his sight.

She didn't know what was in the box, but she could tell it was nothing good. If it hurt so much to open, why open it again? He knew what was inside, why rehash the whole thing for her sake?

"Okay, fine," Ginny poked the mirror, trading determined glares with her reflection. She jabbed the mirror again, like she was gearing up for a match.

"You are enough. You got this. Let's go out there and show him what we got."

She gave her own rump a slap. She then threw on her duck yellow terry cloth robe, hanging on a hook on the door. Dressed for battle, she yanked open the bathroom door and presented herself, fists on hips, to her dejected boyfriend.

He looked up slowly from contents of his box laid out over the bedspread. She gave him a fierce look.

"Are you ready? Because I'm ready," snapped the witch.

"I, er—um."

"Let me hear it!" She marched until her knees hit the edge of the mattress. "Shoot straight, Potter,
"I'm all ears!"

The wizard swallowed thickly, mouth pinched. Ginny frowned, annoyed. Had he chosen not to tell her after all?

"What is it?," she egged him, "Family curse? Horrible disease? Distantly related to Voldemort? Umbridge is your great aunt on your dad's side? Snape was secretly your dad?"

"Ginny—!"

"What!"

"I'm adopted! Okay!?"

Harry grabbed the papers off the bed and threw them on the floor.

"Dammit, Ginny! They're not my birth parents! I went to visit Hermione at the Ministry, then I went to the bank, and I'm sorry for not telling you I'd be gone, but my fucking...I'm adopted."

"Nobody knew but my parents and this super niche healer who I guess is dead now?" Harry flopped backwards onto the pillows, buried both hands in his fringe and whined, "I didn't want this. I should've left it alone."

"Shite, Harry, I didn't," Ginny cursed, hands pressed to her mouth. "I went too far. I lost my temper."

"Yeah, no, it's fine, I don't care," the boy grumbled from under his hands. "I have other things to worry about, and you're fine, honestly."

She murmured something affirmative and kneeled on the bed. She then walked on her knees to the headboard to look down at his covered face. "Still, I'm sorry. How, how do you know?"

One hand waved at the floor dismissively. The eye under it was squeezed shut.

"I threw it down there somewhere. There's a weird handwritten certificate from this secretly famous midwife, Claire something. I don't know. There're two: a fill-in-the-blanks thing, like a whodunnit, and a baby receipt. Ah three, forgot the wanted poster."

"Baby receipt," Ginny whispered, dumbfounded. She crawled back to the edge of the counterpane and lie down on her stomach to reach the floor. She snatched up the couple of papers she could reach.

One must have been the whodunnit, because there were hardly any names on it. There was the Healer and the first name of a witness, besides Harry's given name, but nothing else.

Why the mystery? But then again, if she had ever planned to give up her baby, she supposed she wouldn't leave her full name and forwarding address.

The second paper was just a drawing of a woman. Ginny squinted at it, some rootless recognition tumbling around in her head.

"Who's this?," she asked, holding up the sketch.

"Ha!," barked her boyfriend in reply, startling Ginny. "That's another thing! According to Lupin, I look like her."
Harry then shot up abruptly, whipped off her glasses, and looked at her beseeching. Ginny only broke eye contact for a second to peek at the sketch in her peripheral.

She knew her eyes widened, as aghast as she was at the similarities, but she didn't say anything. She couldn't lie and say they didn't look very much related. So she said nothing.

"Oh, what, now you're quiet too, yeah," Harry went on, tone vaguely mocking.

She returned his glare, although knowing she deserved a bit of it. Not all the throbbing, injured hostility now focused her way, but surely a smidge.

"It's not so easy to talk about, is it?"

"You're doing fine," was Ginny's staunch reply. "Do you honestly wanna hear what I think?"

"Yes," he dragged out in a whistling sigh. "Sorry, please."

"Stop apologizing," she snapped out of habit. He did that too much. "I'm fine. I think you...honestly yeah, if this is a real woman," she waved the drawing, "then yeah, I think she could be your birth mum. Without your glasses, you look...very alike. It's incredible, actually.

"But Harry," she continued, swinging down a hand to swipe the last paper off of the bedroom floor.

She glanced at it and was relieved to find the Potters' names, and his proper birthday. Looks like all this time, was actually been the anniversary of his adoption.

"Harry, the Potters are still your parents."

Ginny slid the adoption certificate in his lap. She felt her eyes well a little at the slow, fearful way he picked it up, like either it or he was too fragile to touch.

"They chose you. They sacrificed everything for you, the same way you've done for everyone else. That's love. I know you know that, and of course you can still feel betrayed and realize they loved you."

"Yeah, I know," he said almost too quietly to catch. "But why didn't I know this? A letter or something would've—just, why do I have to find out by accident? This is fucked up, Ginny! Nobody should have to find out this way!"

She nodded, then shrugged. "It's just horrible that you couldn't spend much time with them, and that they couldn't tell you themselves. I'm not even going to pretend to know how much this hurts. But the basic facts are the same."

"What!? Are you joking?" Harry was now gripping the certificate in both hands and back to staring at her.

"Well, when you have a second to think about it," she prefaced, reaching out to wrap a hand around his ankle, "What did you know before? James and Lily Potter are your parents, and they died protecting you. That's still true.

"I can't say if it's more or less true because you're adopted, but it's true enough to work with, I think."

She eyed him for a moment, gauging his reaction. Harry's face had lost some of its tension,
smoothing from true pain into discomfited contemplation. He had nodded once or twice while she talked, but hadn't replied.

He only stroked the foxed edges of the parchment, processing. Ginny watched him for a few moments and then decided to make them both lunch.

Harry had spent the rest of the day in their room. Ginny had asked if he wanted to be alone. The twenty-two year old wizard had looked up from the book in his lap, blushed, and shook his head. Tugging on his fringe in an impossibly endearing way, he mumbled about how she could stick around, if she wanted.

Resigned to a day in bed, she went down to stack a plate to the ceilings with chicken and cheese sandwiches. She then slid in beside him in the bed, handing him the plate and read the book over his shoulder.

"Why is everyone always trying to feed me," he groaned. Ginny shrugged and spoke around a bite of bread and chicken.

"Ron tells everyone you're too pretty. He thinks if you get fat, he can outshine you," she swallowed her bite and went in for another. "Joke's on him, you'd be even hotter with some chunk."

Harry grinned and nudged her. "Oi, you calling me skinny?"

She pinched his ribs through his sweater. "It's like cuddling with a broomstick. I'm fattening you up so I can finally quit bringing my work home with me."

When Harry rested his cheek on her head, laughing, the young witch figured another day in bed wasn't the end of the world. She settled in, shoving her legs under the comforter, and giving half her lap to the book.

"So this is your family register," she said, turning a page. After the intricate family tree on the first page, there was a log book of births.

It proved a little more detailed than the tree. It had full names and dates, as well as places and times, baby weights and lengths, and short descriptions.

Some of the descriptions included little acts of wild magic at birth. One Victorian age Potter gave birth while floating in mid-air. One newborn girl, a many times great aunt, changed the name on her bassinet in her first night sleeping in it. Any person to misname her had their tongue glued to the roof of their mouth "whilst the infant looked upon them with reproach."

The record was kept in gradually different handwriting as they flipped through the log. It seemed as though every couple of generations, a new family member took responsibility for the chronicling.

Ginny was glad to see that the last entry in the log was Harry's birth—well, his adoption day. The handwriting was messy and all uppercase, unlike the writers' before it.

She couldn't be sure, but given the dates on the family tree, Ginny guessed that James Potter had written Harry in himself. There were no other relatives to survive them. She looked aside at Harry, but kept her observation to herself. The wizard could probably tell for himself, and she wanted to give him his space to grieve.

"Look," she pointed out instead. "You were so tiny."
"I wouldn't know," he answered, squinting at the page.

Harry was born at six pounds and seventeen inches. In his description, it said that no one from the extended Potter family had been present for the birth. That they knew. But it also said, in large, spotty letters, "BABY SMELLS INCREDIBLE." The writer had been too excited and peppered the page with drops of ink.

Harry's dad was a bit of a doof, Ginny thought to herself.

Harry, for his part, was staring bright-eyed at the page, mouth tilted upwards in a half-smile. She wondered vaguely if the son would be as doting as his father. She supposed one day she might find out.

Ginny moved her hand for Harry to flip to the next page. This one was a log of death dates.

"Nope," she said, moving them along. "C'mon, there's plenty of that for later."

"Agreed," Harry intoned. "Wait, what's this?"

He had stopped them on another, two-page illustration. This one was a sepia-toned print of a world map, drawn in two hemispheres. Lines of longitude and latitude crisscrossed the world, overlaying the great continents outlined in lush, green paints. The equator swooped across both hemispheres, and a theatrical sun and moon rose and set, orbiting the earth.

A ribbon across the top read, "Potter Tabula familia."

A drawing decorated the bottom of the page: it was a view of the North Sea Coast, in deep yellows, tans, foamy whites and seafoam greens. The grass waved gently in a rendered sea breeze, and the waves in the distance rolled soundlessly.

An artist signature in the center was distinct, but she didn't recognize the name.

"Why is there a map in here," asked Harry. Ginny looked to him when she realized this wasn't a rhetorical question. He was waiting for her to answer.

"Oh, well, I don't know," she returned. He gave a humored huff, shaking his head. "What? My family book isn't nearly this fancy. Maybe it's a map of the Potter estates? Ask it."

"Whatdya mean, ask it?" He looked at her from the corner of his eye, clearly skeptical of her advice. She rolled her eyes and gestured at the moving artwork all around the page.

"I swear, it's like you forget magic exists sometimes," she teased. "Look, you're the Potter, even if you're a bit store-bought."

"Hey," he protested. "Too soon."

She plowed on. "Ask the book what the map is for. It's most likely enchanted to tell you."

As it turned out, the map had already heard Harry's question. While she finished her sentence, Ginny already noticed cherry red and charcoal grey swirl over the page. The new colors traveled over all the continents, leaving behind alternating pools of vibrancy and somberness.

The letters at the top of the page faded and then resurfaced, now reading, "Harry J. Potter® Tabula familia et trivium."

Harry sucked his teeth, and shook the book as if trying to rearrange the letters.
"Again with the damn asterisk!," he complained. "This book needs better manners."

"So do you if you keep shaking it," Ginny retorted, deadpan. She held the book down by its edges. "Look! It's answering your question, hmm, kind of. I don't suppose you're fluent in Latin?"

"I can guess most of it, except 'trivium.' What's that?"

The book obliged, if slowly. It rewrote itself with much less enthusiasm than when it had covered itself in dots. Ginny told Harry that his shaking probably offended it. The young wizard just rolled his eyes and bent down to read the new ribbon of text.

"Potter trivium, the place where three roads meet."

Harry read this and then sat quietly for a moment. Ginny watched his expression with a bland smile, knowing from how he read the sentence, that its meaning was a mystery to him.

"I don't get it."

The waves on the bottom of the page sputtered, before catching themselves and returning to their peaceful roll. Ginny snickered. She had an inkling about what the book was getting at.

So she savored how it then rolled out a fresh ribbon, in stark white with clear, black print, parting from the vintage aesthetics of the page. This was probably the tome's way of sounding out its words.

"Harry James Potter*," it read with an especially bold asterisk, "a meeting of three roads: the Blood of Olde, the Blood Born Anew, and Magick as the Blood of the Eternal."

The colored dots on the page then pulsed once, as if to draw their attention. Ginny examined the page, starting to understand. She checked around the British Isles to make sure.

Touching the page, she traced her finger from the one red dot in London, to a pair of grey ones in Godric's Hollow. She tried to recall where other Potters might have lived and died, but found she would have to double-check the logs. Still, she had enough to tell Harry the map's purpose.

"It shows you where in the world your relatives are," she explained.

Harry looked at her, shocked, and then bent back over the book. His eyes ran all over the map, mostly in a fuss, she thought. Harry seemed to land somewhere eventually. He focused on where her calloused fingertip pointed out Godric's Hollow.

"I think the grey dots are the, um. Dearly departed."

"That's…," Harry dropped a heavy sigh, but powered through. "That is a lot of grey."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Ginny wound an arm around his waist for good measure.

"You don't have to," he protested.

"Just for a second," she bargained. He leaned into her side, and they shared some heat, before she let him go as promised.

"So the red ones are the living…Ginny." This was Harry's nosebleed tone, she realized. His "violently suppressing a heart attack" manner of speaking. His finger stabbed the page in the northwest of England.
"Hm? Ohhh, Merlin."

His finger above hers was nestled in a cluster of three or four bright red dots. Some were more transparent than others, like they only half-belongs on the map. However, one in particular was a solid, non-negotiable, blaring red, like Harry's own dot found miles away in London.

"I have family," the boy breathed, eyes wide, nose practically pressed to the page. "Ginny, I have living family."

"Are there really more Potters?," Ginny asked, suspicious. After all, Harry's name was the last one in the birth logs.

She didn't think there were other, official, by-the-book Potters, if that's what Harry could be called. However, she didn't want to be the one to argue with the map, or turn down Harry's excitement. She suddenly wished Hermione or Luna was present to be the voice of reason. If she said anything, it would just be her there to manage his disappointment.

Ginny also wished that Harry was a little more for cautious deliberation. His mind, once armed with enough information to decide, tended towards major conclusions and immediate action.

She could see it happening now, as a beaming smile split his face. Harry hadn't considered that the bright red dots on the map might not be Potters. He saw them as undiscovered family just within arm's reach. Deep in her gut, Ginny knew otherwise.

She loved Harry, which is why she hated seeing him upset. So she wished, very much so, that he would try a little harder to protect himself. His exile in Number Twelve wasn't necessarily good for him, but it was on the way.

Whatever idea had currently lodged itself in his mind was throwing caution to the wind.

Before he could even convince her with his big, green, star-catcher eyes, Ginny snatched the book from his lap and shoved it under the comforter. He tried to stop her, but she just slapped his hands away and wielded a stiff pointer finger against his parted lips.

She channeled Hermione Granger, giving in to the fact that one of them had to be the adult.

"Before you do anything," she warned him, face grim, "you need to run it by Hermione first-no! Harry James Potter, I mean it. Normally, I wouldn't stop you and you know that, so listen to me. Do not rush into this."

"But Ginny! Here give me the book," Harry tried to burrow under the covers, but she slapped him away again. "Ow, stop! Listen to me now, Ginny, please! If I have other family out there, I have to meet them!

"I can't believe I've gone all this time not knowing, and what if, what if they—I have to go!"

The witch looked into the Boy-Who-Lived's pleading, puppy dog face and didn't budge an inch.

"And if you go up north to visit them, I'll gladly go with you, but you have to think, Harry, and you don't always do that." Ginny dug the book out from where she'd trapped it under her legs. She pulled it out, cover closed, and held the book with both hands, showing it to him.

"You need to consider that the people on this map are not Potters like the Family Potters. They might not be cousins or long-lost uncles.
"Harry, this map just showed you your relatives. Yours, as in…," Ginny looked into his face, heart sinking as the realization crept over it. "Yeah. These could be the people that gave you up. In fact, they probably are, and I'm sorry about that, but...do you really want to run off to meet them? Right now, today?"

She cast about for the loose documents and, catching them, pressed them over the book. On top was Harry's adoption certificate, with a corner of the woman's sketch peeking underneath. Directly on the cover of the book was Harry's birth certificate, with the very few names and the Healer's prayer for his well-being.

Harry reached out a finger and wedged it into her hand gripping the book's spine.

"Harry," she cautioned.

"Just...lemme see it, okay. I'm not going anywhere right now. I only want the map."

"Okay," she capitulated, feeling he meant it. It was awful to see him deflate as his birth certificate came loose and fluttered to the bedspread. She took it to move it aside but had a hand come over hers. "Oh, sorry, here."

She handed Harry his papers. He looked at them in the order she held them, lingering on the last. He then leaned back against the headboard and leveraged the book on his bent knees. It fell open on the family map, as if picking up where they had left off.

Ginny didn't know what to do, if she should leave him alone at this point or come closer. She made to do the former, muttering about giving him space, but again, felt his hand on hers.

"No, I wasn't...you can still stay," Harry said, looking at her over his knees. She wrapped his questing hand in hers and he squeezed it.

"Erm, please, actually. I know it's been so much today, and it's past dinner at this point. But stay, a-and I'll finish up here, and I'll call Hermione in the morning about everything. I probably need to apologize for storming out anyways."

Ginny snorted and laid herself down along the foot of the bed. She sank into the king-sized mattress, and felt how she couldn't quite reach either edge. Ginny tried anyway, enjoying the stretch.

"What'd you run off for?," she followed up neutrally, after a second of stretching. The day had been a lot, but she'd be fine if they could just sleep. "You were only slapped with your secret family history in front of her and Merlin on a Tuesday without warning. Really, it's nothing to carry on about."

She got an amused 'hmph,' and welcomed the small victory. "But really, why'd you run off?"

"Honestly?," at which point in his answer, her boyfriend turned a new shade of fuschia.

Ginny peeked at him, still joined by the hand, fascinated by his mix of offense, embarrassment, and bashfulness. It had a puckering effect on his eyes and mouth, like he'd sucked on a lemon and the lemon sucked back.

"What," she prodded, passively interested.

"Well," Harry hedged. "Did you know Lupin has a job now? He works with Hermione at the Ministry."
Ginny did know, and only hummed to show she was listening. Harry let go of her hand to pull at his collar.

"Well," the boy repeated. She lifted one eyebrow and smirked. "Heh, well you would've stormed off, too. He said I looked like the woman in the picture!"

"You do look like the woman in the picture."

"Yes, well—! Apparently, that woman makes a business of being in pictures. Lupin basically said she was a…," and the rest of his statement was mumbled into his chest.

Ginny blinked, disbelieving. She then pushed herself up on her hands, and crept up to her boyfriend to peer at him over the book, where he had receded into his sweater, miserable.

"My apologies, Golden Boy. But did you just say that Lupin called your birth mother…a porn star?"

Harry attempted to shrug but ended up slumping over to hide his face. Ginny, on the other hand, had fallen onto his knee and laughed herself dizzy.
Harry questions the map and finds another bitter pill.

**August 21st, 2002: Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London**

Early dawn slipped blue through the slit in the damask curtains. Harry lay in bed, watching his girlfriend's back rise and fall with her light snores. She had fallen asleep in her soft yellow bathrobe, curled on her side atop the covers, hands tucked under her head. He came closer.

With one finger, he traced a tendril of red hair splayed across the pillows, stopping where it brushed against her shoulder. After a moment of listening to her breathe, he opened his hand and laid it on her back.

He felt the solid body stir under the warm terry cloth. Harry avoided her bleary eyes when she rolled over, sorry for having woke her.

"Hm, Har? Wha' happ'n?," the sleepy witch mumbled. He shook his head and pulled away, wanting to let her rest. "No, s'okay. C'm back..."

Ginny rolled over, sloth-like, arms reaching for him before losing steam and sinking back down to the bedspread. Her snuffling breaths resumed.

*She must be exhausted,* he thought, affectionate as he watched her drift back to sleep. She was on her back now, mouth slack, arms canted towards him.

Then Harry blinked, rattled by a snore that shook the bed frame. *Goodness, woman!*

Laughing noiselessly, the wizard bent over and pressed his grinning lips to her forehead.

"Yeh?," said Ginny, with a snort. Her tone then became lost, her brow furrowing. She was still fully asleep as she cried, "Come back!," to someone unseen.

Harry, who had started to lean away again, returned. Hoping to stave off any nightmares, he wrapped an arm around her middle, settling in. Careful not to pull her hair, he laid his head down beside hers and willed himself still.

Eventually, she relaxed again, snoring softly.

A few minutes passed with the sun creeping evermore into the room. Finally sensing the outer edge of morning, Harry dozed. Behind him, on the nightstand, the Potter register displayed its detailed family map, quietly redrawing itself.

Unbeknownst to Harry, who only had been studying the cluster of dots in the north, two other red dots had been floating on the map's edges.

Both had just relocated, transparent in the shadows beneath the unlit lamp.
The first dot, once nestled on an island in the Pacific, had begun a steady trek across the ocean to the American west coast. The other dot leapt around the map. It had gone unnoticed on the cold island in the North Sea. It had then faded from the English North shore and reappeared in the Baltics.

As Harry finally fell into a fitful sleep, it disappeared from its city in Latvia. It then blinked back into existence on northern British soil. It landed a few inches east of the cluster in Manchester, flickered dangerously for a moment, but persevered.

And while the sun roamed freely about the room, it sent a sliver of light across the page, where it fell into the only solid, red dot there. Amid the cluster in Manchester, which formed a filmy blob, the one dot showed out with a sure presence. It didn't flicker, and the day had hours left before the dot would move.

And so, like Harry's dot in London, it waited to be noticed, punctuating the fleeing dark.

"Is this a joke?"

It was mid-morning, and Harry and Ginny were standing off in the parlor. He had spelled the curtains open to let in some light, so he couldn't miss her scowl as they argued by the lightless fireplace.

They had spoken well into the night yesterday, during which Harry had promised to discuss the map with Hermione. They had agreed as a pair that this was his best next step.

Then she had no doubt awoken to Harry muttering to the book, before going still, swearing, and slamming it shut. He had thrown himself into chores ever since.

She had asked if he was serious multiple times by this point. She had asked what happened that morning, and why he was neglecting to call their friend.

But Harry felt the answer to the latter was obvious: he'd changed his mind. He didn't want to talk to Hermione. In fact, he wanted to do anything but talk to Hermione—or anyone for that matter—particularly about the map.

The young man couldn't help consulting the damned thing again when he had snapped awake, shaking from a terrible dream. In it, he was standing in Sirius' bedroom, in a sudden, sweltering heat, staring up at the posters of swimsuit-clad models melting down the walls.

Horrifyingly, all the models had turned into an amalgamation of his features on shriveled, mummified bodies. Different versions of Harry's face were melting in with the dry, discolored limbs. There was a chemical smell, like Dudley had left plastic soldiers to sizzle on the stove. Then the bedroom had begun to reek of damp soil, and when dream-Harry had spun around, the bed and wooden floor fell away to reveal an open grave.

In it were more desiccated bodies, men and women, all inexplicably in vintage swimsuits. Their faces were eaten away by wriggling, writhing bugs.

"I don't want this," he had whispered in his dream, chest tight. The hot room cooked the air, making it impossible to breathe.

Harry had jerked awake when, beneath the beetles and worms, he saw Lily Potter's cloudy, green eye, like jade set in mottled grey skin. His dead mother stared up at him. A woman screamed.
"FREAK!," echoed a voice from the dream, chasing him into wakefulness.

Sweaty and panting, heart hammering away, Harry followed his first impulse. He clicked on the bedside lap and snatched up the book there, glaring at the map.

He had had the thought, then, that perhaps the Potter register had become like the Mirror of Erised. In it, he could see the family he wanted reflected back at him. Except, on the map, the family he wanted was dead.

The living relatives presented by the page wouldn't be the family he'd lost. He believed Ginny when she impressed this much upon him. So he glared down at the page, demanding an explanation. Why were these nobodies around if his real family couldn't be?

"Who are they!?," he had snapped at the map. He had felt Ginny jolt awake behind him, but couldn't, in that moment, care.

The map answered. Much like the Marauder's Map, names appeared on ribbons around the variety of dots. In Godric's Hollow, he read the names of James and Lily Potter, his late parents. Harry had dragged a sleeve over his forehead, mopping up more nervous sweat.

Above their names, in Manchester, were names he didn't recognize. No Potter had catalogued them in the list of births. He didn't even know them from people he'd run into from the Order or at school.

They were complete strangers.

But then amongst them, he had seen a name he thought he'd recognized. Harry had then felt burning hot anger pour from his face, down his arms, to his hands on the page.

"Bullshit," he had cursed, spitting, shoving the covers of the book together with wild ferocity. It was finally too much. The book was playing tricks on him in the cruelest way possible. He had had enough of it.

And so, since waking up hours prior, the wizard had cooked breakfast, spelled the dishes to wash themselves—something he picked up from Mrs. Weasley—and then proceeded to clean the kitchen by hand. He had just kneeled down to scrub the floors when Ginny had come downstairs.

She questioned him, only to be smiled at and ignored, until she had lost her patience. She banished his brush, gloves, and sloshing bucket of hot, soapy water. Then, for the first of many times, she reminded him of their talk the evening before.

Harry, seeing her irritation, had hopped to his feet and hurried past to begin sweeping the parlor rugs. The witch has forgone her morning run to follow him from room to room. While he ignored her, she resorted to watching, arms crossed in the doorway, watching him clean.

"Are you kidding me?," she asked. "Suddenly you'd rather play house elf than call Hermione. What changed?"

Harry didn't answer. He just kept sweeping. He knew he was procrastinating the inevitable. He would probably have to tell Ginny, at least. They lived together, and she wasn't above just looking in the book herself. Besides that, he didn't normally prefer keeping secrets from her.

This didn't stop him from frowning down at her unamused face as he shuffled past. He started to sweep the far end of the room. Affronted, Ginny waved her wand and banished his broom as well.
So Harry was left standing there, empty handed, except for his wand in his back pocket. He traded burning looks with his girlfriend and, finally seeing the bags under her eyes, grew angry again.

*What does she have to lose sleep over?*, Harry thought bitterly. *She has a family.*

"Could you get off my back for *one minute,*" he snapped, jabbing a finger at her accusingly. "*You've* not given me a second to breathe since I told you about my parents! *You'd think you* were the freak with no proper family!"

Ginny's eyebrows flew up as she stared at him, aghast, "Seriously? I don't know where this is coming from, since you *don't want* talk to me unless I *get on your back about it. And you've wanted* me here, and I'm just trying to help!"

"I don't have to tell you every little thing! Or big thing! Or anything!"

Harry turned his back on her, and kicked the ottoman at his feet. Why did she even have to bother with him? This was his problem, and if he chose to forget about it, so should she.

"Yeah? And then what, we just faff about in this depressing fucking house, talking about Quidditch and the weather until we grow old and die?"

He didn't turn to face her as she ranted, only heard her voice come closer. He tensed up, wanting nothing less than to be touched.

"I don't know what crawled up your arse this morning, Potter," Ginny continued, storming out of the room. "But what you need to do is reevaluate who the bloody hell you're talking to before you lose your temper! I'd rather you say you don't want to talk about it than ignore me and act like nothing’s wrong.

“Call Hermione or don't. I don't bloody care anymore. I didn't even want you to dig into this in the first, fucking place! You're making yourself miserable."

The witch stomped away, followed by the front door swinging open and slamming shut. Harry was viscerally glad the portrait of Walburga Black had long since been sealed behind its tiny curtain. If he'd had to hear that awful woman screech just then, as furious as he was, Harry might have set the house on fire.

Harry spent the rest of the day alone. Ginny hadn't returned by the afternoon, which he took to mean she was still furious. By then, Harry's temper had cooled. It quickly changed places with lingering shame and anxiety.

He hadn't meant to yell. He was still too humiliated by the map’s trick to speak on it, but he could at least apologize. Yet he remained on his own hours after the fight.

Lying on the couch in the mostly swept parlor, Harry looked to the cold fireplace, hoping to hear from his girlfriend. He even lit the fire despite it being late August, in case it made receiving a message easier.

However, nothing came, and he knew that, unless he tracked her down, he wouldn't hear from Ginny until she was good and ready to see him. And that could mean either them patching things up or her giving him another piece of her mind.

As the early afternoon tilted toward early evening, Harry felt he could accept a hexing over the cold shoulder. He jumped to his feet when the fire in the grate burst into emerald greens.
Unfortunately, as Ginny did step out of the fireplace, he forgot everything he had thought to say.

He failed drum up an apology when she looked at him. The witch walked passed him in cool silence and moved calmly up the stairs.

"I'm sorry for yelling," he muttered at her leaving back. The young woman paused, sighed, and kept walking.

"Well, you'd better be," she threw down at him, before reaching the second floor and disappearing toward their bedroom.

At least she's talking to me, Harry figured, a bit relieved that she came home. It's not much, but it's something.

Then the fireplace burst green again. Harry turned to it in confusion, not having expected anyone else that day. Usually, if someone of the old crowd planned to stop by, they would send ahead an owl. Being adults, some even with adult children, they avoided walking into any young couple's home unannounced.

"Mate, I'm coming through!"

"Ron?," Harry replied, shocked.

Sure enough, Ron Weasley came bowing out of the Floo, still in his scarlet Auror uniform. When he unbent to his full height, the ginger towered over his shorter friend with a glower.

Harry hadn't seen the young Auror in over a week, and was surprised to see him attempting a beard for the second time. Orange stubble covered his lip, chin and neck. His light hair, skin, and burning red robes shown oddly washed in the green from the Floo. This paired with his serious expression left an already anxious Harry firmly ill at ease.

Speaking of which, the green fire behind Ron kept burning. With a cough of soot, another person backed out of the Floo.

"Harry? Sorry to walk in like this, but honestly!"

Ron kept an eye on Harry while he helped Hermione from the Floo. She tutted at her large boyfriend for fussing and, lacking any sense of irony, began to fuss over Harry.

He was soon sat back onto the couch, hands plucking at his tatty house clothes. He felt a bit offended on his own behalf. While he knew he was far from Witch Weekly's Most Devilish Dandy, he didn't need Hermione worrying at his undarned cuffs.

The whole while, Ron looked askance at him, as if considering his next words.

That can't be good, Harry figured, straightening up. Ron popping up out of nowhere and being tactful put Harry on high alert.

"What," he blurted out. Hermione paused, full of concern, while Ron only stared harder, so Harry cleared his throat and tried again. "I mean, why, um, what are you doing here? Did Ginny bring you?"

"We brought ourselves," Ron replied meaningfully. Harry shrugged and shook his head, not having caught his meaning in the slightest.
"Okay," he offered, helpless. Ron only frowned at him more.

"Is that it?," the young Auror said. Ron then pulled up an ottoman, the one Harry had kicked earlier, and plopped down on it. It was so low that his friend's knees hit his chest, but he seemed not to mind as he looked into Harry's face.

"Harry, what the hell happened!? First, Hermione comes home last night more stressed than usual. She says you visited, but she can't say why, and I'll have to ask you.

"So I sit back, expecting a visit or something today, because y'know first it's her, then it's me, that's how these things tend to go. I figure it was a fight with Ginny, and you were like, afraid to come to me with it or something, and Hermione talked you down.

"But then today it's Ginny barging into my office," Ron ranted on, "saying today you two fought, about something else. But then she can't tell me what it's about and I have to hear it from you!"

"And she spends all day sulking at my desk, looking worse than the case files, so I bring her to Hermione. And then they have this, like, telepathic girl chat, and I'm left not knowing what's up with my best friend, because he hasn't told me!"

Harry barely squeezed out, "Er, it's," before Ron interrupted him.

"Don't say 'it's nothing,' mate. It's never nothing. Harry, you look like shite. You yelled at Ginny! You pretty much never do that, since you think she hung the fuckin' moon. So, tell me what the hell is going on, before I have to kick your arse for hurting my little sister's feelings."

Harry looked to Hermione in desperate need of help, and was slapped with her big, pleading eyes. "I think you should tell him, Harry," she urged, gripping his limp hand in hers. "I know it's personal, but Ron will understand, maybe even better than me."

Except you don't know how personal it is, he thought at her, biting his tongue. You think you know but you can't possibly.

Harry was then struck with how Hermione was there, in front of him. He looked frantically to the stairs, fearing Ginny might be coming down them, with the Potter map in hand. There was no one on the staircase, though. Ginny had sequestered herself upstairs for this talk, it seemed.

Harry sagged in relief, and then slid further back into the couch, feeling all used up. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't not want to talk about it, either, if only for the friction secrecy caused with his friends.

The young wizard sometimes wondered if people had a maximum allowance for secrets. If for people like Dumbledore, they needed to balance their massive checkbook of hidden things even after death. That's why he'd given and kept secrets like currency.

Or for people like Snape, who lived on the edge of secretkeeper overdose, if they needed to spill everything at once to avoid a grisly fate. It felt like any person had a upward threshold of how many secrets they could keep before their life implodes.

If his theory of allowances was true, Harry had blown through his secret budget by puberty. He asked himself if this explained the persistence and perceptiveness of his friends. They kept him honest, in the black, saved him from choking on unsaid things. They were honed by years of shaving past some epic demise caused by a secret. Their prying tended to save lives and was a hard habit to break. Still, he craved long, impenetrable privacy.
He put his head in his hands, not sure if he was grateful or fed up.

"I'm so tired," he groaned. "I feel like I haven't slept right in days."

Harry realized this was true as he said it. The problem was, he had no idea how to fix it. Say nothing and let the matter die? It likely wouldn't, as neither Ron, nor Hermione, nor Ginny would be happy with him freezing them out.

And Harry, while wishing to forget the birth certificate, and the map, and Lupin, and the sketch, didn't want to hold it all in. He didn't think he had to, to move on. He just, didn't want to say it himself.

"Harry," Hermione said patiently. "Would you like me to tell him?"

Harry nodded, face still in his hands. He covered his ears while Hermione talked, tired of his own story. Then the map kept flashing through his mind. He relived the awful joke, and then his horrible dream. Soon, he uncovered his ears, much preferring the facts told in Hermione's quick chatter over the business inside his own head.

"Wait," Ron stopped her, bug-eyed. Hermione huffed, frustrated by the interruption, "Lupin said that?"

"Yes, Ron," the fussy witch hissed, glancing at Harry. "That's the part you focus on?"

"Sorry," he mumbled, clearly nothing of the sort. "Hey, have I heard of her?"

"Ron!," cried both Harry and Hermione. The redhead flushed and waved her on.

"Honestly, I don't know why I keep you around," Hermione continued, exasperated. "This is a sensitive matter! You have the diplomacy of a cat in a sandbox."


Harry waved Ron off.

"I couldn't answer you, anyway. Lupin only seemed but so sure himself. He tripped through an apology and then rambled on about how this stupid sketch I have 'favored' one of Sirius' favorite models. I guess she was popular in the 70's or something, and y'know Sirius."

The two wizards shared a tired grin at the memory of the old dog. Hermione's smile was strained, a little flustered, but there. Then a questioning look came over Ron's face. He scratched his fledgling beard, as he said:

"D'you think her stuff is hanging in his room?"

Harry remembered his nightmare of the melting posters and felt nauseous.

"God, I hope not," he answered, chilled. "How would you feel if it was your mum posing in a bikini?"

"Ugh! Don't say that!"

"You first!"

"Harry?"
He turned, and felt his cheeks grow hot. Ginny now stood on the second to last stair, holding the bannister. Her hair was twisted up into a bun, and she looked as if she'd been crying. He stood up, asking if she was okay. She just gestured for him to sit as she walked into the parlor.

She waved Ron down too, and Harry realized that both he and her brother had jumped up at seeing her.

"I'm fine, stop," she told them both.

Standing by Harry, then, he noticed with trepidation that she had his closed register in one hand. Her other hand came up under his chin, tilting his head back to look her in the eye.

"Did you talk to Hermione?"

"Yeah, yes," he said. He blinked slowly and braved holding her wrist. Harry resisted looking from her to the book. "Did you see it?"

Ginny searched his face, and nodded solemnly. "I wish you'd just told me, but I see why you didn't."

"Can I ask what's going on?," Hermione edged in, pointing at the book. "You read more of it, Harry?"

"That the Potter family tree you were talking about?," Ron also asked.

In response, Ginny simply left the book in Harry's lap and walked away. He wanted to ask her to stay, but given that he had earlier claimed to hate it, he let her go. He would have to properly apologize as soon as they were alone.

"If she's still like that next time I see her," Ron warned in only a half-joking manner, "I'm really gonna have to lay into you. No hard feelings, you understand, but that's my baby sister."

"She can handle herself, Ronald," chastised Hermione, gauging Harry in her peripheral. "They're talking it out. Leave it alone. But what did you need to talk to me about, Harry?"

He almost laughed at how she gave him no room for argument.

Fine, he surrendered, flipping open the book to the map.

"This," he said, handing it to the curious witch.

Her eyes scanned the open pages before it had even left his grip. She read the title, showing no trouble at parsing its meaning. He supposed she had a leg up, given that she worked adjacent to family documents all day. Plus, the book ad unpacked itself thrice over. However, he suspected that even if they were lost in the woods, at night, and the map was in its original Latin, Hermione would still have gasped in realization in the same ten seconds flat.

Having a friend too bright to keep secrets around was a small, mixed comfort.

"Oh, I've heard of these," said Ron. Harry looked up, not having expected that. "Yeah, our family tree doesn't have a map, but I know about them. It's not a physical map all the time, though."

"Really?," Harry asked. He hadn't thought of if the Weasley's had a map like his or not. Then he remembered their big clock, where every hand was a relative. "Oh, like the clock at the Burrow?"

"Yeah, exactly! That's a Weasley heirloom," the young man said, a little smug. "Betcha didn't think
we had any of those. It's no hand-drawn map, but it's nothing to sniff at, either!"

"I think it's better than a map," Harry returned, sullen. He glared over at the thing Hermione ran her finger over, the witch likely memorizing the coordinates. "This thing sucks."

Hermione reached out and smacked his leg. He sniffed at the smart pat.

"Don't you dare, Harry Potter," she chided, still reading. "This is a priceless artifact, and we're lucky to have found it. To think, all this history could've been lost in a musty, old bank vault forever."

Harry didn't answer as his nerves returned. He felt the moment coming.

Hermione started her perusal with the illustration at the bottom. Once she had taken note of the artist's name, she began to move up the page, reading from left to right. Much too quickly, she ran into her first dot, one Harry hadn't noticed, bobbing in the United States.

"What's the difference between red and, oh. I see," she said, trailing off to peek up at him and duck back down. "Sorry, I understand. You've some family in California. I think this is the great uncle Remus mentioned, 'Charlus Potter.' He's still alive!"

"Good for him," Harry clipped touchily. "I suppose someone's gotta be."

Hermione stayed consistent as she examined the map, head turning toward him and then scanning away. There were more late relatives, none living, until she tripped across his name in the southeastern corner of England.

"And here you are, 'Harry James Potter.'"

"Yup," he choked out. He was losing his nerve. "Maybe—"

"Oh my God!"

Too late now, it's all or nothing, Harry caved. It has to be a joke, anyway! Some fucked up prank.

"Harry!" Hermione laid her hands flat on the map, incredulous. "I didn't...he's alive!?"

Harry shrugged. He did well to casually ignore some facts since they came to his attention after the Final Battle.

A letter arrived one day, delivered by eagle owl, on cardstock embossed with a little silver flower. He had saved the world except for some and had been presented an opportunity to save one more. Not even save, simply aid. And the letter was worded so prim and proper. So, he had put in a request to Kingsley. He only asked that the Aurors be nice and respect a certain lady's privacy. Maybe offer her some medical help should she need it. That was all.

The then freshly titled Man-Who-Conquered, still aching from his ordeal, then hid away his impeccably polite thank-you note. Harry still had it upstairs somewhere, shoved beneath the insole of a shoe.

If at eighteen he cured a bit of survivor's guilt, and let that fact fizzle into obscurity, what as the harm? It wasn't as if he would see those people again. It wasn't as if anyone would really know what to do with the information. Honor the man? Try him for murder? No, all parties involved were glad to turn enough blind eyes for one skinny man to live in.
It was a non-issue, really, so much so that Harry had genuinely forgotten until that morning. He could never shake the cold dread of having that kind of sway, but the man he’d helped? Barely on his radar.

"Harry, did you know about this? When? How!?," Hermione's voice went higher and higher as she questioned him, egged on by his silence.

He didn't think he could tell her or Ron everything. They worked at the Ministry, and word could spread. He trusted them with his life, as he always had, but there was far less reason nowadays to test that trust.

He also owed Narcissa Malfoy for saving him in '98. Even if he paid any formal debt when she dodged prison, he still carried an emotional one. Once saved by a person, he couldn't turn around and expose them for harboring a criminal from the law. And said criminal, as little as Harry really liked him, had done more for the fight than most. Maybe he didn't deserve prison or a hero's welcome, but only to be left alone. Harry could do that for him.

But for right then, in that moment, Hermione was looking at him, stunned, mind working furiously to answer her own questions. Harry looked back at her, unsure what to say.

Ron leaned over and pushed aside her hand on the map.

"Snape!?," he hollered, blown back onto his backside. "Snape is alive!? You're related to Snape!?"

Oh, whatever. Harry leaned away from his friends, propping himself on the arm of the couch, one shoulder coming up and falling in the most uncaring shrug ever wrested from his twenty-two year old body.

"It has to be a joke," he insisted. "The book chooses what it shows, so it must be messing with me. It's the only way. It's the only goddamn way."

"But," Ron said, making wide-eye contact with Hermione. "What, is the book evil or something? Like a Horcrux, like Tom Riddle's diary? Maybe someone swapped this for your real family's, I don't know, to wreak havoc."

Harry gave him the floor, figuring this was as good an explanation as any. Anything made more sense than him being related to Severus Snape. The map presented that name in perfect script on a ink-drawn ribbon, like it was a normal thing to suggest.

"Severus Tobias Snape" floated beneath a red dot in Greater Manchester, as if this were speaking to a simple truth. Harry might have honestly found it funny, if the cruelty of such a prank didn't infuriate him. Even now, the hand supporting his head was clenched in a tight fist.

Hermione sighed something deep and put-upon, and Harry already knew he would dislike whatever she had to say. Hermione knew he would dislike it as well, hence the sigh. It was her, "Here I go, time to be the bad guy," sigh. It was a rather unfair attitude of hers, but not entirely off-the-mark.

The witch folded her hands over the book, and addressed both wizards.

"Do you really believe that a Potter heirloom that accepted Potter blood, found in a Potter vault that also accepted Potter blood, would go out of its way to trick Harry?"

"Aw, don't say it, Hermione," lamented Ron. "It's impossible!"
"I'm going to," she shot back sternly. She looked to Harry and grimaced at his dark expression. "Please, be reasonable. We read your birth certificate at the Ministry, we're reading the map. We even have clues from the sketch. Look."

She tapped one of the names in the blob of dots. The group, which had been in Manchester City, was now migrating east, toward Snape. The name she pointed out, however, read, "Georgina Altagracia Hedgerot."

"This could be 'Grace,' the woman in the sketch, your...birth mother. Healer Charing-Claire wrote that she was a Northerner." She circled Manchester with her finger.

"We also know that the only witness to your actual birth was named Eileen," her finger now slid over to the bastard's.

"Remember sixth year, the Potions textbook? Eileen Prince was Snape's mother. If Snape's mother and yours were from the same county, or even more, the same town…"

They all watched on the map as the group of dots all named Hedgerot joined the one dot labeled Severus Snape. They formed one, five petal flower, a forget-me-not that was bleeding red, instead of periwinkle blue.

"You make it sound like Snape's mom was around to goad Harry's into giving him up," Ron said, mildly disgusted with the thought. "No offense, but it'd suck less if this was a prank."

"Men," Hermione rolled her eyes, truly annoyed. Harry scoffed, not sure what she had to be annoyed about. He let her speak though, not trusting himself to. "There are legitimate reasons why a woman might give up her child for adoption.

"Harry! Didn't you say once that Snape grew up poor? Ron, if this woman was the same way, maybe she couldn't afford to keep him. She couldn't predict then what would happen to Harry's parents later on. She might not have even had control over who adopted him, if she got scared and ran."

"Oi, I don't know if you noticed," Ron rebutted, going red in the face, "but my mother isn't exactly an heiress. We didn't grow up with whole a lot, but she kept every one of her kids. And Snape's mom kept him!"

"But did she have a choice? Snape's mom or yours? And you had your dad, and his help and his income, however much that may be.

"And magic! I've literally seen your family just add more space to their house when they need it. I'm not saying that Molly had it easy, but what if this woman had none of that? There's no sketch of a father, so maybe he was absent.

"And what if she's a Muggle? No extra help for stretching food or keeping kids healthy."

"No way Harry has a Muggle mum," Ron said, insulted on his friend's behalf.

"...And what is wrong with having a Muggle mum, Ronald?"

"Nothing's wrong, but!"

"But what."

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, her expression thunderous, and sensed the conversation
might be flying off the rails. There was more being said than Harry had considered. Both Hermione's argument and Ron's defense soothed the boiling anger in his stomach.

But he felt the rage might have jumped from him to them. He didn't want his issues tainting the people he loved.

"Alright, ground it, both of you," he said, climbing to his feet. Neither of them gave him their attention, as engrossed as they were with glaring at each other.

He stood between them to break line of sight, for all of their sakes. "Good game, hit the showers."

"Harry!"

"Mate, look!"

"Nope," he said. Finding the scrap of warmth he felt in being so viciously defended, he thumped Ron on the shoulder. Then, summoning his appreciation for her clarity of purpose, he smiled down at Hermione.

"Thank you for coming here to check up on me. I think you helped shake me out of my own head, and gave me some things to think about. I needed perspective.

"Now, leave my home, and don't return until either I invite you, or the neighbors complain about the smell."

"That's nasty."

"Harry, that isn't funny."

"Yeah, yeah, quit stalling," he groused, pushing them to the Floo. He invited them both to grab a handful of powder. When Hermione arranged herself in the green flames and spun away, Harry held Ron back by the shoulder. He looked his friend in the eye.

"When you get home, you need to apologize."

Ron looked about to argue, but Harry kept his heavy gaze on him. Eventually, the taller wizard hung his head and sighed.

"Yeah, I know. I went too far with the Muggle thing. I don't know why I said it."

Harry patted him on the back and guided him into the hearth. He was careful not to catch the hanging threads of his house shirt on fire.

"You should unpack that. But if Hermione's still upset next time I see her, I'll have to kick your arse. No hard feelings, but she's like a sister to me."

Ron managed a sorry grin before calling out his address and whirling away. Harry watched the flames sink into the cracked logs, and then snuffed them. The parlor was unbearably hot, now, and Harry itched to be upstairs. He left the register where it sat on the couch, thinking he could use a second away from it.

As he walked past, however, he couldn't help a quick count of all its red specks of life.

_Six relatives, excluding me_, he thought. _Seven all together. The magic number, ha ha universe._

He rubbed at his cheeks, and noted he was due for a shave. He then climbed the stairs to the
bedroom slowly, to prepare himself. He still had a proper apology to make, and he wanted to do it right.
Interlude: An Odd Daughter’s Debut

Chapter Summary

Some miles from Cokeworth, an injured woman gets out on parole.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 21st, 2002: Her Majesty's Prison, Failsworth, Greater Manchester

Bzzzz!

"Alright, everybody up! Let's go, outta bed, clothes on, yes!"

Zed oozed into painful consciousness, wrestled awake by the racket. She squinted in the dim cell, and glowered at the dark trouser legs crowding her bunk.

The ambient clamor of women shouting and metal slamming now filled the room, louder than before. Through the open cell door echoed the constant noise of the inmates. As she had every morning for ten years, she'd awoken in HMP Failsworth, known by the locals as Odd-Daughters. Today, however, was the day of her release.

A hairy-knuckled fist gripped a baton, slapping it against the palm of a pink, meaty hand with eager anticipation.

Fuck, Zed swore internally, *Not this prick.*

"Let's perk up, Hedgie love. It's your big day!"

Swearing again, the woman slid her bandaged arms from under her pillow, wincing at the tug of cotton on her stitches. She pushed back her heavy mane of wiry, black hair. She rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth, wiping away drool.

"I'm up," she groused, head pounding. Even her own, gravelly voice bounced around her skull.

"That's right! We're up bright and early today, eh?," she heard the grin in his voice as Moitey, the Wednesday day shift, savored her obvious discomfort.

He gestured up with his baton, and started rapping it against the bunk frame. She hissed at the shooting *ratta-tat-tat* of the nightstick on the painted metal.

*Why this twitchy git,* she bemoaned.

Zed leaned over her cot, trying to push herself up on her forearms, and her innards bucked. The floor spun into the ceiling. She spilled out of bed, heaving on the floor next to Moitey's black, rubber soled boots.

"C'mon, nunna that, up!," complained the corrections officer, stepping away. "Get up, and get dressed!"
"Give her a sec, Moity, she had a rough night," her cellie spoke up. Bedsprings above Zed creaked and bounced, like her bunkmate had rolled onto her side. "She were cryin' painful hard."

_Dumb, sweet bitch_, Zed thought, exasperated, struggling against the vertigo to get upright. Her bruised ribs twinged dangerously but held together. They'd had three weeks to heal, so while they weren't screaming anymore, she still took it easy climbing to her feet.

"Aw, heartbroken at having to leave us so soon? Shut yer gob, Martin! I didn't ask you."

Zed grabbed her own shoulder so she didn't wrench it. She then reached over and patted her mate Peggy's bed by way of thanks. She figured she'd might as well accept the useless help in the spirit it was given.

She started to dress. Zed had slept in her uniform soft pants and a plain white t-shirt. It only took a minute to throw the prisoner's standard grey jumper over it and slide her socked feet into her sneakers. While she shuffled around to fix her bed, back aching, the meaty smack of baton-on-palm resumed behind her.

She rolled her eyes and sneered.

The guard repeated himself, "Pepper up, Hedgerot! It's your big day!"

Before Moity lost his last god given smidge of patience, she threw her pillows against the bare brick walls. She then eased out her cardboard box of letters and thoroughly thumbed paperbacks from under the bed. Gripping it, the soon-to-be-former inmate straightened up, forcing her shoulders out of their hunch.

Her spine cracked as her vertebrae popped into place. She took private joy in Moity going pea green under his furry, greying unibrow. Making that caterpillar wrinkle was almost worth the pain.

Tottering, balance a little off with box in tow, she murmured goodbye to Pegs, and glanced around the narrow, brown brick room a last time. She took in the whitewashed bunks, the barred window, the funk of stale women.

Zed left her unsaid ill wishes on the vacant bed. Then she cleared her throat, and spat on the floor.

"Oi, cut the shit! Disgusting." Moity dug the nightstick into her kidney, prodding her forward. "Move, off to the showers."

Zed left the cell, feeling sorry for old Peggy Martin and the next poor girl to fill it.

Zed was allowed ten minutes to shower. Around her she heard sniffling, chatter, flip flops clapping against wet tile, a squeak of faucets turning, and the screech of curtain rings on the rods. A few other women milled about. Most younger inmates had towels; contrarily, most of the older ladies puttered about in the nude.

Tending to herself, she washed quickly and carefully, cautious of bumping her side with the bar of cheap soap. She rinsed off, and finger-combed her hair under the spray.

Zed spent her last minute holding her head under the showerhead, watching the grime, shed hairs, and dingy suds circle the drain. She let the hot water beat her tired body, eyes drifting shut.

"Hey, something's wrong..."
"You fucking bastards! Help me!"

"Christ, what...what are you?"

She jerked awake and was made to dry off.

The guards handed her a bag of outside clothes, dropped off by her mother earlier that week. She held a sweatshirt, running a thumb over the smooth, polyester tag with her name on it. Just three letters in blue permanent marker, "Zed."

She pulled on the off-brand Disneyland Paris sweatshirt, after several false starts. Doing it was a medieval torture on her ribs. Once on, the shirt hung to her knees, having once been her tree-of-a-brother's. She appreciated the fuzzy lining taking mercy on her sensitive skin.

The scrape of denim up her legs felt rough and foreign as she walked to the inmate release window. So did the hard waistband and zipper pressing into her belly while she stood being processed, officers at her back.

"Hedgerot, Zinnia C.," read the clerk in a monotone, who then proceeded to rattle off her prisoner ID number. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," she said, resting her box on the counter. Her arms were tired.

"Please step away from the glass."

She glared through the barrier, but complied.

The officer at the window flipped through her release papers and explained the rules of her license. Zed listened, answering when spoken to, while watching the other bags of belongings gather dust.

Soon Zed was given her years old possessions in a clear, ziplock bag: a band hoodie that reeked of plastic; her wallet with her expired IDs and gift cards; a keyring with keys to a now repossessed car, and a neon alien keychain. She began shoving some things into her jeans pockets, when the officer handed her an envelope. In it was the remainder of her canteen account, in twenty pound notes.

"Aw, there it is," drawled Moitey with a nasty grin.

She side-eyed him and started counting. She counted sixty quid while Moitey chuckled and quipped with his young partner. Zed flipped over a bill and frowned at the mustachioed man printed on its back.

"Who the hell's this?," she asked, puzzled.

"Elgar," supplied the younger officer. He watched her with mild interest. She didn't recognize him, so he was probably new. "E were a musician."

She looked at him suspiciously. Would they give her play money as some sick joke? Those sixty pounds were all she had to her name. She hadn't the faith in humanity to believe they wouldn't toy with that.

Zed said nothing, though, as she put the money in her wallet and the wallet in her back pocket. The whole process felt awkward, like she was putting on a show.

"Let's go then," sniffed Moitey, gathering her elbow in his ruddy paw. "Time to see what all you've
They led her through gate after gate, down a long paved walk and through a final, outer wall, before leaving her out by the sidewalk. They gave her a final warning to get to where she ought and locked the gate behind her.

For a moment, Zed just stood there, box and bag in hand, watching the guards watch her. Then she turned, carefully, toward the road…

She was out.

The weather was brisk, the air hardly warmed by the creeping sun. It cooled her hands and face. The morning pecked over the lush, surrounding trees. A light breeze brought along quieter smells than she was used to—usually sweat and caustic disinfectants. Here she smelled cut grass, and dirt, and a bit of dust from the gravel underfoot.

*Gasoline,* she thought, unbidden. She craned her neck up the street and sure enough, caught a ghostly whiff of exhaust carried downwind.

People lived nearby, ones who often drove past the prison yard in their minivans and dinged pickups. She supposed it was one of them.

Clearer than she thought right, such that she swore she imagined it, Zed heard an engine. She felt its determined hum wake up the road, vibrating, as if a car were headed her way from the edge of earshot.

Nobody was in the yard yet, so there was no yelling, no feet stamping, no guards snapping names. Waiting and listening to the morning birds and the shushing of leaves, Zed grew rigid as a car came rattling toward her.

She squinted through the sun glinting off of the windscreen, gripping her things. She didn't recognize the limping gold station wagon. Its front bumper sagged and duct tape crisscrossed its cloudy headlights. A shout leapt into her throat when the car honked and squeaked to a stop in front of her.

"Eyyy!," came a muffled whoop from inside. Someone was swinging open the driver's side door and stepping out

All she saw at first was hair. But it shook apart to reveal brown skin and bright, button black eyes.

"Zeddieee!," her brother crooned. Then he jumped at her.

"Fuckin' hell!," she shrieked. She damn near threw the box at him when the giant man loped towards her, arms wide, beaming. "I thought you were some creep!"

"I am!"

"Aw, shut up."

As per old times, her yelling did nothing to dampen her brother's enthusiasm. No matter the time or place, the man was always deaf to her scolding. Ten years vanished in an instant. They might as well have been kids again, kicking dirt at each other in the yard.

She'd expected their mum to pick her up. She imagined the woman still pushing around the same, Jurassic-era purple hooptie. The one where scientists could've carbon dated the junk in its treads
and pinpointed the dawn of man. The car her brother drove, while far from new, was new to her. Then again, that day, what wasn't?

Again, she felt like the world tilted at an angle that grew steeper every time she noticed it.

"Whose car is this?", Zed asked, leaning away.

"Oh yeah, mine! Bought it off old John when his beau died."

"Walt's dead?," she said, coming closer. She remembered old John and Walt from down the way, back in primary.

She then realized with a jolt that she was walking away from Odd-Daughters.

She felt exposed. All the guards and towers and mortared walls were to her back. Everything she had known for so long was behind her. She didn't look back though, pushing on. The ex-inmate continued toward the car like it was hers.

Her little brother greeted her with a sweeping hug. She scowled up at his chin. His scraggly chin hairs tickled up her nose and got in her eye. It was immediately too hot and too cramped where he'd gathered her into her chest. Her belongings were held out between them, and her every joint clicked when he squeezed.

Zed sweat, needing not to be touched.

"Knock it off!," she ground out, irritated, and was, of course, ignored. "Get offa me, you massive goon!"

She jumped at his booming laughter, cursing when he uncoiled and clapped his hands down on her shoulders. She felt pain shoot up from her heels and into her back. Tendons burned. Pulling away, she glared at him.

He gestured for her things, still beaming, reading her pain as surliness. She always hated hugs.

Zed hedged about giving him her stuff, having just gotten some of it back herself. But eventually she handed over the box and bag. Her brother turned away, grinning. Thus relieved, she tucked her arms into the pocket of her sweatshirt. She followed him to the car, resigned to giving her aching hands a rest.

"You're fuckin' free!," he laughed, almost as if to himself. He bent over, dropping her box in the backseat. "This is amazin', sis!"

She muttered something about being on parole, and not technically free. And the world outside already made less sense than she'd hoped. But he faced her again, and his goofy, crooked-toothed smile tugged at the knot in her everything.

She cracked a grin despite herself, and felt it stretch the yellowed bruises painting her cheeks.

She missed the swell of relief, though, once he realized the state of her. Now that they'd stepped fully out of the shadow of Odd-Daughters, and the sun had lightened a little more of the sky, he could see her properly.

His smile wilted, and storms gathered on his face. His heavy brows furrowed, and his lip pulled back in a snarl. She knew he'd never met their father—a miserable old drunk on the dole—but he favored the man terribly.
"What happened to you," demanded her brother. He sent his blackest look past her at the prison behind.

She looked back at it as well, fighting the tilt, feeling the slide backwards into her nightmares. She thought of sterile hospital beds and restraints. She remembered fluorescent lights, and curtains tearing, and blood, and dizzy nothing.

Stop it, she thought, sucking sweat from her top lip.

"Look, hop in the car and I'll tell ya," she reasoned, smacking her little brother on the hip.

He stayed looking at building and its guards, searching and furious, like they'd stolen something. Of course, they had, many things, but still. He wouldn't find his answers there.

"There's no one to bash," Zed said, moving around to the passenger side door. She gripped the handle and yanked it open, banging on the wagon's roof as she climbed inside.

"C'mon, bozo!," she called. Impatient, she leaned on the car horn, obliterating the morning peace. She yelled again out the rolled down window: "Keep hangin' about and they'll keep ya!"

Her brother turned to her, all wound up. She scoffed and honked the horn again.

"Your fuckin' face, Zed!," he protested.

"If I'm not at the P.O.'s in ten hours, they'll say I've run off. I ain't sick of freedom yet, understand, only had it ten minutes. Plus, whoever did it—not sayin' anyone did anyfin' but let's say some arsehole did—they're already locked up then, innit?

"It's done. Now drive me to my fuckin' appointment and tell me how's mum."

She looked ahead down the street, eyes on the blind curve that would lead them off to Manchester. Her heart thudded away while she waited to get going. She felt it stutter against her breastbone when the car sunk and rocked under her little brother's weight.

The driver's door slammed shut and she was overtaken by the strange new smells of the car: stuffy sea breeze air freshener, spoiled takeout, tobacco; something cloying, gamy and cold that she'd never run into before.

"Alright, I get it," he grumbled, nose wrinkled in distaste.

She eyed him, glad when the ignition finally turned. He started them down the street. Tree branches ran shadows that dappled the gold bonnet, which itself shook with the divots in the blacktop. A fringed Guyanese flag dangled from the neck of the rear view mirror.

Zed leaned forward, her awareness of her brother falling away as the road opened up to the highway. Heeding her creaking body, she simply stared into the rear view, and saw the last glimpse of prison disappear around the curve.

She waited for the freedom feeling to hit. All she felt was her healing bones and the cool air whipping her hair into a tangle. They drove in silence for a while, before he asked again: "So...what happened?"

Zed shrugged out of habit and her shoulder popped.

"Christ!," exclaimed her brother, alarmed. "Zed, is it broken!?"
"Naw," she winced, massaging the tendon. "I dunno, it's like everything got shook outta socket. Not broken though, only hurts."

"A fight? On some prison gang shit?"

"No, man, I dunno," she tried to piece together the story enough to tell but was about as successful as she'd ever been. She didn't remember enough to make it make sense. It might as well have been a fever dream.

"Something happened, sis, I got eyes, y'know," he turned from the highway to peek at her, then swerved and looked back. "Shit! You protectin' someone or sumit stupid like that?"

Zed ignored him and took in his profile. He'd gained weight back in his face, and the beard had grown over the pitting from lasering off his tattoos. She knew he had stopped drinking, and had seen him become more lucid over the years. He looked better now—still a great, hulking terror, but kind in the eyes like he used to be.

"You look good, Fox. Healthy," she said ponderously.

Fox gawked and let loose a hoot of laughter. "You don't. Unbelievable."

She shrugged again and cursed.

Her meeting with her parole officer was uneventful. She sat across from a tiny man behind a desk who rehashed her license. Then he started reading off dates when she was meant to return for her regular check-ins.

"I can't make that last one," she interjected when he paused for breath. The man raised his eyebrows, dripping in condescension.

"And why not?", he squeaked. "You understand, missing a date without reason and proof of that reason is a violation of your license. You could land yourself back in Failsworth if you're meaning to play a bit a hooky."

"I got a doctor's appointment," she replied, reaching into her sweatshirt pocket. "Parole board mandated."

She pulled out a creased doctor's letter that she had printed in the prison library just for then. On it was the date in question. Around that was a formal confirmation of a meeting with a publicly-referred neurologist.

The officer took the letter from her and read over it. "What's this for?"

"It's in my file," she pointed out, nodding at the open folder on the desk. "I got a prescription too —"

"Clonazepam," read the officer, speaking over her, "for 'convulsive status epilepticus'."

He put down the papers, threaded his fingers together, and narrowed his eyes at her.

"Abuse and unlicensed distribution of controlled substances is very much illegal and will land you back inside," he lectured. "I know 'sales' is your forte, but please refrain from falling in with your old crowds."

The man lifted one tiny, sparse eyebrow.
God, she hated him.

By the time they left the parole office, it was half past ten in the morning. Fox drove them toward Piccadilly station, where they parked and waited on the noon train from Leeds. Zed dozed against the window, face tucked into her sweatshirt.

She passed in and out of wakefulness while Fox read in his lap, humming to the pop on the radio. They whiled away the rest of the morning, until eventually Fox shook her awake.

"You hungry, Zeds?"

She grunted, "Hm. Meat pie," and was corrected by her growling stomach, "Mmm, no. Steak. Let's go in somewhere."

"Yeah, I'm famished. Ah, never mind, here they come."

She groaned, starving. Fox chuckled and the car bobbed as he stepped out. She resurfaced from her warm shirt and scowled out at the bright daylight. Several cars down, she saw the pair hustling toward them.

Their mother, Gracie, rushed along, leading a child by the hand. She must have been fresh from her shift at the mill, as she was still in her blue factory jumpsuit. She had a patterned scarf around her head, tied under her chin. It was likely meant to hide her helmet hair from the general public.

Gracie noticed her son first, and waved an arm in their direction. Next to her, a girl of about grade school age dragged her feet in their cheetah print flats. Zed lifted her shirt collar over her mouth's downturned corners.

She didn't like kids. They asked too many questions, or brooded in that trying, adolescent way that spoiled precious silence. Even just going about her day, she'd been gawked at by what felt like every brat in Manchester. This girl was already in a sulk, slouching as she trailed along, her eyes on her feet. The hand not wrapped in their mother's held the strap of her hot orange backpack.

This made Zed question the bulky stereo headphones the girl wore over her nest of curls. They didn't seem attached to a game or a Walkman. The girl looked up, noticed Zed watching, and threw her gaze back down to the asphalt.

The woman called for her brother's attention. He bent over, swiping hair behind his ears. She motioned to the little girl.

"Who's the rug rat?," she asked, annoyed.

Fox stared quizzically back, then seemed to understand her confusion.

"That's Laney. Remember? I don't know how much mum said to you," he answered. "I know she didn't bring her to visit, so you've probably never laid eyes."

"The baby!?," she said, gobsmacked. She remembered her mum getting pregnant when Zed was first arrested, and having no clue why she kept it. Who had a baby at forty? Still Zed had requested furlough when Gracie went into labor and was denied.

She suspected her mother of thinking her a liar, assuming she just never tried to come. It hardly came up, but Gracie never brought the baby to Failsworth for a visit. Zed didn't press, not caring either way. But now, she felt wrongfooted, seeing the older woman hurry towards them with a
whole grade schooler in tow.

Fox nodded, gauging her reaction.

"What's her name, Laney?" Zed followed up, sitting up in her seat. Her mother and—kid sister—were almost at the car.

"Yeah, Marisleny," replied Fox fondly, and she shot him a shocked look.

He said the girl's name like he had raised her himself. His smile when the pair finally reached the car was unlike she'd ever seen on the man's face.

Even his beaming down at her, freshly released, had been strong, impressive—a forceful joy. This smile softened his whole face, sapping some of its natural pique, buffing the edge of some of their father's features.

This was peaceful.

"I got to name her, y'know," her little brother explained further, glowing with pride. "After Nan."

Zed felt a little empty, not able to place why.

"Zeddie!," shouted their mother. The passengers door flew open and calloused hands came up around Zed's cheeks. The injured woman squawked at a sudden barrage of affection. Loud, lipsticked kisses smacked on her forehead, eyelids, and cheeks.

Zed gasped desperately. A cloud of smells overwhelmed her senses: machine oil, the leavings of perfume, wax and powdered, sweat, recycled train air; hops, soursop, a curry lunch; kid's breath, cold chicken fingers, pencil shavings, lemon.

Two cars honked, fighting over a spot dozens of yards away. She swore she heard the drivers bristle and the friction in the pause before the row.

_Am I havin' a stroke_, she panicked, ears ringing, face and neck protesting the assault. This wasn't the hard, salty woman she knew. And this was entirely too much touching. Her skin tightened and stung, as if sunburned.

Zed caught her mother's face in one hand and glared at her through her spread fingers. She felt lipstick mash into the heel of her hand and the muffled complaint.

"You're bleedin' mad," she growled, forcing the older woman back. "Stop, you maniac!"

Her mother's eyes squinted good naturedly, and then grew wide with horror. She shoved aside Zed's hand and grabbed her face again.

"Ow, I said stop!"

"What happened to your face," snapped her mother, fingers running over Zed's cheeks. "Who did this to you? I hope you kicked her bloody teeth in."


Zed, face mashed in her mother's hands, glanced over at the kid of interest, eyebrows raised to her hairline.

_Duck?_, she thought, incredulous. Yes, Fox had definitely changed, as had her mother. _What is it_
Laney looked up at him, face blank. She then shook her head and readjusted her grip on the backpack strap.

"I ate chicken," she replied, and Zed couldn't agree harder. Her stomach turned at the smell of milk, grease and breading on the girl's breath. "We're sisters."

Zed flinched at the abrupt address. "Yeah, so I'm told."

The kid didn't quite make eye contact, staring at her chin. Zed's mood soured. A pall of bated breath fell over the car that she didn't care for.

She pried off her mother's hands, crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat, staring out at the puttering cars.

"Yeah, let's eat," Fox muttered, sliding back behind the wheel.

"Three burgers and chips," said Fox to the visibly bored waitress. "Cooked through please."

Zed imagined sinking her teeth in a fresh, bloody patty. Her mouth watered.

"Gimme mine rare, love," she corrected, grinning at the server. The waitress took pause, pen hovering over her notepad, momentarily forgotten.

Zed's grin widened, showing more teeth. The other woman gulped. She scribbled a word down, and hurried off to the kitchens.

"Geez," Fox huffed, scratching his chin. "Take your time."

"'Geez,'" teased Zed.

"Shut it."

"So, your face," interjected their mother. Gracie had one hand on the kid's book, seemingly covering the text. Zed quirked an eyebrow at the title, "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work." Laney had been trying to worm her fingers between the palm and the page, to no avail.

"You were fighting in there in your last frickin' month? You keep to yourself, Zeddie," her mum scowled, "Stupid, what if they extended your sentence? Then what?"

Zed rolled her eyes and fiddled with her steak knife.

*It's wild how they just give these to people*, mused Zed, turning the serrated blade in the light.

Smirking, she turned it till she caught a beam of sunlight from the window. Then she played around with flashing it about, blinding her brother.

"Stop," the man complained, shielding his eyes with the dessert menu.

"Stop what," she snickered, trying to aim around laminated tiramisu.

"Ey, listen here! I'm serious, what were you thinking!?"

"Leave it, mum," Zed shot back, picking up her napkin with the knifepoint. "It weren't a fight."
"Ah, then it were what? A talent show? Who did your face like that?"

Zed belted up before she said something in poor taste. She had grown annoyed with all the questions. She wanted food and rest, not an interrogation. She slapped down the knife and pulled her hands from the table.

"You're getting worked up over the nothing," she finally admitted. "I took a spill and hit my head, so I don't remember much. The doctors inside think I've got brain damage maybe, and get seizures now. It was rough before they caught it but now I've got some medicine for it and it's fine."

"And a seizure did that to ya," her mother scoffed. "Stop messin' with me, Zed. Is it drugs? Did yer old people find you?"

"Mum, she says it's not that," Fox cut in, holding up quelling hand. "If she fell, she fell."

Zed nudged his side, thankful for the assistance. "See, if it was drug shit, Freddy Fox wouldn't even look at me. It's just a thing I've got now, quit scrikin'."

"Don't you talk down to me, missy," groused her mother, jabbing a finger her way. Quickly though, the relief set in of no one being out for her eldest's blood. Her strict outrage melted into disgruntled concern. "Whatever, you done good avoiding trouble."

"Thanks," she snarked.

"How'd you fall?" piped up a lilting voice. Zed looked across at Laney, who was still tucked into her book but had clearly stopped reading. The girl froze while Zed looked her over.

"Three burgers, two well done, one rare."

A new server, this one a floppy-haired young man, distributed their plates around the table. Zed's plate plunked down, bun sweating. She inhaled the beef and onion steam and sighed, contented and ravenous. The room vanished aside from her, her stomach, and sweet, red meat.

"Enjoy," announced the new server, backing away from their table. She nodded, licking her lips from corner to corner. She wiggled, thrilled, before hefting the meal in both hands and tearing into it.

"Christ, woman!," Fox chortled, stunned and childishly delighted. "You're a beast!"

"Slow down before you choke," said her mother, repulsed. Zed ignored them both and continued to scarf down the burger. She was already halfway through when Laney spoke up:

"My dad says you shouldn't eat mincemeat rare. You get sick."

Zed sucked lettuce from her teeth, not bothering to look up from her meal. Oil and pink juices decorated her plate. She tore off some of the bun, sopped up the liquid, and sucked it down.

"Don't do it then," she belched, resuming her feast.

Chapter End Notes

The OCs introduced here are prominent characters in this fic. The majority of
perspectives will be from canon HP characters as they interact with this fun little group right here! Hip hurray!
A newly free woman meets a newly raised ghost. Severus learns of his parents’ secret past.

**August 21st, 2002: in route to Cokeworth, Greater Manchester**

"So her son left you the house?," Zed asked, when they finally set out for home.

The family had spent the rest of the afternoon shopping. Her mother had surprised Zed with a whole carton of Marlboro Gold king sized. Zed had stroked the ten packs through the Tesco bag, tearing up. It was a good time for all. Now Grace snoozed in the backseat, an arm around Laney. The girl, for her part, simply flipped through her book, finally able to read unobstructed.

Zed eyed her in the rear view mirror, but decided not to say anything. Whatever was in there for folks of a marriageable age couldn't be so bad for a kid. It was better than learning it off the streets.

"Nah, more like it just passed on to me," Fox replied, ferrying them onto the freeway. "Remember how Miss Eileen had the house after dad died?"

Zed nodded and, realizing her brother couldn't see it, answered aloud. "He kept it in her name for the taxes, since she didn't have no history or nothin'."

"Oh, I didn't know that bit."

"Really? It’s why nobody talked to her but mum. Too weird."

"That ain’t why she was weird. But yeah, the house were hers, then she died, and it went to the son. He lived in it for a long while, or well, he kept it up. I dunno."

"Hm." Zed bet “kept up” was a loose term, but let it slide.

"No one knows what happened to him after, but I guess he just disappeared? Like he barely lived there but now he's gone gone. Mum says it took a while for him to be declared missing because his job up in Scotland. Plus he was...y’know."

She understood his meaning. Gracie had moved the family out of their hometown after their dad started getting belligerent. Zed only vaguely remembered Miss Eileen as the stooped, grouchy woman who gave her and Fox her son's hand-me-downs. They saw her once or twice, like visiting a hoarder aunt, moved closer and farther away running from the rent man. And then, she passed.

But Zed knew through her mother that Miss Eileen was "odd," as was her son. Lonely, brooding types that never shaped up into normal, the type to show up and disappear without a trace.

Sometimes, after the move, the Hedgerot kids would receive packages with dried herbs and sealed jars of bitter sludge. Lord forbid they came home sick, or they would have to choke it all down with their mum nearby, reading instructions aloud. Once they did though, with noses pinched and eyes watering, the bitter smoothies would break any fever overnight. And any cut they rubbed it on
healed in a wink.

Miss Eileen was like *that*. Once in a while they'd get scuffed playing cards or a scribbled up picture book. Their mother would snatch them away and hop on the phone, explaining in harassed tones why, "No, they can't play that. No, they don't know."

Neighbors said they were Roma, but she knew it was something else, too. Something eerie. She also could tell they were related, as she and what's-his-name had shared the same nose.

Remembering it all now, it wasn’t the strangest part of their childhood—well, it was, but not the most prevalent. Miss Eileen was more a ghost now than she’d been knowing her; her son even more so.

Fox, being two years younger, had never met him. Zed had only glimpsed the older boy in the windows or around the park. Back then she herself was little more than a toddler, always told to act right and stop staring. So she only recalled long hair, and him having a weird name.

"Anyway," Fox continued softly. "He disappeared like three years ago, and there's no sign that he's coming back. Someone dug into it, and turns out he's been legally declared dead."

"Personally, I think he'll turn up murdered. I mean he weren't much older than us, and it's not like Miss Eileen, the way they found her, in the tub. This guy's just gone."

Zed sympathized. She figured if she died, it wouldn't take anyone's three years to hear about it. And while she hadn't made the best choices, she hoped to avoid becoming some marshland mystery.

"That's rough," she said.

"I guess," hummed her brother, exiting toward Rochdale. "Either way the house went to next a kin. You were locked up, so."

He clicked his tongue and jabbed a thumb at himself, as if to say, "This guy!"

"Got you a fuckin' house," she hooted. "Fresh new upgrade! That's what I'm sayin', Fox!"

Her brother rubbed at his nose, playing bashful. "Well, y'know, I just do what ah must."

"The house were fuckin' hangin', though," he went on. The car turned towards Cokeworth, bumping along the winter ravaged roads. "There was shit in this bloke's fridge you wouldn't believe! Moldy, dead rats and frog eyes and shit. He must have been one of those like New Age druid types."

"What, little cauldrons and candles stuff?"

"Yeah!," Fox laughed. Knowing him, Zed figured he had the frolic of his life in all that strangeness. He had whimsy like that.

"Ya think you’re jokin’, but that’s it exactly! We found all types of cauldrons and vials and bird feathers. Aw, we found this jar of just nasty, hairy clumps, and bug parts and little animal claws. And the closets had normal clothes but then costumes, I think? Like vicar robes and shit. And just the weirdest vibe throughout the whole thing, like it’s definitely haunted.

“Ugh, you’re gonna love it!”
Zed sincerely doubted that, but at least he enjoyed himself. She had no qualms about haunted if she could sleep, unbothered.

They pulled up in front of the old row house at the bottom of Spinner's End. She remembered it from her childhood. "The big house," she used to call it, since that was where the married couple and their son resided. The Hedgerots' had been the house of a senile grandmother, a teenage mother, and her ornery, bastard brats. A family, sure, but a creative interpretation, or so thought the head-shaking neighbors.

The now adult Spinnerette scoffed at the house in the setting afternoon light. It wasn't so big now. It looked the same shade of ugly as the one next to it, if a bit more crowded by scrubby woods.

*But, hey, free house,* she reasoned while Fox shook their mother awake.

"Huh," Gracie snorted, drowsy. "Get, er, the, the thing! From the damned boot, the boxes."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Fox. The man then reached over their mother to tap Laney on her headphones. "Let's go, duck. We're here."

"I don't wanna go in there," the girl stated. Zed looked back at her, then decided she didn't care. Fox could handle the kid.

"Why not," her brother asked, having already left and ducked back into the car, moving aside so their mother could squeeze out. While he talked, the older woman stumbled to the back and popped the trunk, lifting out a box.

"You liked the house when you saw it with us, remember?"

"There's a man in front of it," she said, fixing her sliding headset and clutching her book to her chest. If Zed had to guess, she'd say the girl was scared.

"He's covered in blood, Freddy. I'm staying in the car."

Zed, alarmed, craned her neck to look around Fox. Sure enough, her mother had stopped in the front walk, and was stuck going back and forth with a raving lunatic. A grown man blocked the door, yelling and swinging his arms, in a white shirt browned with mud and pit stains. One sleeve, soaked in blood, was rolled up, a gauze-draped arm gesturing wildly at the front porch.

Zed jumped out the car, banging her knee on the bumper as she came around.

Fox had spun around with a duffle and her box of possessions in hand, asking after their mother. The madman was cursing at a stunned Gracie, pointing at the house, his expression folded with violent outrage. He looked offensively similar to her brother. Or rather, the man sharply resembled their dad.

*Shit, maybe the house is haunted,* she thought, breaking out in a cold sweat.

Zed looked back, scanning for a weapon, and dove into the backseat, stretching across a squealing Laney to grab the handle of a short bat—yes, its hard weight dinged off the dented chassis. Fox used to keep it in all his old rooms for running off thieves. Luckily, he had thought to move it to this house. Gripping the bat, pumped full of adrenaline, she hardly felt her muscles bunch and pull as she cocked it back.

Zed charged the ghost.
"And who the fuck are you?," the man sneered, so focused on her brother, he didn't see her come up his other side.

"Wait!," her mother shouted—a split second too late.

CRACK! The bat sunk into the man's shoulder. He screamed and fell back against the house, arm hanging far too low, by his chest.

"GET AWAY FROM US," Zed hollered, bringing the bat up for a second blow. This one he dodged, falling into the dirt. Unable to stop its swing, the bat smashed through the front window, shattering it.

"ZINNIA, STOP," somebody screamed. Hands came up under her arms, twisting her shoulders, tearing at the tendons, and she shrieked.

She saw red. Dropping the bat, she bucked and kicked at the stranger’s head and body. One sneaker grinding glass into the ground, the other connected two, three, four times before she realized, through her fighting fog, that ghosts couldn't be kicked.

The stranger caught her foot and yanked it away from his face. Heart running a mile a minute, she watched, cursing, as he spat blood on her feet and wobbled to stand.

"Zeddie, stop before the neighbors call the cops! Zed!"

Fox's voice broke through the rush of blood in her ears. Still caught up in her drumming heart, her rending joints, she fought free of her brother's hold and lunged for the man again.

The heart monitors were screaming. The mad nurse roared, just on the other side of the curtain, scrabbling to get to her.

"Help me, you fucking bastards! Help me!"

The curtain crashed to the ground, and she saw it: all gnashing teeth and yellow eyes. Beeps and whines when she felt the first tear. Everything reeked of blood.

Severus came to himself in agony, laid out on his now floral couch. He'd spent the hours since the talk with eyes upturned to the ceiling of his living room. The day had grown dark afterwards, once he lost the battle with healing sleep. His arm had been wrapped tightly while he slept. He felt the muffled throb of the raw and now battered skin under the bandage.

"If he presses charges...out less than a day, you can't just snap like that!"

He didn't bother turning his head to hear better. He let the argument in the kitchen play out while he stewed.

"You heinous bastard," Severus cursed his late father's name.

He'd had no idea about his father's infidelity, and was on all accounts, seething. It wasn't enough that the monster had drank away his public assistance. His memory couldn't rest with leaving Severus and his mother to fend for themselves, often against him. Tobias had slept around on his wife. He had children on her, with a woman not much older than Severus himself. And his mother had known.

Somehow the wizard was disappointed, but not surprised. One more dirty truth for the pile. But
how did she know about them without telling him? He supposed they rarely chatted. Shared
silence, maybe, not quite comfortably.

He closed his eyes and imagined the two sibling strangers. The behemoth was undoubtedly his
father's son. The resemblance was uncanny, such that, except for his dark brown skin, he doubted
anything from the mother had made it to the child.

Belatedly, he thought on the other one, the sister's, violence. His shoulder pulsated at the mention
of her attack. If it wasn't for the fact that she was clearly out of her mind, he would swear revenge
on the woman.

But he'd seen the berserking terror in her face. When they finally pulled her off of him and she sat
on the ground, sobbing, he could only think to keep away. She evoked in him an inborn sense of
himself, if a version he hadn't been in decades.

If this woman had thrown herself on Albus Dumbledore's mercy, he felt he could predict the course
of her life.

"...have to apologize," someone in the kitchen finished. Severus heard a scoff, and winced as his
attacker spoke.

"That won't do much," the woman retorted, voice hoarse.

"Zed," the brother started.

"I coulda killed 'im," the sister continued. "I wouldn't forgive that, in his place. It's whatever. If I
go back, I go back."

A floorboard creaked. Severus glanced to the doorway and sat up. A young girl stared at him from
the hall, half in shadow by the lights from the kitchen. It seemed as though everyone in the home
except himself and this child were bickering in the back of the house.

"What," he snapped at the imp. She kept looking for a moment, eyes wide, and then scarpered off
to tattle.

Surely enough, a second later saw an abrupt halt to the conversation and a small voice uttered,
"He's awake."

Severus groaned and draped his good arm over his eyes. All he wanted was an evening alone.

"Mrrrp," he felt a cold nose sniff his thumb, before a cat leaped onto his stomach. Crawling up to
his chest, his cat purred and settled in for a nap. Letting her, he heard small slippers shuffle into the
room, unafraid of the dark.

"What's her name?," asked the girl. Severus glared at her through one cracked eyelid, wishing her
away.

"Cat," he deadpanned. He didn't need a name for the creature, as he only had one cat.

"Laney, let him be," hissed the mother's voice. Severus realized no more rest was coming his way.
He scooped the sphinx off of his chest and dropped her on the carpet as he stood.

"Move," he sneered at the brat, fists on his hips. She shuffled out of his way, and he limped from
the room.
He came into the kitchen, blinking in the yellow wash of the halogen lights. Standing by the sink was the rest of the cuckoo birds stealing his nest. Severus felt foolish for not realizing the signs of life before.

There were dishes around the sink that he had dropped blood all over. A white votive candle burned away in deep red glass on the ledge of the be-frilled sink window.

A letter addressed from HMP Failsworth was stuck to the refrigerator.

Severus skimmed it as he passed, and found it was likely about the lady berserker.

_A convict_, he thought, _Lovely._

Then he re-examined his recent visit to Lucius, and figured perhaps the only real people were those a step or two from prison.

"When will you all be leaving?" he asked the room. He was gaped at for several seconds, for which he turned up his nose. "Well?"

"Now stop me if I'm wrong," drawled the sister. He believed she went by Zoey, and luckily for his purposes, found he didn't care either way.

"You're wrong," he interrupted, holding up a hand to stop her, "if anything you're about to say is short of the word 'immediately.'"

"How about this," she challenged. Severus turned fully to her now, glowering. Why was the madwoman the one talking? "I hear you're supposed to be dead. Start with why ain't ya. Because we have every right to be here."

"Not if I have you arrested for assault," he rebutted.

He didn't have time for games. Ill will or no, and his father be damned, he wanted them out. His day had lasted forty-two years and he wanted to be alone.

"Shit, hold on," the brother cut in, only to be forestalled by the mother.

"Don't beg," she said, tone steely. "Now listen, I knew your mother—."

"And my father, quite well, or so you say," he responded. "My condolences on having met him, he was an odious man. And beyond that, I don't care. This is my house and I want you and your family out of it."

"Then call the cops," chuckled the sister beside him.

Severus had leaned into addressing the mother that he nearly turned his back on her reckless child. He faced her again now, coming to his full height over her. She grinned up at him with a triumphant expression, and took a slow, satisfying drag of her cigarette.

Her nose, long like his, was crooked, like her teeth. She didn't have the withered gloominess of Prince features in her, though. So unlike him, she looked alert and untempered, instead of simply miserable.

She blew the smoke out of the side of her mouth and coughed. He saw the remains of a heavy beating that colored her face and neck. She didn't seem afraid of him now, like she had during her unhinged attack. Whatever she was terrified of in the moment, it was a figment of her own mind.
All that being said, she looked remarkably smug when he continued in silence. He couldn't call the police, and somehow she'd known.

She was right, he was meant to be dead. He was being hunted, and needed time to figure out who by. He had to remain undiscovered in Cokeworth, where the only persons familiar with the address were either long dead—Wormtail, Bellatrix, Lord Voldemort—or personal friends—Narcissa, Lucius, and likely Albus' portrait.

As he thought on it, as horrifying as the thought was, he had a better cover with the house being occupied. It would limit his privacy, and his magic use indoors, but would mask any proof of his habitation in plain sight. He even had an unintentional body double in the behemoth. Of course, no witch or wizard could see him, should they follow him back to Spinner's End.

"Fine," he gave in, sighing for effect. "I suppose one shouldn't put out...family," his lip curled in saying that last word, but he managed to sound believable. He continued with a warning.

"But if anyone comes to this address looking for me, we're strangers. You've never heard of me. Understood?"

The sister laughed again and his eye twitched. She was trying his patience on purpose. He knew so from the smug tilt of her head.

"Got some big baddies after ya, is it," she grinned knowingly. He scowled and spun to leave.

"Aw, don't be that way! We're family. Here," a hand came down on his other shoulder, the one she hadn't beat into pudding.

He looked down with poisonous intent and was greeted with the filter end of a fresh cigarette poking up out of the package. Severus, suddenly thrumming with hunger for nicotine, looked from it, to the grinning convict.

"Go on, a smoke on me," she urged. Her expression settled into something more serious as she pushed the offering. "Say it's an apology, for stomping your head in. A congrats on not being a corpse."

He glared and nearly stormed off, so very nearly. But he could only succeed in calmly taking the cigarette between two fingers. He needed the tobacco with a desperation that shamed him, but masked it as a taking of the olive branch.

He looked around his kitchen then, seeing the brother had left the room. How the massive man managed to slip past him was a world wonder. Severus noticed the mother still by the sink, moving the candle from the windowsill like it was precious.

"What was it for," he said to the mother, surprising her.

Warily, she cupped the flame and moved it away. "It's a prayer candle, for the dead. I'm guessin' you don't need it anymore."

She went to blow it out, but Severus stepped up, holding out his cigarette. Behind him, the berserk sister cackled in a chillingly quick way, like a nip.

Severus tried to shake off his sense of dread as he lit his peace offering on the prayer for his eternal soul. When he finally breathed in the burning tobacco, he was glad to have been offered it after the conversation. Had he been allowed the bliss of a smoke beforehand, he might have given up the house, carte blanche.
chapter summary

Severus learns more about his mother. Harry learns a bit too much.

"Severus, right? Lena's son? You're alright, stop yellin', you're fine! I got you!"

His vision exploded into black spots and starbursts. His shoulder—his shoulder was definitely broken.

"Nah, you're okay! See, it's fine!" Firm hands cradled his elbow and held down his chest. He was pinned against the house. He shook, reaching for his wand, but having lost all grip strength, felt it slip from his fumbling fingers.

"No—!"

With a jerk and a nauseating 'clunk,' the torment of his shoulder reduced to an ache. The arm hung limp, freshly rehoused in its socket. He cried out, and stumbled away, clawing for the door handle. He had to escape!

"Dammit, Fred, take care of 'im! I got the girls!"

"Mum, who is this guy!?"

"Who d'ya think, genius!? He's who you got the house from! Move 'im inside!"

"Shit, what!?"

A great, shaggy head eclipsed the sun and Severus was cornered, wandless, enraged, panicking.

"Uh, this ain't 'dead'." He was manhandled through the front hall, forced to leave his wand on the ground.

"Oh, got it." His wand was swept up from the ground and stuffed into a back pocket. Severus despaired. "So, ya really are the New Agey warlock type, then?"

He struggled in the guiding hands, turning away, pressed into the doorframe. Everywhere he looked, hovering arms were closing in.

"Can you hear m—," the voice bore down

"Don't talk to me!"

"Right-o. Let's go, then—in the house," and a firm grip pried him from his post, pushed, "and oof, that's a nasty cut. Want me to—."

"Don't touch me!"

"Bit hard to carry you with no touchin', but I'm sure I'll manage. Hup!"
Severus was deposited on the couch. They were indoors. He was trapped. The huge Muggle man then reached into his jeans pocket and produced the wizard's wand, aiming at his head. Curling into the couch cushions, Severus howled, "Who are you! Who sent you!?

"Whoa, okay! Relax!" His wand was dropped with a clatter.

"We're Toby's kids! Well, y'know, the other ones."

Addled by the taste of sneaker tread and grit, Severus squeezed his eyes shut and shouted the roof off the rafters.

"GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

The evening progressed well past midnight where Severus stood awake, thinking, propped up in the hall, a wisp of cigarette smoke rising from his pinched fingers. He rested his back against the puckered wallpaper opposite his mother's portrait, grilling the photograph.

His eyes listed from his own fledging self to Eileen Snape's wan visage. His shadow fell between them, impressed upon by the proximate flicker of late night telly down the hall.

He watched blue light play across his mother. She wouldn't waste away until years after the picture had been taken.

Captured unmoving in the Muggle photograph was the larger part of a woman. Her face was thin but not gaunt, her eyes dark, but not fathomless. It probably helped that the process of enlarging the photo had degraded its quality, blurring the more precise lines of her frown. She wasn't much by the end, but all she had been: framed here.

Severus ashed the cigarette on the floor. To think, Eileen had such involved secrets, coming untucked twenty years after she'd passed. The house settled around him television, shifting boards and footsteps belying its other occupants.

"Toby's kids," hah, he thought. Of course.

His father stepping out made more sense than the man being faithful. Tobias Snape was bent on taking, even if it was some girl from up the street. Severus didn't mourn the man, only survived him. And that fact hadn't changed.

But his mother...she wasn't meant to have secrets. Severus was her secret. Eileen Prince and her halfblood son, fading in obscurity: that was their story. He was more betrayed by her making due with other people's kids than by his father messing around.

So Severus smoked, crushing a pack in his off hand, glaring at his family portrait. He almost wished Tobias was in it, instead of off to the side, drinking and heckling—the prodigal father to a spartan son.

Family, he disparaged. He wanted to curse the whole, foolish facade.

"Here, ya might as well have these."

He looked askance at the tattooed woman approaching him, carrying the box of "Lena's" things. She'd been gone a while, most likely asleep. Severus weathered the outrage of a stranger sleeping in his room, now taken over by this woman and her littlest brat.
That's another thought, he considered, returning to scowling at the wall. Where do I sleep?

The potions master needed a place to brew, to send and receive correspondence, and least of all, to lay his head. He gleaned enough energy to stand and angst from his long bouts of unconsciousness earlier that day. But as the night crept on, he'd need a place to settle. He wanted self-imposed and fiercely protected isolation, and his wasn't a five person home. With the mother and child in the main bedroom, the brother in his boyhood room, and the maniac in the basement, all he had left was the attic.

Like some sniveling rat, he maligned, thinking of Wormtail in his servitude. The idea of nesting upstairs repulsed him. He fought the urge to evict these invaders from his home all over again.

"Well? Take it," said the woman, sucking her teeth impatiently. She jostled the box, its contents clinking.

Severus just took another pull of hazy nicotine. Frankly, he’d forgotten she was there. Eventually she just dropped her package at his feet, cast in the cool glow from the moon outside the kitchen window. The box sounded padded inside, and something in it clacked, maybe dishes.

"There," she grunted. "She sent me her tea sets 'fore she passed. You can keep 'em, seeing as she was your mum."

The woman then dusted her hands off on her flannel pyjamas and ran them over her face. Severus himself was still in his hard bottom shoes, wool slacks, and shirt stiff with filth. He needed to shower and change, but into what clothes?

Everything I own is gone. Cheers, Severus. He recalled his last look at his own, proper, just him apartment going up in spellfire. There's likely nothing left. All of it, blown to shit.

"Why would she send you her things," he asked, now frowning down at this woman. She looked back at him warily.

"By your own admission, you were my father's paramour, and yet she deigned to mail you her saucers in her final days. Ridiculous."

"Y’know she wasn't all there, at the end," she answered brusquely, crossing her arms. "Besides, we was friends."

"Ha," he retorted, smiling humorlessly. "'Friends.' Tell me, where were her friends when I buried my mother in a churchyard, alone."

It had been years since Severus cared to remember the small chapel funeral in Dover. It was the closest he could get to the Prince plot south of Kent. Twenty-two and excommunicated, he used the scattered mentions his mother spared him to bring her as near as possible to her ancestral home, by the sea.

He doubted he'd even gotten close.

"She didn't have any friends," he declared.

"Feel how ya must. But nobody was Toby's 'paramour.' It weren't some whirlwind romance with lords and ladies, not between a grown man and some dumb kid. You're a teacher, right?"

Severus let his indifference linger, exhaling a cloud of stinking tobacco. His lungs were growing sore from chain smoking after over a year of abstinence. Then he processed her question, and
"According to whom?"

"Eileen, because we was friends, you stuffy prick. We talked, obviously. But you taught kids, that's my point. Say you fooled around with a girl like seventeen years old: would you say you two was passionate lovers?"

"Ugh," he cringed, pressing a hand to his roiling gut. Now he definitely needed to feel clean. "Don't make me sick. I am not my pervert father."

She presented the empty air between them, having made her point. "Glad to hear it!"

Then she pulled a face and uncrossed her arms, "By the way, great to know you're livin', but you don't smell like it. How's about a wash?"

Now he crossed his arms at her. She barked a laugh and strutted past him.

Following her with a barb on his tongue, he came up short when she swaggered up to the downstairs bathroom, its door ajar. For show, she knocked with a knuckle and called into the darkened room.


Severus grimaced. The toilet wore a fuzzy peach cover, and a bedraggled bath mat thrown over the blackened tile and grout. His gaze floated up to the flashy pink undergarment still flung thoughtlessly on the shower rod. He refused to step foot in there.

"In ya pop," the woman said. He dropped his gaze to her and hissed.

"Who the hell are you to—."

"Name's Georgina! My lovers call me Georgie. My friends call me Grace. You can call me nothin', because quite frankly, I think you're a shithead," the woman rattled off, grinning all the while.

Then she happened to peek back into the bathroom, as if checking for something, and tittered.
"And don't mind the underthings, sweets. Very common, actually, bras are. Funny how Lena wore 'em, too."

"Mum, please!," came an affronted yelp from down and around to the living room. Severus, who'd gone hot in the face, was mortified to realize another person was eavesdropping on their conversation.

Ironic, that, piped up a traitorous voice in his head, with a suspiciously Northern cadence.

He stormed into the bathroom past—the woman's—amused huff, snapping the door shut behind him. Finally getting a hand on his wand, he locked the door, whose original lock had broken disregardably long ago.

Severus faced the shower, and snarling the spell, shot the bra off of his curtain. That they had the gall to make themselves so at home offended him.

Then he ripped back the curtain and wheezed. The bathtub, spout, shower head, shower stool and the handrail on the wall were plastered with underwear: lacy knickers, bathing suits, thinning boxers. There was an entire t-shirt for what seemed to be a band—Black Sabbath. On it was rendered a torture scene with bloody monks and faceless terrors, in scummy browns the shade of
human leather.

He'd seen worst in person, so was hardly disturbed. But a vague recollection of heavy bass in a hazy bar needled the beast of autumn 1981. He wasn't the man of his youth, who needed a draught of his worst memories to spur him on.

Unless blind drunk, or dying, he never harkened back to the '80s.

Severus tossed the wet shirt on the ground and turned the water on. While it heated, he made target practice of the other garments, shooting them to floor.

Washing speedily, Severus stepped out into the bath mat, feeling horribly exposed. He transfigured a towel from a square of toilet paper and then cursed himself. He'd forgotten clothes.

"Oi," someone rapped sharply on the bathroom door. "You!"

He flinched, took a lap around the bathroom looking for clothes, and found only damp underwear, nothing of his. He took his rough towel and whipped it into an even rougher robe, swearing under his breath.

"What!," he snipped back, yanking on the robe. "Get away from the door!"

"Jesus, chill out," the voice continued. It wasn't the mother, and from the deep timbre, Severus realized it was the sasquatch brother. "You need clothes, right?"

"No," he lied. He suspected he heard snickering in the muffled shuffling outside the door. "Leave!"

"Alright well, let's pretend ya do," hummed the man. "You have some shit upstairs, like some costumes. They ain't all motheaten, so there's that. Only if you need 'em though, of course. I wouldn't wanna push."

"I don't need anything," he replied, punching the "t" in "don't." "And what use would they be to me upstairs, I ask? How would I retrieve them, by magic?"

His sarcasm was left where he'd put it. The brother rambled on, "Are you a reverend or summit? A lot a black and hard collars in the closets."

"No," he said, losing patience. Again, he was ignored.

"Question, your holiness: why's a man a the lord, such as yourself, legally disappeared all these years, or better yet! Anybody's got a reason to disappear. Why'd you come back? Bloody, at that."

He froze, wand trained at the door, stone silent. The voice outside the door chuckled, and soon barefooted steps padded away to the living room. Severus released a breath through his teeth and looked around for his pack of cigarettes.

Creating a pocket in his robe to put it in, he walked to the door and cracked it open a hair, enough to yell through. What stopped him was the repeated shock of there being several inches of person before he made eye contact. A version of his face glowered down at him.

He almost felt like a boy cowering before his father. Almost. But he had years more practice at looking fearsome than this man.

"Ah, my apologies," he professed. "I hadn't realized. Is this some pathetic attempt at intimidation?"
The taller man frowned and shifted. Severus readied his wand in his sleeve. It appeared the fight brewed between them that afternoon had not been forfeited, only postponed. He was glad for it, really. It would mean relief from this aggravating, domestic ruse.

The brother's hands rose into view, carrying a bundle of black cotton. Severus, moving only his eyes, glanced down at the clothes and then up at the scowling, younger man. Bemused, he took the bundle, and reeled it into the room.

"I don't need to intimidate ya, friend," the sasquatch explained. "Everyone in this house can smash your head in."

"How...hospitable."

Severus was shrugged at and left alone to dress. The wizard did so, vowing to keep his wand on him at all times. He could waterproof it for washing up if need be, and would sleep sparingly, with his wand strapped to his wrist.

He scouted out the hall and found it empty. He then stepped out, clothed in his old teaching robes. The collar fit snugly around his neck. He pulled some stray hairs free of it, uncomfortable with the drag of his damp hair on the material.

Down a ways, he heard his “house guests” bantering:

"Erm, excuse me, little girl, where're your glasses?"

"Fred, I won't actually ruin my eyes. That's a myth."

"You'll 'myth' readin' when you go blind."

"Wow, that's not funny, and I can just learn Braille."

"Put 'em on, lippy miss."

Severus debated following the chatter to the living room. But like earlier in the kitchen, it was as if every few hours the family gravitated to one room. The strobing colors from the television set lit up the end of the hall. He could hear the commercials on low, catchy jingles underlying the conversation.

"Why's she even up, Freddy? It's one in the bloody mornin'! Don't think because we had a little fracas that she'll be up all damn night."

"Mum, look she's not even up. Right, Laney, are you up?"

"Yes."

With a resonant hoot that made Severus jump and loud stage whisper, "No, say no!"

"Oh, then no."

"See, Mum? She's asleep."

"Horse shit!," she objected.

Someone snored loudly. Severus believed he saw the convict take an evening pill earlier and pass out on the couch within minutes. The family resumed gabbing over her, as they did the late night infomercials.
His feet had carried him within spitting distance of the busy living room. He hovered, listening to the banter, cloaked in late night shadows. Then, before he could be noticed, Severus about faced and made for the attic.

"Okay, I'll do it."

Harry hooked his arm with Ginny's, keeping the overeager witch in place.

"Over my dead body," he said, moving them away from the closed bedroom door.

"Oh, please, Harry. We're both adults here, we can look," Ginny insisted, although respectfully loosening her hold on the doorknob. "Fine, I won't, since it's your mother. But then who will?"

The pair stood outside the closed bedroom of Harry's late godfather, the illustriously defiant Sirius Black.

Following the fight from the evening before, and his apology, Harry had tried to lighten the mood by ribbing her brother's one-track mind. He and Ginny shared in the comedy of Ron's blithe interest in racy pictures, laughing and eye rolling, until gradually, an inauspicious silence fell over them.

"What else did Lupin say about...that?", Ginny had prompted.

"Er, n-nothing, just that bit," Harry had replied, grinning nervously, '"lesbian pin-up girl,' just like that. Sirius 'admired her' and then I didn't need to know more about that, so I ran off. Can you believe that?"

The two had shared another chuckle, this one quieter, more distracted. They had eyed each other as they smiled tightly, until the smiles drooped into contemplative frowns, and Harry couldn't miss the spark of curiosity in Ginny's gaze. He had seen the question form before she asked it, and filled with dread, wondered if all Weasleys rode the same train of thought.

"But, well… do you think?"

And so the couple had shared a fitful night's sleep and an awkward morning following. Ginny ran and Harry cleaned up and, as if compelled, the two found themselves side by side before Sirius' room, debating who would go in. They would agree on something, change their minds, bicker and storm off. Then without fail, they would reconvene at the door.

This had gone on for most of the afternoon. It was now nearly dinner, and neither of them could make the final call.

Harry quite vehemently refused to explore Sirius' collection himself. What would he do had he actually found evidence of his birth mother's craft? Claw his eyes out? Slink away in shame?

And Ginny, Harry felt, was altogether too willing to look. He knew his girlfriend well and loved her every bit. So he knew that, like himself, Ginny toted a healthy appreciation of the womanly form. She was generally more composed than Ron's guileless panting or Harry's tongue tied fumbles, but the Harpy wasn't immune to a batted lash or a well-swayed hip, on any person, at any time of day.

So when she leaped at the chance to check Sirius' collections for a tattooed, wild haired model, Harry shut her down. Even if the woman in the sketch was a stranger to him, he didn't need her enticing his girlfriend from the pages of a glossy magazine.
Harry suggested the only person he could trust to do it: "Let's Floo Ron."

Ginny rolled her eyes but conceded. She offered to stay upstairs while Harry went down to call her brother. The young wizard began down the stairs, but then, thinking better of it, returned to lead his girlfriend along by the wrist. Again, he loved her, but knew her all too well. He was sure if he left her alone for a minute, he'd return to her digging under Sirius' mattress.

Harry knelt in the parlor in front of the fireplace, keeping the fire low as he chucked in a handful of Floo powder. Once it flared green, he resettled on his knees and poked his head in the grate. A warm, tickling spin later, he was in the fire at Ron and Hermione's apartment, catching them in a messy embrace.

He'd only called them at home but so many times, so he smiled in greeting as he surprised the couple on a couch-shaped cascade of scrolls. He caught them leaning in tenderly for a kiss, disheveled in their frumpy house clothes.

"Hullo, one and two."

Hermione squeaked, butting her boyfriend in the nose. Ron swore, jerking away from her forehead, rubbing the assaulted appendage.

"Merlin, Harry! What're you doing there!?"

Harry grinned, just a head in the licking, emerald flames, only somewhat sorry to intrude. He was glad to see his friends had made up.

"I need your help with something. Ginny and I are stuck."

"In what?," grumbled the redhead. His freckled nose bridge reddened as he talked. "Stuck up your own arses, more like."

"Probably. Can you come through? I'll explain when you get here."

Hermione, recovering from her mortification, nodded and flapped a hand at him, shooing him back to Grimmauld Place. He thanked the pair and withdrew, spinning back to his own parlor and making way for his friends to step through. He looked down at Ginny, waiting impatiently with her crossed arms, and deigned to peck her on her furrowed brow. Her frown immediately softened, but didn’t leave.

"Well?," she asked.

"They need a second," Harry replied, just as the fire flared and a slippered foot stepped through.

This time Hermione led the way through the Floo, Ron following. They both were blushing, the former more pointedly displeased than the latter, but not by much. The frizzy haired witch postured in her housecoat, planting her fists on her hips, wand jutting out of one. She looked not unlike a sleepy McGonagall catching her Lions out of bed past curfew.

"What is the meaning of this, Harry James Potter," demanded Hermione. Harry started speaking and floundered, running into a distinct lack of words. Saying "I need someone to sift through Sirius' frisky lady fun mags," was leagues easier when intended for Ron than for Hermione, junior ambassador, brightest witch of their age.

"Bikinis," was what left his mouth. And in a moment of true communion, Ron understood Harry perfectly.
"Sirius' room?," he piped up, looking more thrilled than was proper. "Gotcha, mate, no worries!"

"What is going on," puzzled Hermione aloud, looking from the sputtering Boy-Who-Lived to Ginny, who coughed forcefully to cover her laughter.

The younger witch explained to her friend as the group journeyed to the top landing.

"We kind of wanted to see if Lupin was right, and Harry's birth mother really did model. We figure Ron might be on to something and Sirius had collected some of her stuff in his room. But Harry doesn't want to see, see?"

Hermione giggled, 'I 'see.' And what about you, 'Most Charming Chaser'?"

"That's 'Hottest Harpy' to you, Miss Granger."

"Stop flirting," Ron threw back at them, almost as a reflex. Harry snorted, threading his fingers with Ginny's.

The group came up on the door with the nameplate reading, "Sirius" affixed to it. They hadn't paused more than a second for breath before Ron barged into the bedroom, going straight for under the wide, musty oak bed.

"A bit eager, aren't we," Hermione observed, quirking an imperious brow. However, at a far more leisurely pace, she followed the gangly ginger into the room, and began searching the posters pasted on the walls.

"Hermione!," gasped both Harry and Ginny, with respective horror and glee.

The studious witch just huffed at them, eyes never leaving the women and motorcycles.

"I see a lot of pretty women next to motorcycles, but none with birds on their neck. Goodness, Sirius had a lot of these."

"Yeah, but 'Mione, that's just the light stuff," complained Ron, moving up to grope behind the large headboard. 'I'm sure Sirius wanted to shock his folks, not get put away for perversion or kicked out on his arse."

"He did get kicked out, though," Ginny retorted, still in the corridor beside Harry, leaning back against the bannister.

"No, he ran away," Harry corrected her. "And Ron, I don't know how heavy a rating we're looking for here. Might wanna relax, you just got back on Hermione's good side."

"Yeah, Lupin said pin-up, not Playwizard," quipped the man's sister.

"Mm-hmph," Ron agreed, engrossed in a magazine he'd fished out from behind the nightstand. The young Auror then turned so bright a red, he nearly glowed.

"Merlin, Sirius! Where'd he find this stuff, Knockturn Alley!?"

"Don't show me!," Harry cried. He didn't need to know.

"Honestly, you two, it's just a naked body. Everybody has one," Hermione tsked.

Undeterred, she finished her perusal of the walls and, looking about, decided to tackle the closet. Harry hitched a breath when she had to wrench the door open and climb inside. There was some
ruckus as things were pushed aside and knocked over. A broomstick swanned out of the closet, pirouetting before falling to the floor. Clothes and papers fluttered out as the witch pawed through the debris.

"Alright," came her muffled voice from the depths of the chaos. "There's a crate of records sleeves in here, and a player, aaand... aha! Swimsuit calendars!"

"Quick, woman, get out while you still can!," urged Ron with narrowed, watering eyes. "Before you've seen too much!"

"Harry, I found her!," Hermione shouted in triumph.

The witch tumbled backwards over a pile of discarded robes and school books. She flew out of the closet, losing her grip on the crate she had in hand, sending calendars flying through the air.

Harry, who had sprung into the room to help, was suddenly caught in a cascade of tropical views and sun-tanned ladies. Had one of those women not given birth to him, it might have been a pleasant experience.

Harry threw himself backwards, arms pinwheeling as he landed hard on his bottom and was showered in vintage pictures of beautiful women. He sat perfectly still, squeezing his eyes shut. He didn't move an inch until everything wound down: Ron's wheezing laughter, Hermione's annoyed swearing as she disentangled herself from the mess, and even Ginny's wistful sigh.

"There's no nudity. You can open your eyes," informed Ginny. Harry jumped at her hand ruffling his hair. "Adorable."

Mouth pinched, Harry slid open one eye, and deeming it safe, opened the other. He shushed Ron, who had dissolved into side-stitched sputtering on the floor beside him. Hermione, now freed from the pile, approached and sat primly on the edge of the bed. With only a little pause, she dropped a specific calendar in his lap.

"It's really quite tasteful," the bushy-haired witch reassured him, as he hesitated to even touch it.

He thanked her, taking in the broken, bald quills she accumulated in her fall. She nodded sagely back, resembling a dandelion fluff. Glad for his friends' presence, he took a deep breath and looked down.

In his lap was one of six or seven calendars, scattered about him. He glanced around, surprised by the difference in the one he held. The rest seemed to feature multiple models, all in colorful swimsuits. One calendar was actually an office edition, with businesswomen in pencil skirts, poofy hair, and huge shoulder pads leaning seductively over desks. It was so unlike any wizarding office Harry had seen, he actually grinned.

Sirius does seem like kind of an oddball, looking back, Harry mused. This was really his thing, huh?

It was refreshing to find new perspectives on his late godfather. Although, it seemed like all Harry had recently were new perspectives.

The calendar Hermione have him stood apart from the rest. For one, it wasn't of swimsuits or offices, but overwhelmingly of leather jackets and motorcycles. The cover depicted a woman standing on a cliff over a crowded beach, in a metallic gold bikini top, ripped light wash jeans, and heavy combat boots. Driving goggles were perched on her mop of flyaway hair. She slung an apple-red leather jacket over her shoulder, off-set by the blue-green of the ocean. Her head was...
thrown back, the woman laughing raucously, teeth flashing in the sun.

"Well, that's certainly aimed at ladies," said Ginny. "I see why Sirius liked her."

The model had one leg thrown over a gleaming black motorcycle with longhorn handles and chrome pipes. A gorgeous butter-yellow blonde in a striped dress and an ascot lounged in the background, picnicking beside a sleeping man. The man was laid out, with a book over his eyes, unable to see his date checking out the main show over her white circle sunglasses.

Harry was blown away by said model's cheeky grin, recognizing her as the woman from the sketch. In this, she was younger, and freer than the morose picture wedged in his book.

Across the top of the calendar read, "Gun It, Gracie!" He noted the year, "1976," four years before he was born.

"This is her," he said quietly, relieved.

All the time he spent thinking that Sirius and this woman was a lascivious thing. Seeing it with his own eyes, Harry thought it more likely that his godfather emulated her.

He didn't know when exactly Sirius bought a flying motorcycle. But in the photo, the woman on the cliff, sea and sky stretching forever behind her, half mounting a bike, cackling into the wind. Again, on her neck was the persevering sparrow: FLY ANYWAY. Harry wouldn't have been surprised to hear Sirius looked for a bike the very next day.

"Whoa," Ron intoned. He had finally regained control of himself, only to gape over Harry's shoulder.

Then, on another track entirely, the ginger tapped his girlfriend's knee and pointed to his magazine. Hermione yipped and shoved him away, "Ronald!"

"But can you imagine?," the man defended.

Ginny hushed them and took up Harry's other shoulder, lowering herself to the ground and leaning into his side. Waiting for his nod, she flipped to January. This photo proved a bit more daring: no pants or boots, just Gracie on satin sheets, reclining in a white man's dress shirt and yellow-lens aviator shades, a cigar held between two many-ringed fingers.

"Does it say the photographer's name?," Hermione asked, motioning for the calendar's back. Harry showed it to her. "Hm, just the publisher and the year. Oh, wait, here it is: 'Chuck Pacifico.' An American, maybe?"

Harry shrugged and opened July, just to see. In it, Gracie pointed a camera at the viewer. He could see the photographer reflected in the lens. Mostly he just saw narrow shoulders in a floral shirt, a pair of thick fingered hands with painted nails, and a braid of steely grey hair. The photographer's own camera obscured the man's face.

While the picture clearly featured Gracie in all denim, at a photo studio with lamps and foil, the subject of it seemed to be the man, Chuck. Fully clothed, at least from the waist up. Older. Distended by the curving lens.

Harry let loose a deep sigh, grateful. The calendar wasn't too bad at all. As Hermione had said, it was rather tasteful. Seventies and dated, but nothing to boil his eyes over. Then he flipped to December, caught a glimpse of just skin and hair, and slapped the calendar shut.
"That's enough of that!," he staunchly declared, chucking the whole thing under the bed. "That's for nobody now! Nope, Ron, leave it! We're going!"

"Wha—hey! Wait, maybe there's other stuff," Ron protested. He fished the calendar out again and yipped, bug-eyed and scandalized.

"Gods, what are Muggles on!?"

"What," Hermione said bristling, "as opposed to the old pureblood bon vivants who just painted everything and published their conquests?

"I wouldn't be ashamed of your mother, Harry," she continued, sternly staring him down. "First of all, it's sexist, but also, she clearly did good work.

"Remus explained a bit after you left. 'Gun-It Gracie' was famous in the underground pro-Muggle circles, especially for gay and lesbian magical society at the time. In the '70s, young witches were still being pushed into early marriages to grow the population. Gracie was a Muggle who ripped around, kissing whoever and moving right along.

"She earned more respect than the Martin Miggs comics, for sure. Even straight witches bought Gracie calendars, I think just for the fantasy of freedom."

"How do you even know all this," Harry asked, putting his hands in his pockets, shoulders around his burning ears. "How does Lupin?"

Hermione went pink but kept his gaze. Her intensity didn't surprise him, as his friend was a champion for people's freedoms. He was mostly shocked that she felt the need to defend them to him.

"You should talk to Remus," Hermione pressed. "Regardless, she wasn't insignificant, or a laughing stock. I've found a book on it since yesterday, which wasn't easy, mind. I swear, wizarding society is so missish! It's easier to find a Dark Arts grimoire than an honest monograph on sexuality.

"But pin ups were a big deal leading up to the First War. There were even rumors that Gun-It Gracie calendars were shot by a wizard, using Muggle tools and models. It got young people interested in integrating.

"But then Voldemort came to power, and the photographer either died or fled overseas. Gracie disappeared and the calendars stopped.

"Wizard adult culture hasn't been the same since," Hermione finished. She then took a shaking breath, plucking the corner of the magazine in Ron's hand. "Just these things. Fine, they get the job done, but they're absurd! If there is anything Muggle in them, it's a naked witch holding light bulb and a SEGA Genesis.

"What's she even meant to do with them? It makes no sense. There's more cultural value in one Gun-It bikini string than in all the trifle from that last quarter century combined!"

Harry leaned against Ginny, steam pouring from his ears. Ginny dropped her head on his shoulder with a quiet, "Huh."

Ron stared at Hermione in awe, like he was seeing her for the first time. Harry took solace in that. The young Auror worshipped more of the witch's depth of knowledge the longer they stayed together.
"That's wicked," Ron breathed. Hermione punctuated her lecture with a stern nod, and reached out to take his hand.

"That's…," breathed Ginny by Harry's ear. "What're you thinking?"

Harry searched her arm and, finding it, gave it a squeeze. In his mind, the bright, confident model in red leather was juxtaposed with the sullen runaway from the sketch. Was there a real woman between them? And even then, even if there was, both references were over twenty years old. Who was she now?

Harry could find out.

"I want to meet her," he said. Ginny shifted and wrapped her arms around him.

"You're sure?" Ron probed. "She's still, y'know, the woman who gave you up."

He nodded, firm, borrowing Hermione's determination. He took in his friends' worried expressions and Ginny's weight on his back. Around him, the chaos of Sirius' room reminded him of lost things, and new things, and above all, to value caution.

"I'll be careful. First, I'll talk to Lupin to make sure I do it right. But yeah...yeah, I'm sure."
Connection (Part One)

Chapter Summary

Harry seeks advice on his next steps. Severus only seeks to change his clothes.


Harry set out for the Ministry the next day, carefully shaved and haphazardly dressed. It was a testament to Hermione's stuffed schedule that, at eight thirty in the morning, Harry was already running late.

Scarfing down his still sizzling breakfast while toeing on his trainers, he washed down a mouthful of fried egg with a chug of tea, tripped to the foyer, cursing, and took in the state of his shoes. Harry kneeled and began actually tying them, plopping the book of Potters past on the carpet.

An empty satchel dropped into view, dangling beside Ginny’s pallid legs. He looked up, bemused, fingers knotted in his laces. The bag jiggled suggestively.

"Please use something for your priceless family heirloom," she said down to him, lips tilted up in a favoring grin, "It costs more than everything I own, combined."

"Not more than that very good suggestion," Harry smiled, accepting the satchel. He eased the book into it, glad to concede to logic. The point of this morning was, after all, to be cautious.

Harry kissed Ginny, stumbled on his turn and Disapparated.

He landed in an alleyway, facing the street where morning commuters rushed past him, engrossed in newspapers, watches, and cell phones. A flustered father lectured his sullen teen son, glancing up at Harry without breaking stride. The young wizard checked his satchel and fixed his denim jacket, making himself presentable. Then rearranging the bag strap to sling across his chest, he slid out behind the pair, avoiding the dad’s eye, merging with the foot traffic.

As he walked to the Ministry, he felt a kick of nerves at the prospect of seeing Remus again. The last impression he'd made was of numb shock and crying—and shouting and door slamming. He hoped he hadn't spoiled their newborn reconnection and put the older man off him entirely.

Looking back, he felt childish. He hoped he could salvage things.

Seeing the inconspicuous red phone box up ahead, Harry took the rest of the street at a jog. As he neared, he saw the ruddy, flustered businessman struggling inside, rattling around in the coin return.

"Bloody thing ate my money," the Muggle swore, hauling back and smacking the receiver with his briefcase. "Fuck!"

Harry dipped out of his way and shuffled into the booth behind him.

"Sorry, Rhonda," he coyly consoled the number pad as he dialed.
Soon, he once more descended below the streets of London. He jogged through the Ministry atrium and up to the same guard from Tuesday where the square man sat, fingers folded. Harry didn't manage a smile this time while having his wand inspected. Instead, he hovered, tapping his foot, toying with the satchel straps until his wand was again in his back pocket.

"Control of Magical Creatures, level four," the guard droned. "And what's in the bag, you?"

"Erm," Harry stumbled, half-turned to the lifts.

He couldn't say a book, in case the guard asked to see it and saw "POTTER" on it in big, gold letters. That would blow off the gossamer Notice-Me-Not disarming Harry's features, exposing him.

The young wizard settled for a neutral shrug and pointed to his silver visitor's badge.

Dudley Dursley, Creature, said, "A snack?," and nervously chewed his cheek.

He was sent off with a disgusted gag, and Harry hurried to the elevators, soured on another less than gracious welcome. He fantasized about the day he finally told the guard off for his rudeness. He'd drop the glamour and watch the blood drain from the guy's face as he recognized him.

Of course, it'd have to be worth the Daily Prophet calling him a trickster, or something similar; the enemy of working wizards. And burning Howlers did get tedious. Besides, the thought of being seen as the famous Harry Potter made Harry ill. More than being pestered, he hated being feared.

He would much rather be ignored than too seriously minded.

Ding! And the lift opened up to reveal the same long hallway to the Creature Embassy, vacant except for the receptionist's desk at its terminus. Behind it, Janice organized her files with pointed, nude nails and milky green robes.

"Morning, Janice," Harry greeted the secretary.

Janice looked up from a binder, violet eyes flashing. Her chocolate locks were pulled back in a French plait laid over one slight, jade-draped shoulder. As he neared, the shiny braid hissed and scurried back behind her neck. Harry startled, but kept nearing, if at a now glacial pace.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you have an appointment?"

"Yeah, yes! I do! I'm running a little late but, uh," he said, stopping in his tracks. Janice squinted at him.

Then she removed her desk phone from its cradle and listened at the receiver. She never dialed a number, absorbed in the fuzzy muttering coming through the line.

Harry elected to sit in the closest available seat. He wanted to hurry up and see Hermione, but was on time enough not to get reckless and try blowing past her. Somehow he thought forcing his way would mean never making his appointment—or flat out never being seen, by anyone, ever again.

"Alright, Mr. Dursley," Janice instructed in clipped tones. She didn't return the headpiece to the cradle, but laid it on the desk. The dial tone droned on while she spoke:

"Miss Granger had to leave for an emergency meeting, so she's left behind a referral. You're to visit Creature Heritage, located inside, on the second floor. Please allow Mister Lupin a few minutes to see you, as he is currently in another meeting."
"Go on."

The phone clicked and its dial tone evolved into harsh, indecipherable whispers. Janice held out a tight scroll for Harry to take, sealed with purple wax. He did his part—taking it—and hurried inside, thanking her.

No one received him in the office proper. Instead, he was left to take in the quiet atmosphere. Fluttery files overran Hermione's desk, folders splayed open and spilling onto the floor. A low fire danced in the fireplace, above which waved a banner, "Out On Business. Thank You For Your Patience."

Harry perched on the end of a chair. Above him, he saw that the door to Remus' office was open just a crack. Antsy figures milled through the amber lamplight beyond it, gesturing wildly. Faint snatches of an argument escaped to the first floor, and Harry swore he heard a woman sobbing.

He immediately felt guilty for eavesdropping. He fiddled with the seal of the scroll, staring at his feet, when he heard the door upstairs snap shut. He peeked up through his fringe with nagging curiosity and started.

Remus smiled softly down at him from the next landing, crossed arms balanced on the railing. The man looked a little rumpled and frayed, but all around happy to see him.

"Hello, Harry," he welcomed. "Sorry you had to wait. Please come up."

Harry nodded, glancing around for the upset visitors who must've already left. Then swallowing his nerves, he gathered his things and headed up the metal spiral stairs.

Remus' outstretched hand met him at the top. Unsure what to do, Harry assumed he wanted Hermione's referral. So he handed over the scroll with dutiful quickness.

"Oh," said Remus, seemingly caught off guard.

Harry watched, growing even more unsure as the man averted his eyes and worried the scroll in his hands. There were a few moments of Remus humming, wringing dry palms over parchment, while Harry struggled to think of what he'd done wrong.

"Yes, right, well let's get you settled," Remus finally said, tucking the scroll into a robe pocket, unread. He opened the door to his office and waved Harry inside. The younger man stuck his head in first, and finding no crying women, entered.

"Have you eaten, Harry?", he asked, "We can order you a service, if you'd like."

"No, I ate…"

Remus closed the door behind them, still looking away. He walked over with face carefully blank, staring through the middle distance.

At this point, Harry frowned at him as he made his way back across the room. He recalled him holding Harry's birth mother's sketch to Harry's face, comparing the two. He felt a sharp sting of fear, reliving that moment—afr aid and confused and not being seen.

Is it different now? Maybe because I'm "store bought," Harry worried. He looked down at Remus' copper nameplate, while the man shuffled around the desk to sit. He could hate me now, but…but we just got him back.
Harry couldn't tell who he meant by "we." The whole outside world? It just felt safer than thinking of Harry, by himself, getting Remus back and losing him all over again.

"I'm sorry!," Harry blurted, arresting the man mid-squat. Remus blinked at him, stunned. Harry cleared his throat, cheeks burning, "Uh, I mean, I overheard your other meeting. It sounded sensitive, so...sorry. I didn't mean to snoop."

"Ah, don't worry about that. It happens," Remus smiled mildly. The greying man then dropped into his seat with a creak and a sigh. He massaged his neck, groaning.

"Oof, these old bones," he said, "I hope you don't mind my taking it easy while we talk? I'd love to be a more exciting host, but the full moon is tonight, and she always takes her toll."

Harry made noises of understanding, while his heavy satchel pulled on his chest. At least now Remus was looking at him, if a bit sadly. The man did indeed look drawn and pale, dark purple bags weighing down his eyes.

He should go home and rest, Harry thought, but both he and Remus let the silence drag on.

"I'd also like to apologize...for my behavior the other day," Remus continued. Harry said nothing, just listened, stomach churning. "I know I said my sorries then, and I don't mean to pressure you into forgiving me. I just want to make salient that my shock didn't warrant my reaction."

"I treated you like a spectacle in a moment where you were hurting. I, of all people, should know how it feels to be ogled while in pain. I just never expected—but that doesn't matter. I'll work harder to never do that to you again."

Harry rehoused his bag on his lap, trying to get comfortable. "It's fine."

"I don't think it was, but I appreciate you hearing me out. So, please, how can I help? I want to make it right."

Now he had an excess of Remus' attention. The man's once tawny, now yellowed gaze bore into him. Harry didn't think Remus knew how intense he became around the full moon. Even at rest, he clocked Harry's every move like perched inside him coasted an owl on silent wings, ready to strike. And then Remus would sag into himself and be an ailing, middle-aged man again. The whole of it was jarring.

Harry shook off his unease. Remus hadn't truly frightened him in years, not since the werewolf lived jobless and unmedicated, as a freshly reaped widower. Hermione's first major victory had been Wolfsbane for those in need. This was a Remus who had steady work and took his potion. So it's better that I see him differently. Different isn't terrible. I can relax, Harry thought, judging his own anxieties.

He straightened up, looping the satchel strap up over his head. Pulling out the Potter register, he placed it between himself and Remus on the ink-splattered desk.

"I want to meet my birth mom," Harry declared.

Remus took a deep breath, eyes bright.

"Yes, of course," he sighed. The words weren't upset or relieved, simply blown in from far off, like a leaf through an open window. "I imagine it starts with finding her. Do you have a plan on how you'd like to go about it?"
Harry braced himself and flipped open the book. He turned to the map. Moving aside the sketch and certificate, he tapped on the page where the many named dots gathered. "Georgina Altagracia Hedgerot" had wandered into Manchester City and was sliding over towards Leeds. The rest of the dots, excluding Harry's and including Severus Snape's, remained clustered in the tiny town of Cokeworth.

"It's like the Marauder's Map, but for my relatives," the younger man explained. He then hunched, waiting for his father's friend's response—his adoptive father’s friend. It only took a second.

"Oh, of course he is," huffed Remus, "oh, Harry, I'm sorry." The werewolf looked up at Harry, cringing in sympathy. "So, Snape is still alive, then."

"You knew?," Harry exclaimed.

"Well, I suspected," said the other man, ignoring the map to keep Harry's gaze. It seemed that he meant it when he promised to prioritize his feelings. It was as if the map hardly existed:

"'Snape's Great Escape' isn't an uncommon conspiracy theory. It's featured in the Quibbler at least once a year. I don't blame you for not hearing about it, since you've stepped back from news and society."

"But why is that even a thing?"

"Well, the central argument is that his funeral was closed casket."

"What's that have to do with anything?," Harry asked, confused. Remus elaborated.

"That's considered a mark of shame for wizards, since most disfigurement isn't a concern with the right spell. And shame is a rather strong position for Hogwarts to take on one of its Headmasters, especially given his accepted heroism. You can see why some people are suspicious and take to saying Snape's got one over on us and slipped away."

"That's all? A closed casket?" So, no one had guessed at Harry's part in it. He was relieved, although he tried to sound anything but. "I guess it doesn't take much."

"Hmm." Remus lifted an eyebrow at him, resting his chin on his palm. "That's all the Quibbler has to say. Gossip among the werewolves varies a bit."

Those yellow eyes were fixed on him. Harry kept his face blank, realizing he might be caught.

"A rumored 'discrete supplier' in Northern Europe," the man went on, "sells Wolfsbane for three-night turns. It's an arctic affliction, so it's not popular news in Britain, but treating it is no small feat. So of course an eye's kept out for the brewer publishing."

"Well, if that was Snape," Harry protested, "there's no way he'd risk his cover for some stupid article!"

"Asking Severus Snape to give up recognition for his talents?," Remus chuckled heartily. "I suppose it's possible. He might. But if you compare Snape's few accredited works to the catalogue of a certain Latvian Potions master, who's appearing in British journals as if from thin air…"

Despite his obvious exhaustion, Remus grinned boyishly. Harry dropped his head into his hands, shell shocked.

"Idiot," he gasped. And Snape had accused *Harry* of loving the limelight! That prideful *git*!
"You don't seem too surprised by this."

"I just," Harry tried, and quickly surrendered. "Fine, I can tell from your tone that you know I knew. When did you figure it out?"

"Does it matter?" He heard Remus' grin warm into a patient smile, "I wasn't in the right mind to confront you on it when I did. And now, I only bring him up to serve you.

"Harry, I could care less that Snape's alive. We were far from friends. Considering what he's sacrificed, I'll concede that he's earned some peace. But that he's somehow related to you—besides his service and his skills, that's his value to me. A shock, sure, but a merit.

"Which is why I think you should reach out to him."

Harry shook his head, still covering his eyes. "Sure, yeah. We're old pals, me and Snape. I'll just owl him and swing around later with a roast. And when I go missing, it'll be your fault. Are you mad?"

"If you're asking for my advice, and I think you are," Harry felt a ribbing poke on the top of his head, and relaxed, "then I believe burying the hatchet with Snape might help you in the long run.

"Yeah, where'd you like it buried? My head, my back, or with my body in the garden?"

"Write to your birth mother first," Remus chuckled. "Maybe ask to meet and say you want to get to know her. And consider that knowing her may mean running into Snape. Unless he and your other relatives are invisible to each other, it's likely he knows them.

"That holds whether or not he knows their relationship to you. You could use that to shed light on your relationship to each other."

"To be honest, Remus," Harry said, uncovering his face, "I respect him for what he did in the war and feel for his childhood, I guess. And I'm grateful for him saving me when he did. But he was a prick, likely still is, and we hated each other for too long to get over. I don't want a relationship with him!"

"Trust me when I say I understand." Remus rubbed his temples, likely visited by old memories. "But you just said it yourself: you already have a relationship with him, Harry. It's just a bad—well, a complicated one.

"Now, I don't know what role you played in him faking his death, but that you even know about it tells me you had one. And as vicious a man he can be, even he can respect when he's been done a favor."

Harry doubted that, but let Remus finish.

"Write him a letter, too. Re-introduce yourself. Don't ask for anything. And maybe don't mention you can track him using generations old blood magic. Just say, 'Hello, it's been a few years. I hope you're doing well.' Even Snape can accept that."

Narcissa surveyed her gardens from the top floor of her solarium. She peered through the glass, the high sun glinting off her white robes and pale chignon, a slender nail tracing her cupid's bow.

She stewed, lost in her thoughts, until her son came into the room, brushing soot from his sleeve. With him came the heat of charred greenery and spellfire.
"The house in Riga is abandoned," Draco reported, running a hand through his hair. The platinum stayed streaked with black and sweat. "That and stripped to the studs. It's...meant to be furnished, yes?"

Narcissa froze, goose flesh raising down her arms. A delicate fist clenched, freshwater eyes fixed on the burning landscape.

"Severus, you halfblood bastard."

"Mother!," cried Draco, scandalized.

"Shh, darling. I am in a mood."

The nail slid between her teeth and she bit down on it—a dirty habit, as all Black girls are told. Below her, house elves rushed to douse the last stubborn flames. Unfortunately, the arsonist had escaped in the chaos, their message delivered.

"We must increase security," the woman advised her son. "And I want you back in this house every day by nightfall."

"But, Mother—!"

"Don't whine, it's unbecoming," she dismissed, waving him to his room. While he complained, Narcissa turned her mind to the problem before her, singed into her China roses:

**TRAITORS**

"If that slimy thief is still alive," Narcissa said, "after all I did for him, after robbing me blind, then he won't risk an owl lest it reveal his location."

"So what do we do? He's disappeared!," sulked her son.

"I've an idea of where he might have slithered off to."

"*Homenum Revelio.*"

Blue light unveiled the irate contours of his face, reflected in the wardrobe mirror. Severus barely managed to wake in one piece.

After finally giving in to sleep just before dawn, he awoke disturbed by a sudden dip in the stained, attic mattress. His mind conjured the beast from his nightmare, coming to him in the dark.

A slick, crushing heat traveled up from his feet, and with a scrape of stiff wool blankets against his legs, evoked the terror of being swallowed whole.

*His body was being devoured by a serpentine monstrosity. It grew three times wider and hungrier than Nagini or any of her kind—a tunnel of barbed, stabbing teeth. They were ripping him apart and shoveling the torn flesh into its steaming acid bowels. Severus was dying.*

*He begged for mercy, knowing he'd find none but unable to control himself. The many shadows attending the mile-long dining table pointed and laughed. They mocked his cries as his blood soaked the silver table runner.*

*With aching slowness, the monster's jaws closed around his head, blotting out the sparkling lights from the crystal chandeliers.*
And when he landed back in the stuffy, onesome dark, he cast his horrified eyes about the room, hunting for danger, fearing the heavy-bodied rasp of scales on the wood.

Instead: a child's face, peeking around the doorframe, avid under a mess of corkscrew curls. Through round, wire frame glasses peered a gormless, immature gawk.

Severus knew instantly and with infuriating familiarity that this brat had sought him out, snuck up the stairs, and crept to his door. It shocked the child to actually see him there alone in the windowless attic, suffering. Like a viewing of some caged, tortured animal, stupid with pain.

He saw red.

"POTTER," Snape hollered, but just as quickly, the haze cleared. Severus saw the girl, something pink and wiggling in her skinny arms. She squeaked at his shout and scurried from the door, dropping her bundle as she fled. It yowled when it hit the floor, affronted at being so abandoned.

Severus' cat shook herself, hairless but no longer bare. At some point she'd been dressed in a pale pink, cable knit sweater. Around her wrinkly neck was a cherry red collar, hanging from it, a plastic medallion reading, "CAT," in large, hand-carved letters.

*Unconscionable nonsense,* he fumed. *Outrageous child!*

In blatant disagreement, his cat flopped onto her side, blinking indulgently. She licked her paws, clearly having been fed while her owner slept. The feline, thus reclined, seemed perfectly at peace. He lamented his capable mouser turned plaything and threw back his sheets.

Severus slid from bed, testing his balance. Praying his legs wouldn't give out from under him, he turned to the dresser to fix his rumpled robes. He'd slept fully clothed, lacking a nightshirt. Severus re-buttoned his collar, which had grown suffocating overnight.

The robes cut into his scars.

He grimaced. He wedged in a finger where the fabric nearly strangled him, before giving up.

"Damn this," he groused, diving into the wardrobe.

He rummaged for anything of his to change into. He found musty rags, reeking of weakling sweat—Pettigrew's things. Nauseated, he tossed them aside, and wiped the scum from his hands. That was when he saw himself in the mirror, bruised and drenched in a similar, fearful sheen.

Growling, Severus cast the spell searching the house for the others. He expected to see four blue beacons, and was suspicious to only find three.

Robes snapping, the livid man stormed down the stairs. He encountered the girl crouched in the shadows of the first landing. She curled up, squeezing her eyes shut and holding her breath, as if this could turn her invisible. Severus was struck with yet more *déjà vu.* He was a professor again, stalking the corridors, sniffing for delinquent students. The fickleness of time irked him, simmering his rage.

"You," he barked, jabbing a finger at her. "Where's your mother!"

The girl let loose a quiet gasp and popped open a lid.
"She's at work," she answered. Severus tsked, having planned on impressing her incredible rudeness and peeping janery on her mother. He settled for snapping at the nosey little gremlin herself.

"You are never to enter the attic," he hissed. "I don't care if the walls are burning down around your ears and before your peeping little eyes. You will stay far away from me. Understood?"

She stared up at him, chewing on her answer. His scowl intensified and, leaving her there, he complained, letting her hear as he stomped down the rest of the stairs:

"This is why I loathe you little brats! Always so consumed with yourselves, no respect for the decency of your betters."

"You have a very avoidant attachment style," shared a tiny whisper of a voice. "My dad says that's because you weren't hugged enough as a kid."

Severus spun around, incredulous at finding the girl trailing him down the steps. When he glared, she looked at her socked feet, swallowed her lips, and started bouncing on her heels.

"I don't like hugs, but that's not the point."

Severus stared at her. The old stairs had made little noise as she hopped down after him. Her eyes ventured as far up as his chest before stopping. She held her breath, waiting for his response, and when one still hadn't come, she forged ahead.

"Zinnia doesn't like kids either. Or at least, she doesn't like me," the girl continued. She didn't sound upset by this. But then again, everything she said traveled on a trill. He couldn't tell her bothers from bird song.

"I don't really know her besides what she's shown me, but I can already tell. She's anxious-avoidant like you."

"You're just saying words," Severus scoffed, moving on to the ground floor.

"No!," she protested. Ah, at this she seemed annoyed. "Bowlby, Attachment and Loss, 1969. Ainsworth and Bell, Child Development, 1970. Hazard and Shaver, Personality and Social Psychology, four types of attachment are—"

Great, Severus rolled his eyes, tuning out her tremulous rambling, another bookworm.

He pushed on the seam of the bookcase entrance, shoving his way into the sitting room. He left the entrance ajar, letting the girl skitter out of the nook in her own time. Quickly, she scarpered after him, throwing obscure Muggle psychobabble at his back.

Severus progressed through the sitting room, eyes trolling through the clutter for something of his. Ironically it was almost all his, from floorboards to furnishings, but nothing he could wear or brew with. The only thing in the room he truly cared for were his books.

I can at least use those, he thought, hosting a mess of bruises and missing skin under his clothes.

But even the books, while reliable, were dated. He hadn't maintained the library at Spinner's End, hardly having lived there. The collection wasn't like those he had kept at Daugavpils or Hogwarts. These were mostly Dark Arts, and from before the publishing boom after the Second War.

So he'd have to make his potions from memory. Luckily, at the moment, he didn't need anything
more complicated than bruise balm and Essence of Dittany. But where were his potions ingredients?

"Listen here, encyclopedic pest," Severus interrupted the girl's tirade. Said pest blinked up at him, stuck in her aborted rant. "My things were moved. To where?"

Severus could hear the grinding gears of her mind turning onto the new topic—and failing. She simply stared back at him with troubled, hazel eyes. Bemoaning the failings of children, he looked into those eyes and skimmed the child's thoughts for something helpful.

He found himself stalled by noise and light—the electric whine of the muted television, the sun through the curtains shining on his buttons, the cracking of her toes in her socks. His question repeated like a klaxon while he unmoored from the clean track of therapist jargon until his recorded voice stuttered and his consciousness was propelled to a memory of the girl's behemoth brother, listening, cutting the biting tags from her shirts, booming with skull rattling laughter—cutting the tags from her shirts in Leeds, cutting the tags from her shirts in London, cutting the tags from—.

Severus pulled away.

No more of that, he thought, pinching the bridge of his nose as a headache began to bloom.

The Legilimens had come across a handful of such children at Hogwarts. Each time was a scalding shock. The complex, instantaneous, ironclad connections of feeling and learning proved too much for the wizard. And in a Potions class of unbound stinks and slimes and occasional explosions, led by his own snide and bare instructions, these brats could drive him spare. He never meant to clash with the Wildermented, not since teaching that know-it-all Granger, who was always too quick for her own good.

Nursing his stung thoughts, the man returned up the staircase and sideways down the landing. Huffy at being brushed aside, the girl followed. And as if predicting his next stop, she squeezed past him in the narrow corridor and ran ahead.

Puffing along excitedly, she beat him to his childhood bedroom. She grinned, opening the door on her brother, hunched and scribbling.

Severus sneered. The hulking man looked ridiculous, folded over the small writing desk, pinching a pencil. Her brother removed his headphones at their arrival. This unleashed the tinny trash of heavy metal, all shrieking guitars in a mess of drums and vocals. Severus forgot himself for a moment, surprised mid-snipe.

He recognized the tune. He even remembered the name, as it slapped him back to the clammy spring of 1976. "The Ripper," by Judas Priest. Gods, he hadn't even thought of that song in decades.

But the words came to him as they poured from the tiny speakers.

"I'm sly and I'm shameless, nocturnal and nameless. Except for the Ripper...Or if you like, check the knife!"

The behemoth stabbed with his chewed-up pencil.

To see it and recall once doing the same with a quill, Severus couldn't parse how he felt. It was too unexpected. All he knew was that he was even more out of place, lurking in his teacher's robes and loafers, hearing a song from his spotty adolescence.
"Afternoon, Reverend," said the brother, kissing his broad thumb sarcastically and giving it to heaven.

Then he addressed the brat tapping out the song's beats on the desk. "Didya find him in the bathroom, duck, where you said you'd be goin'? Remember, far far away from the attic, like we promised?"

"Can he meet Bleppy?" the girl cried over the thready music. Her brother leaned back, disbelieving, and questioned Severus.

"You came all the way down here for a toad?"

"Obviously not," Severus drawled, curling a lip at the very idea. What Muggle girl even had a pet toad? And "Bleppy"? What a puerile name. "Where have you misappropriated my—."

But in that moment, the girl blew into the room, showing Severus its interior. And he didn't care about the instruments or the clothes on the floor. He didn't flinch at the framed posters and their depictions of graveyard angels and rotting corpses. Yet he reeled backwards, grey and shuddering.

"Well then, what is it?" asked the shaggy metalhead, but Severus only staggered back down the hall, shaking.

No. Never!

The bedroom was lined with snakes.

Bookcases and dressers were repurposed, holding display tanks filled with them. Acid green vipers hung from branches. Glimmering black serpents soaked in shallow bowls. Albinos slithered over each other, burrowing in moss and peat, flicking their forked tongues at the glass.

Even on the desk, by the behemoth's hand, there nested a muddled, tan and black royal python. And against the far wall in a latched enclosure, a massive constrictor basked in a heat lamp, watching Severus from its coils.

Breaking out in sweat again, Severus fled with bile rising in his throat. As he left, he ripped open his collar, in desperate need of air.

Anything of mine left in that room can fucking well stay there, he thought, horrified.

"Nothing in the attic and the second floor be damned," he briefed himself, panting on the couch in the sitting room. His last options for finding his things were the master bedroom and the basement. Not keen on rifling through more bras and bathing suits, he steeled himself.

He made it through the kitchen and onto the top step to the basement before hearing hoarse singing. Off putting to the ear—not only because the singing fell so off-key, it could classify as assault; but his memory of his basement was barebones.

He mostly brewed in his kitchen, rarely having cooked. He never used the outdated washer and dryer stuck below, having nothing he couldn’t spell clean. And before that, as a child, what had his mother done down there? Housework? He couldn’t recall. For most of his childhood, the basement was only a step from painted shut.

It only stored dead critters and quiet. Never singing.
Not to be outdone, Severus descended the crooked stairs in gothic silence, disavowing the cellared madwoman with his rigid expression.

A cot had been moved in, with pillows and a colorful patterned quilt, upon which sat the elder sister. A radio rested on a folding table beside her, playing R&B amidst snack wrappers and cola bottles, which she sang along to.

Noticing Severus, the sister beamed up, stamping out her cigarette in a tuna-tin-turned-ashtray. She was all stained teeth and battered face, her pitch black mane piled atop her head. She and Severus didn't look too different, in terms of dark, disheveled and wounded. They both even sported rust-spotted bandages on the same forearm, the congruity of which the wizard found revolting.

"Ey, big brother!," the sister crowed. "I was just thinkin' bout ya!"

Severus would've rather had her bash in his skull than be subjected to such abject ridicule.

"Don't you ever in your pathetic life presume to call me your brother, you insufferable banshee!"

"Aww, no," she wavered dramatically, undercutting her pretend heartbreak with lazy pawing through the bedspread. "He doesn't like me! How unexpected and impossible to pre-dict!"

She fished out a pill bottle with a triumphant rattle and shook a handful of pills into her palm. She tossed one, then two, into her mouth, swallowing them dry.

"Anyways, your holiness," she continued drily.

"Oh, great, it's catching," Severus grumbled. The only apology forthcoming was her unaffected shrug.

"Listen, Reverend—."

"Severus," he corrected, eye twitching. Then realizing he'd given one of the intruders license to be familiar, he said, "Or don't refer to me at all, which is the preferred option."

"Alright, Cerberus, wha'ever," the sister went on, "quit interruptin' me. Can you make that weird sludge Miss Eileen used to make?"

"What 'sludge,'" he asked, then remembering he didn't care, said, "As a matter of fact, no, whatever it is, I cannot."

"Oh, bullshit, you can't!"

"So sorry to disappoint."

Indulging in petty revenge, Severus approximated a shrug.

Then he looked to his left, at the pile of suitcases, dented boxes, trash bags, and taped up bins. They were all stored to one corner of the basement, opposite the makeshift bedroom. Not particularly fond of giving a stranger his back, Severus sidled up to the pile, keeping the sister in his periphery. This worked wonderfully to distract from the fact that he had no clue where to start his search.

Seeing her scowling at him, he rolled his eyes and glowered back.

"Stop looking at me."
"No. Fuck off if you ain't gonna be helpful," she spat. She sat up more in the cot, making the springs squeak.

"And don't bother lookin' for your shit in there. My brother moved it and showed me where to because I'm cuter and a great listener. So I can tell you'll never find it unless you help me like I asked."

"I'm not helping you."

"Well then, I hope you got spare cash in the attic, Rev. Or else, I hope you're comfy livin', sleepin', and shittin' in the same outfit—forever."

Severus ignored her and considered the pile. He itched to snap his wand from its holster and Accio his possessions, but couldn't risk doing it with a Muggle just a few feet away. He might've been able to at least tag them with a nonverbal spell and pull them out later, but he would still need his wand to do it.

If only he could get her to stop staring at him with those sickeningly bright eyes. They were almost glowing yellow in the dim basement, caught in the light of the hanging cellar lamp. Being watched so closely made his skin crawl.

"Fine," he capitulated, upper lip curling. "What is it you want."

"Whatever shit you cook up to fix all that," she said, grinning victoriously, gesturing to Severus head to toe, "I want some. Miss Eileen did it with boiled leaves and shit when we was kids. Gimme that."

"Tell me where my things are," he bartered.

"Tell me whatcha need and I'll get it for ya."

With more rusted squeaks, she was out of bed and padding toward the pile. Her joints clicked while she climbed into it, and she groaned, sinking onto a scuffed blue suitcase sealed with duct tape. He eyed her skeptically, then sucked his teeth, furiously rubbing at his neck. The blasted collar had started to itch!

"Jesus, Rev, what happened there?" A finger with a nail bitten to the quick pointed at his chafed scars.

"None of your business, that's what!," he said. "If you want your boiled leaves, give me—dammit."

How could he describe potions ingredients to a Muggle? He'd had a devil of a time teaching them to witches and wizards with minimal success.

"How about we start with normal clothes, since you look miserable in that get-up."

She reached down and started peeling the tape of the suitcase-turned-stool. "This's all da's stuff outta the big bedroom. I was gonna burn it for good luck, but it'll probably do after a wash, yeah?"
Dear Miss (Mrs?) Grace Hedgerot,

My name is Harry. I don't know if you know me, since we've never met. However, I recently found out that I was adopted and I think you're my I believe we might be related. If it's possible I'd like us to meet and get to know each other. Let me know what you think.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

"Okay," Harry whispered, lifting his quill. "Alright."

"You're finished?"

His head was tilted back by freckled hands until he met eyes with his girlfriend. He nodded and accepted her light kiss on his forehead.

"Good job," Ginny said quietly. "How're you gonna send it? Muggle mail?"

He looked down at the drying ink on the parchment. Then he looked up at the barn owl preening its wings on the window perch.

"Uhhh."

"So this's how it's done?"

"Mm."

Severus snapped another sprig of dittany and threw it in the saucepan. It was quite the setup he’d been left to, but his heckler couldn’t find any of his cauldrons. Nothing besides the cast iron miniature he once used for his most concentrated poisons.

Apparently, Mother Hedgerot had deemed it a fitting incense burner. So he enjoyed the unique shock of finding it on a trip to the basement bathroom, sitting blithely on a doily on the sink, filled with hot sand, patchouli and frankincense. The potions master dumped the contents into the toilet, burning sticks and all.

The cauldron was too small for his purposes, but iron imbued with nundu breath should never be left to smolder, especially in an unventilated room. It certainly wouldn't make the sister any saner to leave it be.

However, this was hard to explain to said sister without also explaining what a nundu was and all of how it could kill her. So he lied: “It’s made of lead.”
He also made clear a secondary but vehement truth: that incense promoted delusions of grandeur.

"Nobody cares about your quest for alignment. You just can't see how stupid you are through the haze of resinous bull."

He hadn't been joking, but the woman cackled nonetheless.

_I'll have to search the house again for more ways the Muggles might kill themselves_, Severus thought, when witnessing that manic humor.

It was an irritating thought, Muggle-proofing his home. But him surviving would hardly be easier if they whipped up strychnine while he slept.

He scratched his bandages where the wrapped skin started to regrow. It was so much easier to reach without his long, buttoned sleeves that he was struggling not to tear up his arm chasing relief.

"So this stuff goes on cuts," she asked. Severus sighed, as she'd been dogging him with questions all afternoon.

The ex-con feigned disinterest when he ignored her, then slipped into a thousand yard stare. Then as if escaping some horrible vision, she snapped back to reality with a brand new question. And she wasn't just nosey like the little brat or suspicious like the behemoth. She dug for something in his answers and silences.

It seemed she, like he, wanted relief.

While they unboxed ingredients, she asked what each one was and what it did, fishing for the cure-all. She pestered him throughout brewing the rustic bruise balm, now setting in the fridge. As the day grew long, she grew more agitated, pushing for her potions.

"Yes," he answered blandly. "Boil the plant until the water gets viscous, let it cool, and it'll close most superficial wounds."

"So like, anybody can do it?"

"No."

"I dunno, Rev. Just sounds like aloe to me."

"Don't call me that. And it isn't. Dittany comes from the Greek island of Crete. If boiled correctly, according to specific steps, one can draw out its healing properties. It will then soothe minor scrapes without infection. If you want aloe, hack some off from a houseplant."

"And this isn't oogie boogie vegan shit, right? Like it's the real deal?" She peered into the cauldron, sniffing at the steam, and massaged her forearms like she wanted to scratch. Her mysterious wounds must have itched, mirroring Severus.

Her elbow brushed his side and he hissed at her to give him some bloody space. He didn't like how exposed he felt outside of his robes, more comfortable though he was.

She covered up unexpectedly well, in a tent of a sweatshirt and sweatpants. Severus, on the other hand, ended up in navy blue track pants with zippers and racing stripes down the legs, and drowning in an old t-shirt with the local beer touted on the front. His father had likely won it in a pub raffle over twenty years ago, and now Severus wore it, brewing barefoot in his kitchen, looking like a single dad on a Sunday.
He hated it, but at least he could breathe. No thick robes, no collars.

"Are you asking if I'm making this up?" he rebutted, watching the dried sprigs steep. “Now, we aren't very well acquainted, and while I enjoy that as a consolation and a comfort, pray tell: do I look like I abide by any of that complete trifle?"

He turned from the cauldron to present his stern expression, one hand on his hip while the other stirred. His company hummed.

"But it's just 'cause you come off spooky like Miss Eileen that I'm givin' you the benefit of the doubt," she warned, taking a dried twig and chewing on it.

"You aren't superstitious," he observed.

"Some rubbish ain't worth believin' in. Hey, is this a conversation we're havin'? I think it is."

Severus lifted an eyebrow at the haggard woman and cut off the burner. Taking the saucepan off the heat, he was immediately subjected to the sister's hovering.

"Does it help with pain? I've chewed through most of a bottle of aspirin and it's done jack shit."

"Get away!" he protested, strong-arming her. "It has to cool."

But Severus was a bit overeager himself. By some slip of willful magic, what should've taken minutes to cool took seconds. Hearing the slurp of heat leaving the pot, he held a hand close to the liquid's surface. It chilled to room temperature almost instantly. He tested the viscosity and nodded, finding it adequate—thicker than plain water, but short of a true gel.

"It is finished," he said, and began unwrapping his forearm. Cringing at the gauze peeling off his Splinched skin, the wizard dipped a rag into the essence and patted it over his wound.

*This most assuredly breaks the Statute of Secrecy,* he mused as his split skin fizzled with murky green smoke. Almost immediately, the wound started knitting together.

"Sick," his onlooker breathed. "Yeah, it's just like when I was little. You're really one of them."

"One of whom, exactly?" he probed in an undertone, bent over his arm, watching it heal.

"A witch—or like, a witch's son."

Severus fought to maintain his composure.

"What did my mother tell you."

"I dunno, nothin'. But what else do you call an old lady with magic grass and secrets? A witch, obviously. Budge over, I want summa the goop."

Straight-backed, he moved aside and looked busy packing away his ingredients. The Muggle woman unraveled her own bandages, elbows cracking, gauze winding around her stiff fingers. Inch after inch of stitched skin arose from the wraps. Spidery black thread formed grotesque crescents, like ants marching up the curve of the scabbing flesh. She took in her own arm and grimaced.

"What happened," hung on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it down. He could already hear her obstinate prod, "You first."

"You'll have to remove the stitches, unless you wish for them to become more permanent."
"Aw, damn, probably so," she cursed. "Reverend, you got any tweezers?"

"Uh-uh! Tweezers for wha—Christ, Zed, what happened to your arm?!"

The behemoth brother stood in the entrance to the kitchen, bug-eyed and furious. He glared at Severus who volleyed with an apathetic stare. It wasn't as if he knew anything about the injuries. He just supplied the goop.

"There's no way that's from some random fuckin' fall!,” accused the giant man.

"I didn't say this was from the fall, did I," his sister shot back, spitting her chewed twig into the sink. Severus noticed a level of discomfort in how she addressed her brother, underneath the unfazed airs. It looked like guilt. "I said the seizures were from the fall. These are from the crazy bitch that pushed me over. See, it's different."

Obviously a dodge and a poor one at that.

Severus turned to his cutting board, masking his presence. The leavings of a previous row seemed to bubble up between the siblings. He acted invisible, intending to stay uninvolved, but informed.

You old gossip, teased some lick of conscience.

Simply old habits, he justified.

"Come off it! You said there weren't no fightin', and now it's 'ah, well, nurse knocked me over.' What's the bloody truth, Zed?! It's been a day and a half, and you flip out on a guy and act completely psycho, cry about it then act like nothing's happened! And I know you're lyin' about some fuckin' thing, okay? I ain't stupid."

"Then stop actin' like you ain't never seen a stitch before! Calm down or go away. My head is poundin' and I don't need to be yelled at over somethin' dead and done. Go worry about your precious 'duck.'"

Severus very quietly decanted the essence of dittany into Tupperware. He had a thought about needing to find his vials, but made no moves toward the basement door, lest he be remembered. He just swept debris into his hands and dusted it off into the sink, one ear pressed to the row.

"You can't honestly be jealous of a kid? And don't change the subject! Why're you lyin'?! Mum’s coming home in a few hours, and you better tell her and me the whole truth when gets here."

“Piss off.”

"We're worried about you, you maniac!"

"Yeah? Well, don't be."

Severus couldn't suppress his morbid curiosity, especially now knowing his attacker had been attacked. It was likely just some jailhouse brawl, and he shouldn't have been interested in something so base. But the curves of the stitches looked remarkably like bite marks, and he was keen to hear tell of another, even madder woman taking to this one like a dog to a bone.

Small bit of payback for the shoulder? Mayhaps, considered Severus, smirking, cleaning his fingernails.

But then the argument grew repetitive. Various forms of "I can't trust you" and "mother always
liked you best" were tossed about until it bored the ex-spy, driving him to search for his vials. The fight carried on like he never even existed, his limping down the creaky steps going unnoticed.

He groped the tracksuit pockets for the lighter he borrowed from its forgotten place on the counter. Finding nothing, he finger combed the hair from his face and pulled his wand from under his shirt.

"Accio vials," he cast. He was treated to several boxes tinkling like wind chimes. Inside them, the trapped vials beat against the cardboard.

"Diffindo."

Severus mined his belongings from the mountain of trash. While he worked, taking breaks to thumb through old notebooks and unfinished projects, the mother returned home from work. He rolled his eyes at the renewed hollering from upstairs, Silenced the cellar, and kept working.

Alone, charming boxes about the room, he warmed to the grey area his house became. Muggles upstairs, none the wiser; and him out of sight, doing as he pleased. He couldn't use magic freely, but wasn't living in the shadows either. The surly man could admit to preferring brewing openly in his kitchen, even with an audience, to his night spent languishing in the attic, scared out of sleep. If he had to endure some hours of the sister's company, well—she wasn't the worst in the house to talk to.

What does it say about you, Severus, that you accept the one person who's beaten you and none of the ones that pulled her off? But despite his own pitying self-assessment, the man could only think of Lucius calling him a bad friend.

Poor company was his habit. He always felt more comfortable beside bad people. He appreciated someone who knew they were rotten, so there was no play at being better than him. The only exceptions were Lily and Dumbledore. And the latter only believed he was better than Severus. That didn't make it true.

Severus conjured a chair and a biro, and sat editing on old essay he drafted on the tonic hexes. It put his thoughts on poor company from his mind.

_I'd have to update some of the references_, he mulled over, when breaking the quiet, he heard feet on the stairs. The wizard returned his wand to its hiding place. Then he resumed reading, draft propped on his crossed legs, picking and flicking dandruff from his scalp.

The sister came down the stairs grumbling.

"Too old for this—shit! Rev, you scared the piss outta me!"

"Hmm," he grunted, scratching out a word. "Yes, much too old for that. Don't soil my steps."

"Ugh, I've not got the energy for your stuffy, holier-than-thou attitude. I've had enough a' that today."

There was a shuffling of slippers and the racket of a body hitting old springs. From the muffled quality of the groan, she’d fallen face first onto the mattress. Severus suffered a peculiar urge to remember her name. Zoey? The brother called her "Zed."

"Zoey," he tried, turning to watch her. She snorted and curled on her side, speaking to the wall.

"Who the hell is 'Zoey,'...git. My name's Zinnia."
Really, a flower name?, he hummed to himself. Zinnias, related to sunflowers, a solitary stem with seeds like arrowheads. When one ground the seeds, it added longevity to any potion affecting the muscles. When one pulverized the petals, it carried subtle poisons from expecting mother to child, for generations.

He remembered their meaning, "thoughts of an absent friend," because he'd felt it hilariously cruel in context. Moste Potente Potions called zinnias the "family bane" for their capacity to end bloodlines.

"Zinnia," he smirked, scratching a jaunty note in the margin. The bud would take some of his brews from hexes to curses, but he liked taking down the thought.

"What," Zinnia rasped back. There sounded a rattle of a pill bottle and more dry gulps. "So it's ironclad that you can't help the pain? Like, not to sound wha'ever, but I'm dyin' here."

"Who isn't. Stop asking. I don't have the ingredients."

There was no response. After a few minutes, he heard the sag of her body losing tension and sinking into the cot. Then Severus had the special treat of reading through her grizzly snores.

"Gods, woman," he shook his head, refocusing on his draft.

In the rest of the house, the evening whiled away into night. Someone called from the kitchen about dinner, but neither party heard it through the Silenced door. Eventually even that charm faded, revealing the true quiet of the settled house.

Severus went into his third reread, checking over his shoulder before conjuring a journal. He began to rewrite his methodology, making notes of what he'd have to redo, when he realized. Zinnia stopped snoring.

He turned in his seat, examining her in her shadowed corner. Sensing something was off, he brightened the lamp overhead. In the bright white of the naked bulb, he saw her back, narrow and still. Her sweatshirt was sweat through and had ridden up, revealing the splotchy-skinned knobs of her spine. He waited for that bruised back to expand with a heavy breath.

No such luck. The woman lay in the cot, in clothes dark with sweat, unmoving.

"Zinnia," Severus called stoutly. No answer.

The potions master shot out of his chair, laying down his draft and reaching for her neck, looking for a pulse. Feeling nothing, he muttered a diagnostic spell picked up by old necessities. An image drew itself in the thick air: a core of cool light fluttered faintly, only just confirming signs of life.

"Idiot, what have you done to yourself?," he griped, keeping her on her side, checking her front for blood or sick.

He saw the white bottle of some Muggle prescription, not aspirin as he knew it, but a word he'd never seen before. He snatched it from the bed and scanned the label, seeing the pill description but nothing about what it did.

"Dammit! Accio bezoars!"

The jar of bezoars slapped against his palm and was quickly upended on the quilt. Severus pried open the sister's slack jaw and guided one of the goatstones down her throat.
"Stupid Muggles, can't look away for a measly few hours. Hurry up!"

He massaged the bezoar along, feeling it slide down towards her stomach, hard pit slipping away as it was swallowed. He desperately spelled fresh air through the basement, wondering idly if this was out of his wheelhouse, if Muggle medicine was too different, and if he should call for help.

_I was right here_, he thought, stunned. He felt momentarily out of himself, imagining he was already speaking numbly with the paramedics pulling him aside to the curb, making room for the gurney come to cart the body off. _I wasn't more than a few feet away. I was here the whole time, how..._

Like a possessed woman, Zinnia heaved back to life. She arched onto her back, lifting off the bed, dragging air into her lungs in a horrible gasp. Severus dove in, grabbing her chin and tilting it up to let in more fresh air, spelling in more, lightheaded himself.

"You idiot!," he cursed, hair falling in his face. Furious. "What the hell did you take?!

Glassy eyes listed over to his snarling face. A trembling hand hit his cheek and came down to fist his wrinkled t-shirt, shaking him. He grabbed her wrist, squeezing ropes of straining tendon, jerking but unable to wrest himself free. Her vice-like grip pulled him closer, fabric ripping, to meet her giant, yellow eyes.

"Stop! Stop it!," Zinnia begged, tears streaming down onto the sheets. “Please!”

"Let go!,” he barked, struggling. She was insanely strong., too strong for her wasting build. “I'm helping, you—!

"Help! Help me!"

"I am!" She was too disoriented to realize the wizard was saving her life.

Brutal strength gathered in her terror-clenched fist. He couldn't get free. She was sobbing now, and Severus felt the animal trickle of fear from the day before, when she had lost her mind and kicked him near senseless. He fought to aim his wand, planning to Stun her to gain distance.

He needed space before that berserker fury resurfaced, and she set upon him again.

"Fuck, please! Please! Please, stop heeer!," she howled in agony, throwing Severus from the bed.

He crashed to the cement floor, toppling his chair, salvaged vials falling, shattering around him. He climbed to his feet and looked down at the woman writhing and screaming on the cot, wheezing, frozen with fear.

"Stop her! Somebody! GET HER OOUTH!"

A shuddering growl filled the cellar, and his knees turned to water underneath him. This was wrong. This was deeply, terribly wrong. He wasn't witnessing madness, or at least not a human madness. Rather he had seen real lunacy only once before and, choked with hindbrain horror, knew he was witnessing it again.

"HELP ME!" Her cry fell into a cavernous bellow of blind, bestial rage.

Severus rained down streaks of burning red, shooting Stunner after Stunner as he ran for the stairs. In his panic, some shots missed, scattering along the walls like fireworks. The ones that landed
bled off the breaking, morphing body, failing to slow it down.

The flurry of coarse black hair shivered, taking over the growing form tearing from the stained sweats. The head elongated. The spine snapped.

His numb feet pounded up the steps towards the ground floor, taking in ragged splinters from the worn wood. Below him, he heard the metal shriek of the cot collapsing, and looked against his better judgement, riveted in his terror. The beast continued to unfold, limbs stretching and buckling, growing rough, sickle claws that sliced through the mattress, gouging the metal frame like clay.

Then the beast, hearing his resultant shout, turned its great panting head to Severus. The man froze, shot through with ice, his heart drumming as he peered into the cage of vicious teeth and sulfurous drool and lashing, blood-red tongue.

The door above him opened, letting in light from the kitchen. Unable to look away from it, pressed flat against the wall, Severus only saw the edge of a shadow at the top of the stairs.

"Zeddie?"

The voice—the brother.

"GET BACK," Severus hollered. He tore his eyes away and ran, hearing a howl that raised every hair on his body. Noise and wood exploded beneath him as it lunged. "MOVE!"

"What—!"

Severus barreled into the behemoth, bowling the man over. The kitchen cabinets shook when their combined weight slammed onto the linoleum. Severus, every nerve focused on the demonic roar below, whipped out his wand and flung the basement door shut.

The lock clicked with a timid 'snk'.

_That won't hold_, he knew, and ignoring the brother's frantic questions, he cast ward after ward, laying them down like bricks without mortar, praying he didn't blow them all to hell.

"What's goin' on! What'd you do to her?!

The Muggle stomped past him and grabbed for the doorknob. Severus swore and hexed it hot.

"Calefacio!"

"AH! Bloody hell?!" It sizzled as it burned the man's palm. Crying out again, he let it go.

Severus used the scant few seconds of confusion to hurl another spell at the door. It turned from white painted wood to iron, hulking great chains like to moor a ship crossing over it, sealed with a clunk by an enormous, iron lock.

This left the brother speechless, as the iron and chains materialized out of nothing. In that precious silence, they heard the monster on the other side roar and slam itself against the gates. The whole wall bucked under its weight. Severus cursed again, hurrying to reinforce it.

"Wha...what…?"

Rattled at yet again nearly losing his life, and in the worst way by far, Severus scoffed at the other man’s shock and, exhausted by his efforts, sunk to his knees despite himself. He sat on the floor
trembling. He stayed there, struggling for self-control on the naked tiles. Above him, the brother backed away from the shaking door, looking thoroughly spooked.

“What was that?,” he asked, hissing, curling his burned hand into his chest. Severus closed his eyes, headache throbbing.

“Your fucking, huh—your sister,” he panted. “So, I'm assuming you didn't know.”

“Know what?” From her voice, Severus realized the mother had come to investigate the chaos. He heard her astonishment and worry when she moved in front of the new basement door. “The hell…? Where's Zed?”

Just then, the wall shuddered again. The wards lit up like sparklers, fighting the point of impact. Severus needed to rework them before they went off and tore the house down. He had to, once he caught his breath.

“What the fuck is that?!” The Muggles asked in unison.

“Zinnia!,” he snapped. As if hearing her name, the beast howled with rage. Every adult in the kitchen shivered. "Your beloved 'Zeddie' is a werewolf."

Greetings, Dear, Hi

Snape,

It's been a while. I hope this letter finds you well. I hear you're back in England and think that's neat. Let me know if you'd ever like to catch up. I think you'll find that we've both changed a lot and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Sincerely, My Best,

Thanks for not burning this,

H

P.S. I'll probably regret this, but there's another letter attached. If you happen to know this person, feel free to send it their way.

"Do you think it's going to work?," Ginny wondered.

"Not even a little," Harry replied, handing the two letters to the owl. He also gave it a treat for its troubles, petting its wings while it ate. "But maybe he won't bin it immediately, which would be something. Let's hope he's having a good day."

Harry opened the window for the post owl, thanked it, and watched it fly off. He stayed there in the parlor with his chin tucked in the crook of his arm until the borrowed owl disappeared over the midnight roofs of London.
June 7th, 1969: Spinner's End, Cokeworth

He woke to the shhing of the blackthorn bushes, nose pressed to the dirt. Something rustled through the leaves. Sparrows shouted in the canopy above at the passing shadow of a crow.

Dry grass caught on his lashes. He lay under the alder and hazel, still as stone, waiting for the rustling to pass. It came closer.

As carefully as possible, the boy crouched. Twigs tugged at his hair but he didn't move again. His wrist still ached where his da had twisted it. His eyes were trained on the pale glimpse of sky through the bushes. He held his breath, waiting for a face to block the clouds.

Soon, an adult loomed over him, parting the leaves. He gasped, heart thumping.

"Gods, child! Come out of there!"

He squinted at his mother's dour look, breathing shakily, and stayed put.

"Your father's gone out, so enough. Get inside."

Gritting his teeth, Sev crawled out, leading with his good hand and making his way. The hedge shivered and snapped quietly as he emerged. Once she has him standing, his mother's quick, sharp fingers plucked feathers and clumps of dirt from his hair.

"Filthy. So this is where you've been all afternoon."

"Where else would I be?" This earned him a cuff on the ear, loosening a cricket from its home in his black fringe. It launched from his head and sailed back into the bush.

"Don't get smart! For that you can stay in your room, and I don't want to hear a peep."

His spindly mother hounded his steps, herding him back toward the house. She carried a basket of fresh hazel under an arm as stiff and thin as the branch she picked it from. He paused, curious what she was doing, and was pointedly hustled indoors.

She pushed him through the back entrance and locked it behind them, grumbling all the while. "I should leave you in the yard, since you like to act feral. Get on upstairs."

He made a beeline for the sitting room, planning to lurk behind the bookcase. If he read quietly in the nook, soon his mother would forget him, and he could sneak outside again. He didn't want to stay in the house today. The rain had finally stopped and the ground dried some, so Sev wanted to go to the park.

But he froze in the doorway, bewildered. In place of a vacant living room, there was a girl on their
couch.

She was older than him, a teenager, who sat holding a towel to her cheek and tapping her feet. She wore cropped jeans and trainers. She wore her hair in a frizz down to her shoulders. She had long nails and pink lipstick. And the only thing more swollen than her cheek was her stomach, which ballooned under her shirt.

She stared back at him morosely.

"Severus, right?," the teen greeted in a low voice.

Sev backed out of the room, eyes wide. Not looking behind him, he smacked into his mother's legs and was spun around by the shirt collar.

Eileen Snape glowered down at him, fist shaking. No—in her off hand she clutched a jar of bruise balm, stored in a recycled pickle jar. At first he thought it was for him. Except he had aches without bruises, so how would she have known he needed it? And the paste couldn't help bones, that he knew.

So, he realized, it must have been for the pregnant girl on the couch. For the cheek she was icing. Not him at all.

"I said to your room!," his mother hissed.

"But who's that?," he quibbled. Why was there a girl there?

"Mind yours, that's who!" She pushed past him, shuffling down the hall. Over her rounded shoulder she snapped, "All this listening at doors and minding others' business. One day you'll hear something, boy, and mind me, it will lean on your soul!"

It was the most she'd ever said to him at once. It listed down on him like a hex, but he didn't mind it, as he was always shooed away for something or other. He'd be forgotten and left to know either way. He trailed after her back toward the stranger.

His mother, hunched like a woman thrice her age, entered the sitting room and twisted open the jar. Sev followed, hiding behind her. It was no small feat, as she was particularly waifish in her dark skirts and shawl. But the boy took pride in his exceptional sneaking, and crept unnoticed.

The medicinal punch of bruise balm hit the dusty open air. He smelled black tea and crushed daisy, winterbloom and overpowering clove. The girl, instructed to move the towel from her cheek, winced at the smart pat of mud on her swollen face.

"Rub it in, little twit." Eileen scooped out another dollop and smeared it down the bridge of the girl's nose.

"Stupid, following that wretch into the pub. And if he went after the baby, then what? Look to the side."

"Ow! I know, but I needed—."

"I'm sure all you needed was the sense knocked into you. And that's all you'll get from my husband. Now get on before he knocks it loose again."

"I can't…ouch!" She took a watery breath, and through gritted teeth came,"I can't fucking live like this."
"You don't cuss in my home, girl." There was tense silence except for his mother's slippers sliding over the carpet. Then she sucked her teeth. "Too young. If you can't take it, leave. Pack up all your little things and move, since you can't cut it here."

"Christ, how do you do this?"

"Oh-ho, don't live after me—trust. Stubbornness and pride will get you nowhere."

The jar was screwed shut and put aside. Sev's wrist throbbed, untended, but the boy kept to himself in the corner. Something in his needing pricked his mother's ear, however, despite himself. She turned to the silent nine-year-old, glaring daggers.

"Upstairs, Severus! Salazar, it's like I'm talking to my bloody self!"

His fists clenched and Sev slunk past, hands twisted in his shirt. He looked askance at the teen as he passed, and noticed what he thought was a cushion crushed to her side.

It was in fact a child, a toddler, squeezed into a shaking ball and tucked under the young mother's arm. He didn't see much—only the little back, tiny denim overalls, and two frilly socked feet with one scuffed shoe between them.

His resentment passed over on swift wings, like the crow circling the garden. How pitiful, what a baby, so inexplicably terrified, cowering in its mum. Sev didn't need that. He had grown up. He knew better. Without meaning to, the boy stopped again, stomach burning.

"Child, if I have to repeat myself one more time—"

"Can I go outside," he interrupted. He dodged a pinch on the way to the door. He was leaving no matter what. "I wanna go to the park. I'll be back 'fore nightfall, I promise."

He was already on the porch when Eileen spat to stay out of sight.

"Stay out all night for all I care, I'm done with you. Ah-ah, but get a coat. You won't be freezing to death and sending people to this house looking for me."

"Ma, it's summer," he complained, but he still snatched his father's unused work trench from the coat tree. Sev ran out into the street, throwing on the coat as he went. The coattails snapped in the wind he made, an ugly beige cape across his skinny back.

He now stood, too-warm, in the summer sun. The occasional truck rambled lazily by, and the garbage was out on the curb. Few other children roamed the End at this time, as they were scattered towards the cold mill hunting for fun.

Sev was alone as he peered into his living room from the outside. In it his mom pecked, standing crooked with arms akimbo. There was frizz and shrugging shoulders left to see of the big-bellied girl. And unexpectedly, a round, pigtailed head bobbed into view. He scowled at the baby, wanting it gone. But then his mother moved out of view, and for a second it was someone else's house. It was the girl's and the baby's house, their living room, in no essential way different from the neighbors'.

Magic happened where Sev lived, sure, but barely and not without consequence. So from the street, it was impossible to tell his from any other shed on Spinner's End.
His feet came unglued from the sidewalk then. More wind blew under his heels. The boy flew down the road to the park, coat flapping batlike behind him.

And as he ran, and for years after, he forgot that it ever was his house with the pregnant girl and the toddler. He never saw them again to remind him. They rolled off his mind like sweat down his temples.

In his memories, his living room melted into every other room seen through its front window. Sev would collect so many such snapshots, puzzling about home life, looking for proof of concept. His encounter blended with those views of the lonely, toothless seniors and the other yelling dads and the scowling sulking teens.

It was as if it had never happened.

His mother and the jar became the dozens of other times she tended to herself or him. It dissolved among those gloomy days of her calling one or both of them an idiot. The dark-haired toddler in its mother's side became him or a Potter or a Longbottom, spinning out into vitriol about the dangers of coddled youth.

And the only clear memory he had from that day, which overwrote all the others, was that afternoon in the park. It was the swing set, squealing and squeaking, and the tickling ants in the bushes.

It was the copper haired witch swinging higher and higher, leaping, and floating gently down.

It was magic he remembered, pure and free and wheeling up into the sky. It was a story he guarded jealously, more real than himself and his mother and his Muggle father. He remembered best the world he'd rendered for the beautiful girl with clean cheeks and the pretty dress.

While the decades faded the preceding hours, Severus kept those bright green eyes, ones that only saw the boy for the wizard. Those eyes he would live in, for a few years, for a short time. He owned that first afternoon where he wasn't alone and hurting. He owned imparting on her the promise of a bigger world, where magic would give what one was owed.

The rest was just piffling life, filter, vignette. One pulse of many pains. He would become a man from the good part, forsaking the bigger picture. And the near knowing would sink, like the sun, behind the black chimneys of Cokeworth.

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August 23rd, 2002: Spinner's End, Cokeworth (after midnight)

Spells exploded on the kitchen wall. A shimmering of wards distorted the rattling door chains. The floor shuddered as the undeterred werewolf below attacked the house's foundation.

Severus eyed the cracked plaster of the load bearing wall, growing tired. He'd had so little energy to start. Still he poured willpower into keeping the distended door in place. The repercussions of failure were too unconscionable to do less.

"That looks bad," peeped a voice by his elbow.

"Get away from me," he told the nosey girl for the fifth time that night. Of course it was unreasonable to hope a rampaging werewolf might escape a child's notice. How lucky for him that one hadn't.

"Is it bad though?," asked the brother. He stood to his right, by the sink, running his burned hand
under water. "I mean, do your thing, s'just the wall looks kinda...crumbly."

Severus sent him a withering glare. The younger man had insisted on niceties after realizing Severus had thrown him from certain death. The querulous wizard refused to play along. His focus was on accomplishing two very specific goals: keeping his house standing and surviving the night uneaten.

"Well, it isn't encouraging," Severus snarked. "Now no more distractions!"

He returned to muttering strings of Latin from memory. Fleeting snatches of old grimoires flit under a mental lens. He snagged what he could, but his endurance was waning.

_Bam!_ He lost his footing as the slam of supernatural body on iron tossed him aside. His hipbone banged into the counter, telling a nerve. Pain zapped up his side, buckling his knee, and his recitations faltered. In response, the wards wavered, trembling, threatening to fall.

"Dammit!" His concentration broke completely as he despaired at the mangled spellwork.

Severus had royally screwed up outside of anything he'd expected. In a spiraling panic, he'd thrown too many spells at the one problem, and the tangled knot of needs squirmed about, impossible to grasp, all of it under direct assault from the basement.

Without his stream of intent, the wards sparked magnificently. They cast off brilliant rainbows that shone off the entire kitchen. Colors swirled on the pots and pans, bottles and glasses, spoons, forks and knives. The Muggles—mother, brother, and the wide-awake child, who couldn't be shooed away—shielded their eyes, swearing and gasping in awe.

Severus stalked toward the buckling wall, furious.

*If this collapses, that monster is let loose and we're torn asunder,* he thought, the hard line of it driving him forward. *And if the wards explode, the house topples over and we're crushed.*

"Get it together," he panted, lifting his wand.

He parted his lips to resume chanting—and remained thus posed, affixed with terror. His mind went blank. Severus stood there, hands up, gaping at the shimmering mess. He wasn't calm enough to tackle this problem. It was too much. He couldn't think straight.

A howl like ten werewolves echoed through the cramped kitchen, engulfing his last clever thought.

*I can't do this.*

"Fuckin'—move!"

A broad arm clotheslined him. He choked and saw stars as he hit the linoleum. The arm pinned him to the floor. Severus fought under the weight of a massive body as if caught by a fallen tree.

"Everybody down! It's gonna give!" At hearing the brother's bellow, two more bodies dove to the floor. Severus could do nothing but squeeze his eyes shut.

Above them, a terrible crack and boom tore through the kitchen. The wards exploded in a manganese flash. All their colors melded into bright white light, and a keening ring pealed through the pandemonium.

There was only a moment before the werewolf howled again. Then came the final _slam!_ The whole
house groaned as the beast ripped the basement door from the building around it. Under the reverberating whine of spell implosion, he heard the werewolf’s injured bay.

Reflexively, he opened his eyes, again risking blindness in as many days, but unable not to witness the beast.

"Jesus fucking Christ!," wheezed the body over his. "It's really a…"

Severus shook, sixteen all over, locking eyes black-to-yellow with the once creature of his nightmares. It had fangs like skinning knives, slick with noxious drool and bloody from gnawing at its own flesh. The whole body of coarse black hair bristled nastily, hackles raised, ears folded back in agony.

_The sound_, he realized, sick and thrilled. _It can't stand the ringing of the wards._

"Still might...where's my wand?," Severus breathed, flexing his trapped left hand. He sighed gratefully at the unbroken lean of cypress in his palm. But he couldn't manage a proper motion pinned to the ground.

"Budge up, you fucking yeti," he groused, desperately elbowing the brother in the chest.

"Y'know, Rev, there's a _werewolf_ here and I saved your sus hide just now," the younger man grumbled, lifting up off of the wizard's arm. _"Least you can do is use my name."_

"You first." He aimed by the wolf, using the brother's body as cover.

"Eh…Sebastian?"

Severus grunted an unsympathetic, "Tuh," and cast his strongest amplifying charm at the wards. The humans all cried out as the whining grew louder, drowning out all other noise. He vaguely felt for the child thrashing in unenviable pain under her mother, legs kicking, round face folded in agony. The pair struggled across the room before the girl slumped into unconsciousness, her mother’s shout lost to the ringing.

His own eyes watered at the skull-splitting shriek of the wards. It whirred higher and higher until the bucking werewolf, like the child, collapsed onto its side with a mighty crash.

Whip-quick, Severus hushed the wards, on the edge of blacking out himself. As the tunnel left his vision, he pushed to get free, sitting up and resting his back against the sink cabinets. The small knobs dug into his ribs but he hardly cared as he quivered like a newborn foal, taking in the great unconscious beast.

They bought themselves a few minutes at best.

"I have to get Laney to hospital," yelled the mother irrespective of the stunned quiet in the room. It seemed she was deafened by the attack. She gathered her limp daughter in her arms regardless, turning the girl's slack face into her neck.

"Mum, what're you even gonna say?" A line of blood dribbled from the behemoth’s ear, but besides a wince and a slight slur, he didn’t seem too out of sorts. He was only slightly louder than usual.

“She needs—!”

"Yeah, y-yeah," he stuttered, “you, you go and I'll get there when Zeddie's, um, set to rights, I
guess?"

At this, the large man sat up scratching his head and looked down at down Severus. They shared a moment of helpless shivering on the floor.

"She does turn back...right?"

Instead of answering, the wizard looked at the beast in question. It lay fully unconscious, red tongue lolling out of its mouth. Around it were the remains of the kitchen table, smashed to bits under its weight. Severus could smell the monster's sulfurous breath and recoiled at its closeness.

"We're not done here," he warned. "It'll wake soon, and the house could—"

But he was cut short by said house flashing once, like it had been photographed. For a moment, the colors in the room inverted, like a photo negative. Then slowly, to his astonishment, the wrecked kitchen began to reverse itself. The fissures in the drywall healed, glossy paint and wallpaper rolling back into place. Where the door's arch and some ceiling had fallen away, wood and plaster returned.

Severus tensed, gripping his wand as he noticed the werewolf stir. However, rather than wake it, whatever unknown magic was at play scooped the wolf off the tile. It worked while they watched, petrified, the huge body floating with its coarse, black hairs fanning as if riding static electricity. The wolf bobbed once, spun, and glided through the ragged hole, sinking into the basement. Then the iron door rehung itself, chunks of plaster filling in around it. A lattice of rivets and chains reformed over the door and it tied off with the same, giant padlock.

With a solid clunk, the door was as Severus had meant it to be: daunting and resolute, shellacked with unyielding wards. This door would hold. It shone, like it knew its own strength. It'd let nothing in and absolutely nothing out.

Severus looked over the present party, helplessness turned to seething, knowing he wasn't the one responsible.

*There's a witch or wizard among them,* he knew with sudden clarity.

"Who is it?," he growled. "Which one of you has been playing me for a fool?"

Nobody spoke for a minute, such that they could hear the werewolf below them coming to. The idea of it waking up so soon nauseated him, but now he had cold fury to help him stay his course.

"Who!?," he shouted.

"Alright, you cut that shit!" Grace snapped, covered in splinters and plaster dust. She jabbed a finger at him from by her son's side, baring her teeth around where he'd slid in front of her.

"I won't be yelled at by *any* man in front of my kids! I'm a grown woman and older'n you at that, so you'd better act right!"

"Who—!?"

"Enough."

The hand cradling her daughter's head brushed the fine hair from the girl's face.

"Let me at least put her to bed," she grunted. "Then *you* can explain why my eldest is a b-bloody
monster. Then I might wanna share. Freddy, take her."

"Yep," her son scooped the child from her eyes, glancing once at Severus, and quickly away.

The Muggles left the kitchen under his gimlet eye, her children leading the way. Severus traded scowls with their mother until she too disappeared out the room, holding her head and muttering. Soon, he heard the rapping of footsteps above him, as though somehow, impossibly, a nearly regular night had resumed.

Outside of a few groans from underneath, he sat with the wall for a minute in silence, seething and feeling his new bruises.

Eventually, he examined the wards, which now glowed calmly with a tempered sheen. To satisfy his frustration, he managed to recall a charm to peel back a layer and reveal their innards. Aided by Legilimency, he probed the web of iridescent threads until he sensed something not his own.

Briefly placated by dissection, Severus found it, the oddity, small and buzzing and burning with willfulness. It formed a hard kernel of defiance anchoring the other, more complicated spells. The wizard straightened up, embarrassed. He withdrew from the wards, sure of who was to blame.

_Grrrrrr-humph!_ From below came a rumble, followed by a disgruntled huff. Distantly, he heard the wolf scratch itself and whine, finding it absurd that of all anyone, the _werewolf_ had the gall to act annoyed.

_Mrrrrgh_, it complained.

"Oh, shut up." He rubbed his battered hip and sighed.

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Severus spent some time recouping before hunting down the family upstairs. Having reacquired a limp, he made slow progress to the second floor, taking a break, favoring his side, when he passed the behemoth on the landing.

The always bedraggled man lumbered past, lugging a boom box, a notebook, and a box of clear plastic casings—CDs.

"You," Severus tried, not liking what he saw as the brother marched away undoubtedly toward the kitchen. Years of brat-herding told him there was clownery afoot.

"What are you up to?" But the man kept walking as if he didn't hear him. Severus wondered if he was still hard-of-hearing from the wards, although he thought it just as likely that he was ignoring him—again.

_Merlin, what is that yeti's name?_

"You! Fred!" It worked. “Fred” turned around, shocked, as if he hadn't seen Severus standing there. The older man looked down his nose at the stereo. "What are you about to do?"

"This?,” he asked. “Nothing, I just had an idea."

"Will this 'idea' get me killed or irritate me in any way?"

The brother chewed on this and then settled on a crooked-toothed grin. His teeth were stark white in the shadowy alcove.

"Can't say," he said. “Probably."
And then he stomped down the stairs and out of sight.

"Ridiculous." Severus narrowed his eyes and kept on toward the master bedroom, too tired to stop him. “Let him, what do I care?”

He ended up in the entrance to the master bed, hands folded behind his back. Incidentally, Severus found himself observing a moment of care.

On the bed, the insensate girl was bundled under the covers. Pillows swallowed her head except for a tuft of black hair sticking up over the comforter. An extra wool blanket he’d never seen before was pulled up to her chin. He’d be surprised if she didn't suffocate.

Her mother, whose sat with her dusty back to the hall, slipped the small, black-rimmed glasses off of her daughter's face, leaving them folded atop the quilt. Severus took the opportunity to check the state of the room.

The one window was cracked to let in a breeze and boasted a sill of blown-out, sooty white candles. Their glass jars depicting Christian saints, the paper halos warm with low lamplight. A turquoise-beaded rosary on a kinked cord hung from the wooden vanity. Under it, an ashtray nursed loose change and the butts of a few crushed clove cigarettes. Uncapped tubes of lipstick were strewn around it. The drawers were open, half-packed with jeans and socks and sequined dresses.

Open cardboard boxes lined the room, full of sweaters and toys and pound shop novels. It seemed nowhere in this house was free of books.

This was leagues away from his parents' dreary nest. Thanks to him, it had lost the stink of stale clothes and beer, but once he resided full time at the castle, he let it succumb to mold and disuse. His year under surveillance, dodging sleep with constant brewing, had hardly changed that. If anything it imbued the room with the clinging, chemical fumes. All his attempts to smoke the rat from his attic had vented into there.

Now, that smog of potions was gone. The unwashed sheets were stripped. Replacing that was cloves and burnt wicks, perfume, paper, and cosmetic wax; a wrack of child's shoes; a hideous wool quilt his mother might've liked.

Severus found himself dithering until his presence was felt, very aware that this was no longer his space. Even he knew the difference between a place owned and a place lived in. Someone had made their home here. He hovered outside the hub of it like an uninvited ghoul.

That they chose to domesticate Spinner's End felt as idiotic as it did admirable. They'd certainly be the first. His parents failed, and Severus never bothered. Very brave, these Muggles. Severus was equal parts mystified, disgruntled, and impressed.

Sappy fool, a thought objected, though his countenance remained blank, him watching the woman kiss her child’s wrinkled forehead. You're an insect trying not to get stepped on and barely succeeding at that. You couldn't possibly miss dorms, dungeons, and your awful Latvian shoebox? Homes? Those were home to you?

Severus couldn't deny it. He credited his endless week for his navel gazing, but knew he was homesick.

Bleeding heart. His inner voice sounded remarkably like Lucius. Luckily, this made it easier to push aside.
"Ha!" He gave the older woman his attention. She cursed into a tight fist and threw him a rude gesture. Severus quirked a brow.

"Ah," he asked, "did I scare you?"

"Shhh!"

She hopped off the bed and alighted on quick feet into the corridor. She eased the bedroom door closed after her, and then motioned for him to follow, tip-toeing to the stairs. He rolled his eyes but obliged, flat-footed, surprised that his bare feet were starting to ache.

He suffered the farce of being led to his own sitting room with little complaint. They slouched in across from each other—him to the armchair, her on the couch. The shape of her curls against the curtains bothered him for some reason, like a pressing déja vu. He let the feeling pass, however, opting to tend to the conversation at hand.

"One sec," she held up a finger to stop him. She cleaned an ear with her pinky and tilted her head as if to catch a tune.

"Stalling won't—."

"Shush!" He sat, lips thinned, but soon heard it too: music drifted in from the back of the house. It grew from a tapping of cymbals, easily confused for rain on a window, to what sounded definitively like classic rock and roll.

"What in the hell," Severus mumbled. He twisted in his seat to hear better, certain his overworked mind had begun playing tricks on him. Then he remembered Fred and his boom box headed for the kitchen.

"Oi! Quit muckin' about by the werewolf!," his company yelled, exasperated.

"...Yeah, okay," came the faint reply. The music stopped, a stirring of bass cut short. A few moments ticked by, however, and another song started. This time it was saxophonic jazz.

"Hey! What did I just say!"

"Yeah, yeah."

A jumping chorus of trombones faded into quiet and, after a few minutes more, returned in a sepulchral swell. Piano accompanied a feminine croon. Strangely, the lonesome melody found its place in the hollows of the house. Severus, so agog as to be curious, let the music play out, listening. He glanced at the mother quizzically, strung along by the words.

"...I'll find you in the morning sun. And when the night is new. I'll be looking at the moon. But I'll be seeing youuu..."

The carpet jumped underfoot. Musty air puffed up through the floorboards, and a grumble echoed from below. Severus split from the wistful trance and leapt to his feet, snapping his wand from its holster.

"Freddy, knock it off!" The man's mother stood on the couch now, panicked, a surfer finding sharks in the waves. "Enough, man! Enough!"

"Nah, hold on! It's working!" Instead of stopping, Fred guffawed and cranked up the volume. "Ahaha! Oh my god, she's singin'!"
The floor shuddered, and the two in the living room froze, frantic over the wooden slats settling under the rug. And under the music and their hammering hearts, they heard a thready howl, unequivocally lupine. Horns played and the singer serenaded:

"Suundaaay is gloomy. My hoours are slumberless. Dearest, the shadooows I live with are numberleeess…"

Alongside it was the mournful wooing of the werewolf in the basement.

"You cannot be serious," Severus whispered, feeling dizzy. He retook his seat lest he pass out from just the way thought.

"One of the most afeared Dark creatures for centuries, and the bitch likes blues." He put his face in his hands, grinding his temples, needing to understand.

Across from him, the mother sucked her teeth and slumped down on the cushions. He looked up and saw she covered her face next, wheezing. Severus dragged a hand over his slack mouth and loosed a gusty sigh.

"Your family wants me dead." He glared scorching blame.

The woman chuckled, only the once, before sitting up, head hanging, a hand still over her eyes.

"Yeah. That...that thing's really my kid. Zinnia loves Billie Holiday. Has since she was three."

With her head down, she had more grey hair than black. Though she looked young, to have two adult children and a ten year old besides, she was easily over fifty. Seeing her in her sleep clothes, though, peppered with dirt and more than a little defeated—it was the first time the woman looked of an age.

"No way," she whispered. Severus looked on and said nothing. "Werewolf,' are you—they're not real! Augh, ma would shit herself."

And then she raised her head. Her eyes were red and her short lashes, spiky and wet. Aside from that, she smiled, shrugged and laughed, as if to say, "That's it. It is what it is. I give up."

They met eyes, the wizard wary, the Muggle giddy in surrender.

"Okay! So!" She clapped once, calling some meeting to order. Grinning over her fingers, she cried, "Help us!"

He was shocked to feel he just might. Despite his natural hesitation, his resentment of the Muggles, his battered shoulder, his arm, his hip, the lack of proper sleep, the monster in his basement, and the fact that somewhere overseas a Death Eater pawed through the rubble of everything he'd built and blew up, likely to kill him, a loathed and lauded traitor—despite all of these things, he snorted.

Being begged for help was funny, in a cosmic way.

"Well," Severus mused, "since you've asked."

Dawn approached gently on the night-hassled house. Severus and Grace, who refused to be called otherwise, bickered on the carpet amidst a spread of his many texts.

"But it says right here there's a cure!" She shoved a book review under his nose. He rolled his eyes, and slapped it away.
"And I said Kettleburn refers to scale rot in merpeople, not lycanthropy. You simply will not find a highly coveted cure to a barely treatable curse in Kettleburn's back issues!

"He taught the Care Of course when I was in school and I promise you, he had more limbs than sense."

"Guessin' that's either little sense or a whole lotta limbs." She mumbled, giving up on the book. She looked around for another one. "How bout this? It says—."

"You're closer to being Merlin than a mooncalf is to being a bloody werewolf. Scamander won't help."

"...Wait, Merlin's real?"

The one tome on werebeasts became two on Dark creatures, and four on half-creatures around the world. Of course, with Severus'...special interests, the majority of monographs described harvesting parts for potions.

He argued Grace down from violence post encountering the chapter on lycan spleens. He explained that his Cokeworth library was dated for a younger, nastier self.

"Ha! What're you now, spun sugar?," she scoffed. Then she had snatched down a book titled *Pouring from the Dark Cauldron* and read from a random page.

"'Damocles Belby invented its modern formulation on,' oh, it's the potion again. God, it's everywhere! Your scientist types haven't done shit new since the 70s. Bad press for you all. Awful. Poor show."

"Obviously breakthroughs come in stages," he drawled. "Do you like being wrong? Is it fun for you?"

"Oh okay, except I didn't go to magic school, so what's your excuse, ah? Only seems to me that no one gives a flyin' sequinse'd fuck 'bout fixing anyfin'!" Grace threw down *Pouring* and pushed off the couch. Severus already crossed his arms, giving up the argument as a lost cause.

For pride's sake, he ground out for the last time, "You have only one option and it's the Wolfsbane Potion. There are versions and variations, but it's all Wolfsbane. No twists, and no cures. Stop looking for cures."

She threw up her hands, shouting, "I don't buy it! You're sellin' us werewolves but we don't get the fix!? Something, something's wrong! Every book, every wizard's wrong! This's a joke!"

"Even magic has its limits. The bite's curse has never been broken, or if it has, it's the closest guarded secret in the world. And without saying too much, I would know if it's the latter, as cracking secrets are a point of pride."

"N—ugh!" Grace walked off, shaking her head. "Forget it. I'm getting coffee."

Severus watched her leave, arms crossed so tight his elbows hit his chest. The second he was alone, he sagged into the couch and rubbed his eyes.

"This is pointless."

Convincing her that magic was real wasn't the issue. She'd known his mother. She had her own suspicions. And seeing a kitchen rebuild itself around an honest-to-goodness werewolf did most of
the heavy lifting.

But the Muggle woman would not accept anything less than miracles. It didn't matter how they went about it, or from what angle he leveraged it. Nothing could convince her that a problem magic caused had no permanent magical solutions.

"I'd rather it be seizures! They have doctors for that shit!"

Not only did Grace refuse to believe him, she had him looking at his own books with disdain. He didn't care deeply about curing lycanthropy, but he did think the stagnation unsavory.

Severus knew Belby. Severus knew his own work. He was an expert in lycanthropy and potions. Or he was a well-cited voice, at least. He was academically on the cutting edge and, frankly, it was dull.

Did he think there was a possible cure for lycanthropy? No, and so he wouldn't make it his job to find one.

But it was the twenty-first century. Muggles made gains most wizards couldn't imagine—mobile phones, new vaccines, computers, satellites. Confidently, Severus preferred dittany over stitches. However, he also might have liked an airplane flight over cross-seas Apparition. Planes only lost luggage, not skin.

And while wizards had Portkeys, Muggles gave them trains. One couldn't doubt the innovations. Coming back to werewolves, said innovation lagged.

He hadn't considered Muggle werewolves ever, in all his Wolfsbane work. The field consensus was, without magic, one would never survive the bite. And ignorance and an overdose nearly killed his—nearly killed Zinnia, who by some accounts, Severus felt, didn't deserve.

He valued the statute but not to a fault. Severus acknowledged the need for a middle ground. Then the ex-Death Eater's stomach churned as, quite without meaning to, he remembered Charity Burbage.

Her gruesome death, for teaching things as innocuous as bicycles and comic books. Begging for her life—his stomach lurched.

*It's a luxury to think on this now,* he recounted solemnly. The returns of surviving others never ceased.

*Tap! Tap tap tap!*

Severus twitched open the living room curtains, squinting through the paned glass. He balked at the sky easing from pitch black to navy. Morning snuck in both days too late and earlier than expected. The wizard opened the window and stared down at the owl.

The barn owl hissed, feathers puffed up and shivering. Severus scowled and shot it a stinging hex. The bird carried on such that it must've been feral. But it only flapped, squawling, showing him its talons.

"Get!," he bit out. Then he saw the letters leather-strapped to its legs and went cold. The post owl had a fit as the wizard wrestled it for the delivery. "Give it!"

Before he could drag it inside, the owl took off into the pre-dawn in a flurry of down. Severus cursed, checked the street for onlookers, and slammed the window shut.
He frantically scanned the envelopes in hand. Who wrote him? Why? Nobody should know he was alive, much less receiving post! Narcissa wrote by Floo, never owl, lest it be followed. When that barn owl returned to its sender empty-handed, they would know Severus lived. Hell, if they traced the owl or the letters, they would know his address!

The man immediately went to burn the letters. He couldn't risk being found. He would have to move again.

To where, idiot?, berated his rushing thoughts.

I'll figure it out. He took his wand tip to the corner of the envelope and watched it smolder.

What about the Muggles? The letter boasting his name caught fire.

They'll...they'll figure it out, he reasoned. I can't help them if I'm dead.

It was glancing at the other letter, the one addressed to Grace Hedgerot, that gave him pause. He recognized the handwriting. Merlin, how couldn't he? He harped on how atrocious it was almost every night for six years, except summers.

"Potter!," Severus cursed. He looked at his burning letter, and considered rendering it to ash. That idiot boy! How dare he write Severus like they were bosom pals!? Who did he think he was!?

"Damn!" He snuffed out the letter flame and ripped open the missive. So he wasn't being traced? He couldn't be, not by Potter, not after four years of happily staying out of each other's way.

"What is this, you stupid boy? Gods, you couldn't even bother to rewrite this on fresh parchment. You just love to waste my time, don't you? 'Snape,' oh, yes, brilliant."

He skimmed the letter, made it out to "I hear you're back in England" and bellowed, "How!? Potter, you—how!? You meddling—you worthless—!"

Severus shredded letter and slapped the scraps down on the end table. With a fierce jab and wordless snarl, he burned them and banished the leavings. One piece escaped the carnage, reading "Thanks for not burning this" in Potter's abhorrent scrawl. Taking it as a challenge, he launched it like a clay pigeon and burned that, too.

Standing in the fluttering grey ash, Severus felt lighter, less burdened. For one, he could trust that Potter wasn't his assassin. That brat couldn't kill a conversation. And destroying any communiqué from the Boy-Who-Lived did wonders for stress management.

I should've burned his essays at Hogwarts, he figured, picking up the second letter.

"Fine, so this stupid potion. Where do we get it?"

Severus looked up, surprised by Grace's sudden reappearance. The woman seemed calmer now, returning from the kitchen with a mug in each hand. She reached out with one, trying to give it to him, and finding his hands were occupied.

"You got a letter? At four am?," she asked, opting to put the mug on the now singed end table. "The f—why's this all sooty? You burn something?"

"Hmph," he replied noncommittally, fanning himself with the second letter. He planned on keeping it to himself.
How Potter even knew Grace Hedgerot was an enigma. His only thought was that the boy intended some kind of mind game. Potter might wish to imply that he could not only track Severus by mysterious means, but also knew the people with whom he associated.

If this were Lucius sending the letters, a mind game wouldn't be a question. His friend played tricks abound, even through things as simple as comments on fair weather. But this wasn't Lucius, or Narcissa, or even Draco.

It was Golden Boy Potter, the British wizards' Christ. He wouldn't know deceit from a damsel tied to train tracks. Severus needed time to figure out—

"Oh, it's for me." Grace plucked the letter from his fingers and tore it open. She plunked down her coffee and started reading. "Who…"

Severus gaped at her, blown away by his own carelessness. He started to ask for it back when her breath hitched and her hands began to shake. He leaned in, trying to read over her head, and managed the first couple lines before Grace whipped around, eyes welling.

"Did you do this?," she accused, voice cracking. Severus shook his head, speechless.

He had planned to stay aloof and probe later, perhaps over several days. The former spy hadn't expected any of the whipped and stricken fierceness thrown his way.

"How did this get here? Who sent this? How long have you had this!?!"

Severus held up his hands in a silent plea for calm. They were now well outside of his expectations. A letter from the brat might explain soppiness or delirious joy or even simmering malice from choice wizards. From a random Muggle, maybe mild interest.

But this wasn't that. Potter had wrote something devastating. Grace was overwrought. The woman actually began sobbing as Severus looked on, fixated and alarmed.

He had to avert his eyes when the sobbing became wailing, and he peered with jaw clenched at the blue-hued street, in shock, wondering if somebody had died.

"Mum! Something's happening with Zed! Mum!"

Severus stalked from the room and into the kitchen, holding his side. He frowned down at Fred picking himself up from the floor, where the goon had fallen asleep playing disc jockey.

"Go take care of your mother," he snapped. "I'll go down first."

"Aww, what're ya doin' to us, Reverend?" The brother clambered up and stumbled past him. "Every time someone's alone with you, they fuckin' explode."

You're not wrong, Severus admitted. He sidestepped the radio and the scattering of CDs. Soft blues played over Grace's crying, her son's urgent questions, and the visceral crack of Zinnia snapping back into place.

"Do you think she got it?," Harry asked, hugging himself in the unseasonable morning chill. Ginny soothed the frazzled owl with a furrowed brow.

"I don't know," Ginny said, offering the bird a treat. They had both checked and the owl had returned empty-handed. No "Return to Sender," but also, no reply.
"I don't know, Harry. I guess we'll see." He didn't like that answer, but kept quiet, knowing it was all she could say.
August 23rd, 2002: Spinner's End, Cokeworth (morning)

Zed dreamed she froze to death. It felt like birth deferred. She curled up, naked, on the icy cement floor of a black room.

In her feebly conscious state, she knew this was the barren womb in which she'd freeze. It had sat empty and dry for so long it turned to stone, and had lost her in its nerveless hollow, unable to feel her trapped inside, shivering.

The ground leeched the warmth from her skin, numbing some of the searing pain. Zed wanted to cry, and managed a few hot tears rolling across her face, stinging her cut cheeks as they dripped to the floor.

It was dark. If not for the shape of her hands in front of her, she would try to open her eyes. She had hair in her mouth, and coppery blood, so she opened her mouth to taste the open air, although her throat was too hoarse to speak.

She panted on the ground, hoping the rest would come quickly.

She listened to the body around her as she cooled. There thumped a rapid, scrambled heartbeat, like footsteps up above. Elderly creaks, like wooden bones. Down swanned the absent-minded singing of the mother, unaware of Zed or her troubles.

"I've got my loove to keep me warm," the mother sang, the words echoing in the dark.

Zed felt a flutter in her broken body, faded amusement, the smiling afterimage on a TV screen. Her old mum was Billie Holiday? What a strange dream, indeed.

Crack!

Long-boned feet fell into view, bringing with them a blue-white glow. They were swollen and spotted with blood, unexpected for magic feet, but she supposed they'd walked a ways to get here. Billie wouldn't let just any man walk into her body, not unless he was the love of her life.

Billie's beau bent down and called her name.

"Zinnia, speak if you can hear me."

She smiled, tickled. She recognized that voice from the pulpit by the kitchen sink. Billie had married the priest! He didn't seem happy about it though. Zed thought it rude, as she would kill to be Mrs. Holiday.

The dream changed then. This was when Zed figured she died.
The floor gave and grew warm, morphing into a cushion she sagged into. Static fizzled over her body, running along her cuts and bruises and horrible angles. A flannel blanket appeared out of thin air to swaddle her, holding her pieces together.

Then she was lifted, like a patient on a gurney. Snug as a bug, she floated to the side, the pale glow bobbing beside her. She landed on a cot that sprouted out of stuffing and mangled springs.

Her head hit the flat pillow and she started to fade.

The priest muttered bitingly and paced about her new bed. He passed out of her line of sight, and she didn't mind too much, staring contentedly into the corners of the room. The flannel gave off penetrating heat, which overrode some of her pain. Billie turned to Cab Calloway.

The music melted into the priest's complaints. Swearing, a bitter instrument, made the space just familiar enough to keep her calm. Zed had left the rocky womb. She was in the soft ground now.

She was fine. She was dead! There was nothing else to worry about—not the pain, or the sad old mother, not even the cold.

"What hurts," interrogated the priest.

If she could move her hands, she would shoo him away. But he kept on, so she threw him a line, hoping he’d leave her to doze.

"It's dark," she mouthed, any sound she made ravaged with her throat. She then closed her eyes, leaving the priest with those last words. Zed thanked the old blues singers and welcomed the void, its brass horns lulling her to sleep.

She woke to the patter of rain. Zed opened her eyes and saw the candied greens and overcast grey of the backyard. Rain trickled down the panes and puddled in the grass. Brown frogs croaked and splashed through the mud.

This all happened through a curtainless window across the room. The woman herself lay in her cot, by her ashtray and her small radio leaking static, sweating under a flannel cover. She thought she'd just woken up from an extended nap, gone off the medication. She should be in the bare-walled basement, and yet the token window disagreed.

Am I upstairs?, she puzzled.

The view from the kitchen was the only look into the yard that she knew of. She couldn't expect her claustrophobic-but-better-than-prison, subterranean lair to sport a view of the rainy woods. Especially given that said woods were an entire level above her.

If her basement had a window—which, of course, it did not—it would look out into packed dirt and worms, not the treeline.

In trying to sit up and investigate, Zed realized she missed some vital pains. Her ribs didn't ache, and tensed for spasm in her back that never came. She inched up onto the pillows, which fluffed and firm as she moved. Nothing clicked or twinged, or tweaked or rattled.

She was fine?

Zed peeled off the sodden blanket. Humid air rushed out, and she inhaled a cloud of something punchy and vegetal, layered with tea and spices.
Oh, that's the, uh. She'd been greased down with medicinal goo. It mixed with her fever sweats, slicking her skin.

She swiped a finger through the gunk coating her bare arm. Her fingertip skated from her shoulder down to her wrist, leaving a slippery trail behind. Zed oozed slime, like a slug. She brought her finger to the tip of her nose, eyes wide. Wisps of murky green smoke curled off of her sticky hand.

"Don't wipe it off. It's still working."

Hunched in a chair by her feet was Miss Eileen's son, the reverend. He sat in navy track pants and a loose t-shirt with Cokeworth Cal's Devil Spit Brewery emblazoned in Man United's red and white.

He was odd to look at. Given the stringy black hair and spidery fingers, bloodshot black eyes and sunless skin, he favored a paralytic sleep terror. Add the clothes, and he was a demon on the dole.

And so he looked so much like her father, that if not for the fact that he was sober and present—and wore his hair long, which Tobias Snape would call "queer"—then she would've thought him the ghost of two days past.

"...The hell?" Then she grabbed her throat in surprise. It was sore, but not raw. But then, why had she expected it to be?

"What," the man sniffed.

He had his fingers laced over his stomach, and his feet soaking in a tray of what looked like water. But then he crossed a leg, and the clear stuff dripped off his knobby toes like thin jelly. She recognized it: essence of whatever. It sizzled and smoked like the gunk coating her skin.

Opening his hands, the man held a pair of tiny tweezers that he took to his steaming soles. He worked expeditiously, tweezing jagged splinters and brushing them to the floor.

"Did…," she trailed off, looking at her hands. They were lined with scars. New scars criss crossed her palms and speckled her fingers.

She ran her gaze up her arms. Streaked with sheen and wet flannel fuzz, the skin on her arms curved around the sinew underneath. Tendons wiggled and snapped taut, pulling her joints into place. She grunted, disturbed.

Her stitches were gone. Her wounds, the vicious bite marks, were all healed. Instead of scabbed and irritated, her forearms were plump and smooth save for four pearlescent, keloid scars—four shiny, crescent moons.

"Hold on," Zed gawked at the healer skin, the rainy woods, and Reverend tweezing his feet. "Am I...is this a seizure? Or a coma, or…? Is this real?"

He quirked an eyebrow at her, and pulled his other foot from the tray. This left him crouched on the chair like a gargoyle.

"Yes, it's real," he answered lowly, starting on his other foot. "But it won't feel like it. I suspect this day won't grow any saner, for either of us." The last few words were muttered.

"So this's weird to you, too?", she huffed, squeezing her biceps, groping for pains. "Double Alice, no rabbit?"

"Hm," was his only reply.
"Ah, well. There ya go talkin' my ear off."

Zed ran her hands down her outfit, trying to wipe off the grease, and frowned, forehead wrinkling. A flannel nightgown tented around her body, not at all like the sweatsuit she fell asleep in. It more resembled the blanket thrown over her, almost exactly in fact, except shorter and with arm holes.

Whoever built this rabbit hole was far from a fashion luminary.

Her back went up, then, because again, she didn't fall asleep in a nightgown. Meaning, if this was real life, then she'd been stripped when out cold.

"Oi!" Zed ripped off the sheet, gritting her teeth, fist balled in the ugly gown. When she swung her feet off the bed, a breeze wafted up the gown, telling her she was bare-arsed underneath.

She saw red. "I'll beat your arse, sicko!"

The man reared back, looking her up and down like she'd lost it.

"Are you mad, woman?"

"You fuckin' touched me! While I slept!? And we're siblings, you pervert!?"

"What? I never." He caught her meaning and shuddered. "Eugh! It's always something with you Muggles! If you must learn of it this way—"

He rummaged in his shirt and had to dodge her glancing swipe at his head. "Stop it, brutish idiot! Look!"

He brandished a stick of dark wood with a flourish—a wand, probably from some hocus altar. Then swished and twirled it, then jabbed it at his own get-up.

She jumped back, ducking her head and protecting her middle, waiting for the sharp stab. Then she unfolded, gobsmacked. She stared open-mouthed at his clothes through her mussed hair. They transformed in a shower of sparks, like Cinderella, if she were a revolted middle-aged man.

Suddenly, the reverend sat before her in a black-and-white tuxedo, complete with top hat and bow tie.

His face still screwed in disgust, he swished at himself again, and the tuxedo morphed into a black floor-length robe, then a maroon monk's cowl, then a fur coat, then a flannel nightshirt to match her own.

Finally it turned back to the beer tee and joggers, and Rev threw his arms over his chest with a positively filthy scowl.

"Unthinkable, the shit you lot come up with," he aggrieved. "I never laid a hand on you, nor would I! Atrocious. Makes me wonder what you all have gone through to spew such filth.

"If you're looking for the clothes you wore yesterday, you've already torn them to shreds. I can't tell them from the other trash in this room, or else I'd attempt to mend them. I had to make do to get you decent."

He motioned around the room with a long hand. Zed looked and then staggered back, fists still raised, head spinning.

This…She registered the destruction surrounding her. The lived-in corner, with the bed, table, and
chair, was a bit of order in a stretch of ruined scrap metal, torn fabric, stuffing, and rubber. Someone had shoved the hill of luggage and half the staircase through a shredder, and then chewed on the shreds.

Huge gashes were taken out of the cement walls, exposing crusty rebar. Stains splattered the ceiling and scored walls. One corner reeked of pure animal musk.

"GET HER OUT!"

Zed stumbled toward the cot, missed it, and spilled onto the trash-littered floor. And then, heightening her shock, when her back twinged, a nerve wriggled up her spine and brought new feeling rushing into her legs.

She hadn't realized she couldn't feel her toes until they were intact and tingling, like she'd grown then anew.

"No—!," she gasped. A condensed, digital concerto cut her off with an oblivious tune.

Reverend grimaced and dug in his pockets, yanking out a chirping Nokia on the third ring.

"Blasted thing." He glared at the boxy phone, and shook it. "Quiet!"

He stabbed at the buttons with a rigid middle finger. The toy piano played over and over until there sounded a loud beep. Then Gracie's voice launched out of the low quality speaker.

"...ve magic but can't figure out the bloody phone—ey! Why ain't ya pickin' up?! How's she, is she awake? Is she okay?"

"Mum!" Zed cried, clinging to the first truly familiar thing since waking. "What happened?"

"Zeddie!" Her mother called, relieved. Then there was some scuffling on the line, and she heard her brother's shout.

"Zed! You had us scared shitless! It never ends wiff ya! You only said the nurse flipped out on ya in prison, crazy. You ain't said she were rabid!"

She wiped the sweat and slime off her legs off her nightgown, and squinted at Rev.

"I have rabies?," the befuddled woman probed. "I thought it was, like, epilepsy." He shook his head, annoyed, and started to speak.

Then she blinked and yelled back at the phone. "Wait, forget that! Am I in a dream or another dimension or limbo or summit, 'cuz Rev just pulled some shit outta his hat, and I can't make sense of—."

"Yeah, no, he's a wizard or whatever. Who cares. But Laney—nah, nah, but you, actually!"

"Wizard! Heh, and you don't mean the vegan, worship the earth type, probably?"

She heard a struggle, and her mother's voice returned, persistent. "No, sweets, the Merlin type, the pointy hat, full Fantasia, dancing brooms type. Wizard wizard. From Lena's side."

Rev, deciding to preen, zapped this and that bit of rubbish to make them float or vanish. Zed waved impatiently for the phone. Showing some restraint, he didn't magic the Nokia. He just dropped it into her upturned palm with a smirk.
She rolled her eyes, and ended up following a suitcase wheel as it rolled across the ceiling. She brought the phone to her face, grumbling, "Bloody show-off."

"Tell her!" Fox pestered their mother in the background. "Zed, the nurse!"

"Yeah, she had rabies, I heard. So do I need a shot? Is that what happened to, uh." She looked around the room again, and at her new scars, muttering into the speaker. "Everything? That doesn't seem likely but."

"No—okay, Freddy, relax—alright, so Zeddie, love." Zed distrusted how softly Gracie spoke to her. The old biker wasn't known for her delicacy. That every sentence practically cooed killed any confidence in incoming good news. "Okay, this's gonna get wild for a second. See how wizards are real? How magic's real?"

Zed eyed the wizard present, who'd grown bored with posturing and simply watched her expressions, one leg bouncing impatiently, wand stashed back into his shirt.

"Yeah, I see." That was wild enough, she felt. But it laid smoother over her worldview than an extended dream or a psychotic break.

Or rather, it fit better into her idea of herself that real magic existed. Zed didn't imagine herself the type to lose touch with reality. Sure, anybody could, and so she'd suspected, what with the strange horror of her attack, that prison might have robbed her of some sanity. And that thought might've—no. It definitely frightened her.

But if game changing magic was real and related to that day at all...on second thought, that didn't comfort her.

How could she keep tabs on reality if wizards ran around bending it?

"Yeah, okay, wizards are real. I'm following," she frowned into the pause.

"Right, and they got things: all types of curses and creatures. So...one of them is werewolves. It's just like we know them, y'know. They turn on the full moon, they go after people, they wake up and don't remember anything—."

Zed broke out into a sweat. Her father's son watched her from his chair, looking constipated. She flipped him off on principle, for being wizard mostly, and again for being in her face.

"Ah, yes, the gratitude of Muggles," the wizard sneered.

"I don't know what that means, but shut up. I'm on the phone." She nodded at her mother, even though the woman couldn't see it. "Yeah, mhm, werewolves. Werewolves are r... are real..."

"Christ, what...what are you?"

Werewolves. Zed's insides turned to the smoking jelly. The curtain crashing down, the doctor screaming, the nurse hulking out of her uniform—the yellow eyes, unshakeable, forever branded behind the prisoner's eyelids, following her home, chasing her into her dreams.

Zed didn't like that werewolves existed, too. But she tried to calm herself and restrain the rabbit brain urging her to run.

*That thing was inside Odd-Daughters, she reminded herself firmly. You got away. You're safe.*
"Yeah, okay. The nurse was a werewolf, okay. I can see that. And?"

"And? Baby, she bit you." Zed went stiff.

"She bit you."

Werewolves.

"What are you?"

Werewolf.

"Hey, something's wrong! You fucking bastards! Help me!"

Right, she bit me, she thought, looking at one scar hugging her wrist. It was perforated, but not with straight lines like from flat, human teeth. The islands making her moon were pointed, jagged tears, now obviously misshapen without the scabs and sutures.

"GET HER OOOOUT!"

"I, um." Her eyes were stuck on the reverend. She didn't mean to look at him. She had aimed for the window, but trailed off around his chin, where his scowl hovered over the thick scars on his neck.

She stared, seeing the crescent moons up and down her arms, and smelling the musty corner, and sweat, and medicinal herbs. There was rustling and a sucking of teeth, and she looked up, in a daze. The wizard stood over her, and offered his hand.

Zed only looked at it, unsure of what he could possibly be asking for. Hadn't he heard? She was—.

"Quit crying and get off the floor," he said harshly. "I've had quite enough of this family's blubbering."

"Hey, don't be a dick, Rev!," barked her little brother through the phone. She looked up at the wizard's gaunt face. He scowled, but kept offering his hand.

"She's being ridiculous. She doesn't even know what it means to be a werewolf, having only just been made aware of their existence. Up! Off the floor! I'll not have you wallowing in self-pity like the rest of your kind."

"You've met other werewolves?" Zed asked, smearing an arm across her face. She supposed she had shed a few tears unintentionally, and cleaned up bitterly. "Am I really—?"

"I have. You are." His black eyes bore down on her and his tone was absolute.

From this angle, it was almost like talking to Fox on the street outside Failsworth. The older man was similarly pissed and fearsome, and while she wasn't afraid of him, someone was. So, as he glared Zed's way, it felt like the glare passed through her to bite the problem dogging her.

She didn't expect that comfort. So, she climbed off the floor herself, determined never to mention it to the wizard's face. "Fine, and there's no question? I'm just a werewolf now?"

He seemed like despite himself, Rev was impressed. "You all have taken this remarkably well. Your mother also—."

"Yeah, she's like that. And well, I could reject the whole idea," she asserted, "since I don't
remember much. Maybe later I will, dunno. But, I mean."

She gestured at the ruined corners of the room, and her healed arm, and his disheveled appearance.

"Somethin' happened and it weren't a seizure."

"Oh, last night, Zed! Swear on Nan's grave, I saw it myself."

Fox nattered, filling the awkward silence. "You went full-on gigantic wolf! And first I thought it couldn't be you, what with you bein' maybe five-seven tops and a little scrawny, and this thing bein' an eight foot long, chest height, actual fuckin' beast of the wild.

"But then it butchered Gloomy Sunday and I knew it was you, since ya can't never sing for shit."

Gracie said something far off and then repeated it closer to the receiver. "Be nice to her. She's cursed."

"Nah, mum, she's tone deaf. Plus, I can poke fun. She nearly killed us! It's my right!"

"I did all that?" She looked to Rev, who did not seem amused. This was obviously not off par for him. However, a cold resentment came through that sobered her lick of humor. "Ah, 'kay. That bad, eh?"

"I must impress upon you—all of you—how dangerous you've now become. If I'd not been here last night, complications notwithstanding, you all would have died horrendous deaths, as would have most of this neighborhood.

"I've seen the damage an untreated werewolf can do. Zinnia would have escaped the basement, mauled everyone in this house, and then gone on to the next one, stalking the night, until she devoured the whole street. Then, come dawn, the trauma of your transformation back to human would've ultimately killed you, leaving you broken on the road."


"This isn't a laughing matter," the wizard insisted, glaring at the phone. "It's not reasonable to rely on my presence to keep you alive. My being in England at all is subject to change with nary a moment's notice."

"Where're you goin'? Wait, yeah, where'd you even come from?" Fox probed. "None of this started 'til you showed up."

"A month ago, I wasn't even in Britain. She was attacked weeks before I ever arrived, correct?" He addressed her brother, but stared at Zed.

"...Yeah," she admitted. So, if not for the mysterious magic, Zed and her family would be dead?

"Yeah, Fox, I dunno his deal either, but I'd already been hurt. But then what's up? Why come if you're just gonna leave again?"

"I cannot control the circumstances of my staying or going beyond remaining hidden from other witches and wizards. I had no way to know you all had taken root. My original plans were to heal here, gather intel, replenish my resources, and relocate somewhere else.

"And no, I will not tell you why or where to."

"Well, you'll have to explain somethin'," Gracie pressed. She sounded personally insulted. "The
only options you gave me was some potion and lockin' her up. And it sounds like without a magic expert we can't do either.

"So if you're just gonna say all this and then leave anyway, I deserve to know when and, yeah, why!"

"Despite what you may think," the wizard replied cuttingly, "I don't owe you or your family anything! You have my house and have had a great deal of my help outside of what was necessary for my own survival."

"May I remind you," he relayed in a sinister tone, "if I'd left your daughter down here, this werewolf issue would've resolved itself."

"Y—you bastard!," Fox cursed, winded.

"Funny, coming from you," the wizard said drolly, receding into apparent indifference.

Now, Zed had watched him talk. She saw him fidget, saw him tense and look away. He held her glare when he said he owed them nothing, and when he alluded to leaving her to die. However, he averted his eyes in the middle, when he ranted about already doing more than his part.

_He wants to stay_, she knew with clear certainty. She perhaps knew this better than the man did himself.

Rev had an easy point. He didn't owe them help or explanations. If he needed to leave, he would. She had no qualms about accepting that ruthless logic. But in several ways, he already should've taken off. Zed alone had given him a grand welcome, her bloody Spinnerette best. Yet he stayed and said so as if expecting thanks.

But that was only a slip of the tongue. He was making a point he barely understood.

Because thanks? From them? It didn't take long to see it wasn't coming. They were more the type to complain he hadn't acted sooner. The man went out of his way, and why? In Zed's mind, because he wanted to.

Zed had yet to have an issue understanding where his head was. She'd been there, she knew that place. It was survival brain at war with humanity, a trouble she had herself. And sure, words came out twisted, but they meant the same. It might've been a risk to think she knew him when she didn't.

But something about him told her he talked to keep from listening. He picked fights to avoid team playing. She got that.

"Are the ones after you that scary, Reverend?," she needled him, grinning. Her half-brother looked at her askance, offended by the suggestion he was afraid.

"Please," he scoffed. "The man wants my head on a pike, but from context clues alone, I can tell he's a buffoon. You've done considerably more harm than him so far.

"Regardless, if he comes to this house, you'd prefer that I leave than stand and fight. Although, he'd have lost the element of surprise this time—."

"Nearly gotcha last time, huh?"

"I—!", Rev thinned his lips, jaw clenching. He then sniffed sharply and defended, "I was
negligent. It won't happen again, surely."

"Good, so yer stayin'," her mother declared, words a little fuzzy from poor reception. The wizard began to protest, but her mother spoke over him, closing the book on that.

"Dunno why ya act cagey if you can take him, Severus. S'waste of everyone's bloody time. Mind, once Laney is squared away, we'll have us a chat, me and you, about what shit luck you brought with ya. Once my youngest is all good."

Fox grumbled something intelligible that the speaker couldn't catch. "Whatever. What about the potion?"

"Yeah, the potion," Zed prodded, sitting on her bed and tossing aside the damp blanket. She eyed the wizard, who stared off with furrowed brow into the middle distance.

"Hey, can you dry this?," she asked him, plucking the flannel. "Like, with magic?"

"Hm? No," he said, not even looking at her, opting instead to gaze confusedly out the window, into the woods. The last exchange seemed to have thrown him for a loop.

Zed huffed and flipped the flannel to the dry side. She then climbed back into bed with the phone in hand. She spared one glance at the bemused older man with his chin on his palm and snorted.

"What," asked Fox. "Why's he quiet?"

"Mum caught him with the left. Y'know how she does. He's tryna work it out now."

"Ah, yeah. Wild. I guess we're keepin' him."

Zed cackled, amused by Fox's put upon sigh. "I guess!"

Then she listened to the rain patter before asking the question nagging her: "By the way, why the bloody hell are we on the phone? Where are ya?"

"Upstairs, by Mum's room. She's callin' my cell with hers," Fox's voice lowered. "Can't get in the basement, since the door's kinda locked, wizardly speakin'."

"Who cares? Use magic, unlock it."

"Oh, wow!" He gasped sarcastically and then scoffed. "We're tryin', genius. But Rev magicked it up, down, and doggy style."

"Ew."

"Took it to dinner, and stayed for breakfast. Bought it a ring, proposed at dawn. Shit won't budge."

She stared at the man standing in the basement, in the absence of an open door and a staircase. Her silence was telling.

"I mean," Fox went on, "He can like teleport in and outta the basement. He stayed down there with you, so we can call. But he said us non-magic types don't 'twist' right to go with, and I do not like how he says it.

"But don't worry, you ain't trapped! Laney can fix it, after we can get her to, um, step a toe in the kitchen again."
Zed lifted her eyebrows at the speaker. "Yo, she's just some ten-year-old. What's she supposed to do?"

August 23rd, 2002: Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Westminster

Harry needed an hour of head scratches and two swiftly summoned mice to convince the post owl to perch.

The borrowed bird seemed to regret being on loan to him from Hermione. Even the scratch of quill on parchment sent it into a screeching fit. It had finally calmed down some after copious apologies, only to see the new letter in the human's hand and bristle, betrayed.

"Please!," Harry sputtered, protecting his face, spitting out feathers. "One more, I promise! Just one —argh!"

The barn owl slapped him with a heavy wing and hissed. It nipped his thumb, needle-sharp beak pinching the quick. Harry yelped, dropping the letter, which fluttered to the carpet, landing address side down.

The Boy-Who-Lived gave up and abandoned the parlor, sucking his hurt finger. He met Ginny as she came down the stairs. She greeted him, tucking a shrunken chest into the pocket of her denim jacket.

"You'll be okay for the weekend?," he asked, kissing the witch on the cheek. She gave him a half-smile and brushed a bit of down from his mouth.

"I was about to ask you that. I'll be back on Monday, after I set up my bunk at the camp. Then we can have the weekends."

Ginny looked him over, biting her lip. Harry felt a little sick to see her go. However, he put on a brave face, not wanting her to worry.

It nearing the end of August, the Chaser would attend the Harpies' fall training camp in Wales. The team had to prepare for the start of the regional playoff season come spring. Although Ginny would return to Grimmauld Place in her off-time, once fall frosted over, she'd begin playing for the pre-season.

It worked out this year. Despite the Harpies beating the local favorite, Welsh National Quidditch team, Wales didn't qualify for the Quidditch World Cup, starting the off-season in June. That gave the couple two months of regular domesticity to enjoy.

Now Harry's girlfriend was effectively moving out till the next summer. Leaving Harry alone for the foreseeable future except for weekends and the occasional holiday.

"Not to force it, but I can commute from London," Ginny offered, hesitating at the door. He almost wished she would stop trying to fix it and just walk out, so he could start missing her in private.

"You don't need to tire yourself out like that," he protested half-heartedly. "Plus I wouldn't pull you away from your team. C'mon, don't worry so much. You're starting to make me feel pitiful."

Harry suddenly found himself with an armful of chuckling ginger. He tugged in the end of her rough braid, grateful if embarrassed.

"Yeah, yes," he mumbled. He rubbed her back, playing at consolation, droning on, "I know, such a loss. You'll miss out on all my tantrums and secrets and my sordid birth drama. And for what, to play professional Quidditch on your dream team? You'll be crying with boredom, poor thing."
Ginny pecked the nape of his neck, visible over his shirt collar. Harry wobbled a bit internally, very nearly asking her to stay. But he held on to his resolve, grinned as carelessly as he could.

She peered into the parlor, perhaps memorizing the house before she left. She then excused herself and returned, grinning, giving him a last, lasting hug.

Harry pulled himself together again and snapped open the front door. He posed like a footman, an arm and closed fist resting on the small of his back, and presented her the stoop.

"Chaser Weasley," he saluted in posh tones. "Safest travels."

"Oh, well, this I like," the redhead smirked back, before smoothing her expression into one of regal regard. Her impression of aristocracy was spot on from years of mocking the ton. She tilted her freckled chin up in the air, looking down her nose at the lowly common street. "I will be off then, Mr. Potter. Mind the manor in my absence."

Harry bowed at the waist in mock deference. His parting quip was cut short, however, by Ginny freezing in the doorway.

"Harry...are you expecting company?"

He lifted his head, confused, and turned to the street. Then he too froze. Across the street, attempting to go unnoticed, a slim figure stood facing their house in the rain.

The man was still against the milling pedestrians, eyes and body obscured by dark, reflective sunglasses and head to toe black. The figure grilled the seam between Numbers Eleven and Thirteen, hands hidden in trench pockets. He wasn't Muggle, couldn't be. Despite the trickle of rain, he didn't carry an umbrella and yet, looked perfectly dry.

The stranger nodded and undonned his black hat, revealing a sheen of platinum blonde hair.

"Is that Malfoy?," Harry asked, uneasy. "What is he doing here?"

Ginny's rigid expression iced over into cold vigilance. "I don't like this. Even if the charms aren't air tight, he shouldn't know that we're here."

"It's a Black property. He might've been told the address by his mum," he tried, straightening up easing his wand from his back pocket. Harry stepped out onto his stoop in his slippers, wand out, stomach leaden. "Still. You should go. I've got this."

"Vetoed," she bit out, taking her own wand in hand. "I'm not abandoning you to a fight."

"It probably isn't—a fight, I mean," Harry reasoned, squinting through the poor weather. Malfoy seemed to grow impatient, fists now clenched at his sides, pacing a square of pavement. Harry couldn't call the other wizard menacing, beyond the general bad omen of finding him practically at his doorstep. "Why give himself away like this?"

"A trick," the Weasley girl asserted. Harry rubbed his forehead, doubtful.

It was easy to forget Ginny was just as distrusting and paranoid as Ron. She had a knack for playing it off that she clearly wouldn't employ when faced with Draco Malfoy.

Harry measured his gut feeling and committed to it. He padded down the front walk and through the wrought iron gate. Ginny protested behind him and he shouted back an apology, forging ahead. He begged a surprised mother's pardon—since from her perspective, he must've phased out of thin
"Oi!," Harry yelled across the street, one hand cupped around his mouth. His voice echoed over traffic and carried up to the neighbors' apartments, drawing curious onlookers to their drapes.

In no time, Malfoy pulled off his sunglasses, hanging them on his collar. He circumnavigated walkers, puddles, and cars, approaching the curb before Number Twelve with a stiff saunter.

"Merlin, Potter!," Malfoy cursed, walking up to him, wrinkling his nose. Once eye to eye, the pureblood scion brushed invisible dirt from his lapel, pointy chin hoisted high. "I see you haven't changed much. You've still no sense of subtlety."

"Because standing and staring creepily in the rain is so inconspicuous. You're right, I'll take note." Harry smiled humorlessly, showing his wand without aiming, a cautious courtesy. "Why are you here?"

"Can we take this off the street? Behind closed doors, perhaps?" He sounded more like his father than the prat he knew from school. Harry thanked the lack of "Potty"s and "Scarhead"s for that.

"No," he retorted, maybe more firmly for being reminding of Lucius Malfoy. "What do you want."

Malfoy sighed and reached into his robes, holding up a hand to pause Harry's nervous twitch. "Relax, Potter. I'm only retrieving a letter. I come here on my mother's behalf."

He heard the gate hinges squeak behind him. Both wizards turned to Ginny, who had her wand trained on Malfoy's pretentiously coiffed head.

"She's got no business with Harry," Ginny said staunchly. "Stuff your letter and slink on home."

Malfoy's hackles rose. Harry stepped between the two, unsure of who needed warning or protection. He gave the other wizard the benefit of belief, regardless, and offered his palm.

"Fine, hand over whatever letter and go, Malfoy. I've got the rest of my day to be getting on with." Hopefully, they could come to a quick understanding and go their separate ways.

Malfoy gave him a condescending scan from his unwashed face down to his house shoes. "Ah, yes, of course. Clearly the Golden Boy has a packed schedule. Thank you so much for your precious time."

"You're welcome," he rebutted, wiggling his letterless fingers. With an eye roll, Harry's schoolyard rival slid a lightly perfumed letter into his hand. The translucent white vellum envelope was sealed in brushed silver wax. Harry examined his name penned in cursive, and flipped it over. The seal boasted the monogram "NB" wrapped in brambles in its middle center.

The whole affair had been scented with flowers, same as his previous missives from one Narcissa Malfoy neè Black. Through this letter specifically, he could see the folded shape of a letter, and an additional card of thick, cream stock. The latter resembled a calling card, inscribed with violet in.

The card was new. From what he could read, it only had Malfoy's mother's name, nothing else. He wondered if Mrs. Malfoy thought she needed to impress him, or if it was just her habit to be posh. Perhaps asking a Malfoy to tone it down was asking a fish not to swim.

"Or a scorpion not to sting," Harry thought, eyeing Malfoy over his mother's letter. The other wizard looked oddly fazed by his scrutiny.
Harry worked open the envelope and read the letter, right there in front of his house.

"Honestly, Potter, can we please move this inside?" Malfoy checked the bustling street around them, so pale as to appear translucent himself.

"You didn't seem nervous standing out here a second ago," Harry pointed out, eyes landing on the first line of the letter. "For Christ knows how long. Why couldn't she just send an owl? She's managed before."

"It could be she's afraid to get caught plotting," accused Ginny, tightening her grip on her wand. Her arm didn't seem to tire from being held taut for so many minutes.

She didn't seem to pick up on Harry's slip about writing with Mrs. Malfoy at least once prior. Then again, his girlfriend was a master of her own expressions. While there was no visible reaction now, once they were alone again, Malfoy dispatched, it might be a different story.

"This isn't a plot, at least not on our part. Quite the opposite, this time," said ferrety blond explained with a surprising sliver of self-awareness. His grey eyes fell slab-like on Harry's own, defiantly curious gaze.

"We have reason to believe that an owl could be intercepted. Some...events have transpired that will be of interest to your people. And for security's sake, I'd rather speak of them behind private wards."

Malfoy then grimaced at Ginny's stony regard. "Your bodyguard needn't take eyes off me, Potter, if that's a nonnegotiable."

"It is," Harry conceded. He glanced down at the letter, which despite its luxurious delicacy, seemed to weigh down his hand. Then, shaking his head at his own audacity, he gave Malfoy his back to open the gates for them all.

"Alright, Malfoy, come in."

He caught Ginny's quick gasp and looked to her, apologetic. She glared, clutching her jacket pocket, and he couldn't blame her. She had somewhere to be, and Harry really should have sent Malfoy away.

I'll have to tell her about Mrs. Malfoy and Snape. Harry's heart sank. He suddenly wished that he'd told the witch about the first letter the moment he'd gotten it.

Too late now, he reasoned. The silent trio trudged into Grimmauld Place, Malfoy's eyes widening as the building sprung into view before him. They walked up the path as it formed underfoot, and passed under the doorway through the regular shower of security magic.

"It's quiet...." Harry peeked at Malfoy, who cleared his throat upon realizing he'd spoken out loud.

"You've never been here before, right?," he asked the pureblood. Malfoy fiddled with his cufflinks, white cheeks growing pink.

"It stood empty before it ended up in your hands through Sirius Black," Malfoy explained, eyes narrowed, color still high on his cheeks. "As I'm sure you know, my mother's family has been whittled down to herself and her Muggle-loving sister—."

"Careful," the half-blood warned. He led them into the parlor and stopped a few paces in. Ginny stuck to Malfoy's side, tapping her wand with tried patience against her leg.
"I only mean—yes, I've never visited the Black home," backtracked Malfoy. He then eyed his reflection in an empty display case, but apparently found nothing worth fixing. He stood duochromatic, pale hands lost in his robes. "Why is it so spartan? I'd always thought the house full of curiosities, for lack of a better—." 

"We binned it," Ginny snapped, crossing her arms, her braid tossed angrily over a shoulder. Malfoy gaped at her, and asked if she was joking. She grinned with a fierce, opportunistic joy. "As soon as my family moved in, we swept the house top to bottom and tossed all the Dark junk we could get our hands on."

"Must she be here, Potter, really!," Malfoy said, unbalanced by Ginny's viciousness. "Well, the Malfoys have put her through a lot, then Bill and Greyback."

"Yes," he insisted again, but sent Ginny a staying glance. Regardless of how they felt, he'd let Malfoy in. They could at least act civil until he left. The witch gave a tactical shrug and chose that moment to sit on a quilted cushion settee. The pair rarely used it except to pile coats on. But from it, she could watch the room with gravid displeasure. Flustered, Malfoy retreated to Harry's other side, to lean against the ornate mantle. Harry was sure the Slytherin wouldn't call it running away, despite it being just that. "So," Malfoy started uncomfortably, gesturing to the grate. "Shall we summon my mother and have this over?"

"What?," Ginny pressed, alarmed. "No! We won't give you permanent access to our Floo, Malfoy! Not with your track record!"

"Gin, please," Harry coaxed. "There were a lot of, erm," he looked over Malfoy's tense form and returned to Ginny, "circumstances back then. Even I'd be hard pressed. "But she's right, Malfoy. I owe your mother my life, but I won't just open my Floo to the Malfoy Manor, even for her. Does she need to be here for this, if she's sent you?"

"Even I don't know what she means to say, Potter. She's become rather enigmatic in her...self-isolation. As such, she refuses to travel far outside the Manor grounds, which is why you found me outside and not my mother herself."

"Of course, we aren't asking for a permanent Floo connection, hence the calling card. It is only for a one time use."

Malfoy's spine could have been wood and iron, he stood so straight. He again reminded Harry of his Death Eater father, and the blond's own sordid history. It made him hard to defend, but not impossible. He also recalled the crying boy in the Myrtle's bathroom, and stepped back into his choice to believe him. Harry shook the card from the vellum envelope, looking it over once more. Again, the front had Narcissa Malfoy's name. There were user instructions on the back in more cursive, which upon
closer inspection, looked more processed than handwritten:

1. The host must light their Floo accessible fireplace.

2. Burn the calling card in the grate, thus welcoming the guest into your home for one-time only.

3. The Calling fire will burn violet until the time of the guest's departure.

4. CAUTION: Only the prewritten guest printed on this card's face may travel via this calling. Any persons not written on the card will be engulfed in flame. Please use as instructed to avoid grievous injury.

He'd never seen a card like it before. Harry shared a wordless exchange with Ginny. The ginger chanted her head to say she'd heard of calling cards but never seen on used. Harry sighed and shrugged, resigned to a leap of tentative faith.

He waved his wand to light the fireplace with an eager whoosh. Malfoy stepped away, protecting his robe sleeves. Snorting, the Boy-Who-Lived left the couch and cautiously approached the Floo. He plucked the edge of the card, breathing deeply, before flicking it into the flames.

As promised, the fire ignited in stunning purple hues. The Floo dinged twice, as if announcing a visitor, Then, after a soft pause, an even, aristocratic mezzo-soprano rose through the parlor.

"Mr. Potter," Mrs. Malfoy greeted with a polite hum, "thank you for accepting my request for an invitation. I hope you will pardon the intrusion, but it is a matter of the utmost importance."

Harry found himself getting nervous at the measured address. He hadn't heard the woman's voice since her and her son's trials years earlier. Even then, they had not spoken directly to one another. Only in the couple letters had he met the woman's more respectful tones—not threatening nor desperate. No forbidden woods here, or so he hoped.

The Malfoy son extended a hand toward the grate, bowing some to do it. A slender hand passed out of the flames and took it. A heeled boot stepped through the fire in a swirl of jewel toned sparks. Purple embers glowed under the cloud grey robes that followed.

Gradually, the Floo revealed the willowy form of Narcissa Malfoy. Her nearly white piled atop her head, framing a cool, unsmiling face. She retained the same Black features as Sirius and Tonks, and her polarized sisters. The familiar, heart-shaped face, still unlined by wrinkles, looked about the room with mild interest.

"You've made changes," she intoned. Her opaque assessment started and stopped with that. "I see Miss Weasley will be joining us?"

"Yes, I will," Ginny nodded, resolute and calm. The hard lines of her body softened some. "And thank you for saving Harry's life during the Final Battle. Since you're here now, I should give you my gratitude."

"Hmm. Yes, well. It has been received."

It gave Harry a wobbly turn to see another Black return to Grimmauld Place. The inescapable, internal nagging whispered that he didn't belong. He worried almost reflexively that the true Blacks present would set off some unknown ward and eject him from the house.

But of course, nothing happened. Narcissa Malfoy flicked soot from her bodice and gave Harry the full brunt of her clear, dawn blue eyes. Harry missed his godfather terribly, and let it pass.
"Shall we sit for tea?," suggested the blue blood.

"Will this take long?," Harry answered, then winced, hearing how rude he sounded.

Mrs. Malfoy frowned but didn't chastise. Instead, she perched on a nearby loveseat, smoothing her skirts and crossing her legs at the ankle. Her son stood by its arm, flushing at the slight to his mother. "I suppose not. I can be brief."

"Although, Mr. Potter. I'm unsure of how much your young woman knows. I wouldn't wish to be expository."

"Is it about Snape?," Ginny asked, fielding the question herself. Narcissa held a hand to her mouth then, almost girlishly.

"How forward a Weasley girl can be. That would be the Prewett in you, I suspect. Brash, the lot of you, but refreshing."

"Yeah, maybe…," Harry hedged, watching the two women, one rough-hewn and the other like marble.

"I'll reach my point and be on my way," Mrs. Malfoy assured. She then turned to a silk purse hanging from her wrist, and reached inside. There was a tinkle of glass and out she pulled a vial of silvery fluid—a memory.

"Please have your connections with the Aurors review this memory of yesterday afternoon," the woman requested, handing Harry the vial. "An intruder to Malfoy Manor left a rather poignant message via arson. Effective if tactless, it is likely the attack was carried out by an unapprehended Dark Lord sympathizer. They are statedly unhappy with the Malfoy position in the final hours of the War."

"How do you know it was a Death Eater?," inquired Harry. He received two unyielding stares from the loveseat. "I only mean, I thought all the Voldemort sympathizers were either dead or arrested. Lestrange and the Carrows were the last of them."

"Hmm, one would think," smiled Mrs. Malfoy. It was not a nurturing expression.

"They burned 'traitors' into the Manor grounds," Malfoy pressed, lip curling. "I think we'd know when we're being targeted."

"I say this to say," the cold woman continued, silencing her bothered son, "this person not only sought to inconvenience my family. I believe Severus," and at this, she glanced quickly to Ginny and back, "is also being hunted.

"He has fled his last known address. Likely, if he escaped this person as such, they will keep their frustrations on us until they can retake their pursuit of him."

"Why not report this yourself?," Harry asked. He stood, gripping the chilled glass containing the memory. "If you're asking for protection from the Ministry—."

Mrs. Malfoy coughed while her son scoffed.

"Mr. Potter, I don't fear for my household. I want the Aurors to finish the job they started, so that I might attend to my own business with Severus uninterrupted.

"Should he be killed before I meet with him, I will be—well, incensed is a kinder word."
With this, she sighed lightly and rearranged the lay of her robes. It was the closest he'd ever seen the woman to fidgeting, including before the Wizengamot. For some reason, this communicated a deeper ire than Harry felt he should be privy to.

"That being said, I feel you should know: that man is likely back in England, should you wish to avoid him. To preserve his life until I've had my time, I ask that you not write to him or myself until the attacker is captured. We wouldn't want an owl being tracked to his location."

Harry started to nod, then stopped, horrified.

"Of course, Potter," he berated himself, "right before you're told not to send him letters, it's the one time in four years you mean to send two."

But then, a smaller thought protested, what about…

"Uh, yeah, sure," Harry agreed, shoulders rounded. He looked to Ginny, who stared back with both brows raised.

"Well, then, I suppose that is all." Mrs. Malfoy rose from her chair gracefully, and wafted toward the fireplace. The Floo still flickered purple as she lifted a foot inside. "Do excuse my rushing off, but I've a spy to catch. Best to both of you."

And like that, she called for Malfoy Manor and spun away in the flames. Draco Malfoy nodded to Harry curtly and slid a sidelong sneer Ginny's way. Without another word, he turned on his heel and Disapparated with an air-splitting crack.

Harry and Ginny shared a moment of silence to process what had just transpired. Then Harry slowly leaned down to the carpet. He felt around for the letter to Snape he'd left there minutes before. He felt around some more when his fingers didn't hit parchment, then looked down, moving his feet and finding nothing.

"Shit!" The wizard dropped to his knees and checked under the couch, sweeping the space with his hands.

There was no letter. He bolted up and scanned the room for the barn owl. It, too, had gone. He looked around and, sure enough, the parlor window was open, whatever owl that had been perched near it long gone into the grey.

He turned to Ginny, mouth agape, and saw her guilty expression. It was true that earlier she had dipped into the parlor and returned. Harry had thought she'd needed to collect herself.

"Did you send it?," he whispered, pointing out to rain-soaked London.

"I was just," she answered, staring into the fireplace, sullen. "Damn. I was just trying to help."

He didn't know how to respond. He stayed kneeling on the carpet, wondering not for the first time, if he was terribly, horribly, life-endingly cursed.
Harry rushed outside and down the front walk, arms waving. He spun in place as he searched the eaves and gutters of the surrounding buildings. Praying to catch a flash of tawny feathers, his heart sank as he realized the owl was well and truly gone.

The frantic young man ran back inside, skidding to a halt in the parlor. "Do you think we can catch it?!

Ginny blinked hard, lips parted, and then caught his meaning. The witch eagerly dug into her jacket, nodding. "You're right! We can! It couldn't have gone far, either."

She threw down her doll-sized chest and enlarged it as it fell. The chest blew up and landed with a trembling slam. Ginny spelled it open and clambered inside, hurrying down its built-in set of stairs. As she talked, the top of her head disappeared past the chest's edge. "I'll go after the owl! You get the memory to the Ministry!"

"No, you've got to get to camp," Harry protested, running up and speaking down into the wizard space. A flight below him, a lamp came on, illuminating his girlfriend hopping around on one foot, shoving the other in flying tights.

"Ginny, wait! I'll do both. I'll catch the letter and, and then I'll go to Ron and the Aurors! But you can't be late."

"I won't, I swear! Accio Cloud Cleaver!"

There sounded a smart pat of lacquered wood hitting dragonhide gloves. Gusts of charged air blew back Harry's fringe, sending adrenaline coursing through him. He wheeled away from the chest at her warning shout.

"Incoming!"

As he fell back, Ginny burst from the chest in an enchanted flurry and a rib-rattling whoomf! She sat astride her playing broom, booted feet planted in the bronze stirrups. Its gleaming, forest green handle narrowed to a backwards slanted edge and flowed into coiled, bronze bristles. It was last year's Nimbus Racing team model, in Holyhead emerald: the ‘01 WX Cloud Cleaver.

Harry loved that broom. He'd seen Ginny hang from it, practicing her sloth grip in the yard. Or whizz by at her scrimmages, ponytail snapping. Or done up spectacularly in matching greens and golds, flying past and dive bombing a Quaffle like a true harpy, half-woman half-hawk.

The Cloud Cleaver had proved itself as the fastest broom on the market. Even the manufacturers failed to outdo themselves. No newer broom could beat it.

Its Chaser offset the glorious piece in understated flying gear. Inspired by Muggle under armour,
Ginny had commissioned her own grey bodysuit, worn under padding and a hooded cloak. Compression bands ringed the limbs for circulation. The thin insulation regulated piercing cold and beating heat.

Those shades of dun, charcoal and hazel grey disguised the technology put into that suit. If Ginny ever leaked that George dabbled in athletic wear, her brother would stay buried in commissions.

Harry burned with envy, even though, if he asked, George would make him one, too. Knowing the inventor, he probably had one ready, made to Harry's measurements. But since turning indoors, Harry only thought to ask and never did.

*God, I miss flying,* he yearned, already feeling the remembered wind take him while taking in Ginny as a whole,

She looked stealthy. With some arrangement, the suit and cloak camouflaged her bright orange hair and the flashy equipment beneath her. Harry had to admit that between them, she looked better suited to catch the owl swiftly and secretly. But he also knew from experience that he was still the faster flyer.

Harry summoned the Potter register. He gave the book both his arms to pop into and thought of the map. The book's responsive spine directed the pages to turn.

*Maybe I spend too much time with this thing,* he wondered. The register answered his wishes like a broom, rising into his hand. A mirror image of the map wavered off of the paper like heat lines, soaking through a blank sheet of parchment conjured over top.

Harry closed the book and held it underarm, a photographic copy of the map floating before him.

"You look great," Harry said, leaning on every word. "But, and no offense, really, I'm still faster than you."

"Are you?," his girlfriend pushed, reseating her feet in the stirrups. The map stayed unmoved between them. "I don't doubt it, honestly, since you're kind of a prodigy. But you haven't flown in months—."

"Hey, I can catch an owl!"

"And," she continued, "no offense back, but I'm a stronger duelist. Which," she smiled ruefully, "is brilliant to say to the guy who defeated Voldemort. But I have more stopping power. So, if I stop the owl and you warn the Aurors—."

"Wait, you're going to duel the owl? I thought you were just gonna take the letter from it?"

Ginny shook her head as she drew up her hood. It shadowed her face, leaving her pink lips talking while her other particular features—brown eyes, fair lashes, freckles—were hidden from view.

"It's best to be prepared, is all. Plus, any Death Eater lashing out at the Malfoys is going to hate Harry Potter on principle. You'd be safer going on foot into a hub of Aurors, than up on a broom going Godric-knows-where by yourself.

"Next plus, you've got the Ministry sway, not me," she shrugged. Ginny hovered over to Harry and came down to eye level. He inched back some of the hood, underneath which she stared at him solemnly.

"I'm sports, Harry, not law and politics. Without you, no Auror will take this seriously. Because if
the Ministry's convinced all the surviving Death Eaters are caught, they'll call this some hoax. Meaning this guy could get away."

"So, we both agree it's real," he clarified, relieved at her quick nod. "Good, because I wasn't sure if you…"

"I don't like the Malfoys, so what," she shrugged again. "I absolutely don't trust them. Most of me thinks this could be a stunt to make them look persecuted, since I know they've done it before.

"But if we waste time trying to convince each other, and there's really a rogue Death Eater out there, people are in danger. Worst case scenario is we get had, and the Prophet coddles the Malfoys again. And if this is all just a bid for sympathy, I trust we can handle it."

Harry gripped the handle of the broom. Then finger-by-finger, he let it go. As she drifted away, she tapped herself on the head, casting a thick Disillusionment. She dipped in while the parlor scenery melted over her, and Ginny kissed him with cold, slick lips, before zipping toward the still open front door.

"I'll hurry back!," she called. "Accio map!"

He gave his blessing as the map fluttered over to the Chaser. However, as the witch took off from the stoop, Harry realized something she'd implied. If a Death Eater was tracking the owl to find Snape, then Ginny might run into them. Depending on a letter to reveal Snape's whereabouts, of course they would attack whoever stopped it.

Pulse racing, he sped out after her, but to her advantage and his despair, she invisibly rode the fastest broom made to date. Harry only managed to see a funny warping of the roof across the way. Then even that vanished, leaving behind a frazzled roost of pigeons in a puff of dust.

"Can't catch her," Harry hummed, both proud and worried, with head sore from spinning. "It's okay. She'll be fine…"

He did the only thing he felt he could then, checked himself for the vial, and Apparated to the Ministry.

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement beheld a woefully familiar sight. Goings on had yet to die down for the Aurors, given the recent bookings of Rodolphus Lestrange and the Carrow twins. The headlines over the last week had a general theme.

What had taken so long to put the last of Voldemort under Azkaban?

"It's lackadaisical justice!," or so espoused the Daily Prophet.

"It took how long it took," defended the lead Aurors, giving the news their backs.

Since the war, a reckoning had come for law enforcement. The department had leagues still until it bleached the stain left by Snatchers. And once the golden hero, Harry Potter, declined to join the Academy, Aurors became even tighter lipped under the call for transparency.

Harry's friends understood he needed the break. To the DMLE, however, this was a major embarrassment, from which they'd yet to recover. The rejection fueled the effigy pyre of public opinion.

Of course, it was nobody's job to trust the Auror Corps, with its mixed past and questionable
methods. And as such, each officer did their part to survive the media frenzy at all of their feet. None did so more than Ronald Bilius Weasley.

"No comment," said Ron, sidling through a wall of voracious reporters.

The vultures flooded Level Two, hollering and hoping to get a quote. Woefully, a few glory hounds amid this year's trainees gave up a morsel of time every so often. So now the papers cropped up every day like carrion birds to pick at all their bones. Aurors, backs straight and eyes forward, struggled in single file through the swarm.

"Auror Weasley! A word! Are the rumors true regarding the illicit affair between Miss Granger and her werewolf assistant?"

Ron kept apace with the more senior Aurors ahead of him. He shocked himself by no longer counting himself among the greenhorn gossips. But how could he? He wasn't a smudgy teen anymore, clamoring for recognition. In fact, he wished largely to be left to his work.

A pinch of fame in restaurants and a public mention on most holidays was all Ron needed. It took predictably little time in the limelight to figure that out.

"Mister Weasley! Mister Weasley! Do you support Miss Granger's creature haven in the people's Ministry? What about the innocent families attacked by creatures during the war? Do they not deserve justice?"

Merlin, they're out here today, he boggled.

The papers were absolutely rabid. The war made Hogwarts' '98 and '99 classes permanent celebrities. They all now lived the life Harry had since eleven, and Hermione since fourteen. The Daily Prophet alone had turned his best friend and little sister into recluses. Tabloids had driven his girlfriend spare. Shameless she-devil Rita Skeeter had gone so rank for readership, and had it out for one Hermione Granger, that paired with the heed his mother paid rumors, Skeeter kept a wedge in Ron's family to this day.

The redhead hoped to return to a scandal-free life soon. Luckily, the last Death Eater capture was already two weeks old. The trials would pass quickly, and after that, Level Two at the least would return to normal.

A quill-toting hand knocked the wind out of him. A camera flashed in his eyes, stunning him mid-thought.

"Ronald Weasley! What says Harry Potter regarding his lack of contribution to the Death Eater round up?! Does he feel no responsibility for letting evil men escape the Battle of Hogwarts?! Any words about your friend abandoning you to clean up his mess?"

That one rankled. The speck of Ron that resented Harry for his solitude, the one nib usually ignored at the bottom of the Auror's mind—it scratched him. Ron shoved the quill away, shouting, "No bloody comment! Now move outta my way!"

This incited such a rush that Ron didn't notice the curly mop pushing toward him in the crowd. A swell of "Ron Weasley! Auror Weasley!" overwhelmed this one person desperately calling his name. Ron, who by consensus, was made to tail the other Aurors into the office, felt something brush his back before he was jerked to a stop.

He turned and grew hot, about to make the evening special. A foot pinned the hem of his robes, as a man who'd slipped well into his personal space crushed into his back in the mob. Lights flashed
with acrid pops, no doubt capturing Ron's pissed grimace for the next front page: "Weasley Wrecks Reporter: A Loose Cannon With A Short Fuse?"

"Oi! Who d'you think—!" He was nearly nose-to-nose with the guy, so it only took a second to recognize his hard set green eyes. "Harry!?"

"HARRY POTTER!"

An uproar ensued. The cameras exploded in pops and clatters amid a deafening swell. Some reporters threw rapid-fire questions barely intelligible as speech, while the rest only shouted, "Look here! No, here! HARRY POTTER!" The crowd went mad. Even Ron was dumbfounded, as the first publicly known sighting of Harry Potter, Man-Who-Conquered, happened on his uniform trim.

And as the journalists all clawed for a bit of the Chosen One's time, or even a peek at him for their articles, it escaped none of their notice that said vanquishing hermit hero came hefting a golden book, with aggressively dirty hair, dressed in a housecoat and slippers.

It looked every bit like a nervous breakdown, a rich boy's fall, affirming years of rumors that the man had gone mad. The public would eat it up.

"Ron! I need your help!," Harry panted over the racket. The Auror threw back his head, resigned to the chaos. And if a genuine laugh picked up the corners of his mouth, the owner of said mouth didn't notice.

"Yeah, sure, and of course now. Let's get you inside."

"Mister Potter! Please, Mister Potter, where have you been hiding for the last few years?! Are you avoiding the public eye out of guilt?!"

"What?," questioned the dark-headed hero, startled. Ron, knowing and dreading the coming onslaught, started corralling Harry toward escape.

"C'mon, mate, ignore 'em. They're barmy."

"But!" Ron pushed him toward the Auror Office entrance, leading with his arm. The crowd resisted, but gave and parted, lest they be trampled by the persistent men.

"That's it, all you, enough. Move, move."

They made grudging progress to Proudfoot, who held the door open with grisly determination. Harry preceded Ron into the office, lit up by conjured sunlight, until with a harsh bark from Proudfoot, the office door snapped close, muffling the frenzy outside.

Through the warped glass of the door, they could still see the roiling blob of bodies perforated by flashing lights. Ron felt for anyone who arrived late, as the hall would likely stay packed until evening. Were it on the crowd that latecomers were mauled.

The closest officers hovered around Ron and Harry, dumbstruck. They stood ogling the mess behind them, as well as the startlingly present hero himself. Some moved from surprise to resentment fairly quickly. Others lingered by irritation and concern.

"Well, that's that for the rest of the day. They'll never leave," grumbled an officer working intake. She was broad and bovine, with big sleepy eyes peering at them from beneath bleached, choppy bangs.
"Any proper journalist to hear Harry Potter is down by us might get fired if anything's missed. Man, and I got a cousin at the Prophet, too? Bet he's prolly setting up camp by the toilets."

"Preposterous," opined a silver-haired Auror with square wire-rimmed spectacles. This old man toted an accordion folder bulging with files and tended to a pocket watch on a chain. He eyed Harry with poorly concealed disdain.

"It's a hazard and a nuisance! Now, young man, we're all well appreciative of your work with You-Know-Who, but likely it's best you'd gone home. This is a place of public duties, not some two-bit stage for stunt-pulling!"

"Leave off, Whicket, you stuffed shirt," quelled Proudfoot then, holding out a gloved hand for quiet. "Weasley's tasked on DEs, so this's under me. Doubt he's only here to shoot the shite."

The group of grumbling Aurors settled down. Contrarily, the rumpled savior perked up at "DEs" and stepped forward in earnest. Ron became one of a dozen scarlet-robbed figures by Harry, but the only by his side. He gave his mate a warning squeeze on the bicep and reeled him in.

Ron mumbled an apology for Harry's eccentricity. His supervisor twitched a heavy brow at them and glowered. Then, grunting, Proudfoot jerked a thumb at the briefing rooms down by Interrogation.

"Whatever it is, you got an hour, then he's gone and you're back to your desk. Outta sight, Weasley."

Ron gave a shallow bow and towed his best friend off by his elbow.

"Wait! Sir, this may concern you, too!" Harry broke free, tuning out Ron's exasperated sigh. "There's been a Death Eater attack, sometime this week or maybe earlier. I've come to report it!"

"Have you now?" The Auror dripped with stinking sarcasm. "And in these auspicious times, what a shame. Weasley, kindly take Mister Potter's statement and send him on his pissing way."

"Brilliant! Do you guys have a Pensieve?"

The redhead hedged and looked to his supervisor, suffering Proudfoot's squinting glare. Ron assumed that anything went, so long as he made themselves scarce. He retook his friend's arm, shushing any more objections.

"S'over here, mate." Bearings looks of scalding displeasure until the two turned a corner, Ron then sighed. He sagged, rubbing his straining neck while throwing an arm over Harry's shoulders.

"Bloody hell, Harry...I respect you wanna stay low, I mean it, really. I get it! But I've gotta tell you: staying cooped up's made you a tad bit dense to regular people.

"I have to work here, you know!"

He glanced down at his friend and knew he'd missed the point. Ron clapped the shorter man's back, and led him through to processing. Officers and academy twerps poked out their heads at the pair's passing. Whispers and groans followed them till they dipped into the first available room.

Papered walls and a stone table awaited them. Sparing his friend the bulldogging, since it was a talk not an interview, Ron dimmed the lighting from searing white to a more comfortable glow. He cast a counter to the perpetual draft and, transfiguring a chair not bolted to the ground, he sat them both on the same side of the table.
With a murmured spell, he unsealed the basin set into the table's surface. A Pensieve rose, revealing its inscribed bowl and its carved base. It glided over to Ron, and settled between the two young men. Interrogation had only a few rooms, but each came equipped with a Pensieve for taking confessions. They worked opposite to the Obliviators—Interrogators hoarded what clean-up wipes away.

Ron spent a second watching Harry fidget in his seat. Luckily he'd seen his friend just yesterday, when he was less agitated and more like himself. In the context of his day job, Harry looked like twitchy, like a suspect brought it for questioning.

He even seemed sick, having gone grey when the Pensieve ghosted toward them. One would think Ron had gone and raised the dead, for how ill he seemed.

"Uh, yeah, erm, here," stammered Harry, eyes not leaving the bowl. He unfurled his fist and showed a tiny vial of silver memories. It was barely full, telling Ron it likely held a couple memories at most.

He took the vial, uncorked it and dumped it unceremoniously into the medium. The memory flowed as it developed. Meanwhile, Ron asked Harry if he was okay.

His friend seemed shakier than even a minute before, when he boldly pushed through the crowd. Now, the briefing rooms were built for interviewing criminals. So, the young Auror could admit that being in one gave one the creeps. However, so much unease as what poured off his friend seemed unwarranted.

And hermit or not, nothing about his baggy eyes or worn house clothes denoted a steady mind.

The Pensieve swirled mistily. "Whose memory's this, mate?" Ron then felt a trill of alarm and grabbed Harry's robe. "Is it yours?! Or Ginny's?! Was Grimmauld Place attacked?!"

"No, no! Ginny's, um—Grimmauld Place is fine! I got this from the Malfoys. They were attacked."

"Oh, oka—what?! Who the hell's attacking the Malfoys? And why'd they come to you? Er, like no offense, you're swell, but the Malfoys should hardly think so."

Ron hopped up dive into the memory. He stopped when he found Harry still seated. The other wizard looked blindsided. "...Look, are you sure you're okay? I know you've had a rough week and eh, I can't tell if you're burning to do this or absolutely shiteing."

"Both? I just, need a second? Sorry." Harry glances up at him but returned to the bowl. "The last time I was in a Pensieve, I came out having to die. It wasn't a warm fuzzy experience, to be quite honest. And every time before that was miserable as well. I haven't...done this since."

Ron watched awkwardly while Harry sucked in a lungful of courage. He seemed to be convincing his body to move.

"Okay, okay, I'm good. Can't happen twice, right? Probably fine."

Harry scraped back his chair and stood ramrod straight. His housecoat parted to reveal a hideous, oversized sweater full of snags and a spot of crusted egg yolk. Below that were sweatpants, thrown on backwards, with an ember burn in one pocket. The hole exposed a patch of hairy thigh underneath. The man looked homeless.

"Mum's gonna have a fit seeing this! I'll have to tell Dad to hide the paper."
Harry leaned into the basin. Ron silently debated siccing his mother on him. Molly Weasley would get the boy cleaned up and fed faster than a Floo. His empty nester folks could use someone to coddle, and Harry clearly needed coddling.

His friend's slippers disappeared into the Pensieve. Ron followed.

_They arrived in a wide glass solarium furnished in pale woods and delicately blooms in pots and vases. A polished silver serving tray rested upended on the marble tiles. A tea service of squished desserts, shattered pots and cups littered the otherwise gleaming floor. The room was over-warm and reeked of charred plants._

_The two wizards were on either side of a cold-eyed Narcissa Malfoy sheathed in white. After taking in the upset space, they followed her gaze out the glass._

"Bloody rich bastards! This garden is huge! Oh."

_Ron hawed at the sprawling gardens laid out before them. Rainbows of every flower and dozens of fine trees decorated the grounds. And burning black in view from above was "TRAITORS," scribed in torched flora, stretching toward the manor house._

"It—."

"One second." _Ron pressed his nose to the window as much as he could without phasing through the memory._

_Below them, Draco Malfoy ran into the gardens, arms waving. A meager crew of house elves rushed to douse the flames, and they all went into a tizzy at Malfoy heir's appearance._

_Faded shouts passed through the glass to the spectators. Reflected in it was Mrs. Malfoy's face twisted in fury._

"This looks staged," _snapped Ron, pointing at the woman, the spilled meal, and the garden._

"That message is in perfect line of sight. How did some intruder know exactly where Mrs. Malfoy would be this time of day? Even a Death Eater who's been here before, they'd have to know her habits and where she'd be sitting, or else the letters'd be off._

"And we see this prat Malfoy running up, but no suspect running away? This is a straight out view for at least an acre! And burning in the message this takes time. Ditching Apparition, since we know Malfoy Manor doesn't allow it, we _should_ see someone legging it for the treeline._

"But we dont, not that either._

"So it's fake?" _Harry took in Mrs. Malfoy's profile with visible disappointment._

"I'm just saying this owl won't hunt. It's a holey story at best._

"She," _Ron gestured to the woman, now blinking away crystalline tears, "takes tea looking over her garden. She sees fire or smells smoke, whichever, so she jumps up," he waved at the mess, "runs over and reads the threat. She gets upset, saves the memory and goes to...well, you, mate, which is still a little weird._

"It's too tame. No attempt on her life, even though this person had access and opportunity, knew her exact location and that she'd be there alone. If this is some vengeful ex-associate, a Voldemort sympathizer itching to attack, why isn't she at least hurt? Look at her, Harry, she's perfect! It's just..."
some spooky letters."

"So, she tricked me. Dammit!" Harry turned to smoke and disappeared.

Ron loitered an extra moment, nodding at his own assessment. Thinking he'd done well—he had felt rather sharp, and Harry could no longer be had—he witnessed the last minute of the memory.

Mrs. Malfoy dabbed the welling moisture from her eyes. She pulled away from the window, as below her son noticed her and hurried their way. As she retreated, the woman fixed the tuck of her hair and brushed crumbs from her vestments. Wrapped in chilling calm, she spelled away the destroyed tea and strode to the entrance, long sleeves floating beside her.

She met Malfoy with open arms. Ron, now stumped, moved around to find her face rigid and blank, chin perched on her son's shoulder. Her voice, on the other hand, phoned in affected shock.

"Draco, how did you know to come? Please, something terrible has happened. You must check on the house in Riga. Warn Severus that he may have been discovered."

Of course they know Snape's alive, he reasoned. They're hiding him somewhere. He wished he brought a notepad. He settled for remembering the place, Riga, and returned to the scene.

"R-right." Malfoy spun out of his mother's arms, the woman turning her face to seem distraught.

As such Ron couldn't miss the blond boy's hunched shoulders and guilty expression. While he left the scene, his mother brought her head up, face transformed by rage, glaring at his back as he fled.

The exchange threw the Auror with its pathetically weak pretense. Without saying so, it was obvious that Draco Malfoy had a part in this "attack." And without accusing him, it was obvious Mrs. Malfoy knew.

The redhead squinted. "Then why report it?"

The memory dissolved around him, depositing Ron in the briefing room beside his quiet friend. Harry had resumed sitting, glaring at the empty vial on the table. Ron scratched his head, unexcited by the prospect of having to question him. He took some time to return the memory to the vial and place it back in front of Harry.

"Not to pry," he started hesitantly, "but why'd she come to you with this?"

Harry furrowed his brow and eventually looked up from the vial. "I dunno, Ron, because I'm gullible? Geez, what, am I a suspect?"

"Nah, but you sure answer like one," Ron cringed. He realized he may have been looming out of habit, as Harry began to radiate hurt defiance. He retook his seat by him, tamping down on his nerves and aiming for honesty. "You missed some things in that memory, is all."

"Like what? Was it real after all?"

"Kinda...seems complicated. See, Malfoy looks good for this 'attacker,' mostly 'cause his face can't lie. He had access, opportunity, the knowledge of her habits, and likely is why she wasn't hurt. I admit I don't know his motive, but he's part of it. And his mum figured it out right in front of us.

"So knowing that Mrs. Malfoy has never flipped on her son, it's wild to think of why she'd report him to us. Why bring it to the Aurors? Except she didn't! She brought it to you. And I gotta ask why, mate, I just have to.
"What's this thing you have with this lot? First Snape being alive, now a Malfoy trusting you? When you helped put her husband in jail twice? Hermione thinks you know more than you tell us. And I thought we were done with—."

"We are! I don't know why the Malfoys trusts me! I don't know that much more than you, clearly!"

"But there's something?"

His friend sat silent for several beats. Ron could hear murmuring office life through the walls. Someone outside mentioned coffee, like another complained about the weather. A memo whistled by the door.

His mind started supplying nebulous worst case scenarios. He imagined a cloud of Dark magic engulfing his friend. He imagined seedy dealings down Knockturn Alley. Paranoia rose to the surface like flotsam. What might Harry say?

Then Harry sighed and Ron tensed, fearing a blow out—either from Harry or himself, he couldn't predict.

His friend leaned over to pull his wand from his robe. The length of warm wood flowed silver as he put it to his temple. The disheveled wizard winced, drawing the wand away and into the Pensieve. A vaporous memory streamed after it and wafted into the bowl.

"This is the Malfoys asking for help a little while ago. Please don't show it to anyone else," Harry explained, oddly subdued. Ron peeked into the swirl and frowned, concerned.

"It's nothing bad. They just mention Snape like he's alive and I really don't need that spreading around. Ginny was there, too, so...but I figure you can use it to look into.

"I'll leave Mrs. Malfoy's memory here for the formal report. If you don't push it too hard, it just looks like a regular attack."

Ron shook his head, stalling Harry as the other man meant to leave. "We can't investigate with only half the evidence. If it's gonna be like this, just keep the memory and submit whatever."

"Alright. I'll do that."

Ron leveled his friend with a worried look and, only pausing slightly, he gripped the man's arms to steady them both. "You won't answer my questions, Harry. For real. And you look bloody awful."

"Oh, ta, thanks. I always look like this—stop—okay, well I didn't sleep much last night. It's nothing."

"All the family stuff getting to you?"

"I mean, it can't not get to me, but I'm handling it. I've done all I can about that for now, I won't obsess over it, y'know?"

"...Then why'd you bring the book with you? Did you even notice?"

Ron didn't miss Harry's flinch, or his mouth thinning till it nearly disappeared. "If you need a, a break, even from your own head, you can always go to the Burrow. My mum would love to have you, and—and if you can't talk to me, or Hermione, if you're afraid of us knowing something, y'know Dad won't push."
"Just leave off all this sneaky shite and rest! You're kinda freaking me out here."

"I don't…," Harry trailed off, scowling. The wizard was frustrated, Ron could tell. His look of anger bred with loss told Ron that much, and putting his worries aside, he shook his best friend with tried affection.

Harry continued, eyes downcast, "It's not that I don't want to tell you. God, I've said that before, and this week just—it's hard, since I never thought I'd have to think about it again, and you know how I, um, how I get sometimes."

Ron nodded, relieved he understood. Once, back when he could lure Harry into a night out, the hero had gotten tipsy on Ogden's best and butterbeer. He went on to tell the bar that he'd almost been a Slytherin. The bar's patrons all gasped and cajoled while Harry insisted that the Sorting Hat —"a rubbish fuckin', erp! Sorry, Hermione!"—had wanted him to be a "slippery snake."

He had then started to hiss, giving everyone drink-heavy chills.

Having freshly fought a war together, Ron couldn't believe it. But now, he knew Harry differently. Harry was a bit of a shut-in who could expect one letter from his aunt on his twenty-first birthday. In it was always five quid and a picture of his cousin's baby. Both things Harry would keep in a box in his bedroom. It'd stay buried under half-written thank you notes Hermione couldn't make him send.

This was who he was.

It was the same Harry from school, who balked at his first proper Christmas. The short kid with the bars on his window. The trouble magnet, no parents to keep him in check.

After the fighting and the funerals, he had told Ron about before Hogwarts, about the cupboard. To this day, Ron thought it his wet-eyed apology for what followed, the growing up bit and the closing off, the building of a bigger cupboard and Harry's climbing back inside.

Ron knew how his friend was. Not a snake, so much, but just as tightly coiled, thin and armored, living in the dark.

"Just tell me why I can't help," he bargained. The redhead answered his friend's startled hiss with a snort. "Hey, I know my limits. I just wanna know why I can't help you, what's keeping it all in."

"It's—okay." Harry looked around, flushing, dropping the vial in his pocket and gathering his gilded family tree. He took a deep breath and Ron, trying for patient listening, nodded encouragement as he started to speak.

"It's like this—why're you bobbing your, okay—let's say you have a partner, right? Another Auror your age and they're given all the same tasks you are, you have the same duties, you're working real close together, but they...er, but they have the lead Auror's ear. They have access to them. Would you be totally comfortable with that person?"

"What, like they're gonna rat me out to my supervisor?"

"No, it's! Like, they could be your supervisor, but they're playing along at your level. So at any second, they could go in a room with, let's say Proudfoot, and close the door and then walk out like nothing happened. But something did, happen.

"Would you trust them as a partner? Could you work with them and tell them everything? Knowing they have power and pretend they don't."
"N—are we talking about you? Are you me in this?"

Harry shrunk in, folding his arms and frowning at his slippers. "No, I'm, uh. I'm the other guy. The faker."

"You're too worried to talk to me because then I might see you as... 'the other guy.' And not trust you?"

"Yeah, basically. I mean, I, uh. I did some stuff to, um. To help Snape, because I kind of owed him, but also he kinda owed me for being such a dick, so. I didn't want any fuss, I wanted to let well enough alone, so I guess you could say I 'pulled a few strings.' Eurgh, that feels horrid just to say."

Ron let some of his bewilderment show as he tried to make sense of things. "So, you pulled some strings with Proudfoot—."

"Higher."

"Er, the head of...?"

"...Higher. And higher than that."

Ron tried to imagine who Harry could've met with, knowing the structure of the DMLE. Then he realized who Harry was and who Harry knew, and had his answer.

If someone asked the Ron Weasley of four years ago, he'd have accepted a friendly ask between Harry and Kingsley. They were both Order members, and what as a favor between them, really? However now, as part of the ministry hive, Ron knew the dizzying heights from a civilian on the street to the Minister of Magic's ear. It called for a ridiculously tall bloke.

Even Hermione, a ministry head, and a personal friend to the man, only wrote to him or spoke through his assistant. Through the massive gains of her projects, she earned a right to request with favorable outcome. But even she, even members of the Wizengamot, other department heads, diplomats, they all had a process, with limits and rules and wait times and widespread publicity.

"Kingsley?," Ron asked, aghast. Harry shrugged. The Auror looked around as if they'd be overheard. "He knows about—."

"I asked how much he needed to know and he said less was best," Harry detailed. "So, no, he didn't know. He doesn't. I just, asked for something and he made it happen. He said he'd trust me that it wasn't bad."

"What'd you ask for?" Harry blew a gusty sigh and mussed his hair. "Relax, Harry, I'm just curious."

"It was nothing big! I mean it was, but I wasn't—just asked that, uh. That some Aurors not search a room, mostly. Give some, stuff if stuff was needed, some. It was nothing!"

"Harry!" The boy looked hunted. Ron, who had definitely begun to loom at this point, stepped back and apologized. The other wizard loosed an audible sigh of relief.

_He told professional lookers not to look. He made Aurors look away, Ron thought dizzily. The Minister of Bloody Magic! For Snape! Just Harry!_

The Auror didn't ask if the unsearched room was in Malfoy Manor. He had heard enough to piece that the Malfoys hid Snape, and that Harry helped them. Of course with that kind of influence, Mrs.
Malfoy would seek Harry out for her troubles.

Ron couldn't help looking at him as a league of his own. He always had been, of course, but in adult life, not school or war, with bills and relationships, Ron forgot. However, an insane feat had been managed. Any string plucked for Snape would hum loudly. And to pull on the Minister, well—it'd prove a mighty long string not to notice.

But the public knew nothing. Harry's friends knew nothing.

To move like that with the Minister evoked Lucius Malfoy and Fudge. But Harry and Shacklebolt were such disparate figures to those two that Ron shook off the thought. Still, as the wizard had said, he'd walked into a closed room and left like nothing happened.

*But something did.* Snape had survived. Nobody knew. The spy played dead and vanished. Harry retreated, and life went on, fundamentally changed.

Ron knew better than Harry that Snape was the most wanted man in Britain. He was more than some morally grey martyr. He was twenty years of secrets cloaked in black. Every time a Death Eater evaded them, the Aurors cursed his death. To have a single notebook of the man's notes, the government by itself would pay millions.

When their world honored Snape, it mourned questions it couldn't even know to ask, much less answer.

"Can we drop it, Ron, please? I'm pretty much dead on my feet."

*This little shite's part of a major fuckin' cover-up.* Ron moved aside as he processed this. His best friend eyed him nervously and moved again to leave.

Shuffling away in his housecoat, he resembled the type to rant about "Snape's Great Escape" on a corner outside the Prophet. The irony of that made Ron shout, "Oi! This weekend, we're going out, yeah?"

Harry stared at him, off centered, head already shaking. "I don't think that's smart. I'm pretty sure I caused a scene coming here, so we won't get hardly any peace."

Ron grinned with what he hoped was confidence. "We'll find some nowhere place, a real hole where they don't wash the cups. Sticky floors, nobody knows anybody. You'll love it."

"No, I don't wanna—."

"Don't worry about it. I'll pay! Wait, naw, you're loaded. You'll still pay, but I'll be designated for speedy getaway. It's been a while! Let's do it!"

Harry watched him suspiciously, to which he grinned wider. It was a patented Weasley tactic, never failed. As expected, Harry huffed and rolled his eyes, swallowing a smile. "Fine. Don't whine when we've got to leave out the bathrooms."

"I absolutely will, but promise not to blame you. Here, lemme walk you out. You'll want to avoid the halls. And mate, throw out those sweatpants. I can see your boxers."
We Need To Talk

Chapter Summary

Severus finally shares his past with the woman of the house. A newly liberated Harry flies north against his own advice.

January 1st, 1980: Cockamamie Night Club, Hoxton, London (midnight)

Spiced lavender smoke danced through the humid air settling over the parched, sweating patrons. The crowd cut fascinating figures, silhouettes of wide angular shoulders and riotous, cumulus curls, or plentiful curves in skintight leather, throwing bare naked shadows on the humming brick and pipes.

Cockamamie’s, a new joint spun from a warehouse out of spider silk and booze, thumped and quivered on bleeding bass, enough to shake the floorboards, on this gorgeous Saturday night.

In a spacious booth by the kitchens, two bodies sat alone, crammed against the wall, whispering fervently. The younger, muscled form wrapped in iridescent sequins turned ocean green under the lamp light, soaked, brassy blonde tresses trailing down her exposed back. A heavy ringed hand, wide and soft with purple-lacquered nails, carded through the length to rest in the small of her back.

They giggled, in a world all their own. A server in fitted black wove across the dance floor, from the bar to the booth, sporting a seltzer with a lemon wedge, and a White Russian on a tray.

"Regular for the owner. Oh! Gina-mama! Great to see ya! How's the kids?"

Gracie peeled off of her date with a wet smack and laughed breathlessly at the bartender, lipstick smeared. She was an Expressionist take on debauchery, and a double platinum favorite at the bar. "Miss Mamie’s Cock and Bevvie,” as she had dubbed once many hazy nights ago, always greeted her with open arms.

"They're good, Ceecee, thanks. At home with their nan." She raised a plucked brow and gestured to her indiscriminately close company. Feeling palms ran down to her hips, smoothing her skirt over her thighs.

"I'm not meant to be thinkin' of ’em too much right now, though, ya realize?"

"Yeah, I see! Have ya fun, babs!’" The statuesque woman left the drinks and danced away, grinning cheekily. She threw one last well wish their way before disappearing into the swell.

"Welcome back, Chuck! And Happy New Year!"

Tonight, the bar celebrated the return of its phantom proprietor. Chuck Pacifico materialized out of the sparkling dark, made-up and steely haired and seeking a loving embrace.

Almost immediately, he found his muse. He found soft Georgie, biting Gina, ribbing Grace—all one woman, striding by with chin aloft—and conceived of a bar from across which he could see her and start a new story.
"Now who's she? You're hiring your lovers to work my bar?," came a gentle chuckle. Gracie rearranged her hang in her halter top, and tossed him a roguish smile.

"Worry 'bout yerself, Chuck." She laughed at the hand sliding up her knee. "Yeah! Keep them hazel eyes on the prize!"

"Apologies," a warm mouth smiled into her cheek.

"Follow me upstairs, I'll forgive you."

Self-reportedly from nowhere and definitely from south of London, he bought and built his bar overnight. It opened one fall, ushering in the corner musicians, first, then the self-designers, the inspired and tired, breaking up the cold. No cover fee, and almost endlessly stocked, strange liquor pouring from bottomless bottles, with rooms for rent for a dollar or a song.

He made them a home, of sorts, for his type: the magic at heart. The underloved of Hoxton adored Chuck, and he adored them. Eventually looking became touching, then posing, composing, and with a flash, he was a photographer, starting with his darling heart.

Gracie's likeness took off, and took Chuck with it. So tonight was a rare one, a break from absence, a homecoming.

Gracie needed this. She had gotten so used to missing him that some days she didn't. But she wanted him, the sparkling, unfathomable bits, the escape from two kids and an ailing mum up by nowhere.

She touched him carefully, like the sun shining off the fog. He was just as effervescent, and tonight she feared burning the older man away with the power of her wanting. He could vanish into thin air. He'd done it as a trick, but it terrified her.

Chuck waved a hand, and the music changed. "Something He Can Feel" shimmied down from the speakers. Gracie dragged her hands up his tiger-striped, satin button-up. She didn't know why he loved it, like he'd never seen a plain polo in his life. But he sure was something in it.

"You're not drinking tonight, honey bee?" he whispered, amused, pulling fingers through the condensation on the seltzer glass."That's not like you."

His gaze skated over her—memorizing her, she hoped. She cradled his face on the heels of her hands and tilted his mouth onto hers. They kissed languidly, soaking in the music and the smoke.

Gracie slinked out of booth, pulling her man behind.

"Let's get to the room," she urged. It'd been almost a year last time. This was a little over two months, but one never knew. He could fly out of London tomorrow, hand over the club, and never come back.

"Pop your special pills, and let's go!"

She wanted to get to it. Gracie wasn't a girl anymore, hadn't been when they'd met and time only pushed on. Her heels hurt her feet, and she'd be on them all day tomorrow. Her thighs chafed. Her dress was beautiful, and itchy, so she needed only to feel her own skin.

Her stomach flipped in anticipation.

They made it to his personal apartment—like a dragon's hoard of unfathomable things, odd baubles and trinkets. He kept a collection of sticks on wooden stands spread around the sitting
room. "Artifacts of a past life," he described when asked, with wistful airs.

The air smelled resinous and warm.

He led the way into his bedroom, and Gracie followed, uncharacteristically meek. She sweat, heart hammering, unsure of why she suddenly felt coltish, ready to bolt.

The floor trembled and bucked underfoot. Her ankles felt weak, ready to snap. She grabbed his arm and kicked off her heels, covering a seasick stumble with a playful shove.

"I, uh—"

Her mouth filled with spit. She excused herself by running into the bathroom, and throwing her head into the sink. Gracie fumbled for the faucet just as her stomach heaved, spilling its contents to be washed down the drain. Every muscle cramped, folding her double.

She lost her seltzer and two ginger ales, and the milk and fried bologna she fixed for lunch. She expected the brush of rings and manicured nails, sweeping back her hair.

"Take care of me!, she thought, like when the hangovers started hurting! Treat me nice!

She sighed in relief of many pains when her hair lifted, dripping, from her chin. Gracie looked up blearily to spit something scathing, for making her worry, but Chuck stood gaping in doorway. He was nowhere close enough to pull back her hair.

Gracie screamed, stumbled away, dove for the floor expecting to see the stranger hiding in the bath. But there was no one.

She scanned the mirror, still gagging, cursing, and caught a glimpse of—no. No, there wasn’t a stranger with them. The mirror only showed Gracie, disheveled, and Chuck, withdrawing, pale and shaken.

Her hair with its orange ends and black roots floated and fanned around her. Gracie wobbled, shocked, and her ankles gave and her feet slipped on the wet tile, tossing her up in the air like a confetti as the synth of Irene Cara’s "Fame" buzzed through the floorboards.

Her sequins glittered in the inexplicable crystal lights. She flashed green, then pink, arms wheeling, her halo of hair rippling, until she sunk slowly to the floor, a mermaid in a tide pool, wet and gasping.

"Babe...Charlie! What’s happening!"

Chuck backpedaled, eyes red and welling, looking less a magic man and more the scared little boy. Hands covering his open mouth, breath hitching, jolting back when she shouted.

"Are you fucking kidding me?! What is this shit?!"

"I can’t do kids, Georgie." That voice, faded and petal soft as always. "I s-said, not again. I can’t again…"

"Oh, grow up, Chuck! Leave then, like bloody always! I ain't beggin’!"

"I can find someone. We can just—you don't have to keep it, Grace, please."

"Fuck off, prick! BASTARD!"
She lay on the ground, silent, minutes after the crack when she knew he'd gone. She refused to shed a tear, but they escaped headless of her scorn, so she stayed there, shivering on the tile. Gracie let herself be sorry for all the time it took to be found.

*Until Ceecee came looking for her, she stewed in frigid misery.*

She couldn't do another kid, either. Chuck was special, but he wasn't that special. He was still a person, someone who soured and scared off, someone here enough to make a kid, and there enough to ditch it.

Would he at least send money? He gave her some earnings from the photo shoots. Would that feed them all? She barely made due with that.

Gracie was scared, too. Where was her dramatic exit?

"*Ugh, Baby New Year,*“ she groaned, creeping cold fingers over her belly. Through the plastic, she felt bright tingling and her overwarm skin. "*What're you, huh? Why're you here?*"

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**August 23rd, 2002: Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London**

Harry walked down Grimmauld Place, seeing familiar sights. He strolled contemplatively, taking his time, only to gag one house over and shake his tired head.

If Harry could kick himself out, he would. He'd left his front door open. He could see well into Number Twelve, through to the stairs and the back hallway. In his frazzled state, he had left the former Black home exposed to the street.

He debated taking the front path at a run, rushing to close it. Instead, he opted to leave well enough alone, and in fact, walked slower up to his gate. The house was secure enough. No one passing by even knew it existed. If Harry didn't rush, he might even stroll past it himself, and keep on down the street.

Harry was suddenly sick of hurrying indoors. Maybe he could make a day of being out. He scratched his nose, swaying to manage the weight of the book under his arm.

He dreaded the idea of going seen. Still, he loitered at the end of his walk, eying the gates, the Victorian facades and the curtained windows.

Honestly, he didn't have to go in yet. Even in his slippers and robe, he lived in a city, and could probably go about in his house clothes without issue. If he was polite enough, he'd be left alone. He'd gone all of his childhood in tatty clothes and hardly got pulled up for it.

It'd been a while since his last stint as a runaway. He was due for a jaunt.

*I'll change clothes first*, he decided, opening the latch. *I'll drop this thing off and, and then I'll check in on Ginny, maybe. And then I'll...I'll do what I want!*

Something clicked while emerging from the labyrinthine Ministry. As Ron lead him through cobwebbed lifts and tunnels, Harry realized: nobody cared! No one that mattered to him cared about him helping Snape.

Ron about knew what he'd done, and after some awkward silence, treated him exactly the same. Remus had time to acclimate. Given her nonresponse earlier, Harry guessed that Ginny pieced it together that morning at least—and the witch hadn't seemed surprised.
Maybe he was just that transparent under a spotlight. Some time in the last four years, Harry's nameless fears were unfounded. They let him have his reasons. They trusted he hadn't changed.

The young wizard came in, charming the door shut and towing out of his slippers. He padded in his socks to the parlor and took pause, finding Ginny's open chest still present and unaffected. The witch had yet to return.

Distracted and thinking little of it, Harry jogged upstairs, changed into jeans and a hoodie, then returned to the front hall. He copied the map again, and put the folded map in his pocket. The whole while he stared into the middle distance, pondering.

Save Hermione and the other Weasleys, McGonagall surely, and maybe Neville out of some courtesy, Harry was in the clear. Alright, well, obviously not quite. But he wasn't irredeemable. People, his people, were allowed to know.

Some moss-covered shackle fell away with Ron's ribbing. They threw out headlines for the evening Prophet the whole way up, getting more outrageous as they went. They laughed at how he'd finally crackled, laughed till their ribs hurt. Harry's face had hit the spraying rain, hot and tight from grinning. His persistent self-doubt was obvious now as it lost some hold.

Absentmindedly, the young man searched a hall closet for his broom. Thinking on his lost Firebolt, one of Harry's first and only gifts to himself had been a Cloud Cleaver 650, the predecessor of the WX.

He'd have made off with a Cleansweep if he had to, only wanting to fly. However, he'd been talked into getting the then newest model in the shop. He could afford, and while never having bought his own broom before, he splurged.

He had polished it, managed the bristles, loved that broom. But in crowded London, he barely flew it. He had by then turned down Quidditch scouts and bowed out of Aurory. He wasn't Ginny or Ron. He didn't need it.

Eventually Harry found the broom flashy, too much more for a simple homebody. One day he sat on his bed with the broom in his hand, hearing his aunt's griping.

"What would a useless runt like you need with that?! Think you're something, do you? Put it away! You're embarrassing yourself!"

Harry had shoved the Cleaver in the hall closet, unable to stomach selling it or giving it away. When Ginny called him rusty, she wasn't wrong. As of that day, Harry hadn't flown since Christmas, 2001.

"She couldn't have gotten far," he mumbled, chewing on his bottom lip.

Harry spelled the dust from the handle, and shook the dried up spiders from the broom head. He winced at the state of it. It really was a great broom to leave so shut up.

"Sorry, friend," he apologized. He then carefully laid the Cleaver on the wood floor. Harry shook out his nerves and extended his ungloved hand over it.

"Up!"

It smacked into his palm with a resolute quickness. Harry huffed, pained and exhilarated. He switched the broom to his other hand and looked on it approvingly as he stretched his battered palm.
"Fantastic!," he praised. It balanced perfectly in midair while Harry swung a leg over it.

Harry seated himself, assuming the flyer's forward lean geared for speed. With a wordless charm, the door slammed open, revealing the street.

Harry kicked off into an unfailing, omnipresent current, one that carried every ounce of him, down to the littlest hair. He sped down the walk, whispering a Summoning charm as he went. His Invisibility Cloak rose like a lethifold from a basket of folded linen, toppling flannel sheets to chase after him.

His trainers rambled over the pavement. The rain plastered down his fringe. Harry pulled up at the swinging gate, diving into his waiting cloak. He melted into the cityscape, aimed upwards to hurtle toward the silver medallion sun.

BEEEE-eep!

"Move...day! Get…!"

Hoooooonk!

Harry floated high above the city limit, chilled by the damp and windswept. Below him sprawled the northwest edge of London.

A grid of dull brown designs where cars marched through like colorful ants, decorating the city. Taxis squeezed in the vanishing gaps between buses, one colliding and clogging the slow lane. Honking cars lined up for a mile back, and he could hear the occasional clip of peeved motorists.

Folding over to pillow his chin on his forearm, he flew lazy loops over traffic. Every loop he finished sailed him a little further over the green suburbs.

"Maybe I missed her?," he wondered aloud, starting on figure eights.

Harry was so caught up in the thrill of flying, he zipped well out of the city center before remembering Ginny and the owl. Still stunned by his run-in with reporters, and reeling mid-epiphany, he forgave himself just the once and went about finding her.

There was some issue predicting the flight path of a bird. He ended up backtracking along the straightest route from Number Twelve to Cokeworth. He stopped once, thinking he saw a flash of red, but found nothing. Instead, he wasted twenty minutes rooting around rooftops in Hampstead, and frustrated, flew back to Grimmauld Place, only to find Ginny's luggage gone.

His letter sat on their bed, unopened beside a handful of crushed feathers.

Harry assumed she'd returned, saw him gone, and rushed off to Cardiff to make orientation. Knowing she took the Knight Bus, the wizard gave up on catching the violent purple death trap. He decided to cope with his disappointment with another lap around the city.

It was mid-morning now. The grey weather passed overhead while Harry fiddled with the folded square of parchment in his hand. For the first time in days, a proper boldness took root in his spirit. Having been slapped down thrice over—adopted, Snape adjacent, and fooled—he preened in the bit of control he'd taken of his time.

He stepped back into a bit of old willfulness, touched by some spirit of adventure. Why not take a long flight? Go wherever? See where the day took him?
He had no one waiting on him at home. Harry had nothing but time until the weekend, and a map of sorts, and could Apparate home if necessary. So why not?

Harry wiped his runny nose and brandished his wand.

"Point Me!" The wizard aimed north, sniffling, and gripped the Cleaver's handle. With a gleeful shout, he took off like a shot.

Wind whistled in the young man's ears and he fast became a blur on the horizon, ignorant of the injured Chaser tailing but lagging behind.

"Where's Harry?!"

Ron choked as he was literally pulled him from his conversation, yanked down by the collar to meet his sister's eye. He gaped at a harassed, messy-headed Ginny, crammed in her fancy training suit, with a broom slung across her back.

"Aren't you supposed to be in Wales?"

The witch shook him, pale as a ghost. "Harry! Where?!"

"Ginny Weasley! Has Harry Potter finally—!"

"Miss Weasley, is Mister Potter—!"

The witch's wand hand was armed and at the ready, menacing the reporters crammed into the office doorway, screaming questions. Cameras exploded, not in flashes but in actual flames, melted film and clicking parts flying everywhere. The mob scurried back from the hissing, popping metal, some reporters stomping on others who dove in to save their precious film.

Aurors stepped in to quell the chaos. More than one sobbing photographer was coaxed from the floor.

"Gin, you can't just—!"

"I was attacked," Ginny cut in, eyes so wide they were almost too big for her head. Ron grabbed her tightly by the arm and looked around, catching a trainee's eye.

"Tell Proudfoot this is another tip," Ron barked at him, and then led his sister away. He spoke to her in an undertone, murmuring, "Are you serious?," before noticing her funny strut. He realized queasily that his little sister was limping.

"Who did this?! Did you see his face?"

"Yeah, but I didn't recognize them. T-two men, one tall and rangy, one kind of stout, both mid-thirties maybe, holding masks. I didn't, they surprised me, I-I didn't see them at first—!"

"Wait, I've gotta," he pulled them toward a new briefing room. Ginny wrenched her arm free and shouted:

"No time! It was two men, okay, and they were following a, a letter Harry sent! I went because Malfoy said someone was out for them, and I thought it was rubbish, but. I don't know how they saw me, but. I think I winged one, he screamed and.

"Harry was supposed to...Did he come here, is he here?! I flew by the house, and it's empty. Ron,
somebody's out for him! You must've missed two, okay, there's still D—!

"Shh! The *nnn*!" He covered her mouth, pointing at the reporters. He then looked over his sister again, feeling sick. She reeked of ozone and leaned to one side, panting. She'd clearly just escaped a duel.

"Look, stay here while I get you a Healer. Harry was here earlier, yeah, but he already le—Ginny, wait!"

It was too late. The witch forged back into frenzy, the reporters fearing for their things enough to give her a wide berth. By the time Ron fought through the crowd, shouting people back, and stumbled into the corridor, she'd vanished.

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**August 23rd, 2002: Spinner's End, Cokeworth (noon)**

The Muggles worked Severus near to death. Zinnia peppered him with questions while she helped him clean her space. Having a night of lecturing her mother, he saw her roots as every curt reply inspired another tangent.

They ended up trading barbs until the werewolf discovered her gut of digesting boxers, and ran for the loo. He played handyman.

Severus repaired the splintered staircase, conjured more windows with various views, banished the ruined luggage, mended clothes and furniture, on top of Apparating to and fro to delivery books and clothing, and assure Grace her eldest would be fine.

He failed to convince the little girl of her hold on the door. Likely terrified of being scolded, the brat hid whenever he entered the room. He told Grace that morning that her child's terror was a problem. He'd seen wild magic so often, it bored him to recount, but anomalously it had tied to his own—fear, unfortunately—with extreme potency.

Thus began the yelling. It started low and escalated until Severus, sapped, quit caring and dragged himself to bed.

"Laney, for Christ's sake, come here! It'll only take a second!"

"NO." Severus awoke, ragged.

The wizard nursed his throbbing head. The very little reprieve he found in the attic was enough for a shallow sleep. Yet there he lay, conscious, despite his best efforts. Abandoning the spirit of the cockroach, he wished quite earnestly for death.

Grace and her impudent brat had bickered all bloody morning. Now they were set to bicker well into the afternoon.

"This? *This is where*, he bemoaned. He felt blindly for a limp pillow and threw that over his head as well. Their shrill voices still pierced—through two floor, the walls, the pillows, and his accursed skull. Gods, the child's lungs were unconquerable! When she screamed,"NO," it could shatter glass.

That *lilting runt*? *This is where she takes after this nightmarish family?*

He worked his hands from his blanket and slid them over his face. Severus pressed down on his airways through the fabric, groaning with suicidal relish. Maybe he would luck out, against all
evidence he was capable, and suffocate.

_Bzzz!_ A text message. Severus grabbed the blasted Muggle contraption, Grace's mobile phone, and chucked it across the room. He savored the clatter of hard plastic hitting the wall. He prayed it broke. He needed it as far away from him as possible.

Grace had made him the basement liaison while she managed her youngest. He agreed so as to more quickly escape.

Severus be damned, the devil-sent thing was indestructible. It nattered on the floor. Text message after text message swarmed into it.

_Bzz-zzt! Bzzz! Bzzz!

He ripped off the pillows and screamed. No words, only a maddened, agonized howl. It was the howl of a man three days gone without food, little sleep, and on the razor's edge of toxic shock from magical exhaustion.

He couldn't even curse the phone or silence his room, as just touching his wand left him light-headed. Even the dark hurt to sit in, he was so rubbed raw. And yet all he'd suffered for _hours_ was —

"I HATE YOU!"

Severus threw off his covers. He bolted out of bed viper quick, so much so he staggered dizzily, blood rushing.

"GO AWAY!"

He looked around and, grunting, jammed his aching feet into salvaged steel-capped work boots. He'd found them merely drooled on in the basement, and exhausted, lugged them around for an hour without realizing, until he'd brought them upstairs.

It irritated Severus who, simply sick of plucking splinters deom his feet, had shoved his father's boots on only to find them a decent fit.

He changed his mind. Forget lived-in and admirable. He hated this house. Every morning in this revived Spinner's End unmade him. Spurred on by this new sting in a parade of indignities, the wizard swung open the attic door and poured down the stairs.

"Sasquatch!" He pounded on the door to the second bedroom. Threads of furious hard rock skittered from under it. Of course. His resident behemoth couldn't hear him through headphones.

Severus stomped into the room, knocking papers off the desk as he blew by. So consumed by the boots and the migraine and the _yelling_, Severus didn't see the coil of python he stepped over to berate the cross-legged man on the floor. Absurdly, Fred cradled the constrictor's head on his palm, while he sketched in a legal pad.

Severus, now seeing the beast, carried forward by momentum, had no choice but to push on, trampling notebooks and a walkman, refusing to give quarter. He danced around yards of serpent in a cold sweat. He kicked over a forgotten mug as he stomped about, spraying the other man in tepid tea.

"Yo, what the fuck!"
Severus caught his rhythm and stomped his foot like a child, swooping down and ripping the headphones off his fool half-brother's head.

"You don't hear this madness!?," he bellowed. The python between his boots flexed, a spitting hiss turning insides to fetid jelly. "Gah, God! Fix this! They're yelling down the house!"

Fred also looked to be fraying. His bloodshot eyes bore into Severus, pupils each the size of pennies. His huge shoulders sagged in defeat, great hairy head hanging down over his papers.

"You don't think I've tried? Laney don't respond to yellin'," he sighed, nearly sobbing. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his thumbs into his temples. "Ugh, they're doin' my fuckin' head in! I haven't slept, y'know? Can't even eat, 'cause they're blocking the kitchen!"

"Don't yell at me!" Hollered Grace from a level below.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Severus marched back out of the bedroom, not even sure of his next move but needing to do something. His expression must have been fierce, as Fred shouted after him, swore, and followed suit. The younger man caught up in one long stride, another irksome detail that drove Severus harder down to the first floor.

"Whoa, alright, listen!" The yeti walked with his hands out, like the wizard was too hot to touch. "Just let them have it out!"

"No."

Severus waivered, dizzy, and then pressed furiously on. As he went, he exuded filth. Licks of dark magic oozed over the narrow hall, and mildewed the wallpaper as he walked. The paper shred and peeled, exposing bare wood and glue.

"Uh, okay! Fair! Just don't magic them or anythin'. Mum's all twisted by whatever you said last night, and Laney's just—!"

"I don't care. I've had enough," he declared, bursting into the sitting room. He whipped around on his heel and beelined for the kitchen. With great thumping leaps, Fred chased him.

"Aw, c'mon, she's just a little kid!" He blocked the hallway with his bulky frame, frowning down at Severus, who glowered viciously. "You should know, with kids I mean, you just, uh."

"Children don't behave until taught the fear of God and retribution. It is a talent I enjoy immensely."

"Jesus…where you one of those teachers? They let you whip students or something?" His big arms came up, forcing the heated wizard back.

Over his shoulder, the girl lost her penchant for words and resorted to terrified shrieking. Her mother shouted over it. Severus' lip curled back over his teeth. He could see the sound now, bright colors distorting his vision, bleeding down the drab, box-lined walls.

"Whipping?," he hissed, savoring the silence of memory. A dungeon, cool and foreboding, to lay and lose his body in. To think that peace... "Yes, for a time. Move!"

"Absolutely not. You touch 'em and I snap your fuckin' neck."
This growled up from the man's belly, like the urge to protect sprung forth bloodlust like hunger. Not unlike Zinnia, as just the madwoman, he sensed once he started, Fred might beat him to death.

Severus couldn't afford to curse the Muggle, or even Stun him, expecting he'd take something powerful to succumb. The ex-spy felt so ground down and small, and against his very nature, Severus sobbed and covered his eyes.

"Please, gods, let him," he begged. "Make it end."

He quailed at being threatened by that face again. Horrible palpitations started in the wizard's chest, portending an attack of viscera, cardiac arrest or a stroke, like what killed his father. He would die where he stood if the screaming didn't stop.

Let Tobias' visage strike him down. A snapped neck would be quick.

Pathetic, sneered a voice that even in his own head, fell below the shrieking.

Sleep. He only needed sleep. And he wasn't some fledgling witch, a sapling child with wild magic and emotion so deeply entwined that he could wish away the hurt. He was trained out of that, exhausted, leaking rot, hiding behind his hands like a sniveling boy.

"...Wow."

Fred breathed this in astonishment. A rough mit dropped on Severus' shoulder, unbalancing him. "Oh, sorry. Sorry...don't...it's, man, whatever. Don't have to cry about it."

The wizard sighed shakily and wiped the sweat from his brow. He collected himself some before looking up, squinting in the dreary hall.

"I'm not crying, idiot."

"Yeah, no, sure! You got it. Very manly, you are."

Severus rolled his eyes. Then, seeing a shifting shadow, he looked over and met his reflection in the glass of his mother's portrait. He saw Fred's arm, bridging the space between them, like a scene of man consoling a wretch.

Disgusted, but not resenting the help standing, he looked past both of them to see the kitchen. It was then he felt the quiet.

In the glass he saw the girl with her hand over her eyes, just as he had them, facing toward the back door. The bit of sunlight filtering in from the half-windows glanced off the tile. This made the shape of her mother knelt before her all the clearer.

Grace looked up to her daughter, hands twisted together in a strange plea. The woman reached out and pinched the hem of her daughter's dress, in lieu of holding her hand.

"Please, try," she pushed.

"Mum, Laney's—uh, Rev, you good?"

Everyone stood quiet, while both he and the little girl unbent, and he met her eye in glass. He couldn't see the details of her face, absorbed by the portrait's black, except her eyes, which shone large and terrified.

Unsure what gripped him if not loathing, Severus skimmed her thoughts, and heard the ringing. It was the keening of the wards from last night, amplified by repeated recollection.
Sharp and unrelenting, it made him feel faint. Perhaps this was the Legilimency. Regardless the sound couldn't be bore. Every time the girl thought on the kitchen, it grew louder. Severus' migraine spiked and he withdrew.

"Ah!" He startled. A tendril of the girl's mind trailed his, seeking his visions of cool, dark caverns. It landed light as a moth on an imagined rock and his hobbled mind, too slow to cast it out, watched it flutter and vanish in the boundary between thoughts. A degree of the terrible ringing faded. An almost tangible wind followed, with a roar of beating wings echoing in the dungeon halls, preceding an inundation of thoughts.

The ringing crescendoed.

"Stop!," Severus snapped. He broke contact, squeezing his eyes shut. Behind his eyelids, the dungeons faded to slippery black. He only heard his staggered heartbeat, and swayed. The hand on his shoulder was the only thing keeping him upright. He kept his eyes shuttered as he spoke.

"She, the girl," he swallowed. His throat clicked, cotton-dry. "She needs training. She's out of control."

"It's never been a problem before," Fred defended above him. "She calms down quick most times, and she—she's a good kid."

"Is it that thing?," Grace asked him, her voice suddenly closer. "How she gets into people's heads? I thought it was the books, but...the screaming."

Grace sounded pained. It seems every adult hurt from the girl's penetrating cries. Of course a voice shouldn't be that clear up through the attic. She'd screamed directly into their heads, for hours, voice never tiring as she dealt her psychic damage.

The wizard nodded. "The wards are one thing, but she's a, erm."

"Hey, alright, take it easy."

Arms encircled his waist, and some negotiating of limbs happened as he was coaxed into walking. He was rearranged to hang from a shorter body, as light feet rushed past him and out the front door.

"Ah, dammit, duck."

He picked up splashing and the shush of rain before feeling the tug of sleep. Unconsciousness rolled over him. Ironically, he fought sleep, curious about the state of the girl.

"I...o after her. We'll be back. You okay, Mum?"

"Obviously not, you big goon. Go, go watch her 'fore some creep snatches her up. Go on, I got him. He weighs nothin'."

Severus was walked and then suddenly tipped over. He swung out a hand to brace for a fall, thinking he'd lost his footing. It hit the couch, and he was spilled onto the cushions, boots and all.

"You're done in, hey. Oi, Severus? Can you h...me?"

"Nn. Careful," he sighed. "Careful, she's, dunno how with Muggles. Girl is practiced. She's strong."
“Yeah, my babies are talented. Hard-headed as all shit, but y’know. Only Zeddie was bad at school. The other two were angels. Was...was he? Do you know if—?”

“Wha...?” Severus didn't know if he missed Grace's reply, as he gratefully plummeted into sleep.

"Don't do this."

Severus frowned, unsure if he was dreaming. He felt awake, felt the sore weight of his limbs. He smelled his old sweat on the unwashed sofa. But he couldn't figure who was crying.

"Mother?"

The grown wizard huffed and pushed into fuller wakefulness. He sighed deeply and opened his crusted eyes to shelves of bleary, leather bound books. Yes, he was in his sitting room like he thought. He coughed and struggled upright.

In response, the sofa dipped, and he felt wet, shaking breath on his shoulder. A head of silver-shot curls butted his chest.

"Not another one, Lena, for the love of God. Don't take my baby girl, too."

"Grace," he realized, bemused.

"Shit." The Muggle woman pulled away, hurriedly cleaning her face. "What, Severus, what?"

Severus noted the changed light in the living room. It was still the afternoon, which explained his leaden bones. He settled back into the throw pillows, forgoing a strict posture for rest.

"You, what," he rejoindered. "The hell are you crying for, like someone has up and died. I know I was not nearly so fortunate, assuming you'd sob so pitifully for my corpse."

"You talk just like ya mum."

"With sense?"

Grace scoffed and her too-warm weight left the couch. She was like a furnace. Severus kicked off the sheet thrown over him, and settled back into the cushions. This was becoming his healing position: entrenched in the sofa, fully clothed.

"Wait," he shot up and checked his feet. As he'd feared, he'd been tampered with. Someone had placed his boots by the door and his wand on a stack of magazines on the coffee table.

"Have you eaten? It's usually fend for yourself for tea, but with you and Zed, I cooked soup. Chicken and rice."

Severus meant to decline, more concerned about the sanctity of his person, when his overzealous stomach gurgled. The sound carried to the kitchen. He scowled, betrayed.

"Well," answered Grace with a blunt sniff. "You can serve yourself."

His stomach persisted, growling.

Minutes later, he shuffled into the kitchen, holding his cramping abdomen. He paused in the doorway as he peeped the plain wood, open basement door. Showering sounds rose with whiffs of old clothes, broth, and soap. Rap music bounced over top.
Grace poured herself coffee from the maker. She splashed in creamer and gestured to a covered pot.

"The wards," Severus prompted.

"They did a thing." She wiggled her fingers at it, then wiped her hand on her pants. "Door popped open about an hour ago. Not long after Laney left."

"Hmph. I imagine she's yet to return."

"Freddy's with her. She'll be fine. Eat."

She turned around with a mug and slice of buttered bread. He raised a brow as she dunked it into her light coffee, and scarfed it down. Taking her lead, he grabbed a clean bowl from the dish rack and dipped into the soup.

They shared silence while he ate. After three days of fasting, Severus couldn't hold much down, so his tea was quick. He finished half the rich and salted meal, and then leaned back, uncomfortably full.

"Finished?" He didn't answer. He sensed a sentence building across the table, and watched Grace gather her thoughts. She held his gaze, serious as stone. Then she put down her mug—"Happy New Year!" it read in stars.

"We need to talk." From a pantry shelf by the table, she picked up an envelope. She handed it to him, at which point he recognized it as Potter's letter.

Severus cautiously considered the front—yes, once again it was most assuredly Potter's scrawl. He glanced up at Grace, tapping her name with his knuckle.

"Why would this person write you?" he asked. Below them the shower shut off. He tensed, sure they would soon be interrupted. Instead, he heard the toilet flush, then the running of the bath.

"She won't bother us," Grace said tiredly. "She's crapping Christmas ornaments."

There came a timely groan and another flushing of the toilet. He spared a prayer for the septic tank, unable to ignore who'd likely have to fix that, too. Annoyed, he opened the letter, only to find the envelope empty.

"Where is the letter?"

"How do you know him? 'Harry Potter,' why did you have his letter?"

Simply hearing the insolent whelp's name, Severus saw black spots. Worried for his health, he packed away his complaints—and packed, and packed some more. Some didn't fit, so he drew on Occlumency to expand his mental suitcase.

"He—nope." The question, it was the question, it was too damn complicated. It didn't sound it at first, but it was. He chuckled darkly, not to be bested.

"Potter—no. One second."

Severus cleared his mind and packed some more, shoving down his thoughts, holding his tongue with both hands and both feet. He inhaled, held it, and exhaled, inviting as much ambient sufferance as he could.
And when he still had complaints left, he pared them down to their barest minimum, and spoke them aloud.

"Harry Potter—was a—student. Of mine. I also, erm. I knew his parents."

The breath left Grace so suddenly, it was like she'd been punched. "You knew them? Him and, you knew his family?"

"Lily Potter was from Cokeworth," he shared, approaching more even ground. It wasn't smooth, this new subject, but at least it felt safe.

He had already decided that to get information, he would have to give it. "She was a Muggleborn witch like your daughter. Also very strong magically. She and I were...childhood friends."

There. Nearly painless. Something about having his innermost heart touted to the public made the details easier to give.

He refocused in Grace, who stared at him, age lines prominent. She was struggling. He understood the look, having seen it once before, but not why it had returned. This wasn't telling the woman her daughter was cursed. He only shared a few details about a student and a boyhood companion.

"You keep sayin' 'was',' she whispered. "Is this Lily girl, er. She dead?"

"Yes. Regrettfully."

Grace looked away, out the window, then back at him. He saw Zinnia in her, and then figured he had it backwards. Odd, he thought, how apparently children resemble their parents. He'd seen it in teaching all his classmates' offspring and still it took him aback.

He was glad never to have them himself. Severus had enough people sharing his features. He preferred to exist as an entity unto himself.

"I was distracted," he excused himself, seeing Grace awaiting another reply. "What did you say?"

"I said does he live with his father then?"

Severus shuddered, unable to help it. "I'd kill both Potters and then myself if the boy ever had. That brat, that absolute nuisance is insufferable enough as he is." He hissed. "Raised by James Potter. I'd have quit teaching and sold candles on the beach. The memory of James Potter fouling this earth whilst I held breath robs me of knowing true peace."

Grace stared openly at his tirade. "Is he dead too?" James?"

"They both died on the same night. They were murdered."

"And Harry?," she asked, face tight. The older woman gripped her mug in shaking hands. Severus was still riled up by mention of his late nemesis.

*Harry Potter raised by his pillock father,* the man thought bitterly. *With Black as a dogfather?*

He gave himself chills.

"The boy survived, obviously. Is quite known for it, as a matter of fact. It was a great feat of magic to survive the spell as he did. In my world, he's rather woefully famous."

"I've never heard of him," Grace protested. She stared at the envelope in his hand, looking
betrayed. "I've never heard any of these names, except—Lily, you said she was your friend. Not the pretty redhead, the Evans chit with the, with the precious smile?"

Lost, his brain supplied. Severus allowed it, but powered on.

"Yes. Her."

"Then who raised him? He can't be in Cokeworth, can he? The Evans' kicked it decades ago."

"He was placed with his aunt on Lily's side."

"Not that cunty blonde kid, with the horse face!?"

Severus coughed, delighted. "The very same. Petunia, well, Dursley now. Where he wasn't terribly spoiled, I've been forced to accept, but again couldn't have been too terribly abused. Not with his cocksure attitude."

"I mean, that's not true. Look at yourself."

"I don't see your meaning. I am as meek as a field mouse," he deadpanned. Growing hungry again, he took a spoonful of sodden rice. "Any more questions?"

"Yeah, tons. His parents were killed by a spell. So another wizard killed them. Or was it a witch?"

"A wizard," he confirmed, feeling he may have been understating. However, Voldemort was just that in the end: a wizard. A terrible one, one of an age, surely the icon of an idea of evil, but made mortal after all.

"A very Dark wizard," he elaborated. "Well, to be accurate, I am also technically a Dark wizard. He was leagues more so."

"So you're called a Dark wizard in your world?"

"You don't seem bothered by the implications."

"Again, knew your mother. Ya seem to forget whenever suits you. Eileen said you got mixed in with a nasty sort around when—um. In the late 70s, 1980-ish. Is that why you're in hidin'? You wanted for murder or summit sick?"

"Quite equivocally Dark, yes, and my name has long since been cleared. I have, murdered a man. But he was a friend."

"Ain't it worse, then, if he was a friend?" She got up for more coffee, this time easing the basement door closer shut. She didn't latch it, seeming wary of the lock. She only gave them a measure more privacy.

"Again, you don't seem fazed by the fact that I've killed. What exactly is wrong with you?"

"We're from the same town, Severus. I knew Toby, too. It's not like he never killed nobody outta lack of enthusiasm. So why're you wanted then?"

"I thought you wanted to know about Potter."

"You'll tell me that, too."

She slurped her coffee leaning on the counter. He didn't for a second miss her off hand planted by
the knife block. He found her nonchalance impressive. She truly seemed more stressed by Potter's home life than his blood-stained past.

"The 'nasty crowd' my mother mentioned were followers of this evil wizard. I aligned myself with them for some time during and after school. It's important you know that Lily and I had fallen out by this time, and she had matched up with James Potter.

"We fought until she came under fire. She had her son, who became a subject of pro—foolishness. I spied for her side and protected the boy when she passed."

"So this was that war? You were a spy?"

"There were two. And yes, both times. That's how, hm. I'm sure you noticed the scars."

"They tried to kill you?"

"Funnily enough, not for spying. Totally unrelated, the lunatics. Now, however, the issue is the spying. I am a world renowned traitor."

He ate another bite of soup, not minding that he was still full. "This is good. I should mention: the man I murdered was the one I spied for, a pillar of the Light. I would compare it to killing the Pope."

"Would you!?"

"Truly, I am not a beloved man. If not for Potter, I would be executed."

"Sounds like more than just a 'student,' you berk."

He snorted. "You're right. The boy learned one or two useful spells in all his schooling and maybe one of them from me. Classes provided a break for troublemaking and opportunities to disappoint, nothing more."

She didn't follow up immediately. She spent a minute swirling her drink, staring off into nothing. "Is he a decent person, maybe?"

"Aha! An arrogant, self-righteous fool with a pitiful temper. A disrespectful sneak thief, a glory hound, and a cheat. A hothead. A terror. Blast, I meant to be calm, but well, in with both feet: Harry Potter is a contemptible shit. I owe him a bit of my life, though, so I suppose I shouldn't harp."

"Now, why did that brat write you a letter? What does it say? Why did you collapse into tears? How do you know Harry bloody Potter?!

"Hm." Grace spoke faintly. "...You thirsty?"

He glared at her. "Parched." His mouth was washed in salt.

As she clinked about by the coffeemaker and poured Severus a cup, the Potions master wondered why he felt light-headed again. He looked down at his bowl, sampling the broth again and detecting an odd spice. It tasted pleasant, but unfamiliar, which he didn't trust.

He accepted the steaming drink black. "Potter."

Grace's words reverberated in her New Years mug, "He's probably my son."

He had to pass through her words a few times before they stuck.
"Pardon?"

He heard chattering. The wizard stood and saw the older woman's cup rattle against the countertop.

"July 1980, right? S'about his birthday? I got pregnant by Laney's dad and, erm." She swallowed audibly. She grunted, slamming down her mug, and grabbed her own shaking hands.

"Thank you for tellin' me all that. I. He wrote me sayin' he wanted to meet and get caught up, and. I mean, if you hate him, we'll probably get on, is my hunch."

Severus still wrestled with what she said. Harry Potter wasn't adopted. Lily gave birth in 1980. Potter was Potter Senior's bleeding twin! Lily's sacrifice and the blood protection wouldn't have worked otherwise.

But then, why would Potter write to a random Muggle from North Nothing? He addressed her by name when Severus, inextricably linked, only just learned it.

And Severus thought of yesterday morning, seeing the girl and swearing he saw the feckless eyesore. He looked over Grace, lingering around her curls, thinking, possibly…

No! It couldn't be! Lily had to have given birth. One of her dreams was to be a mother. To suggest she would fake a pregnancy during wartime. And no matter what, Potter had her eyes. That—that could not be ignored, not by Severus.

"Explain," Severus urged.

He couldn't outright accuse her of lying if he wanted to know more. Besides, the letter was a fact too solid to call her delusional.

If any no-name witch asserted she gave birth to Harry Potter, he'd lambast her as an attention-seeking leech. He would hate her, for Lily's sake. He would want her ruined.

But Grace's clock ticked on time. She was real, and dead sharp, as much as her presence could irritate him. He and her, like he and Zinnia, were of a common mind.

So, warming his hands on the coffee, he called on Patience, an estranged fellow. And listened.

Harry messes up. He'd figured he could try one more search for Ginny, once he sped out a ways. He hated the idea of her having to leave before their second proper goodbye. He felt too wrongfooted to cope with months of lost time.

However, as he oriented himself using the map, Harry unconsciously pushed further and further north. He eventually missed the hang west to Wales and didn't register until well over Black Country that he flew off-course. The copied map, being a still, didn't update his location.

Relying on his wand as a compass, he ended up by and far in the sticks.

At which point, he made a solid decision to turn back, and write Ginny a postcard. Mind made up, he scolded himself as he passed expeditiously over the city of Manchester.

_This is a bad idea. This is a hugely bad idea._

_It's not like there are really Death Eaters, his traitor mind argued. Ron said it was only Malfoy prankin' his mother. It's not like this could hurt anyone for real. You're just looking._
I have to commit, he reasoned. Harry spent his last minutes of flight worrying the dry skin from his lips. I'm hidden under the cloak. I'll only look. I just want a peek.

He kept thinking he might see his mother, in his adoptive mother's hometown. The lure was too great. But the dangers...

Snape's gonna murder me. No traitor brain could argue the veracity of that. There would at least be an attempt. Harry would surely be maimed if caught, eviscerated or blown to bits.

You're quick! Just dodge!, was the only comfort his ego could provide. Unsurprisingly, he wasn't soothed.

He landed on a footpath in sparse woods by a clearing. Twigs snapped underfoot, giving him away as he fumbled through the brush. Harry cursed the prickly burrs for clinging to his cloak. They rendered its invisibility moot, since anyone with eyes could see a load of seeds dangling from nothing.

The young man forwent the cloak with a Disillusionment charm, like how he'd addressed the Cleaver while in flight. The cold egg feeling posed over his scalp and body, making him the trees. He renewed the spell to repel rain and continued through the brush.

Only upon entering the clearing did he realize two things. Firstly, the clearing turned out was a park, and at that one he had seen in a memory. It felt strange to step into a real place for the first time and recognize it.

The swing set had been upgraded since the sixties, and still look over ten years old. Its painted metal squealed, shedding flakes. This accompanied the second realization: the park had visitors.

Harry squinted through the rain at the hulking figure in the distance, dressed in black. He wore a hooded sweatshirt and jeans like Harry did, under a faded black leather jacket. Strings of wet hair stuck to his coat and covered his face. From afar, Harry could only see brown skin and black hair, with a beard dripping onto his chest.

"Watch out!," cautioned the man with a deep, clapping voice. As he said it, a child in a yellow raincoat swung over his head and let go.

It's a magic test, Harry thought of the swingset.

Like Snape's memory of his mother as a girl, the child launched off of the swing and balanced on a supernatural breeze. It rocked her down to land on the tiptoes of her aqua polka dot galoshes.

Her bright hood felt back to show pink barrettes in dark, unruly hair. She was a study in colors. A sprinkling of wildflowers bloomed where she stood.

Harry reeled at finding a tiny witch, by complete coincidence, growing so far from magical world he knew. He was in a bush, in the rain, in an old mill town and yet, here one was. Magic sprung eternal. This persistent force shared by complete unknowns, it humbled him.

He tried to imagine if he'd seen this growing up in Privet Drive, what it would've meant to him. He figured, the world.

Suddenly, watching the girl swing again, take off, and land, Harry felt homesick. He missed his own simple first days of magic, not the survival run in Surrey, but Diagon Alley, his first classes at
Hogwarts, his first flying class. Simple, wonderful moments.

She looks maybe nine or ten, he thought, surprised by the control she seemed to have on broomless flight. She only glided, really, but he was impressed nonetheless.

Harry was overcome with second-hand excitement. Soon, she would receive her Hogwarts letter, if she hadn't already. Ridiculously, he wished he could see that moment. He wanted to walk out and tell her what to look forward to.

The giant man clapped, like his voice, sharp and loud:

"Good job, duck!" The child had her back to Harry, so she couldn't hear her reply. But this meant when—presumably her father—knelt down to fix her hood, pushing hair from his eyes, Harry finally saw the whole of his face.

"Sn—!" Harry clamped a hand over his mouth and ducked low.

The bushes rustled loudly and he balled up, shushing himself. Courage leaving him, he tried to shake the burrs from the cloak, also agitating the bushes more, which only made him shake harder. Invisible, he needed to be invisible!

The burrs stuck the cloak to itself. He shook the useless ball of seed pods.

"Oh, come on!," Harry hissed, panicking.

He had no warning when a massive body crashed through his cover. The smaller man held perfectly still, while the titan eerily evoking Snape cursed and surveyed the trees. He kicked great booted feet at the bushes, narrowly missing Harry's shins.

His coal black glare passed once, twice, three times over where Harry withered into the dirt.

"Who's out here!?"

Harry locked up, too afraid to move. Up close, the man's voice rattled his bones, shaking birds from the trees and scaring the critters from the undergrowth.

"Like spyin' on little girls, huh!?" The wizard held his breath. Alright, it wasn't his toughest spot, surely. If he could just get away—

"Nasty creeps," the giant rumbled, who enraged at being watched and missing the culprit, lashed out at the nearest bush with a shout.

His glancing blow smashed a branch by Harry's camouflaged head. The wizard suppressed a cry as he was showered in wet leaves and splinters. The man left while Harry gaped at the split and hanging branch, as thick around as Harry's wrist. One swipe had shattered it.

Leave, leave, leave, leave! Harry's better sense made him reach for his broom. It wasn't safe in Cokeworth, if it was crawling with super-sized, he-man Snape clones. He had to go!

This place is a bloody nightmare!

However, cursing his curiosity, Harry stole a last peek at the park. The girl now faced the woods, picking at her fingers. In the circle of her hood, he saw her worried features and stalled.

Sh...she looks like me! The little girl resembled Harry as a child, an almost carbon copy. He'd had weeks in first year to stare at himself in the Mirror of Erised and knew his childish twin reflected
on this girl's face.

Almond shaped eyes, button nose, round face; a pair of child-sized glasses, circular, and teal, with a strap keeping them in place.

What is going on in this town... Harry leaned in, flabbergasted. Had he flown into an alternate universe? Was Cokeworth a town of ad lib doppelgängers?

Had he flown in an alternate universe, he wondered more seriously. He had been to the afterlife once, so most things were possible. If he'd wandered through some portal without realizing—

"Freddy!"

His heart hurt before he registered the context. He breathed through the habitual stirring of grief. "Freddy" was the man's name, apparently. Harry expected something more like Atlas or Bonecrusher, but Freddy was fine. Common.

Harry sighed, and then remembered himself and belted up. He couldn't chance another close call with "Freddy," lest the man catch him and break him like a twig.

For real this time, off we go. Again, he had no warning.

Harry had backed away, watching his feet to avoid any telling debris. He was having a hell of a time, what with his feet being invisible, and so didn't see the hand until a second too late.

"Argh! No!" Harry cried, as he was grabbed by the neck. His Cleaver dropped into the bush as his feet left the ground. He flailed, slapping at the vice squeezing his throat. He kicked, but his shoes bounced off of hip, torso, forearm, sliding along wet leather and hoodie, unable to gain purchase.

"Please!" He coughed, gasping for air. "Down!"

"What the fuck...?" The giant proved more fearsome up close, particularly when strangling him. The likeness to Snape was uncanny, down to the black, pitiless stare. This man at least seemed disturbed, likely due to hefting an invisible person caught lurking in the woods.

"Fred!" The girl ran toward them out of the park. The man warned her off:

"Run! He's magic! Run home!"

"Wa—nn!" Harry pleaded with luck that he hadn't dropped his wand. Finding fortune had a heart, he pulled it from his back pocket.

A sizzling red Stunner shot out, grazing his attacker's ear. He'd missed his head, but startled the man into dropping him. Harry's back hit the sloppy mud. He rolled onto his stomach, winded.

"Wha—!" "Freddy" staggered back, clutching his stung ear. Harry tried to crawl into the underbrush. But the man recovered lightning quick, and was on him again. He found Harry by his thrashing and dragged him by his ankles to the clearing.

"No, please! Please, don't!" Harry shot another Stunner and this time it hit its target. But the man only wavered and, with a roar, swung the wizard by his legs, throwing him onto the field. "Gah!"

"I won't hurt anyone!," Harry screamed, a hand thrown out to beg mercy, "I swear! I'm not here for you! Please let me go!"

Something of his terrified shriek, or the power of the Stunner, sunk in. The giant lumbered over
him until he stood tall and stark black against the white-grey sky. He swayed drunkenly in the now pouring rain, "Are you—you a fucking kid?"

"Y-yeah, yes!" Harry ended the Disillusionment, materializing on the sodden green. He didn't say he was twenty-two, knowing he looked eighteen. "I'm not a creep! I'm, I was leaving!"

"Freddy," dumbfounded by either the spell or Harry's age, stumbled back. The man fell to one knee, panting. "You gotta be jokin' me. Almost fuckin' killed you, you dumb prick!"

"No, no, don't, sorry," the younger man rasped, touching his bruised throat. "Ah, Merlin, you're strong."

"What d'you hit me with?"

"Sorry, sorry. It'll wear off." The other man groaned and splayed out in the grass. The two men stayed there, getting soaked to the skin. Each teetered of the ledge above unconsciousness.

"He knows us!"

Harry pried his eyes open and looked down his chest. A slip of sunny yellow darted from the trees, holding something. Aqua boots pattered up to him. The girl came so close as to splash him with puddle water.

"Oi!," he spluttered. "Ew!" Some got in his mouth.

The giant slurred angrily beside him, "I told you to run home!"

"I did!," she swore, offended. "I said you were fighting a wizard, and they asked where."

She spun and pointed eagerly to the woods. In her other hand, she held a square of parchment. The rain soaked it enough for the lines of Harry's map to bleed through.

"That's mine," he protested, reaching to grab it. The girl pulled away and looked down at him. He blinked back.

"It has our names on it," she chirped. Harry stared up at her, sure he misheard. Then, unsmiling, she imparted with ominous gravity, "The reverend says he knows you, too."

A cold chill crepted down his spine. Harry heard a rustle, and scrambled onto his knees, to watch the forest path.

"Gimme a sec, duck, and we'll tell 'em I'm fine." The giant tried to sit up. Duck shook her hooded head.

"They're already here."

"Fox!"

Harry jumped at the ragged shout. He glimpsed a shadow passing between two trees, disappearing again in a flash.

He shivered, goosebumps pebbling his skin. Looming grey composed the shape of a woman, long and thin. Midnight dark hair engulfed her head, from which burned two, yellowed eyes like sulfurous pits set over a scowl. This woman radiated instant, demonic hate, as though Harry had trespassed in her quarter of hell.
In one hand, she held Harry's Cleaver. In the other, she gripped a brown-stained, aluminum bat.

"Hold on!," Harry called out, knowing pain, even in jeans and a sweatshirt.

The woman ripped one leg from the bush, then the next, and what followed was another pair, bare under a green nightgown. A steel kitchen knife rested on one thigh, eight inches of stone sharpened blade shining in the dark.

"Oh, everybody came," Freddy remarked with an audible droop.

Harry looked to him, beseeching, hoping for an ally. To his dismay, the man had finally given into Harry's Stunner and passed out in the grass. Duck gasped and kneeled by his side, trying to shake him awake. Of course now, the little girl began to cry, leaving Harry crouched on all-fours, stricken with guilty horror.

The women from the woods surged forward, parting before the most intimidating figure in the pack. He didn't have a weapon, from what Harry could tell. He first saw the sweeping, black umbrella under which this man appeared.

Inky hair slithered down the man's stained, brown trench, evoking snakes in how it fell back from a scar-knotted neck. His coat parted over torn, filthy clothes: muddy, black wool pants and a once-white shirt, now clearly encrusted with days old blood.

As the man stepped into the park, the umbrella lifting to reveal his snaggle-toothed snarl, Harry remembered the last time he laid eyes on him. Frozen in the dilapidated Shrieking Shack, glassy-eyed and already coated in dust.

This was a harrowing reunion, as if the man hadn't actually lived four years; as if a grave robber had dug him up just yesterday and he'd come, smeared in graveyard soil, a spirit lashed forcefully to bones.

"POTTER," thundered Snape. The sky cracked, booming.

"Err, afternoon, sir! It's been, uh. It's been ages!"
Severus wound up sipping his coffee by the counter. Grace posted over the sink, going through the motions of rinsing her mug. She swiped it with a rag and upturned it on the dish rack. An inch of milky water spilled out of it. He dropped the dirty mug back in the sink and breezed to her other side.

"He left?"

"Yeah, he just disappeared, like you lot do," Grace recounted. "We never been rightly together since then. Messed around, had Laney, and he writes to her and sends gifts, but…"

She shook her head. "Can't forgive it. Won't, not that he's ever asked me to. He knows I'd wanna deck 'im."

Severus sucked chicken from his teeth and hummed. "He sounds like a deadbeat."

"Eh." Grace started a show of washing the rest of the dishes, twisting on the cold faucet and passing a spatula under the stream.

Severus reached across and shut off the water, mumbling about the waste. He stuck a dry sponge in the older woman's hand, and let her pretend. She didn't even blink. She rubbed it over a crusted plate from breakfast, lost in thought.

"He didn't know much about me, really, so it was easy for him to go. But Chuck cares, even if he can't parent," she continued.

Severus watched her smear tomato on a spoon with mild interest.

"He'll buy Laney anything she asks for to make up for never bein' around. Sends her postcards, sometimes, with his photos—the landscapes and stuff, not the other ones."

She waved down the length of her body, as if that would explain her meaning. Severus nodded to keep her talking, dismissing the gesture.

“And now she's getting older and reads all these stupid relationship books tryin' to figure him out. Ahhh, he pisses me off!"

"But we were discussing his and your first child. The one you say is Potter."

She glared at the younger man. Severus lifted a condescending brow: "What? A man was a disappointment, a surprise to no one. We've established that you have terrible taste."

Grace huffed. "Me and my ex-girlfriends get on great, just so y'know."

"Well, have children with them next time. See if it sticks."
"Arsehole." A deepening of a laugh line said she nearly smiled. Severus rolled his eyes, at best preferring levity to tales of heartbreak. He had very little patience for heartsick woes. He could barely stomach his own.

She touched her ear to her shoulder, presumably stretching a crick in her neck by way of shaking off a bad memory. Then she cringed, back rounding, as if weathering another one. A veil of gloominess returned over her.

"You gave him up for adoption," he led.

"Yeah, yes, I gave the baby up. I couldn't afford him without Chuck or my mum's help. She'd left work 'cause of sarcoids, and we all shared a friend's pull out sofa in London by then, since the bank gone and took our house.

"My other two weren't even in school, and Zeddie turning thirteen was, Christ. Everything went into her, all my energy.

"Dummy ended up in prison anyway. But hell, at least it wasn't for murder."

"I shared that in confidence," Severus objected lightly, drawing from his cup.

"I ain't judgin', just sayin'. It was hectic. It never isn't for us. This house was supposed to be the change in tides, but pfft! Werewolves and wizards and shit, not bloody likely."

The wizard said, "Your brood is hardly a blessing," when the basement door creaked open.

A pink sweatered body squeezed into the kitchen, yowled, and scrambled up to him, wedging itself between Severus' calf and the cabinets. His cat balled up against the chipped cabinet doors, shaking and mewling plaintively. Grace cooed and bent down, extending her dirty sponge like a treat. Cat only shivered and meowed something shameful.

"Aww, poor thing! Was you stuck down there all night?"

Kissing noises ensued. Severus gagged and waved away the woman soliciting his shin.

"Leave her! Leave her be!"

"Why'd Zeddie not eat her?"

"Werewolves have no interest in animals. Focus!" He picked up the cat and deposited her under the sink. He'd done it every so often in Latvia, after always finding the rescue in a cupboard or a bookcase after a terrible storm. She would crawl out once she thought it safe.

"Tch. At least give her food," Grace chastised.

"Mind your own beasts! She will make herself a nuisance as soon as she's hungry. Who handled the adoption?"

He recalled waking only half an hour before to, "Not another one, Lena, for the love of God."

"Was it my mother?"

Severus dissected her reaction, using the heft of what he knew of her. His reference material was limited, but by this point, fairly dense. She was disturbed, sorrowful, obstinate as she remained in her crouch, then two new emotions as she stood upright, returning the sponge to the sink.
"Yeah...yeah, she did what she thought was best. I mean, none of my pregnancies passed for normal, but this was too much. These weird things kept happenin', like I'd dream about, I dunno, flyin' over the Atlantic and wake up a foot off the bed. Zed and Fred, I don't remember much, I was busy boxin' yer dad, and with Laney, I only got dead good at spottin' lies. I think it helped Freddy get—well, that's no business of yours. But it was easier with Laney, to where I figured she wasn't too magic, not enough to get carted off to wherever, like you did."

"I'll admit that it is cloistered, but Hogwarts is only a school," Severus said, rolling his eyes. He put down his own now drained mug—"I Heart NY," with an apple in place of the heart. Hilarious. "Students return home for holidays and three months' in the summer. No one swings down from the treetops to spirit your children away."

This irked her. Grace dropped the pan she had been scrubbing and pinched Severus in the ribs. He blustered and leapt away, horrified. How dare she—

"Then explain that old man! The one who took him!"

Severus cast off his mental tirade in a snap. Old man? He had no idea to whom the Muggle referred, not technically. And yet he suffered the clammy slap of disquiet at the old man his mind portrayed. The scene drawn vividly: a braided silver beard to his knees, a star-spangled suit, half-moon glasses, a wistful, grandfatherly smile. Merlin, he could practically hear it:

"It is for the best, dear girl. You're brave to do good by your child. Too few people are strong enough in these trying times. Thank you for doing the right thing."

Albus, Severus lamented.

He had so few details of the story, and still saw it spread out before him. Another tweak, another meddle, another hushed contract tucked among the many.

Say Lily Potter lost the child of prophecy—because it was the only possibility. Severus was sure if she claimed pregnancy, his former friend had once a child to mother. And with the stresses of war, perhaps, or a thievesing curse; maybe a fall or unviable genetics. The child was lost.

Albus Dumbledore, the fate fixer, the eternal optimist, would happen upon a new golden child. He would convince the Muggle mother and reverse the tragedy. He would see it as matchmaking, helping troubled homes.

And he'd never visit the hole he tore to mend another. He'd send an eye out, if that, to make sure all was well. And if it wasn't? The guilt of complication was Severus' lot.

How then? If you're so sure? How did they meet?, revolted his logical mind, the one loathing of new fears and upheaval.

"I was maybe, six months in? When I came here. Since I couldn't go to any surgery what all glowin' and floatin'. Still it took weeks for Eileen to get me to see this 'classmate' of hers, some type of midwife. Again, one of you.

"I fought it, since I thought I weren't never comin' back, like they'd cut me open and leave me. I kept sayin' I'd give birth in the tub before goin' to a witch doctor.

"But Lena kept sayin', 'You don't want a wizard's child in these times! They'll come for you! They'll snatch you both!' It's how I knew about you and those shady types. Whatever, I ended up
"And there was this old man there. Long, long beard, washed out and pale on the landing. I thought he might've had a grandchild comin', but it didn't look good, so I pretended like I didn't see him. To give him some privacy.

"But he recognized your mum, which spooked us both, and when he came lookin' later. That's when he said he and Lena talked…"

Grace was too near to breaking something. The last glass pillar Severus stood on, that at least of the man he killed, he knew everything—she would shatter it. She forged ahead, taking his head shaking as doubt. She rolled her nightgown sleeves up past her elbows, counting the keys points on her fingers.

Severus nearly shushed her, as she ushered forth his daunting new understanding. She embodied too harsh a truth.

*Listen, Severus,* counseled a wizened, inner voice. Severus could imagine it in its wingback chair, surrounded by spinning bobbles. *Listen. Let it break.*

"Why would I lie!? Look, Merry had this big house out there, this big, blue and white cottage-type house where you get in and it's crackin' huge! And creepy, like dead quiet, even though you have all these rooms like a hotel."

Merry Charing-Claire, the warwife. Severus knew the Healer Grace described, as she was one of many targets for Voldemort. Rumors said she delivered Muggleborn children in a hidden property, one never found. Albus had shown a little interest in her once, and then never again.

"Eileen squeezed my arm so hard, and I'd already gone into labor on the train to Sussex, so they gave me this nasty drink for pain, stronger than what your mum made. They took me to a bedroom and like that!"

She clapped, startling him.

"He popped out. Two hours of labor, tops. Four kids and till today, he was the quickest. So I'm sitting there, watching them clean him up, and he's wailing and—well, all newborns are kinda ugly, so he doesn't look great.

"Oh, but I loved him. And I'm lying there, my mind changing like, 'Maybe I can work it out. The other two, they can help. We don't need much, I can keep him and keep moving.'"

Grace's face went wobbly, her dark eyes reddening. Severus leaned away, wary of another outburst. If she cried again, he would leave the room. He might leave the house entirely and take his chances in the streets. Fortunately, the woman steeled herself.

"Lena said his name would show up in some registry with your government, so I never named him. I just, while everyone was outta the room, I packed him in his little blanket and legged it to London."

He stared, disbelieving. "You ran?"

She lifted a stubborn chin. "I sure did! Then like I said, the old guy came the next day. Your mum had told him my address, telling him it was my best chance. He showed up with all this stuff for Fred and Zinnia, weird candy and clothes, some money."
"Zed didn't trust him which should've been my clue. But he took me aside, said he knew a couple who'd just lost their baby. He said they'd take good care and love him. And it...it took a few hours, but if I knew I'd never seen him again, I'd have spat on 'im!"

Grace shook, clenching her fists, eyes welling. "That bastard promised I'd be close! That I could visit, that I could write! That they'd say my baby was, I guess, the right kinda blood? And no one would hurt him. He said, 'You would be acting out of love.' Blah, blah, 'You're doing the right thing.'"

"And then I cried and cried, because I wanted him! I wanted to raise that boy, he was special! I'd never given up a kid, I would never—!"

"Hey, hey, tranquila. Mum, c'mon."

Severus missed her coming up the stairs. Zinnia sidled up to her mother, who'd begun to hiccup, face wet. The daughter draped an arm over her mother's shoulders, and proffered a tissue for Grace to blow her nose in. The two of them shared an uneasy look while the older woman got ahold of herself.

"Why're you bringin' all this stuff up for, hey?," Zinnia chastised testily. "Reverend, we don't talk about this, okay. Mind yours."

"How long were you listening at doors," he retorted. She flipped him off and snapped back:

"I came up for somethin' else and heard her say 'Merry.' Why'd you get her started on this old, hurtful mess?"

"Severus knows him," uttered her mother, face buried in the tissue.


"No, h—." Grace stopped and stared at him, twisting her tissue in her fists. He nodded, feeling cold. "You know him, too. Albus."

Again, he was made to answer for the old man's plots. Always so well-meaning and catastrophic. Severus could see how everything Albus might have done served a higher purpose. He only wished the man lived to meet the ones he'd used.

If none of it could be avoided, then he shouldn't have left them with Severus to make the apologies. Even he knew no grieving mother deserved that.

"The man I," he looked to Zinnia. The thirty-something year old frowned back, shoulders hitching. "Can I ask what you were imprisoned for?"

"No. Piss off."

"Alright, well," Severus steadied on. "The man I killed, that was Albus Dumbledore. I was...unaware he had done any of that, but it," he paused, searching for the right words. "It is not outside of my expectations for his character. You have my sympathies."

He could only give a piddling apology when faced with a missing child. Attending the Death Eater revels, he had seen babes torn from mothers' arms enough to feel pity. The emotion usually disgusted him, but he'd listened, so he knew. This wasn't this family's first tragedy. It remained
their worst suffered, something like death but never final, never done.

He’d seen it at play, how the group relied on one another for safe harbor. How they fell together in random rooms, used each other’s presence as a boon. It felt alien in abstract, but even Severus fell into the pile. It started with his parents, maybe, and then with Zinnia and the cigarette in the kitchen.

He thought of Fred throwing him from the ward blast, or holding him up in the hall. The man handing him his clothes in the hall bathroom, where Severus suspecting him of kindness. despite their onerous face. He was the man who played music to a werewolf.

As she stood there in front of him, Severus recalled picking Zinnia up from the cellar floor, and her pestering him, sat atop the dryer while he washed their father's clothes. Of the relief he stifled to see her survive the night. Of the insane way her eyes found his and thought them steadying.

The werewolf who loved the blues.

He recalled Grace, and the box of his mother's dishes, and the night of bickering over books, desperate to cure her daughter, despite all word that it was impossible. The older woman never blinking, treating him like some unruly younger brother, citing Eileen Snape at him as if the woman raised her herself.

He remembered her tending to her youngest in his parents' bedroom. The cups of coffee, the relentless push like a joint into the socket. Even the soup. Grace herself was something like the werewolf: gripping people between her teeth, shaking them apart, spreading the curse.

There was blood between them, old and new. Severus went to sit, dizzy at the prospect of being known. In only a few days, he was different. He knew them in some unshakable way and cared.

"Their nan thought Baby New Year was the devil's spawn—she could be that way about things. The most Christian woman your ever heard of, pushing an abortion like fuckin' Avon."

"Baby Who?"

"And you stop there. That's what I called him, 'Baby New Year.' And he said his name is just Harry? Not short for—okay, alright. Harry. I've known some Harry's. Kinda plain."

"Yes, as opposed to his illustrious sire, Chuck."

"Don't be a prick, you."

Potter, as loathed as he was to Severus, was for them a lost member of a wandering tribe. At best, he was better off without them. And at worst, they had failed to protect him. Severus could know how that ate away. And he at least had some deaths to mourn over. They hadn't even a baby's proper name until Potter's letter, over twenty years later.

Albus robbed them of that peace.

"You killed the guy before you even knew what he did," followed Zinnia suspiciously. She narrowed her gaze as she urged her mother to a chair. "For shit's sake, woman, sit down!"

"He was asking for it," Severus explained. "Grace, do sit."

"It’s a ruthless way to say it," she grumbled, “but I can agree. He was askin' for it, given he went around stealin’ poor people's babies."
"No, I’m not being metaphorical. He quite earnestly insisted. He was dying of a prolonged illness and considering many outcomes, asked me to kill him. He even said 'please.'"

"That's...fucked up, Rev."

"Hm. He could be a vicious pragmatist.” Severus held Grace's glare. She came over red with outrage. "I truly didn’t know, nor was I of a mind or position then to hold him accountable, even if I did."

"He’s—he was—your friend. You said he was basically the Pope, but he hurt people!” Grace ignored her eldest offering a chair, and moved instead to grip Severus' forearm.

He jumped at the rough thumb over his—over where the Dark Mark used to be. It had faded now to be almost invisible. The brown thumb over top stood out more than anything.

He thought of her like Narcissa, a frantic woman seeking her son. He laid a hand over hers, squeezing once timidly before trying to slide it off. Grace caught onto his wrist, now palm flat against his brand, refusing to budge. Severus grunted and when the two of them started wrestling by the fridge, Zinnia grabbed her mother by the arms and forcibly sat her at the kitchen table.

"Yeah, he hurt people,” Zinnia declared, “So did the Pope. Geez, you're gettin' more and more like Nan. There's no point in arguin' about a dead man.” She pulled out a chair for herself and plunked down with a gusty sigh.

"It's done! Quit pickin' at it."

Grace started to explain, when the front door squealed and slammed shut. Small rubber soles slapped up the hallway, light pants preceding Grace's youngest child into the kitchen. The girl appeared, winded, stopping just at the threshold so abruptly she nearly spilled over.

"Fred!,” the girl gasped.

"What happened?,” Zinnia prompted. "Why ain't he with ya?"

Rain trickled down the girl's chin and onto the floor. Severus' lip curled, welcoming this irritation over the onus of sentimentality. He didn't let Zinnia's immediate concern faze him. He knew firsthand how protective she was of that yeti. Still he tuned in to the girl's reply, only meaning to be curious:

"He's,” more panting, “At the park! Fighting a pervert!"

"What!?” Grace was back on her feet, running for the knife block. She pulled a blade from the slotted wood with a hard scrape and spun back to face the little girl, who nodded vigorously.

"Quick, where's the park!?"

"Wait!,” her daughter cried at her mother crossing the cramped kitchen in a leap. “He says he's magic!"

'Rev—!” But Zinnia saw something in Severus' demeanor that gave her pause.

She and her mother carried on the pause and then each shook her head at the state of him. Zinnia dashed from the table, thumping down the basement steps. Severus rose to his feet as she returned, a sickeningly familiar bat in hand, as well as a fistful of his dirty clothes.
She threw the clothes at him, which he caught against his chest.

"I meant to say earlier, you left these in the hall bathroom. Wash 'em, they stink." Then she followed her mother and sister as the girl led them out into the street.

Severus looked down at himself and grimaced. The wizard in the park could very well be the oaf in Latvia. The fool probably confused his Fred for Severus in a weak disguise.

Idiot or not, any attacker arriving today met him greatly disadvantaged. He hadn't much ability to cast without falling insensate. In his outfit, Severus appeared about as Muggle as he felt. The Dark wizard would grip no hearts with fear, least of all one set on killing him.

He mulled over his dirty clothes, gruesome articles they now were. He might at least intimidate. The wizard changed quickly into his musty, blood-stiffened shirt and trousers. Keeping the boots, he threw on the brown trench that hung on the coat tree, itself coated in dust. Severus swiped an umbrella from the plastic bucket-turned-stand and trudged out into the rain.

Severus apprehended the women and girl part way through the woods. They huddled by a decimated few bushes, yards from a part in the trees. He crept closer, umbrella low over his face, eavesdropping on their rapid hissing in case the whole of them were a threat. He listened for signs of Imperius or Death Eaters under guise.

"It's got our whole fuckin' names on it!"

"Zed, I said watch your damn mouth! Laney, don't repeat that."

"What is this shit?!"

"I swear to God."

They're fine, he realized blandly.

Severus announced his arrival by clearing his throat. With a slash, Grace leapt between him and her daughters, knife held aloft. He raised his brows, lifting the umbrella to show his face. The group relaxed, except the child, who dipped behind a tree. He snorted at her antics, glad he might still inspire fear.

"Why've you stopped?" He approached carefully, scanning the surrounding woods for enemies.

"The baby found some stuff," explained Zinnia. The ex-con showed him the broom in hand with angry befuddlement. Severus recognized it as for flying, although not the model.

It resembled what the youngest Weasley flew, from what he could tell from last Cup's news. Its handle angled sharply and the bristles coiled in that same peculiar way. He remembered complaining about it aloud to no one when he first saw the silly thing in the Prophet.

So, there is a wizard, he thought, fist tightening on the umbrella handle. This is bad.

"And this paper—Laney, give it here!" Grace beckoned to the shrinking child tucked in the trees.

Severus only remembered his garb moments later, when the girl averted her eyes with an audible gulp. He braced for a swell of thoughts that didn't come thanks to her looking away. Absurdly, the man edged away as well, although he tried to seem unbothered.

A square of parchment was soon unfolded and hidden behind from below. He groused, "Enough,
foolish brat," as he squinted in the dark to examine it.

He roughly detailed the shape of continents—a map? On it, he confirmed that yes, his and the Hedgerots' names were spelled out, first, middle, and last.

"'Candace'?", he asked Zinnia. The ill-natured woman spat on the ground. Grace shoved her, offended.

Severus returned to the map with a smirk, reading its header aloud. He didn't make it far. "'Harry J —!' It's Potter's!"

Severus snarled and snatched at the parchment. Laney ducked and ran into the clearing, parchment waving.

"It's—wait!" Grace lowered the knife to rest on her leg, and covered her mouth, aghast. She didn't even rush out after her youngest into the clearing. She stood frozen, suddenly overcome.

"He knows us!," the girl shouted to Merlin-knows as she ran up to a black mound in the grass. The heap strained and flopped to one side. Fred tried to roll over and plopped on his backside, losing to the slippery mud.

"What is your fool child doing?!!" As he asked, the girl spun on her toes and pointed at them.

The three adults cursed and dove out of sight.

Severus hissed, incensed. Despite proof based on her diction, the child was either simple, or more likely, cursed to comply. He searched the grass for other people, looking for this purported pervert wizard. He acknowledged they might also be invisible, glad for the rain as a tell. However, as he watched, a hand nodded drunkenly from the grass right beside Fred and the girl.

A forefinger reached, only for her—Marisleny—to pull the map away.

Not cursed then, he reasoned, only dense.

She'd scurried from Severus like he might eat her, only to traipse right by a stranger uncowed. The difference was most assuredly Fred lain there beside her.

Suddenly, the man lolling next to the yeti sat up at something the little girl said. Severus' spine snapped straight, the wizard fuming, recognizing the idiot who now hurried onto all fours.

Potter hadn't aged a day since the Battles: still bony and unkempt and nowhere near his proper place. The boy's chin sported some sad attempt at stubble, or it might've been dirt peppering his face and his feckless jaw, hung open in shock.

Severus seethed.

"Fox!"

Zinnia, broom and bat in hand, surfaced from the forest. Seeing the stranger next to her brother spurred her into menacing action. Her back arched, and her shower of frizzed hair could've crackled with the fury she radiated.

Grace wafted along in her wake, numbly watching the scene. She tapped an absent rhythm on her thigh with the knife blade, mud staining her socks and slippers. Severus worried distantly that the day may have broken her when, blinded by rage, Zinnia stalked into the clearing.
Diffused, rain-white sun drew out Severus' rusty, dry blood on the pitted metal of her bat. Happening on some bit of charity, Severus respected her fair mindedness, and that she reserved the bat for all her enemies, whether or not they were him. With deep regret at seeing the fear on Potter's face and know he’d need to intervene, he called out to her.

As expected, she didn’t hear him. More’s the pity. A second later and he nearly grew sick for Potter's part. Fred sat up, said something indiscernible, and slumped over, unignorably unconscious. Severus felt the plummeting black take over the elder sister's mind even from yards back, still in the woods.

*She might kill him,* he thought, *hard as his head may be.* The young witch started crying. Clinical distance said nothing of the situation beyond, “Oop,” leaving Severus to play referee.

His only solace was the crying triggering life in Grace again. She lurched toward her child, making room for Severus to step out from behind.

He moved with purpose, assuming as much ambient fear and outrage and layering it on top of himself like extra clothes. He honed this skill with decades of practice, adjusted to children or Death Eaters as needs presented. He came through at his full height, lifting the umbrella to meet eyes with the living, breathing aggravation in the dirt.

"POTTER!," Severus boomed.

Above the park, the sky fissured, throwing down lightning that flashed white-hot through buckets of rain. It seared an afterimage of the frightened idiot into the very air. Severus breathed deeply—for one moment, vindicated.

"Err, afternoon, sir! It's been, uh. It's been ages!"

*Oh, to never hear that voice again. What bliss,* he aggrieved. *"Sir," ha! Now, it's "sir."* Exactly like his damned father, the boy didn't know when to quail or quit. The idiot Gryffindor stood despite his obvious terror, trembling like a newborn fawn.

Severus sneered as Potter tossed his head to and fro, trying to decide which threat to tackle first. Like a spectator at a game, Severus wanted to shout to mind Zinnia, who stalked closer, dropping the broom to grip the bat with both hands.

Potter surprised him by grasping the situation rather quickly.

"No, one second! He's fine, he's fine!" The boy aimed his wand at the passed out Fred.

"Enneverate!"

The yeti sprung awake, sputtering. He looked around, saw Potter standing there, and grabbed the boy's leg in his hands. He looked like he might crush it, given Potter's pained yelp of, "Freddy!? Why!?"

"Zeddie, don't! He's just some kid! I'm fine!"

When as expected, words and visible facts did nothing, Fred released the boy and shoved him, yelling at him to run. Potter measured Zinnia up, dithering before being forced back by a hard swing. The bat completed a wide arc, cutting the air by Potter's head, spraying her other family with tossed rain as it hit the wet air so fast, it whistled.
While Fred wrapped Marisleny in his jacket and rocked her to calm, he shouted at the maddened Zinnia to leave off. Grace arrived by his side, gesturing with the blade while she too yelled, "Zeddie, stop!," clutching at the girl in her son’s coat. Now fully revived, she shouted to warn her other daughter back, to no avail.

Severus, about to step in, stole a moment to enjoy firstly, that there was no Death Eater attack underway, and secondly, Potter's pleading squawks.

"Snape! Snape, stop her!" The idiot puffed along, knees up, elbows pumping. One might see where he'd been a decent athlete once upon a time.

Severus held out an empty hand, grinned wickedly and shrugged. He was least able to stop the rampaging woman, if her brother and mother couldn't.

"Just go, Potter!," he shouted. A bit of his anger rekindled when he growled, "You're not even meant to be here!"

"But no one followed me! I—!" Then the twit slid on the wet ground and landed splat in the muck.

Zinnia had begun to drag along, still recovering from her ordeal of last night. She rallied, but fell short of hitting him, lucky for Potter. Instead, she sunk to the ground with a groan, eyes rolling back into her skull.

The bat bounced away, glancing off a rock and pinging like a final bell calling the match. A draw: zilch up. Perhaps Potter boasted a technical win, accounting for that he remained intact and within his senses. Something might also be said for his agility or stamina, but not by Severus, obviously. The older wizard only scowled and walked to the mess of them lying in the grass.

"I do not speak for my own health, Potter," he imparted, looking down his nose at the irritant. Potter panted, eyelids fluttering. He stared past Severus at the clouds. A quietude possessed him that made the other man uncomfortable, like he was mired beyond computation.

"Leave," Severus finished with a sniff. Potter muttered something. "What was that, insolent brat?"

"Harry-hunting. It's just like the Dursley's."

Potter's stubborn but lost look so strongly resembled Grace, and with Lily's eyes—Severus sighed and backed away. The boy stood gingerly, staggered and caught his balance. He made to brush himself off, and smeared mud down his front before seeing it was a lost cause.

"I'll go." Potter kept his back to them as he said this. Carefully, he rounded the clearing to fetch his broom.

Severus turned away and sure enough, Grace came up to him. She sported the exact, hard set determination from last night, glancing from him to Potter and back.

"It's Harry, right," she pressed. "That's him, he came here."

*That map of Potter's...one more troublemaking artifact,* Severus ascertained. *I'll need to ask how he came to acquire it. I suppose I'll have ample opportunity.*

To Grace, he nodded shortly. There was no point in lying, after all. The woman handed Fred the kitchen knife and tucked some soaked curls behind her ears. Shyly, like a girl meeting her beau's parents, she leaned into the quiet trailing Potter's back.
"H—," she coughed and tried again. "Harry!"

The boy turned and saw his mother. Severus couldn't help but wonder how Potter learned of her. Painfully, it seemed. Whatever the boy had cobbled together over his expressions caved into something forlorn and abandoned. If Severus didn't know Potter to be a terrible liar, he would've thought it artificial.

Because no one could possibly look so orphaned. But then, Severus had been alone at the churchyard in Dover. He knew nobody who witnessed the look of him there, leaving his mother behind.

He watched Grace go to Potter. Whatever she called out was engulfed by a crack of thunder. The park was small, and so soon she approached near enough to place hands on the boy's face. Severus expected they were calloused and overwarm, and could only imagine the contrast to the leeching cold.

"M...sorry!" One could hardly hear it over the storm. Potter shook his head fervently, and pressed the woman's hands against his cheeks.

Out of such deep grief like Severus never knew he fostered, Potter summoned an eager, guileless smile.

_Lily_, Severus' sadness stirred. He shushed it.

"Who the hell is that?!," yelled Fred over the lashing rain. Severus thought to say, "Baby New Year," but couldn't find the gall.

"Your brother," he said brusquely. Then Severus turned to pick Zinnia from the grass, where he worried she'd fallen asleep.

"Enough dawdling! Help me with this hellbeast before she drowns in a puddle."
Breaking

Chapter Summary

Ginny overhears her attackers’ plans. Harry’s reunion has mixed results. Severus is met with his poor attitude and the state of his late mother’s legacy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry watched the three of them from the corner of his eye. As he walked arm-in-arm with Grace—she said call her Grace!, he privately cheered—the funereal trio flanking them traded insults and complaints as the rough-hewn family trudged through the woods.

"Ugh, I'm gonna sick up." So spoke the demon lady, Zinnia, Zed. Harry heard her name a dozen times as she chased him around the park.

Freddy had picked her up from the mud and slung her across his back in a fireman's carry. As they picked their way over roots and fallen branches, she dangled woefully over the man's sodden and bunched hood. Harry mostly saw gangly, sweatered limbs and her leaf-littered hair, with one part green, sweaty grimace swinging in and out of view.

He sighed through his nose. In the minutes between shock and buzzing excitement of finding his mother, he strained on the edge of dislike for anyone else. He fought not to close Grace’s eldest out of his heart. After all, he’d just found out he had an older sister!

Just a half-sister. Not much better than a cousin really, pushed an adamant gloom in his spirit.

Zed and Snape had done a horribly accurate rendition of Dudley and his jeering gang back in Privet Drive. Harry had felt every bit the scrawny orphan when bullied, slipping and splatting in the mud.

So much for the mighty hero, he snarked to himself unkindly thinking back to half an hour ago. Now he’d ended up hurting his own pride, and struggled not to make at least a bit of that the sick woman's fault.

I can't bungle having siblings, he coaxed his hardy weed of resentment. It persisted smugly, unswayed.

Okay, well, comparing her to Dudley doesn't help. Granted, he hadn't been afraid of his cousin since he was eight. Years of their relationship boiled down to cautious, but uncowed.

Similarly with Snape. After realizing rather quickly that the man hated him, it was easy for Harry to carry on with courage. He hadn't known the man enough as a firstie to fear his scorn more than any other adult’s. And honestly, once he did know him, upon coming into Cokeworth, he’d leapt on reminding Harry of how much of his scorn the younger man already had.

So it soured Harry's stomach to feel four feet tall, lying in some puddle, rain soaking through to his shirt while being pitied and cackled at. He felt stupid. Panic trickled into kicked and down and smaller than a matchbox.
Harry stared up at the rain, going numb and growing sure that his hopes were draining out of him. Snape having a part should have tipped him off that he'd have no wins.

But then, meeting his mother, forgetting Snape was even there, he looked up and saw...what was it?

Defeat?, he pondered.

"Oh, hrk! Fox, I'm serious, put me down!"

Harry glanced back, expecting to stop, but the group walked on, unbothered. Freddy resettled the woman's weight on his shoulders with a grunt. He then began walking on the balls of his feet, bouncing as he hiked, humming merrily.

"Nobody said to leg it after some kid after rearrangin' all your damn organs," shared the large, grinning man in a sing-song, "It's what you get."

"Fuck y—," but then Freddy bounced her and she landed with a lurching, "Hurgh!," dissolving into tearful cursing.

Harry was caught watching and cringed at the wide, blithe smile thrown his way. While he fumbled with whether he was meant to enjoy Zed's discomfort, Freddy settled into a neutral tilt of lips and a raised eyebrow. He laid his measured gaze on Harry's hands, brushing their mother's side.

The young wizard shied back around, wondering for the millionth time if he was welcome. He was still sore from picking up his things, chin on his chest, struggling to conjure one of Hermione's tight hugs and Ron's outrage on his behalf, and only feeling cold, and hearing rain and awkward silence.

"What's wrong?"

Harry looked at Grace, cheeks burning. "Uh."

Leonine, she bent her neck into the window between them, shouting back at her two eldest, "You can quit gripin' now or walk for yourselves, it's up to you. Freddy, put ya damn sister down if you're gonna be doin' all that!"

"She can't walk," Freddy replied, patting Zee's muddy calf affectionately.

"Every pissin' thing hurts," Zed complained. Her head swung up to shoot a watery glare sideways, at the older wizard who'd since gone silent. "I thought I was fixed!"

"I don't know what you mean," Snape sniffed, clearly lying. Harry snorted and then quickly looked away.

"Pardon? What was that, Potter?"

"Nothing."

Harry faced forward, lips sealed. After a beat, Snape returned to griping about Harry's map, which of course he'd yet to return. He bristled at the man confiscating his precious Potter heirloom—well, a copy of one at least—and finding it lacking.

"If it shows all of Potter's relatives, where are his aunt's ilk?," he growled. "This idiot said blood
magic, and I see—but no Dursleys. Potter!"

Harry jumped but didn’t respond.

"Did you draw this map yourself? No, you couldn't write in a straight line if it cured world hunger, no matter how the nonsensical nature of this wretched thing suggests you might've. Who did you commission this from, a chimp with a quill? This is rubbish."

No, this is great. We're getting along, we're burying the hatchet, he thought, looking to the sky for forbearance.

"I don't know, sir," Harry called back in a deadpan. 'It's just an ancient, enchanted treasure from the family I never knew. Y'know, on account of their grisly demise. I think you'd remember that, actually."

"Don't act too smart, Potter. You'll strain a muscle."

Snape held the map a scant inch from his wrinkling nose, worrying Harry amid making his eyes roll. The man's scowls were so fierce he might burn a hole through the parchment: "If it only shows magical relatives, I can excuse it listing the girl, and this ambulatory disaster as of a month ago."

"Oi," disputed Zed.

"But why include Grace and Fred, if—," Snape cut himself off and pressed Harry's mother, "And you're sure none of your brood have ever received a letter from Hogwarts? Besides Potter, obviously."

"We're almost to the house," Grace shared with Harry, completely ignoring the potions master as she patted her son's knuckles.

"You can eat some, then help me look for my bag of old pictures. That's for family, and I been meanin' to have 'em framed. I doubt you'll be wantin' a peek in the albums I've got now."

"Are you ignoring me?"

She smiled ruefully, in private jest. "Of course, those'd be the only photos I've got scrapbooked. Good on ya, Gracie." It was as if Snape had never spoken.

"You, woman! This is a serious matter!"

Harry leaned in conspiratorially. She lent him a curious ear. "I think Snape's trying to say something."

Grace only raised her eyebrows, suggesting that, despite appearances, she hadn't in fact gone deaf. He swallowed a grin, lightened by petty vengeance.

Snape finally growled, giving her up for a loss and turned to Freddy. "When did you turn eleven?"

"Is this a horoscope thing? I'm a Gemini."

"I can and will hurt you. Remember, you provoked me. Zinnia!"

"He was '81, so I must've been...ugh." She gulped, smacking Freddy's bulky arms. "Lemme down, in the bushes! Hurry up, I've gotta take a dump!"

Losing all composure, Harry spat, and bent, chortling into his free arm. Freddy chuckled and
jostled her again, making a show of it. Grace sucked her teeth at their antics, but let it go without comment.

"Hold it in, Zeds! We're almost inside."

For the rest of their walk, Harry hesitated to count himself with the back half of the procession. Trailing them through the trees, the smiling giant, the fuming terror, and Snape kept rivaling one another for best Inferi look-alike.

Snape managed a tight lead, with his hollow cheeks, burrowing glare, and the clothes.

Harry's gut heaved, as Grace lapsed into quiet after rubbing at the odd scars on his hands.

"Is this a tattoo?," she asked, pointing at it. He looked down, eyebrow quirked.

"What, oh. No, not really." Realizing suddenly that so many of his stories were upsetting ones, he simply looked back at Snape, who stared unfathomably back at him. "It's just a, erm, yeah, a scar. It's old."

"Alright, and this is?," she followed, tapping his forehead. Harry jerked away and hurriedly parted his hair so it fell over his lightning bolt scar.

"Yeah," was all he replied. At this, Grace turned to Snape, too, with a furrowed brow. The older wizard curled a lip at her, although somewhat half-heartedly, and tucked his nose back into the map.

Maybe because he'd been laughing earlier, and his emotions only thought it fair to knock him down a peg, Harry started flashing back to the tear-streaked mess in the Shack. Snape himself watched him hawkishly over the map's edge while Grace turned away.

The uncanny stack of differences over stark similarities unsettled him. Lank sightless eyes had relit with the same old, burning dislike; hair still limp, now graying; spidery fingers twitching against the dingy black of his pants. Harry broke from the prolonged stare, shivering despite layers of charms.

He still looks dead, just older, he thought. It's not what happened, obviously, but...it feels like he never left that place. Merlin, he's a nightmare. The only new thing is the coat, and I mean...

Harry thought on its greasy stains and sighed. He self-soothed with the surety of Grace's elbow locked with his. His birth mother, which boggled his mind to think, felt deceptively solid beside him, given the facts of her: how unreal it felt to be adopted, with close living blood he'd never met.

He recognized her instantly from the sketch and the calendar, as her features hadn't aged much at all over the decades. Smile lines bracketed her mouth, which was now at rest as she'd seemed lost in her thoughts, although her grip on him never slackened.

His mother had pinned him to her side with only that, an elbow and a lean. It felt practiced, unthinkingly skillful, like how Hermione never dropped a book or how Ginny always threw things in perfect arcs. She had a professional grip.

It must've been from years of wrangling kids bigger than her.

I'm someone's kid. Harry wiped his free hand across his mouth, embarrassed for how he must look. Was he too dumbstruck? Maybe. Snape would tell him, if he asked.
But how could he not just stumble along, jaw hanging. She had accepted him so easily! And the wistful sadness, that quiet, forlorn thing he thought they shared the second he saw her picture: it passed between them in such a physical way when her warm fingers touched his cheeks in the park.

It existed there now, sandwiched between Harry's resentment and small fears, and Grace's far-off, commanding silence.

Harry was back to reeling at the idea he could be adopted. Except actually, that was simple to accept alongside Ginny's logic, that James and Lily remained his parents in any definition.

What floored Harry now was being family. He had never believed himself family to anyone without some doubts. He looked nothing like his aunt, or his cousin, nor the Weasleys, who took him in just like family, and whom he hoped maybe one day to call his in-laws.

However, he and the girl, Laney, resembled Grace so strongly that he worried intermittently if he was being had.

Was it a trick, Polyjuice or glamours, or maybe pure coincidence? What could make three complete strangers look so completely alike?

When he stretched, he saw the girl tripping along ahead of them, clutching the short bat in both arms. She kept herself apart from the chatter and minded the woods. From just a silhouette, Harry could see so much of his child self. She preceded them onto the worn, cobbled street.

Then Harry was back looking over his shoulder, studying Snape who muttered ominously at the map. Beside him, Harry's half-siblings fought to keep the eldest in line. The three were so frightening in their likeness, like altered versions of the same person: except for Freddy's honest good vibe negating his fearsome exterior.

It's just genetics. The idea shouldn't mean much, but it made his heart race. To not stick out for once? For taking after someone not to cause heartache? Like those nights with Erised, Harry could stand in that forever.

But then arose the next, harrowing question: if he and Grace were family, as were Snape and Grace's children, who was the ex-spy to him?

"Crucio! Damn bitch!"

The curse cooked the air as it blazed through Ginny's hood, barely missing the skin of her cheek. She shouted wordlessly as it spread over the enchanted fabric, lighting up the cowl in burning red.

The witch dove right and spun into a barrel roll, yanking the cloak off while throwing a blind Stunner to her left. The robe clasp, catching at her neck, pulled the hood back over her nose and mouth, and choked her with a spray of hot sparks and cloying, sizzling air.

I have to lose them before Cokeworth!

Without the time to check her map, she banked right again to avoid an acid teal hex reeking of burnt hair. No, in fact, it was her hair that was burning! Unable to shake the cloak, which had been cursed to the point of ignition, Ginny cursed and slashed with her wand, cutting the cloak in two.

Pieces of robe fluttered away, the wet, whip-quick winds now buffeting her ears and body, snuffing out the tiny fires on her suit. Luckily it lent her some spell immunity, or else the searing lick of Cruciatus that singed her hair would—
"Too close!

"Move, moron! Bombarda!"

Her broom bucked and shuddered while to her left, an assailant's broom exploded in white light, too slow to dodge his partner's straying attack. The weedy man screamed as wood shrapnel tore off mask, robe, and skin.

Instead of falling away, giving her room, he fell toward her as the pincer move the two attempted became one man grabbing at her Cleaver's handle while the other plummeted toward the ground.

Still he managed to blow a fist-sized hole through her broom bristles, sending her into a spiral, having collected himself enough to curse her one last time before Apparating midair.

Ginny pulled up in a sharp incline, glad for a sporting broom designed to combat fouls. The wood broke the other man's grip, who held on with a feral snarl, the slanted handle crashing into his face with a whap and a crunch.

The mask flew off, revealing the portlier man's drink-swollen nose, broken and spraying blood into the wind. She recoiled, feeling the sick droplets hit her face.

"I'LL KILL YOU," bellowed the last man. He meant it in his glare, and was also far from the first Death Eater to threaten her life.

Ginny screamed with the effort of fighting the wind, her pummeled arm wanting to give, her ribs on fire. Barely gripping her wand, praying the ripping slick air wouldn't take it. She cursed him as he spun upwards and she careened into the forest below.

She crashed through the canopy, fortunately with only a few scrapes, curled on her injured side. Wheezing, she peered up at the broken branches illustrating her fall to earth. Above her, her Cleaver teetered sadly on one such branch, snapped in the middle, bristles more scrub brush than broom.

"Dammit," she breathed. Then a crack echoed through the trees.

"Where is she?! Find her!" Booted feet trampled over the ground nearby.

Swearing, Ginny bent her fist backwards and spelled herself invisible. The camouflage spread slower than usual over her, starting at her chest, it being all she could reach. As it oozed its chilly way over her face and hands, she rolled onto her stomach, and crawled on her belly toward a hollow log.

Ginny moved cautiously but quickly, wincing all the while. She huffed at the terrified look of a hare seeing only legs creeping through the ferns. Those melded into the twigs and mud just as she dragged her body into the dead tree.

*Please nothing bite me!* *Please nothing bite me!*, she chanted silently, spitting out spores and detritus.

Something wiggled along her midriff and squealed angrily. She thanked every god she could name that her suit covered her up to her collarbone.

"I'm sorry for wrecking your tree," she whispered down at the squealing thing. Whatever it was burrowed under her stomach and let her be.
She had wedged her entire body into the log when footsteps stomped around above. Someone wore
and kicked as they wrongfooted a hop over her. Ginny wiped spider silk from her eye and squinted
through the huge splits in the wood.

*Black robes, skinned knuckles, is he*—and then a bloodshot eye peered in. She held her breath, and
waited. The Death Eater, one she couldn't recognize for the life of her, eventually moved away,
cursed, and dropped his full weight on the tree.

"Piss! Damn! Potter's girl got away." His complaint was clear through the huge split, through
which Ginny could see his leg bouncing in irritation.

His bouncing shook the log, causing all manner of skittering and buzz. The jittering wood
sprinkled dirt and a few busy, exploratory beetles into her hair and nose. The witch squeezed her
lips shut, disgusted.

"This shite isn't worth what he's payin' us," the thin man barked. "Look at this! I'll have to regrow
my whole fuckin' face!"

"You fhucked thats up, thats and the fhuckin' owl." This voice was nastier, nasally and whistling,
like every tooth in its mouth was loose. This must have been the other man, the one whose nose
she broke.

He kicked his partner's makeshift bench.

"Ghet up! Fhind 'er! She knows our fhaces! Whe're ghonna kill this binch, 'fore she wharns
Shnape!"

"Episkey. There, you sound bloody ridiculous." Skinny shuffled his feet, which were out of sight.
"You're just wantin' payback for lettin' some girlie tag you. Who cares, let her go. She'll think we're
Deathtie scum, papers go wild. People'll see they still need us and we get off the shite shift—well,
not us, us. We just get paid for bringin' him Snape's head."

"Ack!" Stout snorted and hocked a deep-red loogie on the ground. "Fuck you, we'll charge more
after we nab her.

"'Cause if that bitch gets to her rookie brother, we're done for. And I ain't tryna be *in* the jail *with*
the scum, so you better. Get. Up. Before I *get* you up!"

Ginny sucked air through her nose, head fitting to burst as she'd forgotten to breathe. Whoever
these men were, they were only posing as Death Eaters. Of course they knew her and Ron, if they
knew Harry from the papers, but that begged the question of how they knew Harry through Snape.

*They're hired hitmen, she thought, and amateur ones, if I had to guess.* She could give herself some
credit with being a good fighter. However, her escaping two grown men twice told her they weren't
exactly seasoned killers.

*And whoever hired them has it out for Snape. He must know Harry and him are connected.*

They were probably instructed to stake Harry out for Merlin knew how long or for what reasons.
Stout said to catch Ginny before she warned Snape, as if she knew why and what of. She couldn't
help but think that, as well as amateurish, they also weren't terribly well informed.

"Hey!," Skinny whined. "See, I think I Splinched my bloody toenails! Aw, I'm askin' for double!"

Whoever was paying them had settled. Even then, the pair had some tricks.
If they can Apparate while falling, they're not your average wizard. She went rigid as the log rocked. Skinny stood up, grumbling about his feet, while Stout pushed him to keep searching. After a few minutes, and a few more, when she heard nothing, Ginny cast a wordless Revelio and confirmed the coast was clear.

Doubling back, they're also not really fighters, she mused as she crept backwards on to soft ground. They don't know the field and can't hit moving targets.

She shook dirt and bugs from her hair as her mind worked. Revelio was a basic spell for people fighting in terrain. They had learned it from the likes of Hermione and Moody, who always planned for hidden enemies and ambushes. It was standard fare to anyone used to spell fights to check for people.

These two fought like all their enemies had been nailed to the floor.

Besides that, they had no clue how to fight around each other, especially not on brooms. One man blew the other up! How they hoped to kill Snape as they were when Voldemort hadn't was frankly a mystery. They must be relying on numbers and brute force.

Stout, the marginally more skilled one, had only clipped her once. She had been stood on a roof holding Hermione's injured barn owl. Ginny figured they must have shot it down at a far distance, but she had reached it and the letter before they could retrieve it.

They must've spotted her slight ripple, seen the bird move, and shot.

She sat back on her heels, holding her ribs. At the time, she thought she saw camera flashes and landed on that roof. Now she believed she must have confused the spells going wide for paparazzi. Then while she stood there, stunned at the state of the owl, she'd caught a blasting curse to her side.

She shot one back, and Apparated home. Finding Harry missing, she hunted him through London until she saw him whizz away at the city limits. Knowing him, she guessed where he must've gone.

Their pursuit of her since then had been merciless.

And they hadn't traveled along the same route as Ginny, having only found her again halfway to Manchester. Without the owl, they must've had a map of their own.

They seemed shocked at the time, then enraged. And just now, they hadn't mentioned Harry ahead of her, so possibly hadn't even seen him leave first.

They already know where Snape is. They were after him, she realized. I might've just bought them some time.

Wincing, Ginny stood and regretted letting the men get away. She could have eventually followed them to Snape. It possibly happened for the best, as it would be impossible to tail them silently through the brambles, and she had no doubts about the pair being dangerous.

If they got her a third time, she might be done for.

She dug around for her map, and realized it had been in her cloak. The Chaser slapped a palm to her forehead, believing none of her luck. She could Apparate back to London and get another copy. But she didn't how she'd return to this random, nameless patch of woods, and didn't want to risk it being unlisted.
Well, I know I'm not far from Cokeworth, she thought. She had crashed fairly close by.

Considering her only option, she followed her wand north to a delivery road. As soon as her feet hit gravel, she rallied and took the road at a painful jog, in search of a highway.

Ginny wandered into a manicured residential area as the road curved into a cobbled street. She passed a rain-speckled gazebo, stepping under to escape the weather. She took a minute to catch her breath, surveying an intersection of well-tended, white houses and quaint shops ahead of her.

Bidding on help, she headed toward the shops.

Muggles with bright umbrellas darted in and out of doors. She resumed apace an elderly couple waving down a cab nearby. The witch passed in front of the building they'd left.

Her stomach growled and she groaned, drawn to the door, which was propped-open to allow an outpouring of tinny radiator heat and the smell of frying bread.

She looked up at the hanging red sign. It dubbed the place the Railview Hotel, although it more resembled a bed-and-breakfast. Regardless, Ginny felt her battered body all at once, and wondered when she might rest.

On the wall hung a brass placard touting its favor by the Cokeworth Tourism Board. She had jogged clear into town.

"I probably could ask for directions. No point in getting more lost," she reasoned. Her ravenous stomach gurgled in agreement.

"Of course you'd think so. Focus, you."

She tiptoed into the front door, squeezing past a family of four juggling bags onto a cart. Stealing a look about the close, carpeted lobby, a child's complaints covered her cold shiver and sneeze. She met eyes with a calico cat loafing on the front desk and startled. The cat's ears bent toward her as she shushed it playfully. Its tail gave a lazy curl as it stared on with slitted, green eyes.

"Where's the bathroom?," Ginny mouthed at it, creeping invisibility up to the desk. The calico rumbled, permitting a scritch under the chin, making the receptionist chuckle.

"Playing with ghosts again, muffin?," the woman chuckled, giving the animal a pat. Ginny snuck past, glimpsing the sign to the ladies' room by the stairs.

Once in a stall, she transfigured one wall into a full-length mirror. She then undid her camouflage and took stock of her appearance. Ragged and bruised, a little charred as she expected. Harrumphing, Ginny set to work with glamours and freshening charms, turning her clothes Muggle, her hair short and brown, her face bland and unmemorable.

Then she tucked her wand into the waistband of her new tights and gave herself a thumbs up. She strode out to receptionist again, moving slowly to lessen her limp. "Excuse me?"

The woman at the front desk folded her hands neatly. Ginny noted the cat hair on her blazer cuffs and smiled.

"Yes, how might I help you today?," she greeted sweetly.

"Yeah, I'm looking for somewhere nearby. Do you have any maps of the area?"
"Oh!" The woman chirped. She reached over the desk and tapped on a plastic shelf of brochures. "If you're interested in local indoor attractions, given the dreary day, we have a pamphlet of our towns most popular spots, riight...here! Where in particular would you like to go?"

"Oh, um." Ginny unfolded the pamphlet being handed to her. She saw a top-down map of the town, with the downtown area circled, and stars by various restaurants and a museum.

Nothing, of course, marked the wizard part of town, where Snape might have been hidden. Instead, she saw the edges of the residential parts she passed through. This bit listed eastward towards the huge, closed-down mill.

The labor board hosted tours of it, apparently. Around it, the artist had simply rendered bushy trees and crooked squares for houses. Aside from the mill, there were no dotted foot paths, stars, or helpful banners. Just street names in tiny, cramped letters.

Well, it's a shot in the dark, but, she mused.

"This helps me, I think," Ginny thanked the receptionist. The woman looked on cheerfully. "I'm in town for my...uncle! But I forgot to save his address. Thanks."

She turned to leave and bent double as her stomach loosed another, mighty growl. The woman tittered, and pointed her to a table with hot water, tea bags, and little packages of crisps.

"Please take some! They're for guests," she smiled. Ginny nodded appreciatively and set upon the spread.

"Hopefully that'll tide you over. Where do you think you'll be going? I might could recommend some lunch places by there, if it'll be a while with your family."

"I think, uh." She popped open a bag of salty snacks, shoving some in her mouth. Offering a self-conscious grin, she unfolded the map with her free hand. She hunted down the street she had in mind. It slithered to the edge of town, beyond the mill, ending at the cusp of shaded woods.

"Spinner's End," Ginny finally answered, washing down the crisps with too-hot tea.

The woman's smile wobbled. The witch saw the cheer slide several inches down her face while her eyebrows shot up to her auburn dyed hairline.

Looks like I guessed right, she thought. She thanked her again for her help, leaving with all the snacks she could carry.

Severus grabbed the boy by the collar before he skipped into Severus' house. Potter sputtered, turning to give the former professor his most aggravatingly baffled look.

Severus glowered. He loathed that oafish expression. He hadn't missed it at all, as laughable an idea as missing any part of Potter was. However, if they had to speak, he might more have preferred defiance, disinterest or that sudden, inexplicable loneliness—anything but Potter looking any dumber than he already was.

He sent the rest of the group in first. The girl had long since disappeared into the living room. Potter made to follow, like he had erstwhile forgotten Severus' grip on his t-shirt.

I cannot believe I owe this nitwit my life.
No, he dissented. I owe Lucius and Narcissa. Potter is an auxiliary support, at best.

Without whom, argued a third voice, neither friend would have the resources to restore your best health. This apparent noise of reason wielded a Dumbledorean cadence. Given the ex-spy's new knowledge of the man's sins, Severus shook himself.

The others, Fred and Zinnia, filtered in around them. Grace stopped just inside the doorway, demanding an explanation. Severus sneered. As though she and her long-lost brat haven't chatted merrily the entire walk home.

"Potter, fetch the register." The boy ogled Severus, whose frown carved deeper into his face. More imbecilic shock. He needed the boy gone from his home. "Well? You've been so arrogant as to brag about your many treasures. Bring it here!"

"Are you serious?," Potter squawked, face flushing. "I talked about one measly book!"

He wasn't wrong. In a transparent play at modesty, the boy only mentioned that the infuriating map originated from the Potter family register, left to him, the bloodline's sole heir. Severus was sure Potter frothed to boast of his other countless treasures, once he convinced them of his humility.

The bitter man could only imagine the rambling wealth that had surrounded the brat since the war —lands, gold, jewels, and a loving catalogue of a grand blessed heritage.

Grace stood by, gritting her teeth. The older wizard eyed her, surprised she hadn't continued to intervene. With more care, perhaps, than he might have unobserved, he threw the boy away from the door, and pointed upwards, aiming west.

"Go," he snapped. Then he grinned with black humor. "With some haste, Potter. Lest you miss these darling chats with dearest mother."

Finally, a less gormless facade. Potter screwed up his face in a crimson-cheeked grimace. Severus let loose a spitting, "You're wasting time. You'll be let under my roof when you bring me something of some worth," and crossed his arms,undaunted.

The boy gasped, wounded, and vanished. He spun with such petulance that it sprayed wet gravel as far in as the hall. The sasquatch let out a low whistle, scratching his beard. A faint flush told him Zinnia had by now sped off to the toilet.

"If he doesn't come back," said Grace breathlessly. "I swear on everythin' I love..."

Severus winced, glad his back was to her. To whatever end, she seemed nearly afraid to join him at the threshold. Curling his freezing fingers into fists, he mumbled back, "You could've stopped me at any point."

"Could I." He grew nervous as a minute, then two ticked by with nothing else said.

He expected the nebulous, newborn closeness she'd assumed of him to wither. Severus tapped his foot, head and bones aching, and waited for all semblance of connection to crust over and fall at their feet.

She was testing me, he realized. It must have been why she finally let him lead. The rest of the minutes until Potter's return, Severus spent resisting his own gravity. He worked to exude impregnability, imagining himself as strong as the iron basement wall.

Except he bucked. Sweat collected in the creases of his fists.
"Maybe," Grace broke the silence.

The floorboards creaked and she was right behind him. He jolted at a hand touching his hunched back. It balled up his shirt, knuckles grinding into the knobs of his spine.

"Maybe, you should fuckin' mean it when you apologize for dead friends," she bit out.

She pulled back and he braced for a blow, chest tight. None came. They stood apart in the doorway, sagging when Potter finally popped back onto the curb.

"Sorry," the boy sulked, gripping a cloth-wrapped something under his arm. It knocked against the broom still slung across his back, pushing him forward. "I've got it here, but please take care of it. I just got it a couple days ago, and—."

"Keep it, we don't need it," Grace barked, giving him her palm.

Potter fidgeted, eyes affixed on hand. He then meekly reached out and held it, letting his mother reel him in.

"S'time to eat."

She cut Severus a poisonous, narrowed eye as she ushered the boy inside. "Don't ever turn him away from me again."

He scoffed, baring his teeth and looking off into the empty road. "As a matter of fact, I do need Potter's book t—."

"Nobody cares," interrupted Fred, leaning in the entrance of the sitting room. Loud tapping and electronic beeps sprung forth from the television. Severus nettled at the man's tried tone, like he was an unruly child.

"C'mon, man, don't push it."

"I mean, he can borrow it." Severus looked down his nose at Potter, who stared solemnly back. The boy's bent arm tensed under his scrutiny.

He could only think it Potter waiting for him to snatch the bundle and stomp it underfoot, with how still the brat became. It sounded forced when the boy mumbled, "If it's to let me in his house, I mean. Really, it's just a book."

"Spare me," Severus growled, slamming the front door shut.

He pushed by the lot of them, passed the girl pausing her flickering games on the telly, and, purely by accident, met her eye. "Avoidant," reverberated from her immature brain to his, and, suddenly ashamed to have less composure than an actual child, he finished his trek to the attic.

He slammed every door he encountered on his path to his room. He slammed the wardrobe door as well, having tossed his coat, boots, and ruined shirt inside. He dragged his arms into a fraying button-up and left it open over his vest.

Then he trembled by the unmade bed, beating back the urge to throw himself on it in tantrum.

"Shit! Shit!," Severus cursed at the rumpled, musty sheets. He wanted to kick and scream.

He took a deep breath, and then one more, laying the furious gasps in a line bordering sanity. He could never say what scared him. Only that needing Potter gone and feeling gifted by his return
blurred too much of Severus' sense of right.

He heard a clatter, and felt a cold tap against his ankle. The wizard backed up and swooped down to gather his cat.

She meowed indignantly, but remained flipped on her back, exposing her belly. He saw the marks where the reformed stray once nursed kittens, although what became of them he never cared to know.

*What'll you do now, you mewling infant,* jeered some hateful part of him—not quite Lucius, not his father either. Simply Severus. *Will you cry again?*

"Leave me be," he muttered to no one. Glad for her patience, he stroked his cat's long belly until he calmed.

Severus descended the stairs sometime in the early evening. He tried not to notice that he hadn't been called to dinner, although if he ever had before, he had ignored it. He stopped on the landing at hearing a burst of raucous laughter.

*Oh, enough,* he chastised his coward self. *They'll hardly run you out the house!*

Unless Potter has turned them against, needled his ever present counterpoint. Severus didn't even grace the thought with a response. He had spent hours cradling a hairless loaf to recovery from his own poor attitude.

He felt certain that the meanest one in the house was himself. He refused to let a bit of rejection rattle him.

Severus pressed on. He entered the sitting room with chin held aloft. The laughter faded as he came to a stop at the end of the coffee table, fist on hip. He swept the room to measure the handful of reactions.

He found Zinnia notably absent, with all else present, huddled around a pile of photographs. Severus glanced down at them and away, flicking his gaze from the bookshelves, to the overhead fan, back to the pictures, and then the game console, turned off and seemingly cooled.

Potter held fox-edged parchment, growing visibly uneasy, even with Severus catching him mid-grin.

The older man narrowed his eyes at the boy. What joke might he had cooked up at Severus' expense? The Hedgerots gathered round to have a hardy laugh at him, stuck up in the attic after a fit.

"Rev!," barked Fred with a beam of excitement. Severus turned to him, one brow raised. "Harry says ya used to poison children!"

"I didn't!" Potter threw up his hands, eyes bugging out behind his wire frames. "I did not say that!"

"He said you wanted to poison children," supplied Marisleny in the chair.

She hadn't joined her family on the couch. Instead, she separated out her own pile of pictures to peruse at her own space. Severus tried to parse the theme. They were mostly snaps of animals and people-less scenery.
It annoyed Severus to find himself relaxing.

"Yes, it was one of many dearly held wishes," he quipped, unfurling his fist. "I petitioned, but it must’ve been a policy issue, as the Headmaster never approved."

"That's Dumbledore again," inquired Grace. Severus paused in looking at her, and then pushed to, to cover his weakness.

Her words felt disproportionately mild. He wondered if she told her newfound son about Albus' separating them. From the boy's vapid nod, he knew she hadn't. They traded a frown and subtle nods.

"Knowing him, he probably got a kick out of you asking," Potter followed before clicking his jaw shut. Severus raised his other brow at him. Right, poisoning children. How had that come up? No tirade condemning his evil ways? Potter only resumed showing Grace his scrap of parchment.

The boy then mumbled, "You could've chanced a go at couple teachers, though, honestly. Save us all the trouble."

"What was that? Surely you don't mean to suggest I'd harm a colleague, boy."

Each measured the other up. "Well, sir: Lockhart."

"Hm." The man approached the bookcases, keeping the couch in his periphery. Potter shrugged, but did the same.

A wary look passed through the corners of their eyes, driving them further apart. Severus gave his full attention to the shelves, touching where some books were still misplaced.

"I was referring to your third year. If memory serves, you accused me of poisoning Lupin. Because of course if there is any tool a Defense expert requires, it's the paranoia of a thirteen-year-old boy."

"I didn't know you considered Remus an expert. I'll have to tell him. He'd love to know."

Mind yourself, Severus, he thought, alarmed. You might slip up and start getting along.

Seeking to distract himself from a perturbing laxity of spirit, he cast about the room again, searching for a grievance. He found Potter's bundled book in the coffee table, amid potions texts and holiday cards. Next to a blurry photo of a birthday cake sat another book, also wrapped.

This slimmer one had been thrice bound in a hideous towel and balanced on the table's outside edge.

"What is that," he said, walking up to it.

"From Lena's things. I asked Harry if she'd have a book like his for her people. He gave it a try with some spells and that fell offa the top shelf."

Grace pointed at it with her foot, but made no moves to hand it to him. Severus bent over, gripping the most heavily clothed corner. He glanced around suspiciously.

"Why is it wrapped?"

"He said it'd need blood to open, and no one's with that." Severus didn't care for Fred's casual disgust.
He also doubted that Potter could stumble upon the Prince family tree. Severus' mother admitted to losing it early in her senility. Eileen Snape had cried for days that her no-good husband had hidden it. Her son had to remind her that she'd buried Tobias six years earlier.

She died and he cast every summoning charm he knew to no avail. Whatever Potter knocked down would be an old journal or a recipe book. Severus shimmed the book out the scarf and cursed when metal-edged cover bit him.

The book landed on the carpet with a few droplets of his blood. He swore, waving down Fred's hoots of, "See! What'd I say!" Severus flexed his thumb, embarrassed to flinch from a measly paper cut.

Then the cut sealed itself and he frowned. At his feet, the book swung open and flipped to its middle.

A winter beech tree sprawled across the centerfold. Patterned, skeletal branches tooted pale leaves, each decorated in cramped, thin script. He crouched to the carpet, sore thumb forgotten as he stared wide-eyed at the yellowed pages.

He then quickly realized that he had no idea what it said.

"What language is that?," inquired Potter. As always, the boy proved unable to help snooping.

It didn't endear him any that Severus had no answer. It wasn't English on those stripped boughs, even though it shared English letters.

Giving it a few experimental taps, he lifted the book and stood closer to the lights. He eventually saw what he was looking at. He knew from Narcissa that many pureblood witches were given a copy of their family's history as a gift for their husband's library. It kept the daughter connected to her lineage, and aided in the education of heirs.

Severus had never thought his mother owned such a thing. Being disowned by the Princes, what relative existed to gift a Muggle with his mother's pedigree?

Severus himself had never been raised with a great knowledge of either side. He stifled the yawning void in being a singular and defunct Prince. He'd likely never marry, and wouldn't dare curse himself with parenthood. He was likely the last of his mother's bloodline—an endling, a redundant.

He held the handwritten copy of the Prince family tree, and tried to decipher his mother's demented scrawl. His lips thinned. It was gibberish.

"Yeah, her letters was bad, too. Keep it in bleedin'—yeah, I don't want it to cut me. Hand it over."

Severus closed his eyes and held out the book. He felt furnace warm fingers steady his hand. She cleared her throat and started listing off full names and dates.

"You can read this garbled mess," Potter said incredulously. Grace winked at him and kept reciting.

Severus let her go until he heard a name he recognized. He turned and grabbed Potter's bundle, this time not flinching when the thing stupidly nipped his fingers.

Not me, he mocked. The blood magic tingled as it tastes his offering. Severus urged Potter to open the map, rolling his eyes at the bundle's free-for-all method of security.
"Hey, wait, I've gotta," Potter started, as Severus hurried to unwrap and hand him the book.

The lock snicked open while still in the man's palm and Severus snatched it back. He filtered out Potter's strangled outcry like the years at Hogwarts happened yesterday.

The covering cloth, which turned out were pajama bottoms, slackened to reveal ornate, molded gold. Severus sneered at the ostentatious binding. His own homemade tree was housed in moss-green and worm-eaten velvet. At least five inches high, the Potter book dwarfed his mother's malnourished diary.

Severus cracked it open, and presented Grace with the Potter family tree. "Which names are the same?"

The woman looked bored by now, but compared the two illustrations, acting the team player. "Jesus, fine. Not many shared names between ‘em, just—."

"Harry!" They were interrupted by rapping on the curtained window. A voice, likely female, called Potter from out in the street.

Severus flung both books at Potter, who bobbed out of the way.

"You said you hadn't been followed here," he growled. “That sounds like following to me!"

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up that we’re almost at the end of the pre-written chapters. So updates after Chapter 22 will slow to one chapter a week.

I also want to welcome and thank everyone enjoying this story so far! It means so much that What We Own was rec’d on Tumblr and it’s bringing me a lot of joy to write with you all. Glad to have you!
Dealing in Trust

Chapter Summary

Harry bonds with his family with mixed joy and horror. Ginny finally catches up to Harry and learns how he and Snape are related.

Harry sat on Snape's couch, eyes watering, arms protecting his face while it dawned on him that he was well out of his depth. The universe he operated in had certain, easily discernible rules that, while hard to accept, were adamant on being understood.

This day disagreed with them.

For instance, rule the first: Harry attracted trouble. He knew from about age five, when a frying pan swung past his tiny head, that regardless of his intentions, he was perpetually in for it. Exactly what he was in for changed from colliding with cookware to a war shaped by a tumultuous fate, but in any case, if it was troublesome, it was Harry's.

Now, so far the afternoon had fallen in with the first rule. Harry flew to Snape's hometown—trouble. He'd run across Snape's gigantic, grizzly bear of a brother—trouble. He felled said brother in front of his terrifying older sister, as witnessed under Snape's indignant, pitiless gaze—trouble, trouble, trouble.

All boxes ticked!

And so the day had rolled into the second rule: Harry must be punished. He nearly had his neck snapped. He'd been chased with a bat. He had to look at Snape in murder clothes and was thrown from the house to play fetch.

Villains and plots fell between the first two rules. Troublesome bad guys found him a nuisance and sought to punish him, usually with death.

So far, anything Snapely slid in behind trouble and punishment like a card lost behind a dresser. As of a few minutes ago, Harry had reached into the gap, fished out the card and found a heartfelt middle finger printed on the front. All mild, considering the possibilities.

He narrowly escaped the greatest punishment, which would be losing his chance to meet his mum. Luckily, the puppeteers pulling at his many fatefilled strings gave him some slack in that regard.

Harry, Grace, Freddy and Laney all spent the afternoon elbows deep in bags of photos, catching Harry up on little lifetimes. Well, Laney sat nearby, arranging pictures in her lap like puzzle pieces, but the spirit of time spent presided.

He learned as Zed left them in favor of solitude that the woman was fresh out of prison. "Had plenty of time to reminisce," she groused, fist pressed into her middle, waddling down the hall. "I'll leave all the rememberin’ to you all."

"You could stand to catch up," their mother rebutted, hefting a tote full of disposable cameras. She spilled these on the carpet to collect the packs of developed photos, wrapped in plastic bags and
rubber-banded shut.

"Nah." She muttered about cigarettes and, "It’s rainin' fuckin' siblings." Then she shuffled away, apparently in retreat to the basement.

*She seems more Snape's sister than mine. They both love to lurk in dungeons.*

Once she'd gone, Harry mentioned Sirius, glad Snape had fled the room. He described wizard prison a bit, what it was now and what it used to be. Freddy said his sorries for a man twelve years inside while innocent, and Harry weaned off of telling those stories, again because his were so sad.

"He and Snape didn't get on, you could say," he summed up, fussing with his hair.

"Oh, then I gotta hear about this guy. Sounds like a riot." His mother said this smirking, cutting a stack of baby photos like playing cards.

Harry congratulated Padfoot on the being recognized by his idol, if posthumously. He then warmed up to the lighter topics, telling other stories of he and Sirius' short time in each other's lives. He had to explain some concepts, like Animagi and two-way mirrors, but the Muggles cottoned on quick.

He did this well up until he met eyes with the tattoo on Grace's neck, flying through a part in her hair. Then he went grey, stumbling on "walls full of models."

"He, uh. Nevermind."

"Huh?," Grace asked, sunken into the beaten-up couch, legs crossed at the knees. She scratched some dried mud off her calf, flicking off bits of brittle leaves. "He what?"

*Don't talk about the calendars!, he screamed internally. She's your mum! It's weird! Don't be weird!*

"Sirius, er, he admired your...y-your work."

"My…? Oh!"

She threw her head back and laughed, one arm hung along the couch back. She cackled so loudly it echoed off the tile in the kitchen. Harry nearly ignited in embarrassment, although whether it was of his dog of a godfather or the subject of Gracie's modeling, he couldn't tell.

His mother wound down, grinning openly and patting a happy beat out on her thighs. With an unabashed wink, she chucked Harry's chin and praised his good manners.

"'Admired my work,' why couldn't you say it like that, Fox?" She turned to Harry, jabbing a thumb at the man in question.

Her voice shot up an octave in offense:

"'This cryin' bastard would told me I embarrassed him and ran off tellin' his friends I was some bloody accountant! Imagine! Ashamed of his own mum!"

"Yeah, well, it's different when you've had teachers calling your mother 'lovely,' so now y'know they wank to her after flunkin' you in maths." Freddy covered his eyes with one hand and mimed throttling someone with vigorous shakes.

"Thank god I grew like Granddad. All of secondary was absolute hell, but it evened out once I
"could just deck 'em in the face."

"Hmph, and get suspended."

"Mum, ya did skin mags."

"But did you eat?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's right." She picked up a picture of herself, and waved Harry closer.

In it, she squatted in a playground, posing like a rapper by the metal slide. He snickered, as she was heavily pregnant, swaddled to the neck in a parka with a cheeky pre-teen at either side. Zed beatboxed into an invisible mic, and Freddy had his hands out at funny angles. Maybe he played the DJ?

Harry wished the photo was magic, so he could see them all in action. Someone's thumb edged into frame, permanently part of the scene.

The real Grace tapped her photographed belly with a painted fingernail. "Lookie! That big melon there, that's you."

"Whoa," he whispered, reaching out for the fuzzy polaroid. She met him in the middle, pushing it into his hand before revisiting the pile they'd made on the coffee table.

"Yeah, that's taken right before you were born. We visited nearby here, so I could get back in touch with Eileen. It took a quarter hour to teach her how to use the disposable. Complained the whole bloody time, obviously."

"Wow, she died like a year after, yeah?" Freddy leaned in, touching the edge of the picture.

Grace nodded, eyes soft. "Mhm, prickly old bitch. I miss her."

The pair sighed mistily.

Harry sat back, holding the picture up for the two to admire. He wanted to ask how she knew Snape's mother. He was dying to ask how she knew Snape, figuring one answered the other. When he about let the moment pass, Grace spoke up.

"D'you think she has a book like yours, with a big family tree? It's a magic thing, right? You guys keep 'em on hand."

Her eyes were clear and direct, as though Harry were the authority in this.

He wanted to say that he knew an actual expert in such things, and that he himself wasn't one. But he didn't want to disappoint. He glanced sideways at Fox, who also watched him, although more in curiosity than with any particular drive.

Harry could hear the airy, "Well, do you know?," which both relieved and added pressure, making him brandish his wand.

His mind went blank for what to summon. "Snape family tree," "Prince family tree," and "truly any register" all failed to yield a result. He tried with, "Accio Eileen's book, please," resigned to another failure when a slim, green journal dove off the bookshelf and fell to the floor with a clack.
"Wow, okay, so that worked," he dithered. He got up to retrieve it before thinking twice and summoning a towel.

"What, too slippery," Grace snarked. He chuffed nervously and placed it on the table.

"It's been through a lot," he joked back. "No, it could want blood to open it and I don't fancy getting pricked."

"Does yours do that?!" Freddy nudged the wrapped volume on the table with a boot.

"Yeah, but please don't kick it!"

"Sorry."

They decided as a group to leave any blood-letting for after dinner, at least. After which, Harry shared in over an hour or two of more stories and photographs.

There was one of this kid at the beach, or that grandparent in Guyana. Grace pulled out old men in linen shirts, drinking beer on porches; teenaged Freddy towering over his classmates, sulking over a few wilted shoots of onion in an egg carton; Zed at Harry's age, cozied up to another woman, drunkenly smiling in her hair, each hugging the other around her waist.

_I mean, she's a person like anyone else_, he had to admit. He imagined what happened to the couple in the photo after Zed's sentence. Would he meet this woman, too? Somehow, he doubted it.

More recently, they showed him Laney's first day of preschool. He balked at what was essentially a four-year-old Harry in a dress. While Grace and Freddy cooed over the little girl, he glanced up at Laney in the armchair, sorting landscapes by color.

He realized how quickly children must grow. He wondered if one day, he might have a daughter of his own, and see her sprout into a new person every year.

But outside of these warm moments were the rules. Afternoon became evening, and he began to sweat. To be content for so long felt like entrapment. When would the rules ruin this good time?

Because trouble at least never stopped. It was why paparazzi loved him. He would always be in the midst of a dire strait none could have predicted. It kept the tabloids flying off the shelves. It drove Harry indoors, after everything.

He existed in a cycle of bad to worse, with islands of good in between. And to force the good, to assume any power over the universe, well. Harry would always try, since that bit was living.

But he knew that soon, the third rule came into play, as an undeniable fact: Harry must be shunned.

It happened with the Dursley's. All Privet Drive thought him a delinquent, except for Mrs. Figg and her cats. It happened at Hogwarts, in second year, then again in fifth. He had been shunned by his family and neighbors, sometimes by his friends, largely by the government and the world as it dictated.

It happened here! Snape sent him from the house on a pointless fetch quest. As they settled more into a new round of memories, Harry feared the tread of the unseen other shoe.

"Ooh, you'll like this. Aw, wow, this's a gem. Severus says she adopted you. Here's probably the only picture of them together."
His mother pulled him in and showed him—his mother! Harry's breath stopped, heart giving one hard knock in his chest.

She passed him an overbright photo of two children walking down a reedy bank. The subject of the picture was the river behind it, part of a series that Grace called her last haunt about town.

Right before she moved out of Cokeworth, she had captured every facet of her hometown, in a ceremony of quick goodbyes. Many of the pictures were at night, or from a distance, like she'd snapped them on the run. This one was much like it, streaky with movement and reddened by the glare of the dusky sun off the water.

"This is her, right? Did I guess wrong?" Harry shook his head, lost for words.

The children in the photo were tucked in a bottom corner, parting the tall grass. A black-haired boy drowning in a man's coat led his charge by the hand, his chin stuck up with adventuring spirit. Behind him marched a redheaded little miss, denim dress hem gathered in hand, her head turned toward the sun.

The boy plotted their way through the grasses while the little girl lingered, seemingly lost in the view. Without warning, a hot tear spilled down Harry's cheek.

"Damn." He swiped at it clumsily, slapping some pictures to the floor. "Wait, um. Sorry!"

He dove down to scoop up glossy, loose photographs, the one of Snape and his mother still pinched in his off hand. Big hands helped him shovel pictures back onto the table. Freddy made shushing noises as he bent down, cleaning up the carpet. He picked up parchment Harry's knee had knocked from the Potter book's wrapping.

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized again, taking it.

He clutched his adoption certificate next to Lily by the creek. Her name next to her picture strummed at his deep-seated loneliness once again. Then the lonely opened up when Grace cupped his elbow, and across from them, Laney asked if maybe he'd like some tea.

Harry shook his head no and tried to cover up with humor. It was bit too much all at once. He loosely interpreted a good natured chuckle, and nodded at the tiny Snape in the photo.

"It's unbelievable that Snape was ever a kid," he pulled.

Of course, he had once seen the same boy in the man's memories. He realized the coat in the picture was the same one Snape had worn earlier in the park. Again he felt déja vu from returning to a place he'd never been.

It almost comforted him. "He used to threaten to poison us when we had his class. Or during detentions. Or passing him in the halls. He'd threaten us any time, to be honest. Looking back, I don't think he much enjoyed our company."

The room laughed at the obvious understatement. Even Laney, who mostly occupied herself, loosed a little titter. Only then did Harry hear the light creaking behind the bookcase. A panel of shelves swung open to reveal Snape, eying them all at the bottom of a hidden stair.

Harry froze, amid showing his certificate to those nearby. He heard the gong of the third rule crashing over the room. This was it. Snape would cast Harry from his home, cursing his name and turn his newfound family against him.
He watched the tendons in the man's neck flex, his jaw tight, his eye seeping loathing. Harry tensed as he was measured, trying despite his fears to be as inoffensive as possible.

"Rev!" Harry started at Freddy's shout, surprised to see Snape turn his head.

Who the hell is Rev?, he thought, perplexed.

Then he noticed Snape's attire—his fawn corduroy shirt, neatly buttoned to his neck. The change from corpse slacks to brown washed jeans matched the tucking of stringy hair behind his ears.

Harry still saw Snape, starved and kind of sickly, but as he might find in an infirmary, not climbing out of an open grave. He made it down to the man's feet before looking away, thoroughly stumped.

Where are his goddamn shoes? Then Harry tossed aside his reaction at hearing the rest of Freddy's words. Snape looked to him slowly, head tilting as it turned like a mannequin in a horror movie.

"I didn't! I did not say that!"

As the rest of the room's occupants chimed in, however, Harry picked up on a missing note. Any true malice in were absent from Snape's responses. They nearly resembled jokes.

It took the young wizard a second to pinpoint exactly what he witnessed. He was unused to accidental expressions on his old teacher's face. But he suspected rather incredulously that Snape might actually be relaxed, or as close to it as was permissible by law.

This was around when Harry believed he'd exited his known universe. Everything up to "Snape: relaxed," fell in with either a rule or an exception. This was neither, and thus new territory. Snape couldn't be relaxed, as an enforcer of fate's many punishments.

And yet, there he stood, dawdling by the bookcase.

If the man could nearly smile, if a wary look could pass between them that didn't start or end in bloodshed, then that meant Snape was human. Not only a nightmare, or a nuisance, or a wall of cannibal sins, but also an awkward bloke in his living room, poking around for something to say.

Of course then Harry spotted a slice, only a sliver, of the homegrown grey-blue dark in the older wizard. He had only seen it in himself and Grace, maybe in Zed as she shuffled off, and now there—and swiftly stifled—in Snape. The man took up Eileen's journal with reverence, then staunch blank regard, before closing his eyes and holding it out for Harry's mum to read.

The garbled handwriting seemed to stump him as well as Harry. He recognized the pang of disappointment, and possibly betrayal, when the man's eyes skirted helplessly over the page. It induced Harry in the bare stone vault, with only a wooden box on a stand. To have practically nothing when for a second he hoped for everything…

Merlin, I'm empathizing, he discovered in horror. Please, no!

He knew himself too well. Outlandish little notions budded along his struck and winter-scored thoughts. Sweat poured now, and the orphan—former orphan—regretted every lonesome day and every love-soaked moment for how it prepped the land for perpetual sowing.

Unblossomed wonders started decorating his insides in a most dreadful way.

Which is why when Snape grabbed the Potter register, Harry waivered. He spent several seconds stuck on either yanking it away or seeing what happened. He hadn't even known he considered the
latter until he bungled snatching it back.

His hands couldn't decide to take it, and then it was whipped away, sprung wide open.

A very impossible thing just happened: Snape's blood unlocked the book. The register, which had snicked shut after hours by itself, popped open in the other wizard's hand. The older man didn't even notice that only his blood lined the edge of the pages.

Snape just flipped the pages until he found a family tree, while Harry sat by his hip, slack jawed.

*I shouldn't be surprised. We're related,* he reasoned in the midst of stupefaction. The quiet sense hailed unexpectedly loud over the clamorous, *Snape can open the book!*

Sure, they must be related, but on Snape's side, never Harry's. Harry didn't have a side! He just hitched a ride with whoever came by going a way toward home. He had to assume Snape won out, sanguinely-speaking. For such an apparently unrooted Snape to land Harry's way—.

"Which names are the same?," said man snapped. Grace read from the journal with writing like from some dream. Harry pitched forward gripping the couch cushions. Yes, he had to know!

"Harry!" The Boy-Who-Lived gasped, grabbing his chest to catch his leaping heart. Out of nowhere, he thought he heard Ginny's voice. He must have hallucinated in his moment of distress.

Behind him came the frantic rapping of knuckles on glass. Harry scooted back, surprised that the voice calling him was real. Then he felt a tickle in the fine hairs on his neck, a sixth sense attuned to battle and Quidditch. Harry ducked left, then right, only realizing after a lamp hit the ground that Snape had thrown something at his head.

"You said you hadn't been followed here!," Snape spat. "That *sounds* like following to me!"

Harry checked around himself, running a hand through his hair. The two books sat dejected in a corner, having been flung across the room. His heart ratcheted up from a pitter-patter and spun out into full-blown race.

"Ginny's here," he croaked, eyes wide. He clicked into autopilot. The dumbfounded young man made to open the curtains. A hand shot out and smacked his to the couch.

"Stop it!," clipped his mother. He blinked dumbly and rubbed his smarting digits. "Who's Jenny?"

"His sighthound," hissed Snape.

"My girlfriend. Oi! Don't *you* call her names!" He flushed with anger on the witch's behalf. "Not after what you and your friends did to her! You don't get to!"

"It's obviously a trick, you idiot! *That* is a Death Eater in disguise, weedling his way in by feigning some dearly beloved's distress. You'd be sick to know how well tired tactics like this can doom a family.

"Think! How else would Weasley know to come here!?"

"She has a copy of the same map I do!" He got up to answer the door and was roughly shoved down again. He protested, only to feel a wide palm hold him still.

"Hell, were you givin' out maps on the corner? People live here, y'know. Have a care." Freddy managed to worm patient disappointment into the jest. It was a little like being scolded by Remus,
had the werewolf ever claimed the problem.

Not wanting to seem arrogant, Harry apologized and offered to answer the door.

"Then if it's a trap, it's just me in the way. The rest of you can escape," he nodded at his plan. Unexpectedly, the palm weighing him down didn't move.

"Rev? Is he gonna be a problem?" Harry's pulse spiked, awash with dread. Had the third bell rung? Was he out on the curb? What did he do? The map was a major oversight, fair enough, but wasn't it fixable?

"You'll get hurt. That's a stupid plan," Laney offered, putting her pictures aside.

Grace waved her upstairs and told her to hide until someone fetched her. She tried to argue and was promptly shushed, so she grabbed a book to read from the case.

The cracked leather grimoire she reached for rattled when her fingers touched its spine. Snape snatched her hand away and pushed her toward the secret stairs.

"Do you hate having fingers?! You heard your mother, girl. Go upstairs!" The little girl let loose a world-weary sigh and went.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "The gall—Potter—!"

More knocks patterned on the glass, Ginny's voice calling for him. Then it moved, fading and re-emerging at the front door.

*Tap, tap, tap!* "Harry, let me in!"

"Potter, don't you move!"

Now Harry sat frozen in uncertainty. Snape glared at him, nostrils flared, daring him to so much as wiggle. The Dark wizard parted thin lips, no doubt to lambaste him, when a tune tripped through the tension-thick air.

Snape curled a lip and dove into a jeans pocket. He whipped out something black—a cellphone—and threw it on the carpet. It clattered and vibrated by Grace's foot, but chirped merrily on nonetheless.

She uncrossed her legs with a hard eye roll and picked it up: "Throwin' my shit. Yeah, Zeddie, what's happening?"

"Blasted thing is indestructible," Snape grumbled, disgusted by the phone but with eyes glittering. "Turn her up! I can't hear it!"

Grace sucked her teeth and pressed a button. Zed's irritated rasp joined the war room, "—fuckin' sleep! Who's this girl at the door?!"

Harry raised a brow and looked around, but didn't see the haggard woman anywhere. Had she gone outside?

"Where is she? How does she know someone's here?"

"Still downstairs, pretty sure," Freddy explained. His restraining hand became an affable squeeze and shake. It seemed Harry was forgiven. Then the grinning man smacked Harry on the back so hard, the boy yipped, "Why!," leaping to his feet.
"Prick!," he scowled before he could help it. That hurt! He only bought a bright smile for his troubles.

"Who is she, Rev?," Zed groused. Scuffling against the mic, like the phone was slid across fabric. "I swear if it's another sister, I'm packin' up and I'm out."

"Leave then. You'll get no pity from me," Snape sniffed in staunch reply.

He seemed placated, however, by the last person coming into counsel. It confirmed Harry's suspicion that Snape and Zed might get on the best.

"So, the windows are working," the older wizard continued. "At least something can go right."

"Yeah, it's like a Bond movie in here. I can see clear in most directions. Congrats on doing it without the baby's help."

"Shut up. Describe the trespasser."

"What's she doin', uhh." More scuffling, a metal squeak and labored huffs. Harry recognized the sound of a rubbish cot in a closed room. Zed shifted in bed and coughed, "Hm, average height, kinda thin, kinda forgettable. I dunno, plain-lookin'. Brown hair, leggings.

"I think she's got a limp though, since she keeps holdin' her side. Must be hurt. Is that her yellin' in the background?"

By this point, Ginny's voice grew worried. Almost as soon as Zed noticed it, the cries dropped off. They all held their breath as they say a shadow return to the curtain, barely visible thanks to the light on the front porch.

The silhouette fit the description, average and thin and vaguely girl-shaped. But "brown-haired" and "limping" didn't match Ginny at all.

*If something happened, she could be disguised.* Harry looked to Snape for a cue. The man only scowled, fists clenched, making Harry wonder, *Where is his wand?*

"Do something!," Harry mouthed at him.

Just then, a mist of blue-silver light filled the room, and a massive glowing horse burst through the living room curtain. It galloped straight through Harry and the Muggles on the couch, sending the latter into a fit of screaming and cursing. Wisps of light streamed behind the mare like the tail of a comet as it rounded the living room twice.

Ginny's Patronus stopped in front of Harry, standing a head above him, mane flowing in a nonexistent breeze. He cupped a loving hand around the glow of its nose nuzzled into his palm.

"It's her," he declared, feeling a swoop of gratitude. "Thank Merlin."

"What? What happened?!," Zed shouted. Below they heard a crash and thudding footsteps, underneath the adults trying to catch their breath.

"Hello?!," echoed from the kitchen.

"It's a bloody horse in the house!," gasped Grace. Everyone was on their feet now. Harry turned to explain before remembering Zed said Ginny was hurt.

He shot past Zed who stumbled past him to the others, and wrenched open the front door. "Ginny!"
"YOU!" A brown-haired girl rammed into his chest, winding him. Her arms came up, squeezing his waist as she said, still shouting, "Are you alright?!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fantastic. What—," he took in her face under the lamplight and saw her flinch when he pressed her cheek. He didn't recognize the face at all and needed to dispel the whatever glamours she'd used right that second. He needed to see her, see what was wrong.

"Gods, Potter, the fucking door!"

"Is that Snape?" Ginny hugged him harder and ogled over Harry's shoulder. "Sweet Merlin, he's really...did...did Snape just say 'fuck'?"

"Here, we can talk inside." He hustled her into the house, covering her back and scanning the street for danger.

"Harry, there are people after him. Ouch! Please, my side."

__________________________

Ginny nursed a bowl of soup in her lap while her evil headmaster thunked a jar of bruise balm on the coffee table. She murmured a hasty thanks, clenching when Harry took it to smear on her ribs. She could do it herself, but it wasn't worth her boyfriend's panic. He already shook with rage as she recounted her attack.

If it keeps him safe, she compromised, catching his hand and kissing it.

"Are you sure of this, Weasley? You're saying they were assassins."

Ginny leaned on the arm of a chair so old its bones creaked. The Chaser tucked her transfigured tank top underneath her bra keep it up, while her exposed side was tickled with grease.

"Hm," she said, chewing and fishing meat out of her lukewarm soup. It was good, even at room temperature. "Technically, sure, they were assassins. In practice, I've met deadlier Bludgers. If you know they're coming, it's just managing the numbers."

"With you, me, and Snape, we outnumber them," Harry urged, jabbing at her bruises.

She shifted and threaded their fingers together, forcing him to slow down. Ginny sighed when his painful prodding lessened.

"What about without Severus? Can you still beat them?"

Ginny blushed at the nearness of Harry's mother pacing around the table. "Gun-It Gracie" had aged wonderfully—matured did her better justice. Harry's curls but silver-shot and dressing her ears; his pretty eyes but deep brown instead of green, like the ground evergreens grew from; and she had curves, apparent from the hug of her tie-dyed sundress, which she changed into to entertain her guests.

The witch suddenly appreciated why Harry shooed her from Sirius' calendars. It was outrageous to crush on your boyfriend's mum. Of course, she relived the moment she'd ended the glamours and the older woman set about getting her fixed.

Grace snapped orders out to this and that person, sending everyone from the room. Then she took Ginny by the shoulders and muttered, "Here, take the chair."

Ginny sat and sagged nearly to the floor. The Muggle woman then clasped the witch's wand hand
and said, "If he's hurt you, just nod, and I'll get you outta here."

Her tone as quiet as a grave, and as rock solid as a tombstone, shaking Ginny to the core. The young woman could only return the woman's grasp and swear, "No, Harry would never. H—maybe that's normal to say. Ma'am, I'd kill him if he tried."

Grace searched her face, like Ginny could be her child and she only wanted the best for her. The witch held still and equally as serious, and they sat that way for a second until Snape came back into the room.

The wizard's suspicious gaze met her own, turning the moment into a standoff. Then Grace patted Ginny's hand stoutly, and the girl had allowed herself to relax. Her sure grip told the witch she had landed somewhere safe.

As though sensing as much, Snape backed off. He crossed his arms, standing arrow-straight and imposing, despite his almost frail appearance. He left to fetch homebrewed bruise balm, leaving Ginny to question who here protected whom.

Regardless, she did feel safe. Grace's quiet support, if mysterious, reminded her powerfully of Harry. The "saving people thing" shone through.

"Why can't Snape fight?," she asked, meeting the man's eye. He curled a lip, like she'd asked something stupid. But his eyes flicked away and back again. He had flinched.

"Sir?," she pushed. He sneered.

"Don't act cute. You've not changed a bit since your school days, I see."

She gave him a once over, taking in his Muggle clothing, his hair down his sides, and his general position beside persons un-traumatized by his presence. And said nothing in return.

"Disrespectful as always," he groused. She smirked, gripped Harry's hand harder, but didn't blink.

*I'm not afraid of him*, she affirmed.

*He's only kind of deplorable*, she also mused. She forced the months of Hogwarts rebellion to play nice with the man's Order of Merlin for heroism and self-sacrifice. The two facts built a sad little sand castle between her lungs.

*Well, it's his house. At least try*, she tried to scold herself. The rebel shoved a crab down the good girl's shorts, and she had to make eyes with silence.

"He's weak, we think, yes?" Grace paused in front of Snape, who glared down at her. "What, why're you embarrassed?"

"Weak from what?," asked Harry. He at least managed to sound concerned. Poor boy probably was, now that he'd noticed the man was in need.

Ginny blessed his big, free heart. She felt glad to be in it, and happy with her own a little closed. "The first run-in, maybe? How could you be exhausted from a fight with two amateurs?"

"Be fair, I mean. He's done a lot," said the shockingly Snape-ish man camped on the stairs. He looked exactly like a Weird Sisters frontman, which made him impossible for Ginny not to like. And then his name...she could say it, but not that much. She wasn't inhuman.
"Fred was my brother's name, actually," Ginny laughed. She didn't know why she was laughing, and so loudly. It seemed better than going home.

"Aw, damn. Lotta, uh, funerals in this couple, huh? It's fine, call me Fox."

"Besides that's two-on-one," Fox continued to argue. His elbows touched either side of the narrow passageway. "You make Rev sound like some kinda duelin' savant!"

Neither of his former students let on that he was. They agreed on a subconscious level not to give Snape the satisfaction.

"Why do you call him that?," Harry asked instead. "It's not his name."

"Brilliant deduction. Because much like you, Potter, he and his sister struggle to grasp basic manners."

"Because Rev's a weird, old, goth nerd who dresses like a vicar. S'either Reverend or Abe Van Helsing."

Snape whipped his head back and barked at him, now obviously ashamed. Ginny hiccuped, trying not to choke on soup. "Snape is a nerd," she whispered, astonished.

"H-he," Harry squeaked. "Look at his face!"

"Mhm." She smiled onto their tied fingers, feeling weak herself from Harry's good mood. The frantic need to find him finally slackened as she accepted he'd been in good company.

Fox brimmed with self-satisfaction, lighting up the creepy hallway. Snape harangued him to no obvious effect except more delight. It was the twins versus Percy at dinnertime, and it blew Ginny's hair back.

*Hard not to see them for brothers.* She examined Harry who was now openly in stitches. Her side ached less, so she bent and pecked his flushing cheek.

"To answer your question, Weasley, I was not aware my assailant had a partner." Ginny listened to Snape while she swallowed another bite of now cold soup. "I only met with one man before a swift departure."

"Well, you showed up covered in blood, Severus, it's not like you debated this nobody."

He shrugged, and it aggravated Ginny out of a good appetite. She bristled. He would've assigned detention for the *very* same shrug years ago. She could hear it now:

"*Use your words, Weasley. This remains a school, not a locker room. Ten points from Gryffindor for sloppiness and five for wasting your teachers' time. Fix your face, girl. That'll be detention with Filch for brazen disrespect.*"

"Weasley, Potter! Pay attention!"

"Yes, professor," the couple droned. They looked to each other and snorted.

"Children," said like, "animals."

Ginny untucked her top. She felt a draft, on top of feeling suddenly sixteen again and baring her stomach in class.
"I am asking why you assumes I had met them already," repeated Snape. By then he had finally settled on the edge of the sofa, shading his baggy eyes.

Grace had already claimed the opposite corner. Both dark heads dipped into the books she'd picked up and laid open on the middle cushion. Ginny recognized Harry's family tome paired with a starved, handwritten diary. It resembled the hand-bound, more rustic books that Ginny's family tended to gift.

She wondered if it was the Muggles' and then realized it'd have to be Snape's. She wasn't sure, as they had all rushed their introductions. Perhaps he and Grace were actually brother and sister? But then, they looked nothing alike.

"Are you back to that?," probed Harry. "What about the men out there trying to kill you?"

"They've been skulking about all this time, and as Weasley suggests, they know where I reside and have done nothing to end me. They've likely set themselves on murdering her," he said pointing at Ginny, "and will grace me with their loving presence when it suits.

"We have some measure of surveillance, and once I am able, I will resurrect the wards. You both will be lending your services, obviously."

"Obviously," mumbled Harry, wagging his head. "Why can't you do it now, before it gets too dark?"

Snape paused and then dug further into the books. He answered with his face downturned. "There were several incidents in and after arriving here, from which I've yet to recover. Lest I permanently damage myself, I will be refraining from magic until I am ready.

"And how long will that take? If they attack tonight—."

"Then I will fight tonight." He disengaged, and dove into reading. He tried to point on a page Grace was reciting aloud. The woman batted him off.

They don't look like siblings at all, Ginny puzzled on. But if they were that'd make Snape Harry's uncle? But if they aren't, then are Snape and Harry really related at all?

Could Snape be Harry's father, buzzed a terrifying concept. For a second she lived afraid for Harry, only for the boy himself to say, "That really feels like it can wait."

"Why, Potter? Nervous? Well, you're in plenty of company. I'm as excited to share family with you as you are, me. Simply sit quiet and tend to your—," Snape flapped a hand at them, "Eugh. Weasley, I'll not ask again."

She nearly replied with a shrug, knowing it would feel fantastic, but decided to be helpful. "The Malfoys told us."

At this, the wizard on the sofa froze. He had one finger in the air, about to point at something else, when he stabbed it in Ginny's direction, eyes snapping. "What did you say!?"

"The Malfoys came to us," Harry illuminated. "They said they were being harassed and said explicitly that you were back in England, on the run. They actually told us not to write to you—."

"But you did."

"Yeah, I—was going to write again, and actually sent a letter out." He screwed the top on the open
jar of balm, looking abashed. "That's why we went out with maps and stuff. We were trying to
catch the owl before anyone could follow it."

Snape retracted his finger and rubbed his mouth, looking dogged. "You say the Malfoys came to
you? Who, Draco?"

"And Mrs. Malfoy," Ginny added. She simply couldn't resist shrugging this time, when Snape
looked at her aghast. "She didn't want us tipping anyone off before she could get her hands on you.
Honestly, she seemed peeved."

"Yes, well," the man muttered, rolling his eyes. "I suppose she's got a right."

And again, he dropped the topic entirely and returned to the registers. At this point, she was sure he
was running away. "Tell me what it says."

The woman eyed him and then leaned back, drawing lines in the air like she was calculating a math
problem. "According to Eileen, her first cousin was Harry's grandfather. Which makes you," she
squinted, "second cousins once removed."

"Fleamont?" Harry asked, surprised. "Cousins?!"

"Yeah, Fleamont and his little brother, but most of that name's crossed out. Just 'Ch—Potter.'
Damn, all of that guy's branch is scribbled out. She must've hated him."

"Wait, please. The Potters and the Princes were—," Harry interrupted. He and Snape now shared
the same greenish-grey cast.

The older wizard's eyes slid closed and he folded over. He wrapped his arms around his head and
Ginny wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it.

Possibly since she was pureblood, she was desensitized to the shock. She found out in second year
that she was distantly related to the Malfoys. It gave her about a month of angst, until Ron bragged
to everyone that Hermione punched Draco Malfoy in the nose, and everything felt fine again.

"I think your grandfather's aunt was her mother, Cadmea. She might've been thrown out on her
arse, though, 'cause there's this doodle of shears here, see?"

She tried to show the hand-drawn book to Snape. He gagged and pushed it away with a feeble,
"Don't."

"That means you and my dad were cousins!"

Harry's breath stuttered. Snape heaved. Grace, Fox, and Ginny chatted quietly while the two
processed with sickened groans. The witch carded through her boyfriend's hair while he shook. She
put her bowl aside and thanked his mum for supper.

Snape recovered first. Ginny swore under her breath. She had bet on Harry.

"Dammit. I wish to God you couldn't read," Snape croaked after a minute, dabbing sweat from his
temples. He looked sidelong at Grace, who in turn looked over to Ginny—consoling her own
Potter—and grinned.
A scandal breaks on a Saturday. Meanwhile, Severus struggles to design wards to prepare for the pending attack.

August 24th, 2002: Level Four, Ministry of Magic

Ding!

Mustard yellow robes twitched behind the lift gates, which promptly unfolded into the white stone hallway. The shriek of metal hinges made Remus cringe, like the crank of the lift gears, the fluttering of the memos, the stench of the Floos. Commuting to work that morning flayed his tender nerves.

His change the other night had been a rough one.

Steady on, old man. He thanked the blessed dimness of the lower levels as he stepped into the corridor. But even the reverberating clack of his shoes heels beat his brain around his skull.

Meeting eyes with the receptionist, the werewolf summoned a sorry, close-lipped smile. He neared enough to see recognition knead her wariness into smooth indifference. The sense of many peeling stares multiplying infinitely faded into the shape of a young secretary jotting notes in a binder.

Today, she wore rosy red with a pink dahlia clipped to her lapel.

Oh, flowers. That's new, he thought woozily, smiling wider. She graced him with an acknowledging nod, and perhaps a quirk in one cheek. Was that a smile back? He pressed a hand to his chest, truly touched.

"Good morning, Janice! I see you're in early," he greeted a bit too loudly. They both winced. His voice echoed off the walls and the glass embassy door, inducing an odd motion sickness which made his middle cramp.

"Hardly early, Mister Lupin," Janice answered, covering an ear and rolling open a drawer. She spoke and found business to tend to in the files there. "It's quarter ten. You're over an hour late."

Remus chuckled and tried to look casual while he took a breather. He leaned, panting, with a scarred hand against her desk. "Am I? Goodness, I should hurry in then."

"Miss Granger called ahead that she would come in late as well. She asked to return this to you should you arrive first."

She handed him a book from the drawer—ah, "The New Witch's Broomstick: Magical Eroticism in the 20th Century." He laughed again at Hermione's thank you note Spellotaped to the cover. Her curly handwriting stuck strategically over a cartoon witch in flagrante with the devil. Remus smiled down at the book, tickled by where time had brought him.

"What am I teaching these days, eh?" The new skin on his fingers shone pink with the lady's
dahlia. He shook his head and thanked Janice as he passed.

The hike to his office was laborious, but he managed to drop behind his desk before the fireplace pinged. He rubbed a hand over his face and grinned tightly, accepting his first meeting of the day.

By noon, he and Mastersbane, a thirty-two year old half-goblin, were elbows deep in ministry archive requests, having grappled with wording for over an hour.

The goblin sat mystified, comparing several sheets, gnashing pointed teeth, eyes red-rimmed and swollen. His anxiety peaked with Remus' attempts to console him. So, the werewolf restrained himself to folding his hands on a pile of shredded parchment, waiting patiently for his charge to calm down.

He'd grown to like Mastersbane over the weeks since taking his case. The adult son of a Gringotts manager and a curse breaker, he was unfazed by Remus' lycanthropy, which put the older man at ease. In return, Remus strived to find him closure.

Since childhood, the goblin was ridiculed as a hybrid Squib, made to split time between various, unsatisfying odd jobs to make due. In truth, he was a sensitive soul, an aspiring poet, who upon perfecting his first sonnet, saw it glow and take physical form. Bane came decorated in tiny, chirping stanzas that fluttered like fairies from ear point to nose tip to shaking shoulder. It had been a month now trying to register him as a wizard.

"I just don't see why it's not here," he sniffled into a dripping handkerchief. "How did I never receive a letter, I just! Don't understand!"

Remus quietly offered to dry his handkerchief, but otherwise let him cry it out. A limerick danced from the goblin's cuff to whisper in his ear. He swallowed a grin, finding the rhyme rather tawdry.

_There is a theme today, it seems_, he joked, letting the poem rest on his desk. "Bane, I hope you can believe that at the time, your father felt he did you a service. 1981 proved a deadly year for half-humans like yourself. Disposing of proof of your birth likely protected you."

"Don't tell me I'm lucky! No schooling, no career, can't inherit, _nothing_ for _thirty years._"

Remus let his eyes flicker shut. Bane's wrenching outcry stirred up his migraine, carving the moment into glaring light and piercing sound. Oh, what the werewolf would give for a headache potion—or a sudden onset coma.

He thought of Mastersbane's traumas and pulled himself together. He had been there, many times, within the last year in fact. He lost his job teaching. He almost lost Teddy. He could help.

"Alright," he hushed, sightlessly feeling through parchment. His finger brushed against one note, which tripped away tittering couplets, then another. He pinched the last sheet and held it up.

"So, the archive request—hopefully this is it. It's a long shot, but are you still willing to try? If the ministry can find some record of a great clan welcoming, we can at least prove magic on your mother's side."

"How much does it cost?" Remus caught the hitch in the poet's voice. Ooh, he knew that hurt. Valiant, he peeled his eyes open to grimace somewhat reassuringly.

"Not a Knut. We can waive request fees with proof of hardship." He'd fought hard for that power. It was worth the late night proposals to see the fear release Bane in a sigh.
"It'll be alright," Remus assured him. "If this doesn't work, we can try something else. We'll petition Hogwarts for its records if need be. I know the Headmistress personally, and she's been very accommodating with welcoming lost students home."

This sent Bane into another volley of tears, these ones likely of relief. Remus shepherded the tizzy of living poems while their creator sobbed into his shirt.

The werewolf held the handful of tickling parchment, enjoying the tiny wings beating on his palms.

"You should know," he shared softly, "there are legends of how affinity starts, and it isn't too far off from this. The great houses will tell you it's all great lords and ladies, but oral histories say it only takes one person connecting almost spiritually to create a gift.

"Goblin runic magic and human animism made these little friends. Without a wand and with no training. Your children may all be great poets such that define generations."

Bane shivered and, eyes leaking, considered his hands.

Once alone, the werewolf cleaned his desk and sighed. Finally, quiet, except for the soothing flap of the files returning to their nests. His partner wouldn't be in until the evening, so Remus took the opportunity to lay his head down on the cool wood grain. He slipped into a doze until the next happy ping! woke him up.

"Shit! Y-yes, hullo? Madam Ragnalini, yes, about your crisalide date: I've written to the bank—."

"No, Remus, it's me. Sorry to wake you up—."

"Hermione! Oh, ack, no, you've caught me neglecting my duties. Please come in!" He brushed the cold from his eyes and wiped drool from his chin. She tended to insist he take more sick leave if she saw him in disarray. He greeted the frazzled witch warmly as she rushed in.

"Have you seen Harry?," she gasped. Remus cleared his throat, ears ringing.

"Hm? Not since yesterday, why? Is everything alright?" He furrowed his brow at her head shaking. "What's going on? Is he hurt?"

"We don't know. He's not at Number Twelve. Ron's checking in at the Burrow for him and Ginny. Have you seen this morning's Prophet at all? They're back to calling him mad."

Remus shook his head and waved her to sit. "I haven't had the chance, although Harry gone and any mention of the Prophet tells me I should be worried."

Hermione slumped into the chair, biting her lip. "A guard recognized Harry from his visits this week and tipped off Skeeter's editor. Then Harry came to Ron yesterday looking a complete mess. The papers are saying he's snapped! He rushed in in robes and slippers, trying to report a Death Eater attack."

He went clammy. "Hermione..."

"Ron says he looked into it and it's probably fake." He sighed and deflated. She nodded, rubbing her arms for warmth. "I know, I still couldn't sleep when he told me, but Ron's sure it's a hoax and I trust him. And then Ginny ran in a couple hours after Harry, injured reeking of magic. She mentioned men in masks..."
"But where could they be recruiting?" He wondered if he and Teddy should move. Could he convince Andy to leave England? And then what about work?

"Who could be recruiting?! They're all dead or in prison!"

"Well, that could just be the ministry line. It's not outside of image management to push." Then he realized her shudder and eased off the panicked conspiracy talk. "But then, if Ron's sure, I'm sure there's good reason."

They fell silent. He matched her frown and struggled to his feet. "I'll help look. You say Ginny's also missing?"

"She had at the reporters and disappeared." She scraped her chair back and mumbled an apology when he flinched. Then she scoffed with disdain, handing him his cloak from its hook. "Skeeter's started throwing around folie à deux. I bet she thinks she's so clever!"

They gave Janice their apologies as they passed, Hermione slowing to his careful pace. They entered the lift and she pressed for the atrium level, then asked, "Where are you planning to look?"

"I—." He stopped, head thrumming with painful adrenaline. Remus looked to her abashedly. "I've no clue, actually."

The lift opened to a swarm in the Ministry proper. Hands juggled cameras high above a tide of shaking heads and raised voices. People flooded the security desk, forcing the wizard there to stand atop his chair and ride it over the bucking crowd, howling in terror.

More guards pushed into the atrium, wands aloft, shooting flares into the air and turning the chaos into pandemonium. Bodies crested and crashed against the bank of Aurors forced into action. The two heard thundering feet and tearing robes as the mob devoured itself, drowning out any one word in a cascade of noise.

Hermione slammed the close door button and sent them back below. Remus heard a shuddering racket, gripping his chest before realizing it was him, panting through a full-blown panic.

He fell against the far wall and slid to the ground. Hermione fanned him with her hem, cursing at the scene playing out above.

"Damn! We'll have to go through your Floo." Her feet squeaked when she crouched and he saw she had on trainers. They were scuffed and ground to hell, like she'd had them since the kids' fugitive days.

Hermione bit her nail and swore again when the lift opened. The wizard space restricting the embassy to a single corridor had been expanded again. Their once echoing hall now stretched to house dozens of milling backs. Angry scarlets, deep navies, and royal purples marked the Aurors, secretaries, and other ministry officials mobbing the embassy floor.

They all shouted and complained, demanding to see one Hermione Granger at once. Blocking their path was Janice, plastered to the office door and impressing a steely resolve to end the first wizard who dared touch her.

"YOU ALL NEED AN APPOINTMENT," she hollered over the crowd. The vanguard fell back, frightened, but was pushed forth by the surge of outraged civil servants, screaming for answers.

Remus heart, which had not stopped racing, beat in triple time. He slammed into the wall of sound...
and felt only pain, from his locking muscles to his splitting head. Grievances pierced the thick air like shrapnel.

"What's this about Death Eaters?! Does Potter think he's some blasted comedian?!

"He poses as his own cousin and sneaks in to consort with beasts! Where's Granger?! Her den of filth ends today!"

"Move the creature guarding the door! It can't attack us all at once!"

Remus began seeing double as the cacophony reached a climax. He took in a scrap of an apology and then went promptly deaf. He snapped open his eyelids, terrified. He saw Hermione put her wand to her own throat—and roar.

She shook the metal lift. The roar vibrated through his back touching the wall. It no doubt traveled up the lift shaft and spilled onto every level above.

He'd never seen her use the spell, though he heard tell of it from Kingsley. She shook the rafters of the Wizengamot the day she asked for Level Four. Muggles even heard it on the street above. Front page the next day would become an iconic image: young Hermione Granger in her junior robes, Sleakeazy'd mane flying loose of its bun—a young lioness bellowing forth the future.

He was grateful for her Odysseus charm plugging his ears. He didn't favor passing out in the midst of chaos.

"We need Kingsley," he hollered through the deafness, not hearing how his voice carried over the shocked silent siege.

The witch relayed his question to the mass. He read her lips: "Where's—Ron!?"

Remus peered into the mob, sure he misread. However a tall body banged into the lift, spelling the gates closed. Ron, in plain clothes, grabbed Hermione by the shoulders and shook her, yelling in her face. She drained of color and turned to the werewolf, with huge glossy eyes. The man fought his weak grip on his wand and ended the charm, eyes watering at the onslaught of screaming.

"—mus! Remus, there's been a fire! Harry and Ginny, they—!"

August 24th, 2002: Spinner's End, Cokeworth (five hours left)

The attic was hushed except for the occasional clicked tongue and the persistent scratching of a pen. Potter's one page of map had been relegated to scrap paper, Severus having flipped it to sketch ward configurations on the back. The whole, golden register had been whisked away when his borrowed biro dipped "dangerously low" to a margin. Before he could jot down a thought, he'd been barred from the thing, "double battered cousin aside."

"Are you mad?! This's like two hundred years old! No way, I remember what you did to your textbooks," the brat had tsked.

Muttering filled most of the dead air, that and a few wefts of conversation snatched from the floors below. He would eek out a rune and then scribble it out, repeating ad nauseum. He growled and crossed everything out. He couldn't piece the wards together!

Why did I chase the bloody Defense position for years?
Dark Arts he knew. Unsavory as it may be, they inspired him. He breathed potions and curses like dragons did flames. Pure defense, especially so passive as wardsmithing was simply beyond his nature.

All of his plans were unexploded mines, an array of fine triggers itching to ignite. His wards in Latvia were mostly anti-theft and privacy. But they were piled in such a way as to destroy everything secured within should he need it.

He'd laid the wards smirking at his funny little joke. Severus scowled down at his work now, annoyed by his limitations. He couldn't continue tearing down houses. Spinner's End can go, but not the people in it. Him and a hairless cat? Who cared! But the others...

He spent his time more fruitfully when dissecting Potter's map. A non-essential riddle, but at least a solvable one.

The wizard sneered, sweeping his failed sketches off his lap. Years ago he might've gone to Vector for equative advice or bothered Flitwick to discuss intents. He could never teach again, but not for the first time he missed ready access to other's expertise.

Maybe he could visit Hogwarts in the future? Ah, but that would mean rising from the dead. Minerva might fell him at the gates. It could've peeved that old battle ax to mourn a living man.

Assuming she bat an eye. Survive the night first, you drip, then consider your career moves, he resolved.

Deciding on a break, he trod over his plans and sought fresh air.

Slap, slap...creaak...slap!

He'd borrowed slippers off of Grace, refusing to resume clomping about in his father's used boots. They clapped against the heels of his feet as he tottered down the steps. He was adjusting them on the first landing when he heard a booming, "I said what I said! Go to sleep, please!"

An angry mop of curls padded toward him, tiny soles pounding through the dark. He heard the storm blow past the master bedroom and beeline for the stairs. Severus struck, gripping the child by the crown. He squeezed her head and spun her around to face him.

She greeted him with a nasty, "Ugh!"

"You don't sleep in the sitting room, girl," he drawled, letting her go. He then bridled at her indignant pout and the sudden pressure on his mental barriers.

Now awakened to the talent for Legilimency, it was fast becoming a nuisance. He snapped at her to speak aloud. The girl only pushed harder. He heard the phantom beeps of the telly game, impressions of birds and sword swinging, and resentment for a surprisingly stern Fred.

That last emotion scribbled over the "please" and multiple chances, and leaped to heated defiance. The double edged sword of speaking in thoughts meant telling on oneself more often than not.

He gave her another shock, now well rested enough to snap his shields down. For the girl it might feel like snagging a sock on a nail—no harm done with some harm lending.

Tread not, he warned, smirking at her fluster. He turned her back toward the bedroom and postured, daring her to run past again.
"Your brother said please. I will not. Try me."

She glared up at him, eyes brimming.

"Marisleny! Bed!" Severus quirked a brow at the full first name. They were past precious nicknames apparently.

The bathroom capping the second floor corridor stood open. Fred, crammed inside, twisted to glare, withdrawing a hand from the sink cabinet. It made the older man step back, curious what would happen should the girl continue to act out.

He didn't see much, however, as she simply loosed a scream of frustration and threw herself into her room, slamming the door behind her. Severus did not care much for that either, but took the little victory. His petty rage from earlier felt paid.

Fred returned to his fiddling by the sink. There was a rattle and a plastic snap, which warned Severus closer. He approached and noticed the headphones nested in the man's hair. A wire sprouted from his stringy locks and fed into a box in his sagging seat pocket.

Severus sucked his teeth. "No wonder he's yelling. They'll grow into his fool head next. Fred!"

He kept on bobbing his head to his music, growling a word or two. By now the screaming vocals could be heard much too clearly to be safe. He'd probably deafened himself after thirty-plus years of obliterating his eardrums.

The wizard snuck up and peered around his side. It rankled that he couldn't simply look over a shoulder.

*Whatever Grace puts in her damn food should be outlawed.* It restored more of Severus' health than was excusable given his ails, and had raised an impossibly hardy brood. *Maybe she* should've *raised Potter. He'd bloody never die.*

He watched his half-brother grip a pill foil and push a pale yellow tablet onto his palm. The man knocked the pill back with a grunt.

When he stooped to drink from the tap, Severus snaked in. Being thinner, he snatched the white box from the cabinet and retreated to a corner, out of reach. He heard a few gurgling protests, but focused on sounding out the name.

"'Rice-parry-done,' what Muggle snake oil is this?"

Fred wiped water from his shirt. He threw out a big hand, coughing, "Hand it here, now, what're you doin'?"

Severus shook the box. More foil sheets slid around inside, fit for someone's doom. "What is this for? 'Rise-pur-eye-dun.' Is it related to that other rubbish, colonic spam or what else what nearly killed your sister."

"Ris-peri-done," Fred sounded it out, pushing his headphones to hang on his neck. "Quit it, it's prescription. I ain't bout to poison myself, alright, I need it for my shit."

"It's a laxative?"

"No, my!" The Muggle hunched over the sink and guffawed. His laugh echoed—again, that irrepressible good humor. Severus eyed him warily, not seeing the joke.
He sobered up some, grinning and scratching his beard. "Nah, it's a, ah. I dunno if wizards have it, but it's an, uh, heh. An antipsychotic, for hallucinations and junk. I'm schizophrenic."

Fred leaned against the sliding shower door, holding his own wrist. Severus looked at his hands and saw them gloved in odd textures like regrown skin along faded lines of ink. They might've been a tattoos once, but now were unrecognizable.

"I don't...," the wizard started. Fred wiggled his fingers and whispered, "Ooooh!," like a bored teen telling a ghost story.

Then he went on, "It's for 'the voices.' I—did my mum ever tell you how I got the snakes?"

"Poor life choices?"

Fred beamed.

"Yeah, actually! C'mon, I'll introduce you. Yeah, I know you're puss about 'em. They're put up. They can't hurt anyone. In!"

Severus was beckoned from the corner and herded into the small bedroom. He tried to stay in the hallway but Fred swiftly yanked him inside. Several serpents hissed, striking at their tanks upon spotting him. He shivered, already feeling dewy distress break out over his body.

The narrow cot from his boyhood offered the farthest seat from any tank or rack. He stuck his gaze to the old spell burns on the ceiling. He clung to the shrunken rumbles of heavy metal rivaling the din of angry snakes.

"Oh, so you're scared, scared." Fred sat backwards on the desk chair, arms folded on the back. “Christ, what happened to you?"

Severus glowered at him, gripping the scars on his neck, swallowing sour bile. Ropes of keloid flesh rippled against his palm, feeling alien beside the flat skin prickly with many days' stubble.

"These...,” he started, fuming. “I was attacked. By a snake, a cursed snake."

"That? H—they're just animals," Fred tried to reason, but Severus swore and tossed the prescription on the sheets. "Or, or y'know, ya run into a bad handler. Or was it a safari, like a wild —."

"It—damn!" He balled his fists, driven to stand firm. He'd harvested from ashwinders. He'd defanged runespoors. None of the piffling things in the room, including the deer eating demon in the rear enclosure, had anything on Nagini.

Voldemort had personally bred that beast with nightmares. "She was more than just an animal. She was a familiar to a despot. She shared his intelligence, his will, his bloodlust. He saw through her eyes and spoke her tongue.

"I'd watched that monster eat a woman whole for her master's entertainment. And when he finally set her on me, I felt her rip out my throat and inject a poison so potent it paralyzed me for months afterwards.

"I nearly died," he ranted, forehead pouring sweat. "I thought I had. I sat trapped and bleeding in a dark shed for hours, unable to scream or cry, sure that this was it, that I'd gone to hell despite everything. And I couldn't argue unfairness."
"Even if I could, there was no one to convince. The sentence had been dealt. I felt damned and justly so, caught out and abandoned and completely, utterly fucking helpless, a terror I've yet to…"

Severus was handed an unlit cigarette. "How'd you...shit, how'd you get out?"

Seconds passed as did the fervor. As Severus cooled, an evil pain released him, and he shuddered.

"...Friends, came for me, expecting a body. I listened to them bicker over helping me. But they were the only ones to come looking, so." He listed for a while, blank of thought, before putting the cigarette in his mouth.

_I have work to get doing_, he meant to say. Severus waited for his feet to hit the floor and carry him to the attic. Instead, he looked up, dazed, into someone's worried face.

Fred looked grim. Was that for Severus' sake?

"Odd kinda friends, but it suits," the younger man hemmed. "Hold on, before you light that, lemme open a window. The smoke's bad for the, uh, darlings. Y'want, we can head downstairs."

"No." He felt Fred's eyes on him as he grunted, flexing his hands and glancing around the room. "Talking about it...did something."

Reliving that night and returning to comparably teeny things: it didn't make this his favorite room, no. But the Slytherin gleaned some esteem from meeting these snakes' tiny, caged eyes. Severus was bigger. Maybe not stronger, but smarter, possibly faster. None of these pets could really bother him.

_Longbottom killed the real monster_, and like that, the spell was broken. His limbs were light as he resettled, crossing his legs, going lax, resting his hands on his stomach.

He'd survived.

"Well, alright then," Fred snorted. "Go ahead, big man."

His brother opened the window and produced a neon Bic. Severus blew clinging smoke out to evening, fanning to help it go. Fred changed the tape in his "Walkman," playing it full volume to send some thready riffs his way.

"This has to be American," guessed the wizard, discussing the song. "Or else the nineties were a completely parallel universe."

"They were, but no, yeah, this's from New Orleans. It's a change from the classics, but it's good. I can't believe you've never owned music! You've got a little ear for it, mate."

"Nn." He pulled from his dinner and coughed. He answered while slapping his chest, "Wh—ha! What money? What store? I didn't touch real money until twenty...one? But by then I'd had a notorious trial and gone into teaching, damn papers shouting down my appointment. I don't blame them now, but then?

"Besides, I had no wish to play Muggle, and no good wizard would sell to me."

Severus paused.

"It just dawned on me. I don’t think I enjoyed anything but work and misery until…," he considered his cigarette. "This. Until this bloody smoke. No, in fact, not until your mother's soup."
"Oh, yeah, Mum can throw down. But really!? Miserable all this time, and you're how old?"

"Forty-two."

"Forty fuckin' two! No fun till ya forties, what a bleedin' trip." Fred shook his head, amazed. "I had too much fun, I guess, but none at all is wild. Look, how's about we all survive, kick hitman arse and throw like a party or summit later?"

Severus snorted. "Stupid. Hell of a party you'd throw. Your music is a health hazard. I don't believe you've mentioned even drinking once."

"Sober eight years!"

"Sounds less like any party I’ve been to and more like a group nap. Except for these." Severus picked up the Muggle medicine and gave it over. "For the 'voices.' I didn't know your doctors could treat that."

"Yesss," Fred said, dragging out the 's' as if leaking air. The wizard jumped when a few of the snakes hissed and slithered in response. He squinted into the boa's box. It wiggled its forked tongue and puffed almost curiously, nose poked out of its coils.

"Do magic doctors have this? I mean, do wizards have mental," Fred twiddled fingers by his temples, "Yeah?"

Severus reluctantly pulled his gaze from the boa once it tucked its head into its hide, long body following after: "Absolutely, yes. Some have gone famously insane—but it's all Cheering Charms or padded rooms over there."

"That's fuckin' outrageous."

Confident the snakes were quelled, he tipped his cigarette as a gentleman would a hat. "We suffer for the art. Plus, we have government recognized Seers and all, so I suppose 'hallucinations' seem a Muggle ailment next to all that."

"Garbage to ignore your problems, though, if a wizard can do—what can ya do, exactly?"

"Anything," Severus smiled coldly.

Fred fidgeted with a notebook while he ruminated on this fact. Some of the polish had rubbed off his shining attitudes. It seemed the state of magical mental health care really weighed on his heart.

Severus watched and smoked until his cigarette was done. He stubbed the butt out on his slipper and pocketed it to throw out later.

"Don't keep it! There's a bin right there."

Severus looked at the trash, overflowing with balled and crumpled paper. It looked like sheet music for the most part, most of the notes crossed out. Apparently, he wasn't the only one lacking in inspiration that night.

"So when did you start hearing voices?" he asked instead, flicking a tune off the pile.

His brother hummed and tapped a beat out on the chair. "Depends on which ones you mean, I guess. Like, some voices went in and out since I was a kid. I heard 'em clear as day for a while and then not as much in London, a lot since I got clean."
"It isn't always a problem problem for those, since they don't ask for anythin' dangerous. They just tell me, uh, I dunno."

"You hear them now." Severus nearly checked the room for anyone but them and the reptiles. He restrained his silly impulse.

"Yep, like," Fred pointed to one rack to their right, at the first of six clear plastic drawers, "The rat snake in there, she's been off feed for a couple weeks. Stressed from moving and lots of new smells. Right now I'm hearin', 'Live mice! I want live mice!'

"But it's harmless, that—just chatter. It's not makin' me want to eat the mice myself. So I'll thaw some later, throw it in there, get a little 'thanks.' It's nothing bad."

The wizard sat up straight, incredulous. "You think you can hear the snake's thoughts?"

The Muggle wiped his nose on his sleeve, leg bouncing. "Don't make me feel crazy, Rev. The pills aren't for that, anyway. That doesn't go away. I just listen to music and tune it out, but medicine don't touch that.

"It's for other things, horror movie, brain-on-fire, 'everyone's out to get me' shit. I used drugs for a long time, and it warped whatever I already had goin' on. Pills and not drinkin', that's for the drug voices. To keep me at home."

"A foil of little pills is all the help you get?"

"I got my family, man!," he shouted.

He beat his chest like a wrestler and started punching the air. "They're my superpower! The pets help, too. Way too many macho junkies buy snakes for show. I mean, I ain’t too much better."

He flexed, David and Goliath. Then he dropped his arms and laughed. "But I do take 'em in, get 'em better, keep who—heh, who 'speaks to me.' Takin' care of things, that's what I do. I stay on my meds, I own my shit, and now I can help with Laney and move us to this house—."

"My house," snarked Severus. "That you'd all be under without me."

"That you'd be alone in without us! See, it's fuckin' symbiosis. Snakes and springtails. It's, whatever, it's life. Complicated. Ahh, feels good, all this love!"

"Don't be obscene."

Fred smacked his knee, which Severus pulled out of reach, shocked but hardly hurt. "I don't wanna talk about bad memories anymore, hey. I got another pack off Zed, so here, smoke it up. Just aim outside."

Severus rolled his eyes and watched the younger man round the room.

He realized with residual sick, as Fred passed the glass tanks, that the serpents within seemed to follow him with their heads. He called Fred back to make sure, and as he suspected, the snakes turned their shiny heads, flicking tongues when he crossed the room, eyebrows raised.

Severus leaned on his knees at this point, staring at them, brows furrowed. Then asked, "What do these—would you say kinder?—voices sound like?"

Fred slid the top off of a tank and reached inside. The royal python the man favored slid out from a
hide of fabric leaves. It met his questing fingers with a lick.

"How do you mean 'sound'? They're just words. No one's really sayin' them."

Then the Muggle bent his head and hissed into the tank. The python bobbed once and hissed back.

Severus bolted to his feet. "What are you saying!?"

"Ah! What!? Nothing!" The snake flicked at Severus and receded puffing into a cave. "Yeah! Why are you yellin'?"

He thought on the Potter's map, drawn seemingly without sense. It had an inexplicable lack of Dursleys paired with the obvious presence of Hedgerots.

_Both Muggle, unless..._ An image of a grand ward formed in Severus' mind.

It wound a serpentine path around Spinner's End, buried in the smoky dark of the street outside. It looped through the woods, its giant head brushing the treetops and then plunging underground, passing between the feet of a great wolf, striking out and upwards through the gallop of a mighty stallion.

It came to rest by where it began and, yawning, surged forward to take its own tail in its mouth.

"Potter, wake up!"

Harry shouted and tumbled to the floor. He blinked blearily up at the haze crouching over him.

"Wah?" He'd been thrown from a perfect sleep. The couch managed to fit Ginny in between himself and the cushy back rest. Warmth from the borrowed quilt still wrapped his foot, now trapped under Ginny's bottom.

His girlfriend mumbled awake and scratched her fiery bedhead. "Snape? We fight—are we fighting!?"

Both shot up, wands out. Harry fumbled for his glasses while Ginny scanned frantically for enemies. The glasses were dropped onto his head with a curt, "Upstairs!"

Ginny covered his back while he took off for the staircase. Snape had left it wide open, clearing the way for them to shoot towards the fight.

"Where!?," Harry called, shoving on his glasses and propelling up the steps.

"First landing, end of the hall! Quickly!"

Ginny scrambled up behind him, Snape barking directions at the rear flank. The group hurried, Stunners primed on their lips. Their wands sparked bright red. Harry and Ginny skid into a bedroom at Snape's urgent, "Left!"

They dropped into a shooting stance, hearts thudding, panting, raw-edged for battle.

"Hey! What's this!"

Harry staggered, floored. Freddy lounged in a chair next to them, cradling a snake by his face.

“What’s happened?,” he gasped. Freddy shrugged, a forked tongue flicking at his upper lip.
The young hero looked around and found tons of snakes, one huge one and dozens smaller. They were in clean, elaborate tanks designed like miniature deserts and forests. Very pretty, and not a single enemy in sight.

"Aww, see, I told him not to wake ya. Rev, they're guests."

Harry clutched a stitch forming in his side and stumbled to face the hall. Snape skulked in behind them, a thick book under each arm. He plunked the texts on the writing desk for Fred's chair, spinning them to point right. First he dropped a burgundy, fabric-bound encyclopedia.

Then, stacked on that, he placed Harry's—their—the Potter register.

"The hell's this?," Harry wheezed.

"Watch your mouth. Sit over there." Snape gestured to a sorry cot and started flipping through the books.

Harry wobbled, adrenaline still pumping. He looked to Ginny who went to the open window and leaned out, searching the street below.

"There's nothing," she said, confounded, battle-flushed to her collarbone. "Is there no—why—!
Sleeping! We were sleeping!"

Snape ignored her and pointed to the cot again, all the while rummaging in his jeans pockets. Harry gaped as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and tapped one into his palm.

He then stuck it in his mouth, but didn't light it. It just jutted from his lips while the man ran a thumb down the Potter family map.

"Are you still a Parselmouth?," asked the git.

"Wha, I?! Why would I be? It was Voldemort's stuff. He's dead, remember?"

"Oh, goodness, is he?," Snape drawled, "It must've slipped my mind. I know that, idiot. Have you tried practicing Parseltongue since then?"

Finally, Snape looked at him. For some elusive, unknowable reason, he was annoyed with Harry as if the young man had actually shaken him from a luxurious dead sleep.

Harry couldn't believe it! He dragged his feet to the bed and climbed into the covers. Ginny sighed and followed suit, sitting on his legs.

"What's going on?," she groaned, rubbing her eyes.

"I dunno."

Snape snapped, "Potter! Answer me! Have you tried speaking Parseltongue since the war?"

He groaned and rolled over, pulling the ragged blanket up to his chin. It smelled like cigarette smoke and men's body spray. "Maybe, as a joke. Hsssshh-htshhssusu. To freak people out, not with an actual snake."

"Fuck me! She's listenin'!"

Harry peeked over. The thick patterned snake unwound from around Freddy's wrist and wavered his way, head aiming for him, tongue flickering earnestly. She anchored her body on the man's arm
and smelled Harry, who shrunk into the cot.

"Boy, do you bring foodsssss?," she hissed.

He blinked slowly.

"I guess it stuck," he grumbled, unimpressed. "She says she's hungry."

"I know!," Freddy shouted, eyes wide with awe. "Holy shit, I heard her!"

"You've been hearing her," growled Snape. Then a thunk and a paper shuffle later, "Jormungand!"

*Is this a dream? I don't think that bit was English,* Harry thought. He switched sides and propped up on an elbow. The snakes complained about the noise—shouting, thumping, squeaky bedsprings.

"Husshhh!"

"Noisy humans!"

"Live mice! Is that live mice? Warm and crunchy!"

Harry didn't miss the skill this much. Regular snakes rarely made good conversation. This wasn't, "rip and tear!," but he still preferred people—or sleep.

Ginny had crawled between Harry and the wall, curled up and returned to sleep. He gave up half the blanket and was prepared to let her be and follow soon after.

"Don't get too comfortable. You'll be helping me with the wards, all of you."

"Huh?"

Snape stabbed the map with his finger. Harry winced. The map wouldn't care for so much rough treatment. He wondered if he could claim some right as the Head Potter, hide the book from Snape, and forbid the man from touching it.

“What’re you talking about?,” he asked again.

"Every person in this bloody house has magic!" He met the wizard’s eyes, not sure if heard right. The black glittered madly:

“If those two, shoddy goons so much as breathe on one brick, one blasted shingle, I will give up and end myself!”
Magus Night

Chapter Summary

Severus throws himself into his first attempt at a family ward. Harry thinks it should be his last.

August 24th, 2002: Malfoy Manor, East Sussex (late morning)

They struck the road hacking in a cloud of pitch black smoke. They collapsed in the dirt, blonde hair frazzled and grey, batting away the snarling beasts molded by the stinking haze. A blistered fist slashed at the smoke, unzipping the cloud to reveal mother and son, gasping.

Fresh air fought the strangling fog until it finally rushed into their lungs. Tears streaming, they flung the cursed smoke to the four winds. The two lie blinded and shriveled on the ground outside the manor gates.

Overcast morning sun sapped all the color from them besides their scarlet heat-razed skin. They barely stirred, sheet white and ash grey and furious, char lined red.

Eventually, gagging, begging for water, Draco lifted his wand and doused himself with a freezing cold Aguamenti. He cried out at the stream of cold water hitting his tight, stinging face.

“Please,” croaked his mother, waving her wand fruitlessly. He obliged and cast again, more gently, to soak her skin and singed hair.

He winced at her pained keening. His off hand scrabbled in the forming puddles and grasped hers. Black caked under their fingernails, they clasped weak, shaking hands and cursed the pain, the wet ground, each other, even the sky.

“Why—what, what are we—mother! What’re we,” rasped Draco, nearly sobbing.

“P-promise me,” Narcissa croaked, climbing to her knees. Water seeped through to her shins, sending her into wracking shivers. She trembled like a foal, unable to stand.

“Draco, promise me, if anyone asks, especially the Aurors, we know nothing. Do you understand?!”

Her son crumpled again, rocking and pushing his chest. He coughed and gasped, wrecked either by smoke or emotion. She couldn’t tell, and balled his robes in her fist, making him meet her eyes.

“‘We were home all evening.’ Say it!”

Streaked soot scored his face as he forced out, “‘W-we were home all e-evening.’”

“Yes,” she said, letting him go to both sink into exhaustion.

They heard the gates squeal open and the rush of voices overtake them. The small, panicked hands of house elves plucked and gathered their employers. Heedless of the manor wards, the elves cracked them inside, fretting at the heavy infernal stench now haunting the immaculate halls.
August 24th, 2002: Spinner’s End, Cokeworth (four hours left)

Severus shushed the room and sneered, having wasted his breath.

Everyone besides himself had regressed to idiot childhood. Fred visited every tank, lisping excitedly as he bounced from English to Parseltongue. Weasley, snapped awake by the hissing, peppered everyone with queasy questions. Potter woke more fully as the other two carried on, and began tossing progressively louder accusations at Severus’ hunching back.

“Thisss isth blowing my mind!”

“Does that mean You-Know-Who could be...but Fox. How?”

“Snape, you have to have already known! If you knew, why didn’t you say anything! Please!”

Severus hunched over his work. His pen tap tap tapped on the hard desk top. He stared at his hand on the page, and fought for the last few details of his sketch. The wizard turned again to his only reference on domestic ward work, Loughlina Trixibelle’s *Hearth of Steel*.

Trixibelle tended toward grey magic, weaving Light and Dark Arts into ward patterns he could respect. She supported her snarky, blunt manner with the references to the many beings and deities to inspire human creation. The downside of her work was that it required many wands, her intricate designs demanding collaboration from every magic user in a home.

And so Severus, who as a young professor only read the book for pleasure, blew more dust from the yellowed page as he read.

“To confine Chaos: Wards for a turbulent home.” A moat of smooth scales flowed through runic nodes on an eight-pointed star. It proved a frightening amalgam of evocations. Just seeing it again inspired a sense of unbowed willfulness that reminded him of his company.

Weasley gasped something and Fred, forgetting English entirely in his eagerness, loosed horrid susurrus on the room. Everyone, including the man himself, shuddered, skin crawling. One could feel a hum of power passing over them.

The snakes made an awful racket, sending Potter into more frantic interrogation.

“What’s happening!! This isn’t right!”

Severus’ gaze flicked over to the discolored varnish under the edge of the monograph. Some teen version of him had etched, “never,” into the secondhand desk. He glared at it past his headache. He didn’t remember doing that, but wholeheartedly agreed. Whatever brought him to this new aggravation: never again.

“Snape!”

“Potter!,” he barked, banging fists on the desk. “All of you, shut up! I am working!”

In the tiny break of surprised quiet, the song from Fred’s tape player changed. Chattering drums kicked up a crash of dissonant guitars. It was a furious sound—almost relieving in an immediate onset of sonic pain.
Inconvenient to his frustration, Severus found he rather liked it. He snatched up the Walkman, spun, and launched it at the open window.

Fred yelped, diving in its path, and caught it against his chest in a dramatic arc to the floor. Snarling, Severus bent to his work. He nearly left from his skin when the player was dropped in front of him.

“Bloody maniac!,” the yeti snapped, shaking the foam padded headphones at him. “Here, no one’s stoppin’ ya! Focus! Focus!”

Angry and exasperated, the older man made to stand before he was forcibly seated and thumped hard on the back. Something slid over his hung head, and music blared so loudly, he felt his eardrums vibrate. He looked up, and scowled.

But finally, he could concentrate.

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**August 24th, 2002: Spinner’s End, Cokeworth (three hours left)**

Severus worked and reworked the wards. Severus tried all the while to permit his mind to be calmed. With those few minutes of demolishing his hearing, lyrics vomiting rage over the feel of ballpoint on parchment, he finished.

He split his designs on several sheets of paper commandeered from a sketchbook. A page for each of their parts, and Severus with the master. Assessing them from every angle, he sat back, satisfied. It was experimental, imperfect, but mighty.

Eventually, he eased the headphones off of his head. He placed them on the desk beside his book, gathered his papers, and turned to the room. The others were entertaining each other, Fred having made a game of convincing the python to dance, with Weasley as morbid judge. Potter looked on anxiously, leg bouncing, fists tucked under his arms.

They froze when Severus sucked his teeth and stretched.

“Children,” he strained before oozing into a slouch. Severus rubbed one eye swollen with sleeplessness while, with the other hand, pointing at the vacated bed.

“We’re starting,” he grumbled. When he didn’t hear shuffling feet, he glowered. “I’m sure your clown jousting can wait. Sit while I summon the others.”

Potter and Weasley shared one of their conspiratorial glances before returning to the bed. Fred elected to stand, hands in his pockets. Severus handed the three their parts.

Weasley received a short paragraph beneath a sketch of the eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. It stood roughly rendered, the artistic focus being on the hoof planted on every point of the star. Her eyes ran quickly over the words, widening with surprise. She met his eyes, baffled.

“I’m helping, too?,” she asked, forehead wrinkling.

Severus rolled his eyes, “I said as much earlier. Don’t think you’ll be here swaddled and safe while the rest of us work.”

The witch rolled her eyes back at him and scoffed. He caught her meaning. Though he’d only known her as an adolescent thorn in his side, even Severus recalled her devotion to team efforts. She was like her brothers in that way, always linked in arms with some struggling soul.
He designed to move on without comment. Potter accepted his paper perfunctorily, mouth formed around another objection. The boy uttered most of a heated, “Why,” before Severus interrupted him.

“Tell me: is English your first language?,” he drawled. It brought Potter up short, and he watched lip curling as the savior struggled to answer.

“Wh—Yeah?”

“One couldn’t tell, from your failure to understand basic instruction. Besides which, you’re predictably mistaken.”

The boy scowled. “I’ve been speaking it my whole life, professor. I think I’d know if it was my first language or not.”

Potter tossed aside his assignment, and started in again gesturing to the tanks. Severus plucked the page from the bedspread, rolled it into a tight scroll, and smacked the brat over the head with it.

“Oi! Listen to me, you git!”

“You listen!,” chastised the older man, posturing as if in lecture. “You’re wasting time—yours and mine—if as soon as I lend you my attention, you ask about the damned snakes. Have you ever considered that English is not your first language, you odious twit? The first you were exposed to, yes, but not the first you were able to speak?”

“Huh?,” said the boy, bemused. Severus sighed and motioned to Fred.

“Sasquatch, I believe your sister speaks Spanish. She used a word of it to calm your mother. Did you all learn English first or second?”

The man mused for a moment and shrugged, leaning on a dresser. “Second, I guess. Nan only spoke Spanish and we lived with her growing up, so yeah, second. Mum’s said she still dreams in both. Hmm, Zeddie, too.”

“And what about you?”

Fred scratched his beard. “Uhh, y’know, I thought it was weird, but I used to talk in my sleep a lot. I thought I dreamed in English only, but half the time it was—shit. I guess it was Parso, um.”

“Parseltongue,” Potter finished, going pale.

Severus nodded, cradling an elbow while he pointed with his work.

“Consider, Potter, that infants begin using rudimentary words sometime within the first year, year and a half. It isn’t unheard of for magical children to begin speaking later, closer to two years, as they first learn to express themselves with incidents of wild magic.”

He went on, “Even the most verbose child, like say a Granger, will not speak until after most Muggle toddlers. Rich pureblood babes are tutored from conception, and still experience a delay.”

Severus looked into Potter’s face. It grew more ashen by the word. “And so, a child age eighteen months receives a language gift in totality, sans years of education and practice. Is subject to the full fluency of an adult speaker housed in a developing mind.

“Do you then think, once the original speaker has gone, that not even a syllable of proficiency
He pressed a finger into Potter’s forehead, near abouts the infamous scar. The boy flinched; Severus smirked.

“You’re brain molded around the gift, imbecile. You had it for seventeen years. If Parseltongue could be ripped away so easily, then what would be left of your already pitiable mind? Another hole for the wind to whistle through?”

He returned the scroll to Potter’s slack grip. It unfurled to show an identical pattern to the sheet he handed Fred. Fluid coils of the Serpent, Jormungand, encircled a top-down view of Spinner’s End. Severus had translated the runes filling the circle into English with the footnote: “In Parseltongue.”

Then he ordered the group to memorize, and left down the hall to rouse the others. He didn’t expect his first knock to be answered. The bedroom door swung open for Grace to be framed grimly in her woodsy nightgown. She was shadowed by bright, flickering light and the burning end of her cigarette.

Severus quirked a brow and peered over her head. In the room as cluttered as he’d last seen, the girl Marisleny bullied a handheld game, legs swinging off the edge of the bed. The bright lights flashed on the tiny screen, keeping the child enraptured.

“It’s two in the bloody mornin’,” Grace groused.

“And you’re both up. Good.”

He showed her two pages. One boasted the black ocean, dotted with trees. On the other was the trickster god, Loki, in female form, beside the giantess, Angrboda. Without a father in the house, Severus had to adjust Trixibelle’s roles. He felt some pride at the fascinated gleam in Grace’s eye. He’d drawn the lovers well.

“What’re you gettin’ up to, eh? Up late drawin’ naked ladies?” She brought the drawing to the tip of her nose and chuckled. “Jesus, Severus. This’s good! I’ll stick it on the fridge in the mornin.”

She tried to return it, but Severus refused. He gave her the second one, indicating it was for the now attentive child. Again, the sketches focused on the most active details: the ocean composed the dark around the house, submerged in which would be the serpent; and the two women, nursing a fire between them, posed stoically over a stove.

“What’s this for,” she asked. Her child went unacknowledged behind her, even as the girl looked up, frowned at Severus, and returned to her game with a harrumph.

“A spell, for protection.”

“This looks like witchcraft, more than the tricks with the door or...” She seemed interested and uneasy. “Is it a curse or somethin’?”

He snorted, shifting his weight. “Well, it should look like what it is. And it’s not a curse on us, only those who seek to do harm. Come, I will explain to everyone together. Bring the child as well.”

A cloud of probing curiosity and residual resentment floated from the bed to by her mother’s hip. Severus glared down at Marisleny, who peeped, “I want to see,” with quiet resolution.
He glanced at Grace, who pushed her back into the room.

“Will this hurt her?,” she inquired, ignoring her daughter’s exasperated, “Mum!”

Severus shook his head. “Her part is minor and well within her abilities. It will take some concentration, but it’s designed for children to do with no ill effects.”

“And this ain’t gonna raise devils or anythin’? It’s safe?”

He didn’t hesitate. “The only potential danger will be to me.”

With this, he guided them to the last bedroom, where even Potter had capitulated and studied his part. Severus left the door ajar after two more filtered inside. He accepted Grace’s wary look with aplomb and journeyed to the basement.

The hinges on the bookcase squeaked as he emerged. He pulled the partially smoked cigarette from behind his ear, sniffed it, and threw it on the floor. It reeked of unwashed hair, and wouldn’t be better than eating.

He picked dandruff from his scalp and padded into the kitchen, taking in the open basement door. His stomach cramping for more real food. He stole a moment to eat.

The empty soup pot soaked in the sink. Severus stares at the oil and herbs floating on the soapy water as he chewed on a slice of white bread from the bag. Easy blues rose like warm air from below. The music faded and a new song started. A lighter flicked; Zinnia cursed. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and called down, “Have you seen anything?”

A heavy pause, and then his half-sister replied with a grunted, “Squirrels, mostly, and sparrows. What d’ya want?”

“You’ll be reading something for me. It will lend to the efforts to secure the house,” he answered. The last paper in hand was a wolf trapped on an island, and one phrase repeating—a call for enemies’ destruction. He listened to Zinnia’s insomniac shifting. It seemed after most of a morning spent sleeping, she’d break night.

“Piss off. I’m already playin’ bloody watchdog. Read it yaself.”

Traces of smoke and the pop of a can of cola. The music resumed louder than before. He considered Fenrir on her lonesome isle and pondering a spell on the safety of distance. Severus dropped the paper and it fluttered on an unnatural breeze across the kitchen, through the sagging doorway, and down the steps.

First a beat, and the radio turned down. “...You can draw?”

He grumbled, suddenly embarrassed. Perhaps he’d gotten carried away with the imagery. “Simply read it when you are called.”

“Pfft, whatever.”

Severus lingered a moment, then, affected by the gelling reality; because it was there, housed in the quiet by the blues: an indomitable urge not only to survive, but to protect. He’d only felt it a few times, and always he bore the burden it hailed alone. In a grand motion played quietly in the dark, his petrified knees bent to purpose, cleaving apart a pedestal built on four years in perforated obscurity. His will to serve shook the cold stone from his body, showering his petty fears in dust.
At first, he suffered pure terror. He thought on Dumbledore, and Voldemort; Lucius, in those early years, and his father. He lost so much time with others’ hands on his head and his nose pressed to their hems, however gently. So when feeling dormant servitude stir, Severus fought not to be humbled.

However, like a word in a spell, like a rune in a ward, like an ingredient in a potion, he could transcend himself in his giving. To be part of a collective, even such a tiny, ragtag one—he found awaiting him a measure of grace, paid with meaning. Now something in him brewed with Zinnia’s tacit awareness, one he sensed as the two let the radio play.

He felt his gasping roots touch soil, and physically leaned over to sigh, suffering the changing wind.

“If you’re just hangin’ about,” Zinnia called up the stairs, “be a lamb and throw us down a sandwich!”

“Fuck you,” Severus laughed, low and broken, his body reforming around the sound, as new and smothered as the first grain of sand to be a pearl.

August 24th, 2002: Spinner’s End, Cokeworth (two hours left)

Harry worried a loose thread in his sleeve, eyes watering from minutes of unbroken eye contact. Green to brown, he refused to look away. He held his breath through the hard rasp of chalk on the splintering boards.

Snape circled Ginny once, twice, more and more, chanting too quietly to be heard. His black hair hung low, brushing the ground as he drew. The rings of the circle came closer and closer to Ginny’s feet. Harry hissed, as the man’s spidery scrawl cut jagged, white runes into the wood.

Each symbol leeched liquid darkness from the shadows wedged in the shelves or under the furniture. Despite the pale chalk, as each circle’s terminus, the runes turned a luminous black.

The whole house save Harry’s older sister had gathered in the living room. They were lit only by conjured purple candles at the eight points of a star. He looked to his mother, who gripped Laney to her side with fierce solemnity. Nobody moved but Harry and Snape—the former now pacing, kicking the rolled up carpet, while the latter finished the last rune, lyrical whispers dropped into silence.

“Read,” the dark wizard instructed Ginny. The witch shifted uncomfortably, spurring on Harry’s unrest.

“Why does she—!,” but Snape cut him off with a vehement, “Shush!,” and nodded at her to continue.

She grimaced, pupils like pennies in the glowing dark. A sheen of sweat coated her forehead as she cleared her throat and began reading.

Harry caught the first words: “Sleipnir, god bringer, mightiest steed.” Suddenly, the flames on every candle doubled in size, wrenching a fearful shout from those gathered. The Hedgerots fell back, even Laney who until then had been riveted. Harry spring forward, ready to pull Ginny from the ring, until the witch held up her hand, and stuttered.

She kept reading, only sharing through a wide-eyed stare that she was fine. The page trembled in her grip and Harry tensed, ready to leap in regardless. However, with a sigh and a last phrase,
“trample our foes under hoof,” the roaring of the candle flames ceased.

Wick by snuffed wick, the room went dark. Nobody breathed as the spirit galloped around them, blowing their hair back. It swept up and out of the room, leaving a thudding drumbeat in its wake. The feeling was of many hearts beating in tandem.

Fred, swearing, clicked on the lamp. The amber light made the candles look brown. Harry rushed to Ginny as she stepped gingerly from the circle. They threw arms around each other and he felt the witch lose a shaky sigh.

“I’ve never,” she swallowed, lost for words.

Harry held her face and nearly Apparated them both to London. He didn’t believe Snape that this was ward work. In all their time camping, Hermione never resorted to anything more than wand work and incantations. This was undeniably Dark Arts. How could it protect anybody?

“Next,” Snape mumbled, dabbing away sweat with the wrist from his buttoned sleeve. He turned, eyes hooded, and stalked to the kitchen.

Harry looked around the room for anyone eager to follow. Grace seemed to do the same, head swiveling and landing on Harry with a deep frown. He could almost hear her question of, “Is this normal?”

Harry shook his head and led the way after Snape. The others listed behind.

*Can we stop this?* He planned to try.

Despite Snape’s “lesson” on evocations and home wards, Harry didn’t understand what was happening. In classic Snape fashion, the man had mostly paid homage to the “poetry” of chaos. He mocked Harry for his ignorance of Norse mythology, despite the boy knowing as much as everyone else. When asked to explain anything—for instance, what the symbols’ actually meant—Snape only offered snide remarks.

“Serves you right for dodging real education like the plague. Simply follow instructions, Potter.”

Then the man started in about sidewalk chalk and candles. Any helpful advice on raising ancient, violent, and deceptive gods came so buried in derision that Harry could only grieve its passing.

So, of course, he didn’t trust the whole affair. Far from it—his only thought now was of ending this ritual, even if he’d incur some evil wrath.

Harry squawked as he tripped over his little sister in the doorway. His glasses were knocked off his nose and clattered on the lino. The young wizard grunted an apology, squinting at the fuzzy girl-shaped blob in the hallway. The shape in pink pyjamas backed away from him, back toward the lights.

“What’s wrong,” he mumbled. He held out his palm. Some movement—she seemed to shake her head.

“Don’t worry,” he coaxed, shuffling forward and wincing as his big toe hit a lens. He heard his glasses skitter off across the tiles. “Dammit. No, I won’t let him hurt you.”

“Lower thy sword, oh valiant savior,” ridiculed Snape, the “him” in question. “She has an aversion to the kitchen, not my person. Would that she could mind me with such steadfast terror. Perhaps then I might know some peace.”
Harry rolled his eyes, and then felt the air shift. Snape rounded the room, falling eerily silent, pacing catlike and near soundlessly like he’d done at school. He had expected the man to insult him again, or mutter something precious about his ineptitude. Instead, there was only drilling nothing, not the busy quiet of like when he’d been at work at his desk. This was an absence of noise, almost like Snape had stopped breathing, as his mind left the room.

After a beat, something skated Harry’s way. With difficulty seeing in the dark, blurry kitchen, he kneeled to rescue his glasses while trying to track the thin shade passing in front of the closed cabinets. Hinges squeaked when Harry’s fingers finally brushed his wayward frames. Just then a melody Harry hadn’t noticed before announced its untimely end.

Snape’s baritone rumbled, “Zinnia, begin reading.”

A faint, “Huh,” and soon Zed’s rasp wrapped around,”Fenri...sulfur—what?—bound in chains,” before Snape stopped her, telling her to be serious.

“I dunno what it is you’ve given me, ya prick! I don’t read whatever this is!”

There was an angry clack of slapped plastic, and the radio he now couldn’t miss resumed, accompanied by the alkaline stench of burnt tobacco.

Maybe I won’t have to do anything, he thought, smirking some. If the one person just didn’t cooperate, they’d probably need a new plan.

Harry pushed his glasses on in time to hear the complaints of old wood and see Snape sink into the basement. The man turned, glowering, into the bulb lit room as he stomped down the stairs, such that the wash of halogen pulled out the yellow in his skin. Snape had a fiendish gleam in his eye, like a man possessed.

There was a harsh bark of laughter, and Snape’s head disappeared, ghoulish looks and all.

Harry broke from dread enough to feel worried for Snape—Christ, he looked ill—and sorry for himself for caring. He hated that even as he made to pursue and demand they end the casting, that he was glad for Ginny holding him back.

I’m not afraid of him, Harry insisted to himself, and he wasn’t. He simply didn’t know what to feel, besides lost in this new, alien night. He didn’t want to confront Snape, or rather, he didn’t want to have to. It took the snarky git going funny for Harry realize: rude, looming know-it-all had its charm, compared to this.

He looked at Ginny and shivered, meeting a strange glimmer in her eye a fraction the shine of Snape’s. It made her look changed and creepy.

“I’ve gotta end this,” Harry whispered, rubbing her hand in the crook of his arm. “This is mad!”

“It’s…,” his girlfriend muttered, breath stuttering. He’d never seen her struggle to string together a sentence.

She held on when he jerked away toward slowly ascending footsteps. Clearing her throat, she stammered, “I-it’s not—Harry, don’t. Don’t make me defend Snape out loud. I think he’s really, he’s...whatever it is, it’s protecting this house. I can feel it.”

Harry wormed his arm free, shaking his head. “He’s having us summon god-knows-what! Hermione never resorted to Dark magic to keep anyone safe! Even you—I!”
“He’s not Hermione. Look, just wait for your part, it’s...,” she trailed off, given the basement door respectful distance as Snape’s dark head led from the entrance. He hung over all of them despite at least Freddy towering above him.

“Keep—,” the man started, but then bestial bass beat on the house. A song more like screaming ambushed his words.

It was like Freddy’s music, wailing and dissonant, only not springing from a tiny, headphone speaker. It devoured the quiet, amplified more than the output of any regular Muggle radio Harry had ever heard before. This was as if Snape had summoned a concert speaker directly underfoot. From upstairs, they could hear electronic bits buzz and rattle in their casings from the sheer force of sound.

A long, terrible howl overtook them. With a barely audible shout, Laney ran past him and sped out of a back door, hands clamped over her ears. He saw her slight form bound into the woods, scared as a baby deer.

He looked to their mother, mouth falling open to shout, “I’ll get her!” Except Grace had Snape by the neck, knocking over pans and plates and unlit candles in their struggle.

“I said no devils!,” she yelled, haywire curls flying in her face.

Snape smacked at her forearms, and Harry stood dizzy and torn. Help Grace? Go after Laney? His hand summoned his broom, which he mounted, head spinning. What was he doing? What was happening!?

Snape finally leveraged his height and pried Grace off of him. His breaking free of her made the woman gasp and spin to the knife block, chest heaving.

“Get outta here!” Grace pulled out a skinning knife and slashed at Snape, who didn’t flinch, having himself entered a muttering trance. “GO!”

Harry was pushed out of the way of Freddy’s one-man stampede. In seconds, Snape was trapped between the larger man’s arm lock and the point of Grace’s blade. The dark wizard didn’t even notice. His head had fallen back on Freddy’s chest, a fierce expression cut across his face, thin lips a blur sporting snatches of craggy teeth as he spiraled into recitations.

“...above the dead...rule the crimes of your siblings...unrelenting...icy and resolute...”

Even Ginny hung about growing grey at how the man held perfectly still, spindly and crooked. She recoiled when Snape began to keel over, as the screaming music crashed into a new level of fury.

“Mine wasn’t...like this,” she said, mounting Harry’s broom behind him and wrapping around his waist. “He’s channeling something else.”

“He’s absolutely insane.” Harry felt sick to see it. He felt poisoned. He heeded his mother’s slashing and pointing, and flew them out the back door, up and over the woods.

“We’ve got to find Laney,” Harry explained a minute or two into flight. Ginny nodded that she understood, resting her head on his back.

They leveled out a hundred or so feet above the canopy. The pair glided over the patchy forest, glad for the near full moon illuminating the glimpses of forest floor. He scanned the ground for a flash of Laney’s pink pyjamas and came up with nothing. He’d assumed she would run in a straight line and said as much, for Ginny to suggest they circle.
“I think I saw something,” she mumbled, directing him lower. “Maybe it’s clothes...it’s hard to tell, is that a person?”

Harry swooped closer, mind still sullenly in Spinner’s End. He searched the trees half-heartedly, and saw nothing, then remembered what he was looking for and guiltily applied himself to the search. He still found nothing, at least not anything Ginny might think was a person. Confused, he looked over his shoulder at his girlfriend, who matched his frown.

“You don’t see it? The pink thing?,” she asked, pointing.

They hovered over one spot in the woods, now, and he followed her finger to the treetops swimming below. Oddly, the spotty sprawl of trees had solidified, seemingly multiplied under the bright white eye of the moon. The occasional clearing and peek of underbrush disappeared under a carpet of black.

The scrubby Cokeworth forest was an ocean of trees. It didn’t end in the near distance with a next town cropping into view. Trees, that and cooling moonlight, rolled into the skyline, melding with more lightlessness.

Harry was dwarfed by the abyss. His breath clogged in his throat, vision blurring, as more insurmountable deep crushed every place except his hands on his broom handle, Ginny’s hands gripping those, and her red hair—falling into his lap as she wove under his arms and took control of the broom.

“I’ve got us, I can see her,” she repeated over and over, shushing him like a startled horse. “You’re doing really well, and I’m here, I’m right here. Look, we’re okay.”

She submerged them in the burgeoning black and for a moment, Harry gasped for air, afraid of drowning. But just as quickly they landed on twigs and soft brush to the fizzing cries of insects still taking up the late summer night.

He stumbled off the broom, falling on his arse in the dirt. “W-what—! What w-was—!?”

Ginny swung off of the broom, laying it gently on the ground. She moved delicately, reverently, bathed in cool white. Again, her eyes glimmered as she whispered, “I don’t know what it is...Snape did it. It’s not like Tom was. I…”

Her brow furrowed and some of the glimmer wore off. Good, Harry felt. She was scaring him. Ginny pushed both hands into her hair and sighed long and hard.

“Don’t do it if you don’t want to,” she reasoned, holding out a hand as if physically stopping a thought. “It’s a lot. It’s better than Voldemort—it feels natural, like I fit in it, but it’s nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“What are you talking about,” he pleaded, voice cracking. She looked sorrowfully at him and twisted around, giving her attention to a trembling bush.

The witch crouched down and shimmied into it, giving a harrowing impression of having lost her mind. When he choked up and ran to the bush, ready to pull her out, he saw her huddled next to a small body.

A pink, cartoon-print pant cuff stuck out of the branches. “Laney!”

Ginny motioned for space and eased out of the undergrowth, bringing Harry’s little sister with her. The twenty-two year old fell to one knee, his legs losing all their strength.
Laney was fine, alert and unhurt with cheeks full of color. She was only a bit scuffed from crawling on the ground, but other than a little shaken, she seemed okay. Harry asked if anything hurt, just in case, but only got a head shake and a mush-mouthed apology.

“I shouldn’t have run off,” Laney admitted, looking ashamed. “Fred says all the time I could hurt myself. M’sorry.”

Ginny dropped a hand in her curls while Harry brushed off leaves and dewy spider webs. He went to inspect a dark smudge on her hand, thinking it was a scrape.

It was only mud. Harry held her small fist carefully as he wiped away the mess, and found a ball of paper she clenched in it, decorated with that wicked, spiky scrawl.

“Can I see that?,” he coaxed, unfolding her fist.

She gave it to him, and he smoothed out Laney’s assignment on his thigh. The paper turned to pulp at the edges from being squeezed in a sweaty fist. Ink stained her palm, as well as his.

He saw a sea of nothing drawn around a barebones take on Snape’s house—a crooked little shack with the lights on in every window. These were the picture’s only lights save the waning moon.

There were no stars or street lamps or sense of anything but black and the family’s ramshackle home. Written on the paper’s edge was a too simple ask, “Think of water.”

“This is all he gave you?” Harry showed Ginny the paper, who nodded like she understood. He gawked at her. “You’re kidding me. This doesn’t make any sense!”

“I’m telling you: family wards are just different. It’s supposed to go deep, so deep that the house becomes you. At the Burrow—you’ve not got to do it yet, but when there’s a new Weasley, they’re keyed in exactly like this.

“Well, no, nothing like this, but that’s because yours is new. These things is usually passed down generations, you know?”

He didn’t know and nodded anyway. Ginny groaned, reading his confusion plain as day.

“Think about how mad Hogwarts was! Just like Dumbledore! You didn’t see it when Snape was Headmaster, Harry, it was like the whole castle went to sleep. Not like Umbridge, where it didn’t recognize her at all. Snape took over and it’s like the school went into mourning. It—ah. I guess that should’ve been a clue.”

His eyebrows met his headline. “Ginny, are you okay?”

“Yes!? No! Merlin, why were you raised by Muggles!” Ginny returned his skepticism with earnest noises, throwing her hands up to welcome the whole forest-made-ocean. “This is your sister!”

He looked at Laney, who stared at her feet, then at a moss-covered rock doing nothing of interest; then back at Ginny, slowly, trying for no sudden moves. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you mean. Are you saying Laney did that, with the, the everything? Or like, the lack of anything, the blackness?”

“Yes! Gods!” The redhead shouted triumphant, “This is her part! Every member of a family has a part in protecting everyone else! It’s like—I’m so sorry, but it’s like your mum—Lily, not Grace, but maybe—it’s what she did for you.”
“Sacrifice herself?” He eyed Ginny’s hand on Laney’s head. What was he thinking? She’d never hurt a child. But then, he didn’t know what hold the dark magic had over her mind.

Except even suspecting that Ginny was a puppet for some evil ritual felt insulting. He appraised how eagerly she tried to make him understand. Usually he was the animated one, tossing his hands up and pacing the room if it was something he cared about.

Hearing his tone, Ginny cringed. “It’s an example, I guess, I—never mind. Just, the protection stuck to her blood, your blood, and followed you around your whole life. For a home, a proper magical home at least, wards are supposed to be that strong. It’s supposed to be a haven.”

“Good luck convincing me of that for Little Whinging,” snarked Harry, crossing his arms.

“Or that whatever demons Snape was summoning aren’t just evil fuckery! It’s done something to you. It drove Laney into the woods. It’s making me see things! And you saw him, he—.”

Harry swallowed bile, throat burning. “I won’t do it.”

“Then don’t, but,” Ginny turned and yelled into the woods, “Fuck! I just know you need this!”

Harry shook his head, unsure of what she wanted from him.

“Mum’s doing hers. I can hear her,” Laney said, lifting her head. She turned to face in the direction they’d flown from, like she could sense the house nearly a mile away. Then she looked to him and they traded stares for a second, Harry lost by what she meant.

He didn’t find any clues in her expression, mild as it was save for a slight squint. Harry held her gaze, wondering at the squeezing pressure around his head. It felt like—.

“Oh, you can’t do it.”

“Do what,” he asked the girl, who seemed suddenly disappointed in him. “What? What can’t I do!”

“A different thing. The reverend can do it,” she breathed. “I mean, I guess I could use words if you need me to.

“I’m saying I want to head back.”

“Er, I don’t think you do, actually,” he tried, looking up to his girlfriend. The two ladies seemed to be in agreement! Harry continued kneeling, incredulous. They wanted to return to that madhouse?

Ginny loosed an impatient, “Ugh,” and offered Harry help standing. She directed Laney to fetch the broom, who did so puzzling as to why they needed a broom in a forest. It wasn’t as if people went about sweeping the leaves.

“We fly on them,” Ginny explained. She laid the Cleaver down again, nipping a bit of joy from the evening by directing Laney’s hand over the handle.

Harry watched as the girl tried to guess what to do. She looked baffled by what Ginny described. Hardly thinking it the time for broom lessons, Harry suggested they Apparate to the house if they were so keen on returning.

He was left to the buzzing bugs while Laney clarified, “So I just say, ‘up’? That’s easy.”

“Yeah, it is,” Ginny grinned. Harry crossed his arms, irritatedly snapping, “Let’s just get this over with! We can get through the damn night first and then I’ll teach everyone to bloody fly!”
“Promise!,” Laney chirped. He looked at her, stunned. Oh, he had forgotten—he was in some part arguing with a child.

“Uh, yeah…sorry. Yeah, I’ll teach you later?”

The girl’s smile wasn’t huge, but it hit him hard. It had Harry showing her how to sit in front of him on the broom, holding it steady while she tested her grip. Ginny Apparated ahead to check the mayhem at the house. And so Harry and this child short enough to prop his chin on zoomed across the disk of the moon, around which were unveiled the stars.

Having Laney with him, squealing into the rushing wind, “We’re so high up!,” without a lick of fear—Harry looked down again, expecting the abyss. He only saw woods speeding by below and their shadow rippling on the canopy.

The Cleaver dipped and he panicked, wondering if it was failing. Then he saw Laney’s sure hold steering them toward the house. Harry had to double check ahead of them, and there, Snape’s house leaned ever closer. Soon Harry was relegated to co-pilot to the beaming witch with the messy curls like his.

“You’re a natural!,” he praised, suppressing the sick flip at seeing the silhouette in the kitchen window. It watched them approach. “You’ll love flying classes at Hogwarts. They teach—.”

“My mum says I’m not going anywhere,” Laney replied flatly. She kept her eyes trained ahead and spoke softly. “She gets upset when I ask.”

“D...do you want to go?”

“I don’t know what it’s like where you’re from. I wasn’t supposed to, anyway. But, maybe. I wish I could test it out first, just to see.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, but it didn’t matter just then. She dropped her gaze to the backyard as they passed over to the house property.

“Who’s that in our yard?”

Harry scanned the ground and only saw Ginny gesturing at someone through the open screen door. His girlfriend then spun and shouted, and his heart kicked his ribs as she dropped on all fours, scrambling inside for cover.

A streak of red exploded against the siding. Harry wrested control of the broom and flew them around the front, mind racing. It must’ve been the assassins finally starting their attack. Harry cursed. The wards weren’t finished, and he didn’t trust what they had not to side with the bad guys.

“There’s someone else at the front door,” Laney breathed. She tightened her grip on the broom handle, and seemed to shrink between his arms.

“How do you know?” He flew one-handed as he cast a Notice-Me-Not on the two of them. He searched the street for attackers and again saw no one. Harry didn’t much like all these new sights unseen. “Where are they?”

“I can hear them splashing around. I can’t explain it, but she sounds angry.”

“She? Splashing, huh?” Harry tried harder to near the front door, looking for enemies.

A hazy spell with a tang like hot metal burst forth from the empty street. It was leagues beyond the
Stunner flung at Ginny in the yard. This one reeked with malintent and slipped like mercury over the front window, eating away at the glass.

The house rumbled. A fierce wind blew into the street, taking the rest of the window out with it. Invisible hooves thundered through the front gravel, smashed the mailbox, bowed the street lamps, whipped up litter and silt. Two unseen things collided, and a woman screamed in pain. The wind stripped a cloaking spell from someone long swathed in close-fitting robes, kicked and trampled into the curb.

Harry recognized the pale hair first, and then, though aimed at the house, Harry realized the infamous, Black rage. She picked herself up off the sidewalk and staggered through the wreck, hollering.

“BASTARD,” howled Narcissa Malfoy, unleashing a barrage of Dark magic on the home. Spell and spell laid thick on the house, filling the air with fetid smoke. “COME OUT AND FACE ME. AFTER EVERYTHING I’VE DONE FOR YOU.”

“This isn’t an effective mode of communication,” intoned Harry’s little sister. He ferried them higher above the smog, thinking poor outreach was the least of it.

“IF LUCIUS CAN’T KILL YOU, THEN I WILL. I! You’ve made me—SEVERUS. SEVERUS! YOU WON’T LEAVE THIS SHITE HEAP ALIVE!”

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**August 24th, 2002: Spinner’s End, Cokeworth (one hour left)**

Severus smeared dittany on his cheek where Grace had cut him. His blood thrummed with the call to Hel, his head still stuffed with visions of the teeming underworld. He’d felt that cold grip on his neck and thought, very faintly, he had heard his mother cry.

“That was dangerous,” he muttered to himself, unable to believe his luck. Severus had reserved the least forgiving goddess for himself and had he misstepped—well.

He hadn’t. That was what mattered.

Weasley crashed into the kitchen behind him. Only Fred jumped. Severus, Zinnia, and Grace all stood around the fire on the stove, warming their bodies like lost travelers in a storm.

“They’re attacking!,” the Weasley girl snapped. Severus grunted, staring into the purple flames. The stove wasn’t lit. The fire flickered above the cold burners, bringing life back into their faces and fingers.

Zinnia panted beside him, unable to catch her breath. Grace waved her son to attend them, afraid to speak. When she did, she had two voices, and it terrified her more than anything he’d seen. The three oldest in the room stayed clumped together, weathering the making of the home.

“Are you not hearin’ her? She says people are attackin’ the house! Rev!”

“Pity for them,” he sneered. Grace huffed, cupping the dancing fire. Zinnia looked askance at them and laughed.
Chapter Summary

Concern for Harry and Ginny peaks after tell of a new magical phenomenon. Narcissa nurses a broken heart. Zed and Harry are in chaos.

August 24th, 2002: Level Four, Ministry of Magic (noon)

“Move along, the lot of you! Make way for the Minister! This way, Minister Shacklebolt—h—! Hello, you there, step aside!”

Remus was led along by the elbow in the wake of the Minister’s entourage. Hermione tutted agitatedly, glaring at the various stools and lackeys hopping to cut in front of them. Pressed close to his other side by the smothering crowd, Ron had Remus by the forearm, ushering him to follow as he tottered down the hall, legs threatening to give.

All the closed channels to the embassy had been pried open, undamming the swell of indignant bureaucrats. The corridor, once quarantined in wizard space to leave Hermione and himself to their “unsavory” work, had in his opinion kept them in some sense of peace.

Remus squeezed his eyes shut, weathering the return to clamor. This new unleashing of publicly funded fracas was worth either seeing or hearing, but not both.

Objections were shouted over the Minister’s shaved head as they passed, some going so far as to accuse Magical Creatures of treason. Remus felt the fury pouring out of his former students and, stepping a bit into himself for their sake, he gripped both their wrists.

“We’ve got Kingsley. Just keep on ahead, keep toward the office,” he breathed. This quelled them, if barely.

“You’ll be watching your mouth over there, Spitz! Accusations of treason are above your pay grade!” A man lost in the sidelines scoffed, affronted. Remus jolted, recognizing the precise tones of the Minister’s former secretary.


Remus squinted and there in front of them posed the orderly Weasley, hair combed neatly parted down the middle, shoulders narrow and straight above the mob. The hobbled man took reprieve from the battering thrum of panic and outrage in a defiant tickle of pride. He’d make sure to thank Molly for her sons on his next visit to the Burrow.

The cluster of five carried on, shelled in executive aides and a security detail pushing apart the crowd. Fresh-faced junior officials stepped back respectfully seeing the silver-haired seniors be ordered and pushed aside. Soon the many reopened veins to the greater Ministry sealed themselves behind those fleeing the scene. Corridors returned to plain, smooth walls with a hurried zip.

Hermione spat, “Cowards,” and pushed on, cheeks slashed with color. He leaned on her shoulder as they walked, ironically trying to lend her his support. He caught her swiping at her face and let
his eyes shutter again, beyond exhausted.

A third of the mob remained by the time they reached the embassy office. They swarmed to the
Minister, yelling over each other in what Remus was positive they felt was a justifiably concerned
consensus. They in fact resembled preschool children rushing to tattle to tattle to teacher.

The werewolf swayed to a roughly independent gait, pallidly smiling away Hermione and Ron’s
worried looks. He appreciated the help to the door, but would rather stumble inside on his own
than continue to show himself to the mass of conservative idiots.

Janice lowered her arms and greeted them with a harassed, “Minister!” She patted her updo and
attempted to tuck down her flyaway fringe. She and Percy shared a nod of recognition before she
moved aside and showed them the door.

“Minister Shacklebolt!”

“This farce of a department has gone on long enough! Give us the funding! We can—!”

“Anyone to follow me into this room besides these four,” Kingsley announced, presenting the
Weasleys and the two ambassadors, “will be suspended for bypassing priority clearance. You’ll be
escorted off the premises and can twiddle your thumbs with the reporters out on the sidewalk.”

The black man bore down on the ashen faces of his delinquent officers. “And trust that the person
to leak a security breach to the press will be dealt with extensively. An investigation is already
underway.”

At this, the last stuttering secretaries and department heads shuffled out of the hall. The scant few
corridors still open zipped closed and returned them to quiet. Kingsley cracked his back and
sighed, massaging his sides. He bade them to enter ahead of him, “Miss Granger, Remus, please.”

The werewolf thanked him and puffed out his chest, trying to seem at least a little self-possessed.
Hermione pulled a little ahead and Ron behind, muttering to his older brother. Percy whispered
heatedly in reply, “I wouldn’t know! The damn thing’s probably broken. It’s decades old besides.”

“That’s not how it works and you know it!,” Ron shot back, screwed up and flushing. He pushed
in, bickering with his brother chest to chest, forcing Remus to intervene. The older man wormed a
heavy arm between the reddening Weasleys and cleared his throat.

“I know you’re both worried. Let’s discuss it inside,” he coaxed. The brothers passed on either side
of him, shoulders squared as if readying for a scrap. Remus shook his head.

He looked back and paid Janice an apologetic wince as she properly scowled at her overturned
desk. He gasped—all of her files, the innards of her purse, and her telephone were scattered on the
ground.

“Thank you so much for everything you do. Of course we’d be a ruin without you, but this was
absolutely too much. Do forgive us, please.” He fumbled for his wand to help her right herself.

The desk floated back upright, its many books and binders returning to their designated piles and
drawers. Her phone settled again by the sign book, unmarked as it had been, with its cordless case
and dated rotary dial. She demurred and then thanked him resignedly, attending to organizing her
papers and setting her odd phone flush against the desk edge. She put the receiver to her ear and
Remus heard the line click, connect, and begin to chatter.

“You can clock out early today, if you’d like,” he offered. She peered at him unblinkingly, hand
white around the receiver’s neck, before shaking her head.

“I’ll stay on in case Miss Granger needs me,” she intoned. “At least until the street is less…”

The werewolf understood and left Janice to her listening. He was now the last into the office, closing and locking the door behind him. He hoped to hear her knock soon to signal she’d gone home to rest.

“Remus, come look at this.” Kingsley and Hermione were bent over her desk, shuffling papers. He approached, swearing as his legs began to stiffen. He arrived to their conversation pointing ruefully at Hermione’s chair.

“Oh! Yes, please do,” she permitted, urging him to sit. Remus sank down, knees snapping, pain shooting up through his hips and chest such that it left him breathless.

“Merlin, you shouldn’t—,” started Kingsley but Remus shook his head, making the other man straighten to really look at him, arms crossed, crinkling his fine, embroidered robes.

“Harry. And Ginny, please. What’s happened?”

“Mum, show him the bloody clock! N—sorry...well, I don’t wanna yell! Gods, woman, just show him Ginny’s hand!”

Remus shivered, trying not to shout. Off to the side, Percy knelt with his half his body in the Floo, with Ron folded over shouting into the call. The tidier Weasley was just a backside and two gangly legs stretching out of the fireplace. He heard, “won’t stop spinning,” and “danger,” and “can’t find her!,” in Molly’s high cant.

“Ron came back from the Burrow and neither Harry nor Ginny had been there in weeks. Well, Harry hadn’t since, you know,” Hermione explained, face a tablet of worry.

Remus, who could fathom his friend’s son’s reclusion, pushed her to go on. What he needed to hear was if the young man was safe. “What’s this about a fire?”

“While Ron was there, Molly said she’d been trying to get in touch with him. The Weasley clock—you know the one—Ginny’s hand had been on ‘Mortal Peril’ since yesterday afternoon. Then it was ‘In Transit,’ but to where, we don’t know. After that—.”

“Her hand keeps spinning,” Ron finished, rubbing his nose. He smeared it with soot that Hermione absently smudged off. “Thanks—I’d never seen anything like this. It just kept going around, forwards and backwards. Percy, right it’s fucked?”

His brother crawled out and brushed himself off, face gone absolutely ghostly. “Yeah, y-yes. It must be broken. Even if it couldn’t...find her anymore, it’d be on ‘Lost.’”

Remus swallowed drily. “So, she’s not dead. That’s a good thing.”

Kingsley slid the papers across the desk for Remus to see. They weren’t on parchment, but rather thick, off-white stock, torn along one edge. They were charred black on all the corners, some with holes burnt through the sharp, slanted writings. The paper looked Muggle, but the plans on all seven of the sheets were most assuredly magical. Rushed, hand-penned illustrations of dark gods laid out over diagrams telling stories of protection and oneness and rebirth and redemption.

Some had curt instructions like, “Think of water,” or another which simply said, “Burn when you’re ready.” Others had incantations, maybe four or five lines as per any basic beseeching,
although two of those asked to be read in Parseltongue. He broke out in wracking shivers and took a break to calm himself.

One page had the Norse wolf, Fenrir, an adopted patron to the werewolf camps further north. Chained to a rock for biting off the hand of Tyr, sword-gagged and imprisoned till the end times, he was an inevitable evil, a monster.

Just seeing the sketch made Moony turn over, so near the surface after the recent full.

For a second, Remus’ fatigue swanned into a craving in his marrow for freedom. It wasn’t human freedom, obviously—freedom from financial woes, freedom from work, from oppressions, to live sans obligations to self or others.

This was animalistic freedom, the cry of a chained beast. It wanted breaking. He felt his skin ripple and shoved the paper away, cursing violently.

“What the fuck is—I’m sorry, I’m sorry. But what in Merlin’s name are these?”

“These came through the Floo at the Burrow. We think Ginny sent them,” Hermione said tightly. Remus looked at her and she drew away. He inhaled deeply, tasting a trickle of fear.

*Stop it!*, he chastised the curse stuffed deep down into the recesses of himself. You’ll not be getting out any time soon.

Moony whined, and Remus mumbled an apology aloud. “Ahem, sent them from where? Or, right, you don’t know.”

“The fire turned purple, instead of green,” Ron interjected. He sat on the edge of the desk, seemingly oblivious to Remus’s plight.

Again, the werewolf thanked Molly for her durable children. He only hoped to bring Teddy up with that sturdiness, if a touch more sensitivity. “Purple? I believe some wealthier wizard families have access to a purple Floo.”

“You mean a calling card,” Kingsley supported. “We offer them to foreign dignitaries. I’d be inclined to agree with you, assuming they wound up in a manor house somewhere north of London.”

“Why would you assume North?” Remus asked. The office went awkwardly silent as both the minister and Percy Weasley neglected to say.

“Ah,” he strapped down his simmering resentment—*freedom*, his blood called for *freedom*. “You’re tracking Harry.”

“What!?” cried Ron and Hermione, both shocked and betrayed. Kingsley looked about their myriad reactions, visibly uncomfortable.

*Good*, Remus pressed. *It means at least he has a conscience.*

He’d learned from the last war that surveillance often meant punishment. When will they leave that poor boy be? Tracking a lonely twenty-something? Was hounding the creatures not enough?

“No, we don’t, at least not that I know of,” the Minister sighed, rubbing his head. “I know same as you not to ask you to trust the Ministry, maybe moreso, probably less.”
“Hmm.” He wouldn’t say a word, but he gripped his knees, buzzing with rage. He had to wonder what the Fenrir page had agitated. As an academic, he wanted to pull it closer. As a human being, he wanted it burned.

*And what about as a prisoner?*, whispered some sinister thought. Remus coughed, and began counting the seconds wherein Kingsley waited for a response.

*I’m as free as I’ll ever be.* He clamped down on the call to grieve how little that sometimes was. If he let it hurt, it would hurt forever. This meeting was about the kids.

“I can’t tell you the details, if we’re being honest,” Kingsley continued. “And I won’t apologize for needing secrecy, what with the madness upstairs. I can owe you being upfront. But no, besides the basic measures around any subject of prophecy, we aren’t tracking Harry specifically.”

“Then what is it,” blurted Hermione. She added a quick, “um, sir,” only for Kingsley to shrug off the formality.

“That’s for them out there, not you all. I don’t need titles to know I have your respect.” He eyed Remus as he said this, who was unwilling to deny him that much. He nodded once, which Kingsley returned, knocking the edge off of his ire. “Mysteries—I’m sure we’re all familiar—they and the Auror Office, and a few more departments, keep tabs on various magical phenom.

“Early this morning, we had an alarm down below, then another after dawn up on Two, and another—you get it.”

“And the alarms all said, ‘fire,’ right? Ron said the Auror Office reported Fiendfyre,” the witch followed, worrying a curl into knots. “And if those two are—with the clock and the papers—.”

“Actually, the one in Transportation described, erm, sir?” Percy joined the circle, looking to Kingsley for permission. The man gave it with a tired smile. “Right. You probably don’t know, or could be only Ron doesn’t—.”

“Oi!”

“But Transportation monitors the Hogwarts Express, the national Floo network, Portkeys, mass apparition points—the Quidditch World Cup is an eldritch *nightmare*, by the way. In any case, after dawn, our system reported a disruption to the Floo.”

“Which Floo?,” Remus followed. Percy took a moment to answer, having noticed the papers on the desk.

His eyes were trained on the drawing of Loki and her lover. They were intricately detailed, nude and entwined in an embrace, holding a tall flame in their locking arms. Hermione looked at it, blushed, and snapped Percy from his trance.

Remus felt for them. He could think of no two persons more forbidding of chaos. They could become enthralled. Whoever had drawn these plans had tapped into too deep a magic for polite company.

“Which Floo, Percy?,” Hermione repeated to the flustered aide. She did them a courtesy and flipped the page over to the blank.

“Oh, erm, which? All of them! Every Floo opened from the edge of Scotland to Cornwall. Even warded ones, as in estate homes and even Hogwarts, they all lit up and went out just before sun-up. Then once more after that, when I’m guessing these... *portraits,*” he said, fixing his collar, “were
“Well, I suppose it is a type of fire, but not Fiendfyre.” Hermione rested a hand on her cheek, frowning. “Either way, any fire can get out of hand, especially a magical one.”

“Mysteries reports ‘flames newborn and ceaselessly ancient,’ so we can thank them for informing us in as vague a way as possible.” Kingsley pulled in the drawing of the ocean, grimaced, and pushed it away. “But whatever it is, if it can be confused for Fiendfyre, then it’s probably Dark.”

“Or old?”

Remus took the initiative to help Hermione cover the drawings. Banking on his intuitions, he directed the lovers, the wolf, and the world snake to rest facedown. He doubted chaos, rage, and destruction would serve the people present.

This left them with the god steed, Sleipnir; the unfathomably dark ocean; and Hel, the Hidden, goddess of the dead and the underworld. These were powerful, but not nearly so personal as to have them obsessed.

Who were these written for? Remus couldn’t figure it. He examined the casting circle beneath Sleipnir, upset that some of the runes were singed away.

But still, what he could read was in pagan Norse atop the biblical star. This altered the circles’ asks. The horse now carried swift judgements; the ocean baptized the lost in nothingness; the dead demanded redemption on pain of cold, unfeeling demise.

Bold of the architect to hybridize warring magic. Remus thought whoever had done it could be a limitless visionary in wardsmithing. Either that, or a complete amateur, high on hubris, with just enough knowledge, just enough skill, and dogged by a strange enough muse to make this: heartfelt anarchy.

“...to be done, right, Remus? Remus!” He dragged his eyes up to Hermione’s.

“Mhm...yes. Sorry, I wasn’t listening.” He moved his ponderer’s fist from his mouth to speak more clearly. “Repeat the question?”

The witch huffed, “Something needs to be done! It’s been hours and nothing we have is detailed enough to tell us where they are! If there is a fire raging somewhere up north, however disputed, it means people are in danger. Ginny is in danger, surely, and Harry’s probably right next to her!”

“And we can’t fine tune the hit on the Aurors’ alarm?,” Percy asked, “or the one down in Mysteries?”

Kingsley and Ron both shook their heads at the first. The Minister and former Head Auror let the younger officer explain, “Whatever is affecting the clock at home is jamming the Hot Box. It can’t spit out an address.”

“But if it’s Harry and it’s up north, he’s probably—.” Hermione stopped talking and gawked at Remus. He raised his eyebrows at her wordless urging, struggling with what she could mean.

“Naw, you don’t think! But if he has the m—!” Ron shut himself up and, also with wide, bloodshot eyes, stared at Remus. The two of them pleaded silently. Fanning himself with a new one of the pages, he started to shake his head, not seeing what they meant.

Then he realized something.
Remus pulled back the page to stare at it, waiting for the knowing to break through. Something about that page—Hel, the Hidden—struck a nerve. He scanned it and its summoning poetry, sparing a thought that the writer was talented but overwrought, when he caught it. The handwriting! He recognized it in a rush from schooldays and the notes on his potions, and other trifling things that made up knowing a person.

Snape! It was Snape’s spidery scribble, carving up the page, sinking into the slashes in the paper. Snape always wrote like he wanted the page to feel it. He did this!?

“Why am I not surprised,” Remus groaned.

He looked disparagingly at the two youngest in the room. Perhaps unfairly, he blamed them for not keeping better tabs on Harry if it would lead to this.

He reached for generous assumptions. No one could’ve predicted that whatever Snape cooked up with Harry presumably on hand would be this effectively mad. The two spiraled in opposite directions. They canceled each other out. If he were honest, Remus couldn’t think of how the two could knowingly work together.

“What do you all know that I don’t,” probed Kingsley, splaying both wide hands out on the desk. Percy tacked on, “What’s not surprising?”

Remus blinked, feigning ignorance while he took in the couple in his peripheral. Ron went particularly green, and Hermione hid in her hair. Honorably awarded in troublemaking, he knew the “Don’t tell teacher!” look, even among adults.

“I’m not at liberty to say.” He gave Kingsley’s balling fist a warm squeeze à la the late Albus Dumbledore. He resisted the urge to add, “I’m sure you can understand.”

It wouldn’t do snubbing their world leader. Hope Lupin would spin in her grave, a kindly woman till death.

“It’s not mine to tell,” he offered instead. The Minister fell short of happier having heard this. They did pass a moment in silence, however, where they each acknowledged the other’s hard won rights to privacy.

The Minister sighed.

“You understand that if this threatens the public, I’ll have to insist and only but so nicely,” Kingsley warned him. Remus promised he understood, now looking to Hermione—who loosed a thankful sigh—and Ron, standing at odds with his brother.

“Is this to do with why Harry’s been sneaking down here?,” Percy demanded. Ron kept his lips stubbornly sealed.

“Harry doesn’t need to ‘sneak’ except to avoid being hassled,” the witch hopped in. She distractedly stroked the picture of Sleipnir. She went red-faced, tone sharpening. “He was doing nothing wrong.”

“He entered a government building under false pretense. Some would call that ‘infiltration.’” Kingsley held up a hand to quell the outcry. “I only mean to speak accurately: this is a problem. But it’s a small one for much later when every bell in the Ministry quits ringing.

“Remus, can you find these two?”
The werewolf hung on his howling bones and grumbled, “I’ll need someone to nip up to Census, but yes.”

“Alright then. That’s all I need to know.” Remus watched Kingsley leave, motioning for Percy to follow. The older Weasley muttered, “He forgets I’m not his assistant,” before huffing and clipping after.

As soon as the two were gone, Hermione dashed down to Census, having no supervisor to answer to and thereby promising secrecy. Ron helped prepare Remus for a journey without being asked. He simply went about ordering Pepper-Up and hangover potions through Janice.

*Four years with nothing major, all exploding within a week,* Remus mused, fussing with Snape’s handiwork. *One of these days, I’ll convince that boy to stay put.*

Narcissa spent the rest of Friday like it was her last. After visiting the Black home and setting Harry Potter into motion, she returned to the Manor and took a bath. Rather, she soaked.

She had her favorite clawfoot tub filled—freestanding black porcelain with silver duchess fixtures. She washed herself without attendants. She worked her specially ordered soaps in a thick lather, luxuriating in knowing her own skin.

She treated her budding headache with steeping in rosemary and fennel oil. She hummed to herself, brow wrinkled, trying to remember a tune.

Narcissa toweled down and sat at her vanity, and brushed her own hair, as she’d always done. Supporting each lock on the heel of her hand, she soothed the wet tresses with boar bristle until they shone cremello pale. She took time twisting and pinning her hair into a dainty coiffure with a citrine comb.

Then she gathered her silk robe about herself and padded, slippered, from her private quarters to the master suite. Draco found her in the hallway connecting the two wings, him looking down from an unsmiling portrait of a Malfoy ancestor.

Her son hesitated under her reserved regard, tense with concern. It touched her that he cared to check the soil, water her roots, after her trying him all of yesterday.

She was within her rights, given what he’d done. Still, it was nice to see him keep the peace.

“You needn’t worry about me, Draco. I’m not as upset with you today as yesterday. And not nearly so upset with you as, hm. Others.

“Most importantly,” and she said this coolly, “I am not your father. You needn’t submit. We can be at odds, and you’ll still have every mean to happiness. I’d never dangle your fortunes over you hoping you’ll come to heel.”

“That’s...,” he struggled to respond. “I still...want to apologize.”

He folded his hands behind his back and bowed at the waist. Narcissa let him for a moment, amused. So formal, but then they’d raised him to be when it counted.

Except apology and keeping the peace: they hadn’t taught him that. This was the new girl, Astoria. How that busy miss Greengrass had tied Narcissa’s son to her skirts, the woman couldn’t bear to imagine. It was either a tactic too tawdry for the girl’s station or too soppy for Narcissa’s character.
“Enough. If you wish to make amends, keep me company.”

She carried on to her and Lucius’s former bedroom. Draco gave her his arm and she took it, gently, since he seemed so skittish, as if she’d snap it off. He learned to fear his parents from them, which was fast becoming her second greatest regret.

As they walked, warming up to small talk, Narcissa considered those regrets. Marrying Lucius could be one, except it gave her their son and an admirable lifestyle, even now. A little loneliness was worth the wealth.

Perhaps heeding Bella so closely, long past the point of her sister’s sanity. Anything that opened her home to the Dark Lord, she regretted, which she was finally freed to admit.

Her petty jealousy driving Draco out of doors—that, too.

“I’m...also sorry,” she managed, looking at her nails. They were clean, but overlong. Still, not at all like the nails that taught her the habit. Hers wasn’t the mouth that clipped nails to the quick. She never fidgeted mid-banter, picking the filth out from under them.

*Later,* she swore. *He will have his time.*

“It was silly of me to treat this girl you’re courting—.”

“*Astoria,*” Draco piped up, bright eyed. She took in her darling son with jaw clenched.

“*Astoria,*” she bit out, “as a threat. I drove you away. I made you think you needed others to convince me give my blessing. You don’t. If you claim to love her, it’s more than your father and I have, and so you might as soon treasure it.”

*Far from a real treasure,* she thought, *like gold and land and jewels and a birthright.*

The Greengrasses weren’t poor, but they certainly weren’t suited for the only Malfoy heir. They also held with integrating with Muggle cultures and owned stock in Muggle business and it was all mortifying to think of, really, but, well.

*Love is precious, I suppose, in its own way.*

She reached her former bedroom and excused the elf made to occupy it. The girlish thing bowed and popped out of sight, garish handsewn dress and all.

Only that year, the new Ministry had forced the proper houses to give their elves clothes and hire them to a living wage. Narcissa had thrown them anything of hers Lucius once liked. She favored what they crafted, surprised to see the creatures had individual styles. All atrocious, mind, but unique and quite funny.

“Well, now that we’re past that,” Narcissa sighed, gliding into the room. “You might make yourself comfortable while I vent, and then we can set about our day.”

Draco followed, aghast at the state of it.

Letters piled up in every corner, mostly unopened and gathering dust. Confetti covered the floor from Howlers long since self-destructed. The bedclothes, the drapes, and the carpet were picked over and dusty. A mountain of feathers and owl pellets sloped off the bed, from birds nesting in the unanswered missives.
They waded through a layer of paper two inches thick. The must of moldering paper blew in from the balcony, where forgotten letters were destroyed by the summer rain.

“Are all of these from Father?,” her son asked.

Narcissa smiled and, finding her wand in the belt of her robe, reduced the nearest pile to smoldering ashes.

“Sadly, he’s been difficult about the divorce.”

Draco winced. Before giving herself over to vexation, she held his chin and might have smiled. She couldn’t feel the expression on her face, so aware of her husband’s ravings surrounding them.

She laid into the next pile, and the next, until the room was hazy with smoke and papery ash. Draco cleared the balcony, forcing the glass doors open to let in fresh air, only for an eagle owl to swoop into the room screeching.

It dropped a new stack of letters, bound together with strips of bedsheet. It seemed Lucius had stopped Transfiguring the cotton scraps into ribbon.

Narcissa hexed the owl’s tail feathers and rejoiced in its startled squawk. She rolled the new stack over with her foot, and cursed herself when her slipper broke a deceptively fragile seal. A bright red envelope shot up toward her face.

“YOU PARASITIC WHORE,” it belted out. It had Lucius’ voice, and maybe his pitiful spirit, too, thin enough to slip in beside the letter “YOU’LL SEE WHAT YOU HAVE LEFT AFTER HE’S GONE. I PROMISE YOU.”

She glared at the letter as it tore itself apart. Her misstep irritated her, but at least she could remind herself that everything she did was with reason. Finished with the bedroom, she stared at the red scraps littering her feet. After a minute more, she left, contemplating another soak.

“Mother! How could he—!” She paused and turned to see Draco stumbling after her. That was right. She’d forgotten for a moment that he was in the room.

Suddenly: rage. Narcissa *boiled*. Berated in front of her own son! Treated like some back alley no one!

“Be ready to go out again in a few minutes,” she snapped. “We’ve an appointment at Gringotts to discuss your estate.”

“‘My’ estate? But Father is still alive.” Ah, another regret. She wished now instead of papers, she’d picked poison. It costed her to try for decency over results.

But then, as Draco came to her side and escorted her safely to her quarters, she wondered if the trade had been fair. How close would they still be if she killed his father? And he knew it? Not very, she could guess.

“Yes, unfortunately so. Luckily for us, he is also disgraced, imprisoned, and arguably in want of his senses. It is certainly no way to head a great house.”

“Ten minutes.”

Narcissa exited the Floo in Riga and saw outlined the story of more regrets. The house was stripped
to the studs, as Draco had said. Furniture, paintings, bedclothes, even wallpaper and paneling were scooped out, pared, and departed. Floorboards were pried up from some rooms, with stores of cash gone from underneath. Outside, she could see the enchanted garden gone to seed.

Severus had taken everything. Narcissa floated through the halls, making herself see and believe.

She’d never seen the finished house, having supervised the decorating via letter. Years back, they couldn’t afford too many visits to Latvia lest they be traced. So now, at the end of her plans and redesigns and waiting and arrival, she had a starved house, a skeleton.

Again, Narcissa boiled. She had given her friend everything she had left: her time, her money, her home, her hopes and fucking confidence. And he’d sold it and ran. She believed it when Draco first told her, and to see it made her more than angry.

She thought of her own, unanswered letters and it broke her heart. Weeks spent waiting by the window like some lovestruck girl, unknowingly used and forgotten.

She had asked one thing of him, and it was to play a part. To help get her safe, to keep herself and Draco settled. She warned him of the consequences, that danger was brewing; and she offered he return to the manor, despite both of them preferring the time alone.

Narcissa regretted visiting Riga. Her son witnessed the few tears run off her chin, and swore, and cried himself. She held him, fearing he’d seen something unforgivable, like how little she’d been loved.

Eventually rousing him, the pureblood refused to let herself dwell. She had her plans for these men. Lucius would take solicitors, signatures, tearfully told lies, and creative interpretations on words like “sanity” and “best interests.”

And Severus, he would have her fury.

The pair arrived before dawn. Narcissa hoped to catch him asleep. During his stay, she’d found Severus pacing his room and traversing the halls, to later see him passed out in the library right as the sun began to rise. At the time, it made her feel stupidly safe.

She decided to be glad she knew his hours and only that. The line of his nose on the open page dissolved from memory.

They landed on the top of the nearly abandoned street. The body of the great, gutted mill threatened the horizon, a barely visible monolith against the sky. She looked over Draco, wondering if he’d need sending back. Her son had gone translucently pale and shivered in the cool night breeze.

He felt her measuring him and opened his posture—his chest out, his shoulders back, chin aloft. He still shuddered, catching a chill. Narcissa touched his arm, proud of him for trying, and led them along.

“Cloak yourself,” she whispered, tapping her own head.

Draco hesitated before melting into the night as well.

She wondered if confronting Severus would be hard for him. She didn’t know why the thought hadn’t occurred to her until they were already approaching the man’s home.
As they neared the last house on Spinner’s End, they suffered a gradual and then complete utter blindness. Narcissa heard Draco cry out and grab for her, his heels tripping on the cobblestones.

“I’m here!,” she shouted, throwing out her hands. She found his and held on. She asserted through gritted teeth, “It’s only a trick! All Severus has are tricks!”

*Untrue,* sung her unkind fears. *Maybe he’s blinded you. Maybe he’s blinded your son. He could be so close, laughing at your flailing about. You should’ve known better.*

*What, so you’re hurting? And that means he’ll stand still, take your anger and not a single thing more?*

Fear spiked and parted the dark. Slipping, she entered a current of double vision swirling in blindness. She called Draco into it. He gasped in relief at suddenly seeing the street around them. The leaning house’s face appeared as if down the barrel of a wave.

Narcissa fished for the invisible edge of her son’s robes and, snagging it, pulled them toward the color of an electric lights on behind a curtain.

They shook, numb to the waist in freezing void. Visibly, though, they stood before the home, now towering, with no piddling mill town around it, simply miles of black. She saw shapes, enough to tell her this was an illusion: some dark grew upwards, like the Muggle lampposts; other dark raised an edge suggesting a curb.

“Go around to the back,” she breathed. “We will attack from both sides to force him out.”

“Mother,” Draco wavered.

“Curse the first shadow you see!” She pushed him. She watched the boy struggle before he ducked his head and slid into the fence of woods. Narcissa heard the rustle of the unseen bushes.

She gladly followed his nearly white hair ghosting between the shapes of trees. Once he vanished behind the house, she withdrew well into the dark, praying her foot found stone on every backward step.

She decided on a safe distance in her higher mind; meanwhile, she begged her rage to broil, to roll, to spit and spill over. The street passed in and out of clarity.

But she ate the dark, she welcomed it. She prayed to her gods that Draco could find her after. Then she raised her wand to damned lit curtain, consumed with the thief behind it.

The moment her curse hit the window, the house rumbled. A tremor traveled up her legs and into her ribs, shaking her insides, jostling her stance. Glass shattered and the cold, creeping nothing blew away in a violent gust of wind.

Suddenly there was street, lamps and houses and forest behind and garden walls. Thunder pounded the pavement, pelting her in glass and stinging gravel. Narcissa fell back, screaming, and then grunted as she weathered a blow to her stomach.

She felt the charm tear off of her as she fell under the pummeling flurry. Dirt and dust flew into her eyes and mouth, and she hacked, arms thrown up, curling and protecting her head. Whatever spell to hit her came and went with a boom and a whinny.

Narcissa fought to stand, beaten and furious. Nothing broken, but everything aching and bruised. Her crystal comb swung tangled in her curls, plucking stray hairs from her scalp as it bumped
against her shoulder. She staggered onto the sidewalk, fuming, incredulous.

*Severus did this? To me?* Contrary to the spirit of hunting him down, swearing vengeance, wishing for his damnation, she couldn’t help thinking: *But we were friends...*

“BASTARD!” She felt like an idiot! She would destroy him. She would tear down his house. She would drag him by his hair through the streets.

Narcissa loosed unholy fury on the house’s face. Every ravenous curse she could imagine, she threw at Spinner’s End. “COME OUT AND FACE ME. AFTER EVERYTHING I’VE DONE FOR YOU.”

She passed up freedom for him. She toiled in the night for him. She disinterred centuries old spells and played nurse despite never healing anyone and read to his venom-locked body and gave him a whole new life while she whiled away in England, hoping one day he’d think to visit or maybe send a gift.

She blossomed quietly for four years. And he took her kindness and left, although she thought they’d had an understanding. Now she needed help. Now she needed to escape. She thought Lucius would be against them together. But where was Severus? Arming his house against her. Stomping her into the dirt.

“IF LUCIUS CAN’T KILL YOU, THEN I WILL! ! You’ve made me—.” She teared up again, bereft, humiliated. She saw a shadow move behind the dingy curtain billowing in the leftover wind.

She pitched forward and screamed, “SEVERUS. SEVERUS! YOU WON’T LEAVE THIS SHITE HEAP ALIVE!”

She poured herself into destruction.

A crack of Apparition! She whirled around, looking for the source, thinking maybe she’d heard it from the roof. Then, over the top of the house, Narcissa heard Draco holler.

“No! Don’t—help!”

The witch staggered away, shaken, then bounded for the back of the house, through the woods brightened by shooting spells.

**August 24th, 2002: Spinner’s End, Cokeworth (one hour left)**

Zed read the bloody poem. Rev stomped down the stairs so seriously, she laughed at first. Reflexively, she cracked a joke about insulting his art. He just watched her from the foot of the stairs, watched her circle the basement and check the windows and snap.

“Quit lookin’ at me like I’m some fuckin’ animal!”

“Will you help with the spell or not,” he asked. He gave her pause. His whole energy came over frigid. She reared back to shout from her gut.

“Just answer: yes or no.”

She glared at the drawing he’d given her, angry that it upset her. She was thirty-five years old: she had no business fearing some sketch of a wolf, shackled to a scrubby island.
It wasn’t even proportionate. The wolf took up most of the island. It lorded over the scribbled pines. One paw covered a third of the rock, such that the front claws skimmed the ocean and a rear paw dipped beneath the surf.

She itched looking at it. Her fingers itched like they were sprouting claws. Her body itched as if growing fur. She felt closed into the tiny basement and stalked along all its walls.

Ever since she got the picture, she’d edged on panic, needing air. The windows didn’t help. She jimmed them open, open-mouth panting, and leapt away when she met with worm-filled dirt. Pebbled brown sprinkled every windowsill. Even while she heckled Rev, it caked the tough creases of her palms and under her chipped fingernails.

Buried, she’d been buried. Zed didn’t pretend to care about a random spell when she could hardly breathe.

“I didn’t really promise anythin’,” she rebutted. She dug her nails into the meat of her forearm, wanting desperately to scratch. “Christ, I can barely stand my own pissin’ skin. What’d you give me! Just—get away!”

Her CD ended with a click. It whined in the radio a few seconds into the sustained silence.

Without another word, Rev slinked back up the stairs. She waited to see if he’d start something, but his leaving plainly said, “Do what you want.”

*The music changed. She hardly noticed.*

Zed confronted the sketch, irritated that she accepted it, and twice over that she’d gone back on her word. She hadn’t explicitly promised to help. However, she also hadn’t flat out rejected that second time; she used the same noncommittal silence Rev had just done; and she couldn’t claim to read his quirks and their meanings as if it didn’t go both ways.

*She read and reread the picture’s poem, and a noise built in her chest as loud if not louder. The radio howled and so did she. The noise crawled up her throat like vomit.*

Her claustrophobia gave way to a driving pain in her gut. She mouthed the written words, then spoke them aloud, then yelled them, outpacing the coursing bay. But soon, it overwhelmed her.

*She was all noise, all baying. She ripped from her skin and crashed back into it, pulsing. She stamped on the cement floor, shocking the stays on her bones, tearing.*

*Inside her, yellow eyes flashed. They danced. They set themselves on rending flesh, on spreading, on broken chains; busted metal, falling walls; out, running, free!*  

Zed stormed upstairs, unable to catch her breath. The basement more than tilted: it flipped, threatening to throw her down into the buried, starless sky.

The first thing she saw was Fox’s wide back. She dove into it, needing more give than cement to break upon. She wrapped him in flexing arms, grabbed her own wrist, and squeezed until she felt the burn in her tendons. It wasn’t a hug, more like amateur gravity, an attempt to anchor them to the ground. Nothing short of another planet could possibly pull him away.

She squeezed him, and the huge man wheezed. Zed gasped, struggling right along with him.

“If anyone ever laid hands on you,” she promised, “I’d kill them!”
He’d become a kid in her mind. All the panic forced abstract dream logic into her world which made her younger brother truly younger, not much more than three. Even she felt shrunken despite also feeling humongous, too big for the house, too big for her body.

She fought for control, shaking so hard her brother’s teeth chattered. Zed blinked away the boy she felt in her arms and squinted at the adult towering over her.

“You’d get ‘em first, okay? And then I’d find them all, and I’d—!”

“Yuh, I kn—!,” Fox squeaked.

“I’ll eat them. I’ll—!” He smacked at her arms.

“Stop! Rev!” She looked down and realized, under her foot, the spill of hair on the floor.

Zed hacked, “Gah!” Unthinking, she planted her feet and hauled her little brother to safety. Her spine popped. Her ropy muscles strained, but persisting, she lifted him off of his feet. In her mind, she’d traveled back to preschool days, chasing behind a toddler wobbling too close to the street.

Snatch—up—over!

“Shit!,” Fox cried, limbs wheeling. She started inching backwards with her brother hoisted over her head. It was work to keep her balance, unwieldy as he was. He fought her, and she cursed at him, sure he couldn’t properly see.

The thing on the floor unfolded, and only then could she pick out Reverend. But there were other, nastier things covering him—bodies in strange clothes, capes, robes, and Victorian dresses; starched collars and tall, pointed hats; odd leather shoes, like snakeskin with massive scales. They layered over and through each other like phantom photographs.

Under that, she saw his slack features played out on a dozen other faces: the same eyes as Fox’s, but devastated; her nose, more crooked; Rev’s mouth, but twisted in agony.

Ghosts. He was mobbed by ghosts. Zed stole her brother toward a door.

“Zeddie!” Her mother wavered over the writhing mess, rusty red spots on her nightie.

Zed objected when the woman kneeled beside Rev’s body. Gracie braved the flower of dead things growing from the kitchen floor.

“Well don’t touch ‘em! God, you’ve lost your fuckin’ mind!”

“He’s havin’ a fit! He started chantin’ and all this, so I nicked him a little to snap him out of it, and now he’s gone into this, uh—! I—he, it’s—dammit!”

Rev’s eyes were vein-streaked white. Color drained out of him, his skin going the same pearly grey as the ghosts suckered to him. Zed couldn’t imagine what her mother saw, but it was nothing compared to this.

The ghosts moaned either in victory or in grief as their collective grip on his throat coaxed a tight, bright orb from his parted lips.

Some hindbrain instinct choked her as if forcing down her own wispy glow. Visceral empathy closed her throat even more. Her body revolted, making her drop Fox and struggle again for air. Although she didn’t consciously know it, Zed was witnessing the taking of a soul.
“What’s that thing? What’s that!?” Gracie hovered like she planned to start breathing into his mouth. Zed shook her head and tried to pantomime, “Ghosts!,” “Stealing!,” “Don’t!”

“‘Wiggly,’ um, ‘take, grab, ta’—what the hell are you sayin’, woman!? Is it the spell thing? The glowin’ thingy part? You did his magic, so—.”

Zed nodded, pointing to say, “Yeah! You’ve got it!” Then she threw herself down by her mother and slapped a hand over Rev’s mouth. Static fizzed along her finger bones as the orb passed through the back of her hand, shocking her knuckles, and continued to rise.

Again, her body lurched. A transparent hand floated toward the glow. She pulled in a sliver of air.

“Not yours!,” she snarled at the greedy ghost, baring teeth.

The phantoms jittered and keened, but didn’t dare move closer. The orb, however, kept rising, beginning to arc away. Zed tried to grab it, and again, it slipped through her fingers. She could see it, even feel it, but not hold it or force it back inside its body.

The further it flew, the more Rev’s skin cooled under her palm. Zed suddenly needed to catch the thing.

“Fuck it, where’s—ha!” Zed looked to her mother, who rushed to the stove. The woman dug her fingers in the gap between it and the cabinets. Fishing out a sheet of white paper, she stood and started fussing with a burner.

“Damn thing won’t...light, arsehole!”

Zed leapt up, still snatching at the truant glow. She swiped at it uselessly, even ran in front of it to block its path outside. The orb simply passed through her, flickering as it sunk toward the ground. The ghosts were now bystanders who jeered as she dove to the ground after it.

She jumped when Gracie shouted, “Gimme a bloody lighter!”

Fox grunted. Something plastic hit the countertop. A tick and a crackle later, Zed smelled butane and burning paper.

Under the black soil outside, the loam, and the dead people, she smelled everyone’s sweat, a tang of copper, and of all things, salt—seawater—and pit fire, not just lighters; sour and honey, pine resin; wilderness, and ash.

The ghosts hushed. Zed, half in the yard on her belly, mocked their twisted, gobsmacked faces. And then they blew away like smoke.

The cold stopped. The orb bobbed at the tips of her fingers, strobing bright as a lightning bug. Its descent arrested, she managed short, quick breaths.

“Oh. Oh, that’s different.”

Violet light flooded the kitchen. Besides that, Zed, Fox, and even their mother stood panting. There were no spirits, no wailing, no blaring music, just the three of them around Rev’s body. Them and the orb, which wafted over to rest on the stove.

Gracie scooped it onto her pinkie. It swirled and shrunk till it was pea-sized and solid, searing white. It spun so fast it whistled faintly while her mother appraised it.
“Are my ears fucked? Is there an echo?,” asked a disheveled Fox. He tugged sheepishly at Gracie’s nightgown. “Y...you alright?”

“I’m seein’ doubles and everything I look at’s on fire, so no, not bloody likely. What’s this I’m holdin’?”

Fox gestured to Zed. She shook her head, “I dunno, man. Mum, what floated outta him,” she explained, standing, slapping dirt off her clothes.

“These ghosts were mobbin’ him and squeezed it out.”

She scanned her mum for changes. The older woman seemed normal, just sweaty, stained, and rumpled. When she spoke, however, Zed heard her mother’s trembling midtones once, and then again as if from on high.

Her words rang together like twin bells in a church steeple. It was a bit of a trip, like the voice she’d always felt the woman should have finally coming out. Zed’s mother weighed the whistling glow with a finger wriggle. It warbled.

“Ain’t you a heavy bit a somethin’.”

The ball of something rolled onto her pinkie nail. Gracie huffed, “Want back in, do ya?,” and flicked.

It streaked white as it flew down, past Rev’s crooked teeth, and disappeared down his throat like the light of a diver’s headlamp swallowed by a deep-sea cave.

The man shot upright with a barking, “Shit!,” just as a crack split the quiet in the yard. Zed jerked away from the screen door, dreading more frigid ghosts. She only just recognized one of the new kids’ bright red hair.

“Damn, Gina, relax!,” she snapped over the girl saying, “We found your daughter! Harry’s bringing —um. Why’s Snape on the floor?”

Rev refused anyone’s hand, grunting. He picked himself up, and unbuttoned and rolled his sleeves, unbuttoned his collar, pulled stringy hair from his mouth.

“He tripped,” quipped Fox, rubbing his tailbone after having picked his way off the floor, same as Rev. “We’re all takin’ a spill today, I think. Laney’s okay?”

“Yeah, uh, yes.”

Zed glanced at the girl once, then stumbled to the stove. Fox took her place and kept on their conversation through the screen, asking after the baby’s health. One could just see Gina’s leg lean along the door frame while she answered. She seemed unsure of if to come in as she described where they’d found the ickle duck.

Rev and Gracie huddled around the light casting big shadows on the rest of them. Zed joined them and realized they attended a gorgeous fire, lit up in shades from lavender to burgeoning almost-black. Impossibly hot with how contained it was, hovering over a half-torched drawing on the burner. It drew the cold from her skin, and fluttered when she came closer.

She felt it welcoming her, which made no sense. People helped themselves to cozy firesides, not the other way around. It was grand to give up sense, however, if it meant she could get warm. Panting, she inhaled the sour and honey, sea salt, pine.
“Oh, is that it?,” asked Gina.

Rev massaged his neck and answered, sounding parched, “Yes, hmm.” His throat clicked, it was so dry. “The hearth flame is nearly finished. Once Potter and Fred have done their part...”

He eyed Zed. She returned his wary look on a silver platter: “I don’t like this magic. This fire’s good, but, Huh,” she wheezed, “trash the rest. It’s dead clear it’s for more than stoppin’ hitmen.”

“We need the ‘rest’ to create the hearth fire? I high does the stopping,” Rev sniffed. “This will serve us for years to come. I’ll concede that some of my part escaped me.”

“Some,’ he says,” she sniffed. “Y—,” but she didn’t finish the thought, entranced by how the fire swayed. It curled like it’d been tickled. She cursed at it. It wriggled.

“You prick, can it hear me?”

“It is you,” was all Rev managed when red sparks lit up his features and their peculiar zeal. None of them moved from the fire. Gina finally made her decision and ran inside to safety.

They were under attack, apparently. Finally, these hitmen showed themselves.

“They were under attack, apparently. Finally, these hitmen showed themselves.

“Pity for them,” their resident wizard said.

Zed cut their group a look and laughed. They were doing fine wearing themselves down to nubs, but sure, she could greet a hired goon or two. Strangers shot funny, stinking spells at them from the woods. Wizard or not, they were each one a person, same as her.

She could fight them. They could bleed.

She inhaled, finally filling her chest with a long, burrowing breath. The werewolf scented morsels of more sea, and faded cologne, and cold dirt, and hand cream. A hint of cut fabric and real leather in the garbage and cigarette woods.

Someone with money attacked their happy home.

Her hearing wasn’t as good as days before. But if she strained beyond just heartbeats, she heard a posh twat stammering nonsense words. Zed couldn’t place the accent with its perfect “t”’s and breathy highs. She knew, though, that Rev spoke like him but slower, heavier, like he was holding down his tongue.

“Your spooky hitman sounds rich.”

“No, you can’t hear him from here. He’s hidden back in the trees,” insisted the redhead.

“You can’t hear him. I can tell you, he’s a rich boy who just tripped on his own damn feet,” Zed clarified, hitting a hard “t”.

Rev’s lip twitched, and she thought he looked powerfully pleased. He radiated approval at the fire in Gracie’s hands and then at Zed, who glared suspiciously.

“It’s working,” he praised. Then he whirled and strode outside, head held high.

The screen banged and exploded again in red light. It was almost like the shooter wanted to miss. None of his red magic hit an actual person. It only succeeded in showing Rev’s outline in the dark.

The man stood in defiance of the forest.
“Bit stupid to ask to be shot,” Gina mumbled. Zed silently agreed.

Just then, an awful stench snuck up on her from behind. She gagged, overtaken by traces of savory herbs on hot, noxious metal. It was so potent even the witch girl recoiled, although Fox only seemed focused on the yard.

He only noticed when the house shook and they heard glass breaking. There was a whining buzz and a pop, and the living room lamp lost a bulb. Startlingly cool air whooshed over them, blowing away the stink, like a window was suddenly thrown open.

“Is the other guy out front?,” Fox yelled over the ongoing rumble. Zed shouted yes. “Alright, then, if we’re doin’ this, then let’s really do it!”

He pulled out his own folded up sketch.

The house continued to quake. It sounded like a stampede, thrilling when it parted around them and drove down the hall. Their shadows rippled around the growing handheld flame, which sparked blue and red-orange as it withstood the wind.

Fox, using the fire as a reading light, started to hiss. Zed had déjà vu. He had made those sounds before, although she couldn’t recall exactly when. They were distinct, like they meant something, and she remembered—was it recently? Or in a dream?

No! Fox used to hiss in his sleep. They hadn’t shared a room in decades, but she was sure. She could see it now, with her baby brother snoring, belly out, spread eagle on top of his quilt.

“Ssssthhhhssaaaaaaa, haaaaaaaaa…”

Gracie flinched. The fire nearly took off her eyebrows as it doubled in size.

“That’s not a man.”

Gina shouted at the echoing voices. Her mother gave them all a stern glare as she carried the fire down the hall, flame tip waving just under her chin.

Zed understood the implicit, “Stay put.” She watched Rev disappear past the tree line and kept vigil of her brother while he read.

Harry landed on the roof, seeing no safer ground anywhere else. He held fast to Laney’s wrist as he urged her off of the broom. The shingles were damp from yesterday’s rain, so he watched their feet closely, terrified of a fall.

“Careful! Here, you can use my arm.” He played the bannister while the girl got her legs under her. “Yeah, don’t slip. We’re going to Apparate, like, erm, what Ginny did. You’re just gonna want to hold on. Close your eyes, or you’ll get dizzy.”

They spun away and cracked into Freddy’s snake room, it being the clearest image in Harry’s mind. Laney wobbled and he checked her over, glad for no Splinched skin or fingernails. Toes and tips of noses accounted all for, he let her go and gave her a second to steady herself.

The little witch staggered like a drunk and flopped, arms spread, on the cot.

“I feel sick,” she whispered. While he sympathized, he couldn’t leave her behind alone.
He urged her to sit up, put her head between her knees, and breath long, even breaths. She made it through the first breath, hiccuped, and swung her head back up before bothering with another. Her eyes watered and she scowled at him betrayed.

“I know, it’s terrible. I’m sorry,” Harry said, crossing his fingers. “From now on, that’s for emergencies only. Right now, though, we need to get to everybody. Are you cool with—,” she nodded sickly. “Brilliant! Let’s go.”

They stole down the hall and peeked out the bookcase, only to find themselves trapped. Mrs. Malfoy drew from a limitless well of rage-fueled Dark magic. Books and furniture rotted, turned to mold and ooze before their eyes. The floorboards, the carpet, warped and blew mostly shreds.

In the midst of the destruction, Grace, hardly seeming to notice the carnage, stared out the busted window. She held a miniature bonfire in her hands that grew taller and taller by the second, seeming to feed off of the calamity. Its edge teased the ceiling, threatening to give it a lick.

Harry snuck the secret door shut again and treated Laney to a preemptive apology. With a sigh longer than her years, his sister gave him her wrist to grab and squeezed her teary eyes shut.

They cracked into the kitchen in time to see Freddy vanish. The second before he’d been standing by Zed, reading from a sheet of paper. Harry couldn’t finish, “Don’t!” before the man faded away.

Laney and Zed both cried out, rushing to the now vacant spot by the pantry, grabbing at empty air. Ginny, who’d turned to Harry, spun around, shocked by their sudden shouts. He cursed, and absolutely livid, searched the kitchen for Snape, the maker of all this chaos, needing to hit him, needing to know why he ruined everything.

Except Snape was gone. Grace courted her fire, Laney was in tears, Zed started tossing the pantry looking for any scrap of her brother, and Snape was gone. Harry ran to the pantry, ready to help tear down the shelves—

And then, in a wink, Freddy reappeared. In the same spot, no longer reading, but blinking at Harry owlishly, Snape’s drawing held loosely in his hand. The young wizard plowed ahead on momentum. He crashed into the man’s torso, bounced off and landed on the...ground?

Merlin, no, he begged, seeing the impenetrable black underneath him.

Freddy was here, but at the expense of everything else. The kitchen and the people in it became only the ceaseless night. Again, Harry had entered the dizzying nothing, Laney’s forever sea.

It boasted the dark of deep sea trenches, tge kind so pressing and blank that bones and eyes were optional. He looked up and saw the moon again. It lit nothing and the two of them, marooned.

“We have to get out of here,” he told Freddy.

The larger man muttered, “It’s what I get, fuckin’ with this shit.”

He seemed to be talking to himself. Then he motioned over his head and body, then Harry’s, mumbling nonsense.

“Hmm. See, I don’t know any proper spells, but if it were up to me, that’d work.”

“If it were up to me, we wouldn’t be in this mess!” Harry leapt up to pace, but when he turned away from Freddy, he only had the trench, and his stomach dropped instantly. Without a point of reference, he lost every sense of being or direction.
He spun back and gave Freddy his full attention as he spat, “I never learn! Snape is trouble. Don’t trust him. He only lives to ruin people—.”

“Harsh! Who said that?”

“Everyone who’s ever met him, I guess. At some point! I mean, really! There’s a lady out there attacking your house. She literally saved his life and now she wants to kill him! It’s just what he is!”

“Destructive?”

“Yes! Destructive and evil and, and unlovable! I can’t believe I really almost gave him a chance! I was starting to, I was this close!”

Harry sat back down, cross legged. He pulled a Laney and flopped down on the ground, arms wide. He closed his eyes, hoping he’d open them and see the kitchen ceiling. He quailed to see that domineering moon.

“So, did you do your part?”

Harry bristled.”I’m not responsible for an adult not having his shit together! Snape spat on us knowing each other on day one! One! I was a kid! I’m still kinda one now, y’know—I’m still young!

“And all this time he could’ve reached out to me and maybe thanked me for covering his arse? Or apologized for how he treated me, or done anything decent but no! He wants to do all this and disappear again!”

He pulled at his hair, fed up with trying and giving and bad advice. “But sure, I’m expected to know how to solve everything, because I’m the Chosen One, when fully capable adults could just do their bloody jobs and leave me alone!

“I wanted to have tea with my bloody mother, not fight demons! God!”

Denim scuffed on denim as Freddy sat across from him. “I meant, this part.”

He grinned bashfully and showed Harry the paper. Harry flushed, seeing the giant serpent wrapping around the little shack, and deflated, embarrassed by his losing his temper.

“I mean, all that sounds important. Quotin’ Duck here, ‘I want to validate your emotions.’ Just so happens, I was talkin’ about the spell thing, that part. The snake bit. I think I pronounced it wrong when I did it, I dunno.”

Harry sighed and frowned at the moon. “I’m not reading that.”

“Okay, I mean, yeah, you don’t have to. Thing is, I don’t wanna die here or live here for eternity or whatever, so. We kinda left things in a bit of a shambles. What’re our other options for gettin’ back?”

Harry stayed frowning. He wasn’t just going to read from some page Snape pissed together for him. He didn’t know the rituals, or anything really about wards. The only thing that stuck with him was Ginny’s excitement in the woods. She was certain that somehow he needed this, that had Snape attempted to embody them, or make a house out of them, or something he didn’t understand.

In any case, he knew he didn’t need Snape deciding what part he played in anything. Harry could
devise his own parts. He dug in his clothes for wherever he’d put—yes!

Harry pulled the crushed piece of paper from his jeans. The same snake as Freddy’s winded around the tiny house on the page.

“If it doesn’t work, oh well, but I’m not reading his words when I can think up my own.”
Redemption

Chapter Summary

Severus is tested.

Severus had very few occasions to be so, but that night, he was elated. The wards worked.

In retrospect, it was a long shot. As he’d chanted, vying for Hel’s attention, he didn’t hear any goddess’s voice or his family’s dead like he’d expected. Instead, when biting hoarfrost crept up his body and he began to go blind, he weathered a few moments thinking he’d made a fatal mistake.

He hadn’t studied enough or been cautious enough or altogether fell short. Trying to sow something he barely understood, he felt his roots growing cold, the wintry soil unyielding. Hel wanted him. She’d judged him unworthy and pitilessly claimed him to keep.

Severus had expected a tough invocation, but a quick one. That was his arrogance. He’d bounded into his real demise. Still, he pushed on, his awareness of the others fading as he entered a numb grayspace. There was no stopping once he’d started, not with who he’d picked.

Time bent oddly, and he’d only had an impression of wailing and packed earth. He couldn’t see the kitchen, or even his own feet, and wondered when feeling the close, dirt walls if he lie in his own grave.

Maybe the summoning already failed and now he was a nightmarishly self-aware corpse. Maybe all he could look forward to was an eternity of rotting. Bugs and grime and loneliness and...

Well, isn’t this familiar, he had thought, surprised by his own self-control.

He felt far less panicked than he could ever expect. But despite the requisite terror of possibly having died, which he had known once already, this wasn’t his worst scrape.

Yes, this was a great danger to his immortal soul, and for that he was sorry. But so had been taking the Dark Mark, and that proved generally fixable.

Here he could at least speak. Moreover, he wasn’t torn open and choking on his own blood. Strange that his hours in the Shack could prepare him for anything else. Here he’d spent years only a fraction of who he had been, which itself was only the semblance of a man—and all with some purpose.

Severus pushed aside his emotions—cold dread, hot embarrassment, and sinking despair—and kept chanting. Soon wailing rose around him. Drawn out and agonized groans seeped through the dirt walls, driving into him with fury taut as bowstrings.

Ah, Severus realized. The test of self continued as Severus heard his ancestors through the soil.

“Filth!”

“Half-blood trash!”
“The Prince line, reduced to rubbish!”

“Put him down! The arrogant disgrace!”

This wasn’t exactly pleasant to hear from the ghosts of his estranged family. They materialized out of the dirt, teeth gnashing, all yellowed collars and torn frills.

His vision upped its intensity. It tried to convince him that everything since the Shack had been a long and shyly hopeful dream; that he was awake now, his dream dissipated; and that he would be paralyzed again, split open and abandoned, no longer suffered now with all his uses exhausted.

And these were the people he’d join: a legacy of souls nobody would cry for, dogpiled underground, forgotten by the living.

He scoffed at most of it, but a single worry caught him. Did his mother escape this misery? Or was she dragged here to be hated when she died?

He searched the twisted faces for his mother’s and didn’t find it. Could Severus have saved her by burying her by the ocean, out of sight of her family plots?

Or did blood bring them all here when it cooled? Past the dead Princes, he saw Snapes, and beyond them, dispassionate and favored by golden light that cast their shadows with upturned noses into the hollow below—not Potters, surely?

Of course they died too, and famously. So, they would be there in the distance, if they and Severus were truly related. But seeing them broke the vision’s hold on him again. He’d be damned if they were any family of his!

He thanked Merlin that his spite outweighed his terror.

The dead jeered, but he hardly cared for their opinion. He chanted on, meaning them every disrespect.

And then he felt the sting on his cheek, and something collapsed. His grave? The house? No, him, his body. The dead were more real than Severus’s side hitting the floor. But once he fell, the angry spirits piled atop him, and he rolled over and they clawed at him.

A dozen evil hands encircled his neck. The collar of cold broke on his scars, where the nerves were deadened and he prayed that he hadn’t died yet.

It was an unsure thing, but on some level, he was still in the kitchen. He had a chance of surviving, maybe even succeeding.

Severus was glad for Occlusion, which pooled silvery calm about his consciousness. He withdrew into it, far from his body and the vision, and found his own memory of his beseeching as adapted from Trixibelle’s guide. He was sure he only needed one last push.

“Hel, under the earth, She and Her sovereign, a tyrant above the dead: as You rule the crimes of Your siblings, take to them those who would End me.

“Find me unrelenting, or have me. Hone me in your likeness, icy and resolute. Reveal them, or have me laid bare.”

Severus stopped feeling his body. He didn’t mind it, since now he could concentrate without feeling his accruing aches. The wizard couldn’t know that he’d just left his body entirely. He
chanted, strong in purpose, doggedly pursuing victory. Meanwhile, Zinnia chased his soul around the kitchen, while Fred fumbled in his hoodie pockets for a light.

“Take stock around my fire and the blood which braves the night. Should one among them not weep for me, so interred, I will return to You. Should one...”

He realized then that Grace may not have started her ritual. Without her enacting her role as head of house, he was screwed. She’d need to stop yelling at him, for one, and light a fire with all of the them in mind. Once they had something of a hearth, their wards could come together.

But if she failed to burn her page, he was dead. If she burned it and didn’t think of him, he was also dead.

Severus hadn’t lied when he said the only danger would be to him. Evoking so many chaotic forces could threaten them all, and so in his design, the only promises of sacrifice were ones he made himself.

But even then, without the others honestly caring about him, he was lost. He entertained that very nasty notion of faith and, lacking other options, had to commit. He relaxed again into calmness and finished speaking.

“Should one among them not seek me, so Unseen, have me attend Your halls until the last life is Yours. But if so, if so, lend me Your strength.”

The dead evaporated. But then, Severus could say now that they never mattered. He hadn’t bothered with a birthright since he was a teen. And self-knowledge and power and belonging, those desires hiding behind heritage, he’d found elsewhere.

Not in Voldemort, or Dumbledore, where he expected it, but then, that might’ve been for the best.

Severus shot awake, swearing. Something fast and heavy slapped the air out of him, and he sat sputtering on the floor. A crack and he heard Weasley’s voice, although he didn’t follow what was being said. He stood, holding his neck, wiping spittle and soil from his cheek.

He took in the room and saw it, the flame. He huffed, surprised. He hadn’t thought it’d be so colorful. Purple: a royal color. He smirked, more than a little smug.

Severus had some time to admire it up close. He tried to see what part of him made it, and assumed the almost black. But then, they all had a bit of unspoken dark to them. The deep shades could just as easily be him or Zinnia, or Grace’s struggles, or Fred’s past.

The house came under attack, but the people in it were fine. They chatted on around the fire, with Severus thinking to goad Grace into speaking. He knew she had the two voices and wanted to hear them for himself. She only looked askance at him and thinned her lips.

Regardless, seeing Grace hold the fire in her hands, and it sparking with all their colors save—he counted quickly—two, he rejoiced. They had a hearth, a spirit to define their household by.

The group itself had grown measurably stronger, since Weasley seemed revived from her injuries. Severus felt fantastic compared to being dead. The worst of it had passed and he could feel the house’s reinforcements. Grace marshaled the awakened powers well.

They weren’t finished, of course. Without Jormungand, enemies could still touch the house past its first defense. And as potent as he suspected Marisleny’s work may be, he didn’t imagine a child as having enough power to stop a determined, fully trained adult.
“You can’t hear him. I can tell you he’s a rich boy who just tripped on his own damn feet.”

Severus turned to Zinnia and couldn’t suppress a fiercely proud grin. She’d done her part, he knew from the flame, and to fantastic effect.

To hear a person in the tree line was by and far impressive enough for him. But she had the attacker’s affect and his movements, all in one. She had the strength and sharpness of judgement.

The wizard had no more concerns for the turn out of the night. Him alone at full capacity assured him that they’d survive. He added to that Zinnia, an offensive force by Muggle means and now imbued with superhuman senses, plus the Swift Wind ward in the sitting room.

With the girl’s work to stun and confuse the attackers, Severus refused to think a whit more on danger or defeat.

He only felt a new kind of excitement building in him. It was one part academic curiosity, the scientific urge to observe this new magic at work. It was also the vibrancy of creation, an artistic passion he didn’t often indulge in without the brace of scholarship. And yes, it was the thrill of power, something he could never deny.

But beyond even that, he reveled in the allure of the unknown. What had they created, he wondered. He chomped at the bit to find out.

Severus strode into the yard, marking the coming softness of dawn on the horizon. Every night lightened into blue, he knew, and in the daytime all this new mysterious power would feel alien. But now during his time, Severus walked into the woods, invigorated by the spells zipping past him.

It was oppressively dark there, the promise of the day lost in the girl’s lightless maze. Severus sank into it, stalking the flashes of red to their source. He laughed when he heard a stumble. It was as Zinnia described. The attacker could barely stay upright, he was so afraid.

“No! Don’t—help!” The assailant turned tail. Their meeting became a hunt.

Severus pushed harder into the dark. He could see the shape of trees and, under the spell, heard the critters bother the pricking nettles. Twigs and the odd bit of litter crunched underfoot as he kept a merciless pace.

The fleeing attacker’s back came closer, although he heard more than saw him as he passed in and out of the illusion. He could pick out the panting and panicked shouts, and dodged the occasional spell thrown to drive him away.

The other man must be camouflaged. Severus was practically on top of him and saw nothing.

“Help!”

Severus stopped. He knew that whine: “Draco!”

“Get away! Get away from me!”

Another Stunner flew from the trees, flying over his shoulder. This one brushed close enough to sting the wizard’s ear.

Severus searched the trees for the boy’s frightened face. He didn’t pick up any hints of anemic paleness or pointed features, which would surely stand out in the dark. Continuing to be unsure—
why would that child be _here_ —he wondered if this was a trick. Perhaps the hired killers had assumed the form of someone he knew, to throw him off.

He wouldn’t fall for it. Severus pursued more viciously now, unsheathing his wand and slashing at the shrubbery. All that could be heard besides running creatures and panting was the march of splintering branches and sizzling spellfire hitting on the ground.

The hunt led him into a copse of stooped rowan, by a footpath feeding a creek. He tread lightly, keeping to the shadows. An unseen person ran splashing into the water, screaming with the icy cold shock.

“*Finite Incantatem,*” Severus casted.

Instantly, the blindingly blond head covered in smoldering leaves reflected the gibbous moonlight. Severus cursed at Lucius’s son thrashing in a grubby puddle. Draco squawked, tripping on the far bank and crawling, grasping at roots to pull himself up.

Severus scowled, brimming with unspent, violent energy having cornered the wild goose in the chase.

“*Levicorpus!* _Expelliarmus!*_”

“Ack!”

Magic yanked the boy by his ankles and hoisted him into the air. He swung, stunned, and yammering as soon as Severus stepped from the shrubs. He plucked the boy’s wand from the creek and forged ahead.

“Y—you get back! Traitor! Thief! M—You won’t get away with this!”

“Shut your fool mouth!,” he snapped, quickening his pace.

Hissing at the cold water, Severus realized, in all his haste, that he’d gone out still in his slippers. Growling, he made them into shoes and took on the stones on the creek bed. He closed on Draco, grabbing the fool up by his lapel. Spinning his wand, those mud-splattered, short-heeled boots came down to parody standing.

He leaned well into the boy’s ruddy face, and said softly, “A traitor, am I?”

Tearful grey eyes glared back at him.

“Don’t you _touch a hair!_”

Severus jerked Draco and himself away as a jet of nitrous blue magic cut toward them from the trees. They landed together on the bank, the boy’s pinned feet upending both of them.

He grunted, throwing off the extra weight. He jumped to his feet and faced Narcissa, lip curling. Someone had mentioned her as out to get him. He left Draco there on the ground, petrifying him for good measure. Severus didn’t need him leaping into action to help his mother.

Speaking of, the woman cast another nitrous curse from the rowan. He dodged again, and again, falling back as she threw one spell after another. She looked harried, her usually fine do a shambles, and her robes, much abused, coated in dirt. Bent stays belted her bodice, along with a broad hoof print stamped across her chest.
Severus winced. She’d met with Sleipnir. From her rounded back and labored breathing, he imagined her in considerable amount of pain.

He attempted to cross the creek. She struggled for perfect posture, teeth bared and pink with blood.

“Bombarda!”

The creek exploded. It came down, showering the wizards in murky water, garbage, and a few former fish. Severus was blown back and pelted with gravel.

“You bloody bastard! You con artist! You, you!”

All this for a few ugly paintings!?, he thought incredulously. Using the mist of burning creek as cover, he returned to the woods to watch.

Narcissa staggered across the pit blasted into the forest floor. She fell on her knees, dragging exploded fish off her son’s face. Severus balked at her mournful expression. Had Draco been hurt?

“Are you alright,” she panted, freeing him.

The boy sputtered to life and whispered something, supporting his mother’s side. He narrowed his eyes, even more confused to see Draco was fine. Had she hit her head? What was she tearing up for?

He didn’t know the woman to cry, not in childbirth nor under Cruciatius. If she hurt physically, she hid somewhere, or stood straight and went quiet, cool as a cat close to death. He found it a hilarious quirk, given how she minced no words about things not quite to taste. If she hurt, well, non-physically—and truly, not just for show—she stayed about as quiet. Only if she hurt enough did she lash—oh.

“Oh, please,” he complained under his breath. “This could only be about the damn house. You’re rich, woman, buy a new one!”

If he’d known it meant that much to her, he would’ve only sold the silver. Maybe a vase, she wouldn’t miss one. Severus had been legally dead! She could understand needing funds to make his own way.

He chanced creeping closer and grimaced when she screamed. She spun around and blasted the creek again, spraying clay everywhere.

“I ask you to return one stupid favor, and you...”

And there she went, crying again! He heard a delicate sniffle and coughed, discomfited. Luckily, she hadn’t heard it.

Wrapped up in her moment, she snatched a comb from her hair and threw it away. It hit a flat stone and shattered, and like flipping a switch, Narcissa sagged onto Draco’s rigid shoulder, giving over to a gothic despair.

Severus couldn’t fathom it. Stealing pretty nonsense and heading out on his own: what else could she expect from him? He wasn’t a perfumed Krup with a bow on his tails, to wait loyally by the door till she came home.

Hell, until Wednesday, “home” was a filthy, four-letter word.
Opting to approach silently, he walked heel-to-toe down the slope. He came as close as the hem of her robes, which he rolled his foot onto and pinned to the ground. He waited for her to pause in her sobbing.

It took a minute for her to finally dab at her eye and wrinkled her nose at her wet fingers.

“Narcissa,” he greeted firmly.

Draco shouted, gripping his mother’s arms. Narcissa tried to leap away but was caught by his foot on her skirts. The robes were embroidered brocade, and held fast when he leaned his full weight on his heel.

“Damn you!,” she spat, leveling her wand with his head. Draco hesitated and then followed her lead, training his wand on Severus’s chest.

He frowned and crossed his arms, done with the dramatics. Both Malfoys looked seasick. Narcissa, at the very least, leaned dangerously to one side and needed her injuries treated.

“If you must,” Severus sneered in lieu of asking. Then he silently cast a shield charm and waited to be hit.

His stoicism threw them off their guard. Tugging futilely at her hem, Narcissa glowered at him and hissed for Draco to try disentangling her.

Severus stared down at the pureblood scion hovering over his nondescript, foam shoe. It was no finely tooled dragonhide with brass eyelets and finished laces, but he’d be damned if the boy laid a finger.


“Careful,” he warned.

Draco glanced between the two of them and backed away from his foot. Severus approved of his good sense. Narcissa did not.

“Draco, I have been captured!”

Severus sighed, dropping his arms. “No, you’ve been erratic. Cut the hem, hex my foot, Apparate—strike me down! I’ve done nothing to waylay you except stand here and frown.”

He motioned to his foot and made a show of lifting it. He placed it square against his other one and spread fingers, mouthing, “Wow!”

Narcissa swayed. Draco pushed her upright, and it soured Severus’s stomach. He hadn’t thought of her when he set up the wards. On one hand, he was glad they worked. However, “too well” was a phrase to seriously consider.

“If we are done here, you might as well come inside,” he suggested. “We could heal—.”

She spat at his feet. Severus raised both brows at the glob, taken aback. The prim woman deplored such vulgar gestures. What did he do? Did he sell a family heirloom?

“I’ll curse that rat-infested hovel until it’s less than what you left me!”

“Yes, as you’ve lived so pitifully in your great mansion enshrining centuries of accumulated wealth. I only stand before you in my dead father’s clothes and Transfigured flip flops, but of
course, yes, Narcissa, how I weep for you.”

“It’s not about the bloody money!”

“Mother, please,” Draco mumbled, reaching across to grasp her wand hand. It trembled. “I think, maybe…

Severus only watched the exchange, wishing a bit too minorly that he could better hold his tongue.

“Gods, calm down, woman.”

A curse blistered the air, sailing past his cheek. The knife cut he’d healed with dittany peeled open again but didn’t bleed. The small vessels had welded shut.

He rephrased expeditiously, “I only mean...we should do this in a more, well, secure place.” He cleared his throat under her scorching ire. “There are hired wands after me—.”

“I know, you idiot! I warned you about them!”

“That—yes, you did. I know you did, in your pretentious, coded letters.”

“Pre—you have a lot of nerve calling other people pretentious! They were coded for both of our benefit, even though you barely responded! And I assumed they were read. Well! Now I know they were!”

She stabbed him with her wand, not enough to break skin, but certainly enough to bruise.

“I told you about trouble brewing weeks ago, and how did you repay me, Severus? You threw over our entire plan, sold everything, and vanished!”


The wizard thought back and couldn’t recall any remarkable scheme. If he were truthful, he could only remember flower talk. He’d followed the saga of her geraniums quite loosely, and beyond that, had been assured that her writing meant she was likely alive and well.

Aware of it all having secret meaning, he would need to study them further to accurately respond.

In either case, he had no part in throwing over whatever plan she had cooked up for them. If his role proved so vital as to sustain the whole thing, maybe Narcissa should’ve followed up in person.

No, don’t say that, cautioned his voice of reason, holding him perfectly still. Don’t ask what the plan is. Don’t treat her like a fool. It will upset her. You know it will upset her. Simply focus on acquiring her help.

She tried to blow me up, he contested.

There, case closed. Severus looked down at his nails, and started digging the forest out of them.

“I don’t know what plan you’re talking about,” he sighed. “If I did, I would admit to abandoning it. You saved my life at risk to your family, and remain one of the only two—ugh, friends —I have left in this world. The only two, perhaps. The least I owe you is honesty.”

Narcissa had simply gone icy. It was Draco viewing him with leaf-littered disdain that really worried him. He expected surprise or disappointment. Dislike seemed a bit much.
“Why lie?,” Draco accused. “You know about my father! You know about the divorce! You probably read my letters as you delivered them, so you know he tried to win me over! Just admit you were scared of him and ran off!”

“I already said I have no idea what you mean,” Severus pushed back. “Lucius mentioned the divorce during our visit and he would give you your way.”

And then he ribbed me for an hour and bragged about how easily he bribed his guard.

Severus was uncomfortable showing Narcissa his back. However, had he been less so, he would’ve left them for Spinner’s End, regardless of if they followed. He had a far less personal attack to prepare for, and had started to look forward to it.

“We can cry about this here, or we can go inside before we’re all caught in the open unawares.” The wizard gave them a couple paces, looking pointedly back across the creek.

Neither pureblood budged. Even Draco seemed genuinely turned against him.

“I won’t beg, but you do need to heal. Had we finished the wards, you wouldn’t be standing.”

Narcissa glanced at her handiwork and back to him.

“Who is ‘we’?,” she asked. Draco tensed, covering more of her body. Severus sucked him teeth. She looked stubborn and defeated, a worrisome combination.

“If you agree to come, I’ll tell you.”

“Then I don’t need to know.”

He prepared for another curse, strengthening his shield. However, Narcissa rested against her son, who led her to a log and eased her down onto it. She gasped as she sat, fingers fluttering over her chest. Perhaps unwisely, Severus muttered a spell in her direction.

The three of them heard her ribs creak and swallowed nervously. Narcissa shivered and closed her eyes.

“I,” Severus tried again, “I obviously broke your trust—.”

“Stop talking to me,” she whispered, rubbing her sternum. He went quiet. “No, actually...tell me.

“You’re a misanthropic ghost with no connections or sense of finery. You wouldn’t know a reputable collector from a Knockturn peddler in a frock coat. So how did you strip the house so quickly?

“And why return here of all places, when that money could take you anywhere? To mock me...”

Severus looked up. Dawn approached.

“That money is all but gone at this point,” he hummed. “Rent, food, mail delivery, rare books, quality ingredients, this and this and that and another thing.

“I mostly live—lived—on advances from publishers and regular commissions.”

Draco choked. “You spent hundreds of thousands of Galleons in two weeks!”

Narcissa stopped rubbing, her fingers on her lips. “How...? You don’t...”
She waved, encompassing all of him. Severus quirked a brow, vaguely aware of an insult. Still, he made himself clearer. Only some of his tastes were that costly, and none he could stand satisfying.

“To set it straight, I robbed you nearly four years ago. This doesn’t frame me as any better of a friend, mind. But it had nothing to do with this plan of yours.

“That house was simply insufferable. It wasn’t...I didn’t fit.”

“So, you sold everything.”

Severus nodded, finally feeling the outer wall of his loneliness. It bordered all of him, but looking over, was surmountable. Taking a deep breath, he employed his most unpleasant recourse. He apologized.

“Maybe I should have written you when I was feeling,” he looked away with a sharp sniff, “alone. I took liberties with your possessions. I am sorry.”

“I don’t care about the things, Severus. I thought you left me.”

They met eyes. Creatures rustled. A fish gasped in the filling trickle of the creek.

“I wasn’t aware.”
A Great House, Not Fallen

Chapter Summary

Finally, morning ends the ward night. Who and what survives?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus led the trek back to Spinner’s End, burdened by his own feet heavy from crashing adrenaline. Sharp rocks jabbed the soles of his feet through his foam shoes, punishing every reluctant drag.

He sucked his teeth, reversing the spell so that he trampled the balding footpaths a smidge more respectfully in thick flip flops, only for leaves and troublesome twigs to worm between his toes and under his arches.

The wizard cursed softly. Narcissa judged his petty predicaments.

“Serves you right for blazing through the forest in slippers and rags,” she said snidely, lifting a pale brow at him in his borrowed clothes and then looking down, watching her own feet.

Beside him, the purebloods tiptoed over Muggle litter claimed by the Cokeworth woods—beetle homes made from crushed beer cans; mulch with loose pages from nude magazines, their eaten glue and rusted staples having gave way. With a clink, he heard Narcissa’s heel tap another bottle of Devil’s Brew sloshing with murky rain water.

She gasped at a pair of discarded knickers in a shrub and gripped Draco’s elbow for dear life.

Severus thought to offer her his arm. Then again, Severus thought she might take it, and refrained, folding in, arms over his stomach.

“This is horrendous,” Draco shivered, keeping close to his mother’s side. “I can’t believe you prefer this to the Manor.”

“Well, we’ve established that our Severus has... unpredictable tastes,” the boy’s mother replied.

The half-blood rolled his eyes. All the rubbish were remains of neighbors that had already left for the cities. There was nothing properly “horrendous” lurking, no sullying, bare-bottomed lush to lunge from the shadows and muss their dubious virtues.

And “our Severus,” indeed.

He bit out, “You both needn’t overstay your welcome, then.”

The pair paused in skirting a mossy boot, and he sideeyed them watching him with their shoulders back and brows bunching. Severus grunted and looked down the path toward home.

They were close: he could already see the electric kitchen lights and some faint, fluttering purple peeking under a hole in the hedge. He pushed on, expecting it’d spur the Malfoys into action.
did, and they trailed after him now, huddled closer together.

Severus continued at a louder, irritated clip: “I’ll give you something for your pain, Narcissa, and then you all can kindly bugger off back to your sterile palace. Leave us to our business,” he finished, biting his cheek.

“He said it again,” came Draco’s loud whisper.

_Woe betide the fool to ask earnestly for his discretion_, the ex-spy thought impatiently.

Severus unwound some to bicker with Narcissa in a long, pernicious stare. They both knew her son lacked any prodigious skill in subtlety. Now she shared his offended tension, and stopped again, the group now spread over the path. She asked in low tones:

“Well then. Who else is in your house, Severus? You neglected to say.”

“Ginny Weasley, for one. I remember, I tried to Stun her and she ran inside. If Potter’s boorish little girlfriend is here, Potter can’t be far behind. She must have warned him!”

Severus considered Draco tiredly, lip curling in disfavor. His tattle-telling nearly cast him back into the abyssal dark, where the illusion could swallow him for a few hours while the wizard returned to his work. Under his frown, Draco only acquired that arrogant lift in his chin that brought out his father in him.

Snobbery, self-assuredness, and hardheadedness—all Lucius’s breeding. Severus itched to pluck the boy between the eyes.

“You aren’t wrong. I did say I’d explain,” he admitted, looking askance at Narcissa, brushing a gnat from the bridge of his nose. “Speaking of unsaid things, however—Lucius. This plan of yours.”

Narcissa cleared her throat and patted her hair. As they’d backtracked from the creek, drying themselves and rationing quiet, he’d asked again: what plan did she say he abandoned? Blinking like she’d woken from a daydream, the woman had flushed.

She returned to coolness eventually, and with disgust for their surrounds, bade he lead them back to his house. She mused about the house from whence she’d no doubt meander home herself to nurse her many hurts.

Had he kept all those books?, she asked him.

Would he take advice on decor? Would he stay in England?, she probed.

He found her affect leagues too girlish given the context. At most, she just seemed prettily embarrassed, creaking ribs, exploded fish, and all. Had it only been a matter of Severus and his beguiling friends, on any other night, he’d be amused.

Like in her classic fashion, she’d put the dangers of the situation aside once her feelings were no longer at stake. This mysterious plot, the Malfoys’ divorce, Lucius devising way off in prison, the attempt on Severus’s life: they were melting snow, only cool enough to pink her cheeks.

_If Draco were threatened_, he mused, feeling managed.

Narcissa urged Draco to bring her closer so that she could touch Severus’s sleeve. He flicked a look down to the pinched fabric and up to her face again. Her features had smoothed over, like a clear
puddle over marble. He could tell it was to ease the way of bad news.

Severus pulled back, waiting.

“I’m prepared to call us even,” she announced, a clean “s” to finish off “us.” “If you truly meant it, that I’m one of your two closest friends—.”

“Don’t make me repeat it.”

“I won’t. I only mean...ahem. You are my only close friend, Severus.”

He snorted. “That’s pathetic, but I’m beginning to suspect I’ll soon say the same.”

“...Possibly. You should know: Lucius...sent his men to kill you. He’s...he’s bragged about it, in his letters. I may have...”

He paused and withstood the ambient noise, the moonlight showing every facet it could spring from. More tree hollows, breaking twigs, moths fluttering in dew-jeweled webs. All of it overwhelmed his sudden stillness. Narcissa blinked slowly up at him, and he sneered—at a version of her he knew, the wounded cat, consoling a feral beast.

Like the two of them in the adjoined bedroom where Severus unfroze, her sat blinking slowly on a chaise while he clawed into movement.

The cat and the cur.

No, he rebelled.

They weren’t animals. He wasn’t wild. And he wasn’t some poor, precocious boy the couple favored and pretended to raise. Upset of father’s fury, needing coddling from mother like a child laid out of sorts. And Narcissa would never claim he was any of those things.

It was her husband who considered him a pet project. It was Lucius who, had he a dog who bit his feeding hand, didn’t hesitate to beat it. He’d certainly taught his family that frame of mind. However, now here Narcissa was, brushing his sleeve just as much as he could bare, circling the drain to sorry.

She and Severus had grown, if only a little. He fought not to lash out, held fast, and let the knowing happen. Twice in as many days, he let a pillar break.

“Go on. What did you do.”

“I...Lucius no doubt behaved preciously during your visit,” she said, letting go of his shirt. They both looked ahead, her hands folded in front of her.

“Before I wrote him through my solicitors, he’d spent weeks trying to convince me out of any legal separation. He said it was a whim. I told him we both knew it was coming. He quoted money. I said I had my own inheritances from my family, and Draco had his trust.

“He then made appeals to ‘preserve’ our image, complaining about how we would look to our acquaintances if we ended things. I sent him a copy of the Prophet and stopped answering his letters directly after that.”

Severus knew which copy, having it branded in his mind. It boasted her crying face on the front page, with a two-page spread on her family’s trial. Even he didn’t know all her emotions from that
day, but he saw them hanging from her shoulders in the photo. And she didn’t offer to describe them, now that they’d been traipsed before the public.

Anyone might understand, even Severus, especially Severus, what that kind of exposure could spoil. Her drawing inward suited him, so he never mentioned it.

But to cite appearances revealed how out-of-touch Lucius had become. He didn’t realize his wife no longer appeared, anywhere or in anything? That she’d rather haunt her own property? Together since they were sixteen and Lucius didn’t sense the change in tide?

“Quick as ever, he resorted to plying Draco.” She spoke quietly the whole time, but lowered her voice further, sparing them all, what? Shame?

“I can guess the rest,” Severus droned. He blinked, realizing he hadn’t for a while. “Your son’s letters featured the Greengrass chit far too much. You’d think he found Jesus. His shift in loyalties scared you, he went to his father, and—let’s see if I can guess it verbatim.”

His voice had tired from his earlier chanting. Still, he managed the impression of cold, lofty amusement presented on calculating calm. It wasn’t too far below his real emotions, whatever they were.

“‘Now, let’s speak plainly as men,’” he said, playing father, “‘we both know your mother has her moods. She simply needs guiding back to better sense, you understand. I only wish I could care for her myself.’”

Severus delivered his next line over to the ashen faced boy, sliding it out of a humorless grin like a bribe across a minister’s desk: “‘Tell me, how has she been doing, Draco? You realize, as you’re my only heir, that I trust your opinion best of anyone’s.’”

Draco, shaken, ducked his head and pushed ahead of them, fists clenched by his sides. Severus dropped his politician’s grin and stared expressionlessly at his rounded back.

Of course Severus knew Lucius’s favorite traps to lay. The man had honed those clever words on Severus himself in their school days. Severus knew how to latch onto a wriggling need for approval. He knew how it looked when one was caught out playing the heart-starved fool.

Compassion sat in him, unused. He hummed and finally looked again at Narcissa.

“So, you realized his plots,” he mumbled, urging her to finish. She tore her eyes from her son, frowning at the scraggly hedge the young man stopped in.

“I did,” she agreed. “He didn’t know—Draco didn’t—as I tried to keep the worst of it private, but Lucius hired thugs eventually, trying to intimidate me into staying.

“They visited the Manor, first lurking on the edge of the property, then bothering the staff, testing the locks at night. We’d find the doors broken open in the mornings with nothing stolen. They did it only to show us we weren’t—that I wasn’t safe.

“I officially filed for a divorce, hoping to just end it, but he—.”

Narcissa took a steadying breath, but coughed, pressing her chest. Severus, hesitating, felt the color seep back into him. He stretched out his arm, nudging her and offering her the brace. She pushed him away, shaking her head.

“Listen—Lucius. I thought he might back down if I used your name.”
He looked ahead again, and started them nearing the house. At least he could get her closer to help she’d likely take after her confession. “That was the plan? You told him I said to leave you be?”

“Well, not in as many words. I simply said we were lovers.”

“Lo—!?” He spun on her, mouth agape. “Lovers!? Wha—we’re not—are you out of your mind?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes, huffing, and wound her arm in his. Admission made, she used him for support as they closed the gap with Draco. Severus glared at her profile, softened by the moon and as cool, if not as distant. Whatever space they’d had, closing so quickly it might’ve squeaked.

Lovers?

Lovers?!

“So you wanted me dead, is what you’re saying?”

“Obviously not, hence my warning you in several very important letters, which you neglected to read until it was almost too late. Did you even notice that I’d written more in the last few weeks than in the leading six months, year even? And that you’d think me so vapid as to write about gardening!”

He harrumphed and stole back his arm.

“Oh, don’t be petty,” she chided.

He ran through his last exchanges with Lucius and suddenly saw the pattern. The biting interest in his love life, and even the strange ask:

“Take care of her for me,” said in a cell that felt three lifetimes away.

Severus had thought it a request for a friend’s support. What else was he meant to think!? That Lucius saw Severus as his replacement? That the man had been convinced, should Narcissa Malfoy take on a lover, it’d be him, of all people!

“You told Lucius I stole his wife!”

“I’m not my things, Severus. You can’t steal me.” She said, arresting them again. He rolled his eyes and kept walking, only to be grasped by the back of his shirt and tugged back into the conversation like some unruly teen

“I only said it because I thought he respected you! At least, he used to. And if he targeted you, with enough forewarning, you could easily hold your own. I couldn’t possibly expect... whatever shape this is we’ve found you in.

Neither would I, he conceded privately. Granted, most of this is—.

He turned again to the house, and choked on his yanked collar.

“Off!” He shook his friend’s grip, and they stood on the path, scowling at one another. “I won’t hold you: this is worse than my shit apology by far. At least I was sincere.”

“I’m sincerely upset! See, you’re acting childish. Like I said, if you had written properly, maybe called for once, I could have explained —.”

“You’re blaming me for a situation you’ve put me in? For all this, you mightn’t have even bothered
telling me! I prefer not knowing to—lovers!? Bloody lovers!

“Why me, woman? What power could I possibly have over him?! Hell, I recall you being on such
glad terms with Potter. He’s been besting Lucius since the tender age of twelve. You could’ve
asked him for his connections and left me completely out of it!”

Narcissa stamped her foot and exclaimed, dropped curls flying: “Fine! I misjudged him! I’m sorry
that my ex-husband resorted to attempted murder instead of, of—!”

He growled, “It’s what he does, Narcissa! You know that or else you wouldn’t have warned me!”

“I offered to bring you in with us! We could’ve worked together! Protected one another!”

Severus carried on as if she hadn’t spoken, making her go red.

“He either doesn’t care at all or uses what’s at hand to crush his enemies under heel! If he’s not too
busy trying to save his own skin, which he isn’t, boxed away in a stone cell under constant guard
he’s paying to do his bidding.”

Now you’ve made him my enemy, and I’m so sure it eats away at you, he said in a baring of teeth.

She held her head high, like he was too low even to spit at now.

“Oh, go on, wrinkle your nose,” he mocked. “You won’t escape this stink, not by me.”

“Well, now I wasn’t aware of something. See, I’m admitting it!”

“You don’t get to use my words back at me.” Narcissa started when he turned sharply away. He
felt her jump and reach for him again, and shook her off again. “You can replace what I took from
you. Even the trust! I mean, look at us! Like nothing happened!

“I was followed home, Narcissa! A home I blew up to escape with my life. I sustained injuries, I
had to flee!” They were close enough to Spinner’s End that he heard a few raised voices, fading
into his own.

“Other people are involved now. Potter—the Weasley girl, those goons attacked her twice. I never
wished to see any of them again and now I’m dispensing them bruise balm like I’m a bloody
matron!”

She pushed into his space again, holding both his wrists, incensed, but grip loose. Severus couldn’t
quite plan for the forceful air curbed by the almost fearful touch. Like suddenly she was afraid to
shackle him.

He cuffed her smaller wrists in his, squeezed, and pushed her away.

Narcissa’s breath hitched, and he broke again from anger, the whiplash making him sick. She
wouldn’t dare cry? Had he worsened her injuries? She kept closing the distance, but if he hurt her
by accident—was she steel or was she glass?

“Who else did I have!,” she snapped, snatching a can from the ground and chucking it at him. He
bobbed away, avoiding a splatter of bugs and slime. Most of that flew backwards onto her dress.
She harangued the mess she’d made of herself,

“Damn! Gods, who else could I trust?! The Aurors! Who do you think he paid to harass us! Potter?
I wouldn’t even ask Draco! Asking someone’s child to save me from my own crumbling marriage!
“I had to tell him it was Death Eaters to get him to act and pray it’d do something! Cause chaos, stay the attacks.

“And I told him not to write you, for both of your sakes! That he did wasn’t my fault! I’ll apologize, I’m sorry, but some of it just isn’t my fault, Severus, same as you!

“It’s Lucius. He’s a poison. Or he’s been poisoned, I don’t know. I’m just miserable, I feel nothing most days but emptiness, and, and yearning and fear! I thought you’d understand—I know you do! I know!”

She gasped for breath. “But your home, and that ugly house, and your friendship with Lucius, even—I shouldn’t have. I took liberties, I assumed. I’ll do what I can to fix what I can, obviously. I’ll pay for damages, replace the books, I’ll have it all done.”

Severus mumbled, “You damn well better,” but nodded, waving the white flag. And finally, Narcissa deigned to look apologetic. It read as indigestion, but lain over the deeper, quieter thing, the fragile silence and not the stubborn one, he conceded

“The time lost to his thoughts didn’t help,” the wizard supposed, the words coming gently as if they’d traveled through sunset fields to be heard. Peace, he wanted peace.

“Last we spoke—apparently whilst he plotted my murder—Lucius complained of his worst prison being his emotions. Guilt, I believe it was.”

“I don’t know how you do it, Snape. How can you handle feeling endless guilt without contemplating ending it all?!”

And how had Severus replied? Some reference to already nearly dying and finding it disappointing? Gods, he was glad to find something more to live for.

I will never tell a soul that, he vowed, so I can stand it being true. Something to live for meant something to lose. But known secretly, truly, he was glad.

“Ha! He said he was imprisoned by his guilt? He—!,” Narcissa scoffed hard, loosed a harsh bark of laughter—that, horror of all horrors, evoked Sirius bloody Black. “Merlin, to finally be rid of him!”

She applied herself to coraling her son, snapping the boy from his brooding and taking the lead down the path. He watched the blonde snarl of her head float away.

Tetchiness about his plight aside, it mortified Severus that he missed her. His post-war life had proven pitifully free of machinations, fruitful conversation, any real companionship save his pet.

Again, he missed playing a part in something: for greater purpose, like a home; and for petty foils, shelling secrets, joint misery, understanding.

It felt simple to acknowledge, but he had gained and regained far more than he’d lost in Latvia, or left unclaimed in the Hogwarts dungeons, or had broken in him in the Shack. But from the broken things, he remembered lying there, Lucius a breath away from his face, Severus fading and wordlessly begging and so relieved to know a friend he could’ve sobbed.

“Only you, you impossible berk…,” said with awe.

It hurt. Severus would survive, aware that between himself and Lucius, for once and for some time, it seemed, the halfblood could better find happiness. But he hurt, still.
They were near enough now that he could actually feel Spinner’s End, although through a cushion of something thick. Air resisted him as if, buried in the top layer of ocean, a sagging weight broke into the realer world to wrap around the house.

He overtook the Malfoys and looked back. They reeled back, squinting tightly, hands shielding their faces. They looked bullied by some terrible sight and struggling not to show fear.

“Severus! What is that!” Narcissa no longer sounded near and clear as she had on the walk. Her voice was muddled.

Wet, boggy air clogged the path, once quiet enough to hear whispering bugs. Now it blasted over them with the dank, rotting smell of peat, sloughing the last shadow of the ocean ward from them. Around them now was only woods, Severus’s yard, and the back of Spinner’s End with the kitchen lights pouring over the grass. All these things and the impression of swamp.

He pushed forward through the bushes only to hear the Malfoys cry, “No!” He turned back again and found them sheet white, wide-eyed and trembling,

“N-nagin—!,” Draco stammered, pointing, only to have Narcissa shove his arm down and cut him short.

“Severus, step back. Come, come back here,” she said, clasping her son’s arm, speaking sternly, patiently.

He had to read her lips by the end, using the moonlight closing in on real sun to shape her words. Her voice, barely above a whisper, squeezed through the heavy air to where he stood, ankle deep in overgrown grass. Even then, he only caught the gist of them.

“Please...step away...back over here…”


Yes, Zinnia flung herself through the screen door, stumbling toward him, Weasley at her heels.

More importantly, curved around the house’s side and leading to the street, he saw the massive tail of a serpent at least as tall and twice as wide as a city bus, coiling about his home. Every dark green scale spanned wider than his torso. It out-sized the snake from his memories and his nightmares. Each of those could be swallowed by the other and another bigger than them, and so on for days before approaching the tip of the beast he bore witness to.

Damn. He felt a little faint.

“Pot—ahem, erm.”

Zinnia fell into him. He raised a cursory hand to catch her, still in the grip of the tail growing steadily larger around his narrow home. Jormungand had notably encompassed the world. Severus had expected a huge serpent, of course he had—of course.

He swallowed bile, feeling his gut churning. The white bread in it repelled up his throat. His limbs were loose, though, as he firmly grabbed his half-sister by the elbows and held her up. Her strength left her when she also caught sight of the snake.

“Fuck! No! Is that!”
“Merlin’s sack! Snape, is that Harry’s ward!?”

“Potter and the yeti,” he muttered, and then, stricken with terror, he spun to face the house’s other side. The world snake was so large, it could circle the earth and bite its own tail.

Meaning, where the tail sat, the head followed.

“Inside, in! All of you, in!” Severus gestured widely, pushing Zinnia onto Potter’s girlfriend’s shoulder and beckoning the Malfoy’s from the trees. “Quickly!”

Draco braced his mother and hurried across the grass, having to avert his eyes from the beast, going green. Narcissa winced, hand pressed to her hoof prints, and gasped at the true size of the snake as she passed. Severus urged them in, holding the screen door and feeding the lumbering group inside.

Then, eyes snapping to the forest, he saw movement—shadows shifting, small leaves shaken from the hedge.

He came to himself and saw Marisleny planted in the yard, gaping at the tail. Severus yelled her name and she looked at him, sending him cold feet sunk in the mud, scratching grass, fear.

A palm on Narcissa’s shoulder as she tripped past him, he sent the girl wind on one’s face, running, the overheated house, safety within walls; his ire. She squeezed her eyes shut, picked up and ran to him at full speed.

“Stay put!,” he barked at her as she dashed past, running over his feet.

Severus then brandished his wand, locking the back entrance with a strangled breath. The various locks clicked and some air sucked away as the doorway sealed shut.

He surveyed the room and snapped at Zinnia, “Your mother!”

“She’s in the living room,” Marisleny piped up.

He matched her stare, and heard the creeping ring of the wards on the full moon. He then saw Fred, in the corner by the pantry, pop out of view, and the wards rang louder, and his already pounding heart began to race.

Severus passed by the girl into the kitchen, mumbling down to her as he did, “Control your emotions.”

And she glared up at him, and like the remembered wards, old memories rang, and he was in his dungeon office, jars of pickled specimens lining the walls, everything stone instead of wallpaper, his collar strangling, his anger sharp as shearing glass.

Except he felt the heat in Spinner’s End, growing as he entered the hallway, tumbling down his box-lined hall, hitting his one side. And he knew the girl glared tearfully, replaying her brother’s vanishing as the wards squealed louder over his thudding chest.

And the brother that vanished was his as well, doing what Severus told him. In the girl’s mind, Fred disappeared, and Potter, who had ferried her dutifully back, leapt into the same corner and disappeared after him.

And the Potter he scowled down at now, this one was younger, and however strangely, asked for help. And even when the Potter Severus loathed had needed help—the boy, never the father, and
damned had he tried—even then, it had been the one thing Severus didn’t deny him, forever fueling his irritation.

Clearly, where the boy had taken himself, Severus need follow.

“Idiot,” he hissed, rushing to the living room for Grace.

He thought to stop and tell the girl—something, he figured, anything comforting. He settled on skidding to a halt and looking at her, at them all, crowded in the doorway. So many shining eyes, watching him, perhaps even trusting him.

“...Wait there,” he managed, turning away again.

“Wait!,” cried Zinnia, who then growled in frustration at his continued leaving. “Arsehole! Did ya bring the fuckin’ assassins inside!?”

“Severus!,” Narcissa demanded. “Who are these people!”

The man ignored them, powering into—the ruins of his sitting room.

Grace stood in the middle of it, staring and still as her youngest had been in the yard. The hearth flame towered over her, over him, shooting upwards in a geyser of purple flame, catching the ceiling and rug on fire. Even the near black flames in the inferno hurt to see, as the light they cast burned deep as cave dark.

Stone sunk his gut to his grass-painted soles. He was positive she’d done fine, brilliantly at that! Grace had been lucid and bright, quick as ever, if entranced by the flame, as they all had been.

She’d carried it well! He didn’t think it would overpower her, didn’t even imagine it was possible! Nowhere in *Hearth of Steel* did it warn of a ward fire consuming its host.

*Perhaps she wasn’t a witch, after all,* he posited. *But then, the flame wouldn’t light!*

Holding either side of the doorway, he stepped into the living room, toeing a flame. It felt hot, but failed to burn him, being only a margin warmer than Floo fire. Emboldened, he forged ahead, immediately pouring sweat.

The fire grew hotter as he approached, yes, but still bearable, or so he thought. As he neared Grace in her surrounds of destroyed suggestions of furniture, melted glass, shredded books, his exposed skin dried and tightened as the flame sapped moisture from the air.

She made a desert compared to the bog outside. Flames withered the paper and wood splinters as fine as sand, washing over his feet, baking him.

And all the while, Grace stood and cradled the burning flame, fixedly watching the morning come over the wrecked street.

Severus came close enough to brush the sleeve of her nightgown before screaming, her scalding skin forcing him back.

“What happened!?”

The greying woman turned to him, eyes beaming purple as the flames. She blinded him, and he covered his face, such that he only heard her echoing voices lament.

“The house...she’s killing it.”
As if rising to agree, a smog of Dark residue engulfed him, vibrating and sweet. Severus choked on the powerful hatred. The heat from Grace’s fire beat it back, burning the violent magic off so mercilessly, it keened as it curled into smoke.

He wondered then if the damage Narcissa had promised—razing his home to the ground—had been somewhat fulfilled.

Through the blaze, the fore of Spinner’s End fell away around what once was the wide front window. His sitting room crumbled into gravel and open air, becoming bowed and dented lampposts warped by the rippling heat.

The hearth fire continued to billow around him, washing strips from his uncovered skin, hurting but not burning. Only wand work could explain the charred curtains and pitted floor.

If the house was a body, and the killing magic an infection, the fire Grace made wouldn’t consume. It was a fever. It’d cook until Narcissa’s sick was gone.

“This is all we have, and she’s killing it.”

“She—I know her, she—it was a misunderstanding,” he tried to explain. They had magic, Narcissa had money. They could rebuild and replace. He needed Grace to believe on some level that with magic, not all but more things at least were fixable.

But then he saw the pictures—the melted scraps of them—decorating the rug between the flames. Severus recalled leaving Potter to fall asleep with the bag of photographs on the table.

He’d caught him mid-handing the Weasley girl a snap: a river lined by reeds.

Ah, the river bisecting the park. Factory run-off soaked the soil there. A gate had gone up some years ago to keep stupid children out. No one would remember that the park used to run down to the highway.

Or, well—Potter couldn’t remember anything. The whelp had never lived in Cokeworth. What’d he care about a river? He’d never been.

The boy had tried to hide the picture from Severus. However, he’d also been too tired to feel the man lean over his shoulder.

“Weird, right?,” said Potter conspiratorially.

“Guess everyone’s little at some point,” Weasley shrugged, and the couple bent, heads obscuring the photo.

The older wizard left them to it, needing to think on security. Fred and Grace were already mumbling about heading to bed. Marisleny played her game, and Zinia was downstairs. The two professional pains listed over, beginning to snore.

And amid all of them spread Grace’s pictures, hers and her mother’s, and his mother’s, and older than that.

Made salient to him just then was the title of the giantess, Loki’s troll-wife, mother of monsters, witch of the Ironwood. Composing one of Grace’s towering voices was Angrboda, the Bringer of Grief.

“You…,” he trailed off.
Hearing him, she drew her head back and more fire, burning white and lavender, ran down her cheeks like tears. Grace stared at her conflagration as it carried through the collapsing bookcases and danced up the stairs.

The dark passageway lit up amethyst and imperial. She poured up the stairwell and, from what he could tell by the brightening ceiling, progressed along the upper floors.

_Fwoosh!_ A tendril of fire ventured into the hall. Fever raced up the entrance.

Severus bounded past the seeking flames, the corridor growing brighter as he ran. He heard the gaggle of outcries and was speechless. Where could they all go? The yard, with the snake—but the house—it all seemed dangerous. Surely any of these things were meant to protect them? But could he bet lives on that?

The women surged forward, only to see the fire and turn, shrieking. Zinnia threw Marisleny on her back, screaming as she fought with the back door, “The fuckin’ boys! Jesus fuckin’ Christ, please! Where’s Mum!?”

“She—!,” he panted, waving his wand over the fire. A patch of it went out with a huff and reignited. “I’ll find them! Go!”

He’d sooner they chance the serpent than the fire.

He went to unlock the door, but with a bellowed, “_Bombarda!_,” Weasley blew it off its hinges. The kitchen window splintered and the house shook. Mashed wood and twisted mesh sailed into the grass outside, trampled underfoot as the people fled.

Stumbling into the kitchen, he froze, conflicted, and swearing, backpedaled to snatch his mother’s portrait off the hall wall. Eileen Prince stared at him, sad features lit up purple.

Only as he shoved the frame into Draco’s hand, snapping at the child to take care of it, did he suddenly wonder when the portrait had been hung. Severus first seeing it in the hallway, of course he recognized it. He remembered not only the subjects but the picture itself.

Except right then at the least opportune moment, he also remembered only ever seeing in a photo sleeve, tucked in a book of recipes. Someone had dug up the photo, enlarged it, framed it, and hung it on the hall.

Grace, maybe Fred—they were the caring types.

The man watched Draco carry it out. Fire climbed the legs of his jeans, hot without hurting.

_Alight, Severus fought to stay calm, and strode to the pantry. He crouched, searching the cupboards, and called into the basement, hoping for a glimpse of pink wool or wrinkly skin. He wrestled some composure when he found himself in engulfed in flames for an entire minute, to no terrible effect._

_He didn’t dare to even think of anywhere besides that kitchen, however. The fact was he felt covered in Floo fire, and didn’t need it whisking him away. Similarly, he felt the fever wash his body, searching for more of Narcissa’s Dark magic. He quailed to think what it’d do if it settled for burning out his own instead._

_“Mroooow!”_

_“Come on, you,” Severus breathed. He strained and sucked his teeth, scooping his cat out from_
under the sink.

She certainly didn’t appreciate her handling by the flaming man. Opening the cracked window, he dropped the thrashing sphinx outside. He listened for the rustle of her paws hitting the ground. After a few seconds, he saw her dart for the far bushes.

Returning to the pantry, Severus cursed at the lack of two idiot, dark-haired men. Something upstairs groaned, pressing him to think faster. Weasley’s spell wouldn’t keep this old shack standing.

He reached out into the dead spot in the rapidly lighting room. Heat waves parted like light around a black hole, and his fingers hit—cloth? A t-shirt? No—it moved away.

He turned his hand experimentally, feeling clamminess, despite his fire-cloaked arm suddenly ending at the wrist. No numbness, no pain, so it hadn’t been severed. Only a brush of humid air—ah, the shirt again! He grabbed, going in up to the shoulder.

Dammit, the wearer escaped.

*This could just as well be a stranger or a spirit,* he cautioned, and thinking better, slid his arm back out of the space.

The flames on it were doused and stayed that way. Severus smelled stagnant water, although his sleeve was still dry. The groaning upstairs collapsed into a terrible crack, sprinkling down grit. The wizard feared Spinner’s End might finally come down. With everything the old house had gone through this week, it wouldn’t surprise him by caving in entirely.

But then he stared at the ceiling, eyes narrow, expression fierce. Acid ran to his belly when the groaning resolved into men’s shouts, and the crashing very obviously became stomping from heavy-soled boots. The roar of fire couldn’t mask the panicked yelling of people unexpectedly caught in it.

*Four feet, two men,* he counted, backing slowly from the pantry. He heard another crack and shot his glare to the backyard, into the trees.

At first, he didn’t see anything, but he glared harder, and harder still, burning like the fever to punish the intruders. Severus knew who they had to be—wizards, from the cracking Apparition, and if they were at his house on that night, they were Lucius’s thugs.

They were the only thing that night that Severus truly hated. The shadows in the bushes from earlier, which may have been deer or more ghosts, were neither.

He could see the two men now. One hovered, gangly, arms limp, face peeling and swollen, teeth bloody as he snarled. And the other grungy slab of a man seethed, frazzled and frayed, nose buckled, beady-eyed and unraveling—like Lucius’s own squatting bloodlust had raided the grounds.

This second man’s glare and Severus’s connected through the cracked glass, although only Severus seemed to know it. Through him came a chill that hit the heat and made the air pop. A cold puff blew sweaty hairs from his eyes and his vision sharpened, again, more than the lean into new details.

Severus realized the difference between sight and Seeing.
Another frigid breath prepared his eyes, and he Saw. He knew the men. A pair of Aurors, like Narcissa had said, the ones who ferried the Azkaban boat. Partners, but not friends. Evil without ambition, only broke and with a grudge. Not enough valor for Aurors, too much time spent near a prison without earning it.

They were unafraid of killing.

But the thin one killed for curiosity, like a toyless child threw stones into a pit: to boredly guess its depth. He sent the conveniently criminal into death ahead of him. He harassed them into fighting and threw them into the sea. He watched them flail, petrified them, let them float, made them sink.

Severus thought of the few times Draco visited his father. Had the boy been a bit more pugnacious instead of just snide, each grey-water float could’ve been his last.

He Saw the way the rangy Auror glanced at his partner and shrunk away. He’d realized what Severus could See, being that the other man killed from his soul. Hel would want them both, but this one, She would savor. This man felt either nothing or rage, and rode the latter away from colorless apathy as far as it would go.

“\textit{Sectumsempra!}”

Peeled lips recovered gapped teeth and a scabbing jaw slackened. A fist like a cinder block raised a twiggy wand and flexed. Severus hissed when his curse clipped a lock of Narcissa’s hair as it chopped past, the blonde tress jolting and spinning away into dust.

\textit{Too close!} It landed true, though, splitting the squat man open like a watermelon. Blood splashed the tree trunks. A great deal spilled into his partner’s mouth, who loosed a horrified cry.

“\textit{Diffindo!”}

The gurgling scream alerted the others. They edged away from the woods, shouting themselves, pushing the youngest behind them.

Well, almost all the others retreated. Zinnia twisted to look at Severus through the glass. She nodded at the trees and lifted an eyebrow, questioning.

Severus muttered, “For the police,” knowing she’d hear him. Rubbing her mouth, the lanky woman hunched, patting her pockets.

The clarity faded, and Severus wavered, alone in his body again. He surveyed the room sleepily and found a toppled, blazing chair for the kitchen table. He bent over, righted it, taking a seat with a dirt deep groan. He then leaned back, thumping his head on a shelf, and decided against thinking for a while.

His brain rattled and puffed along pitifully. He let the flames take down to the basement, lazy in considering the pantry while the fire wound down along his skin. The dead spot rippled, and he squinted, irritated.

\textit{Just like the brat to vanish behind any Fred. If only it was as simple as Potter stealing off for the Burrow,} he mused. The purple flames puttered like the muffler of an old car.

“What the hell…,” Severus wondered aloud and—oh. He saw the sasquatch right in front of him, waving blindly in the dark.
He couldn’t place where the dark came from, particularly. But he pressed his forehead to the table, relieved. At least the man was well enough wherever they had gone to look a damn fool.

Severus slipped into sleep with the banking inferno. Outside, dawn broke free into day.

“See, ya keep sayin’ there’s trees here, but I’m not feelin’ anythin’. You can say if you’re havin’ a laugh, Harry, I’m not mad.”

“I thought I felt my shirt catch on a branch or something earlier. Sorry...”

Harry sat on his hands with his chin on his knees. He twirled a cowlick, gaze affixed on the paper floating in front of him. Annoying as he found it, the poem had no major issues. It was like Snape has given them the most innocuous ward, save the picture.

He mouthed the words for the fifth time.

Great Serpent, coil. The currents of this world wind also.

Great Serpent, bite. Hold tightly onto the earth.

Great Serpent, the ocean takes, and carries old gods to new soil.

Great Serpent, buried in shipwrecks, be patient, hold fast.

Raise your head, Great Serpent. A great house sits beside it.

I bid you clasp.

“Tell me how you read it again?,” he asked Freddy, yawning.

The huge man sighed, “Sure, from the top,” and quit groping the endless night. Harry tried to describe the ocean to him, saying that they could probably find the regular world underneath it. He’d gone on to spend however long waving about, hoping to hit something—anything.

He fished out his assignment and scratched his head.

“Uh, alright: Hhusstsh ssttssspth— ow! Bit my thounge!” Freddy frowned, squatting, paper to his nose. “Mm, I dunno, kid, I think I said one of these wrong.

“What’s ‘shipwrecks’ in snake, d’you think?”

Harry guessed and maybe succeeded. It was hard to tell how close “sea nest” was to “ship.” Snakes didn’t have “ships.” And the Parseltongue equivalent to “wreck” seemed to split into a bunch of slightly different words.

His best choice was, “hstrk,” roughly translated to the crunch of bird bones in one’s throat. He could see that being the breaking of a ship’s hull. Possibly.

“I don’t think rewritin’ this is an option.”

“Yeah—no! Snape didn’t even write this properly! Here, I can, uh.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, stumped. He couldn’t call himself a poet by any stretch. The quiet stuttered around tapping and humming, and the younger man swayed, realizing the tiny noises fell into a tune. He watched his half-brother mull the meanings over. He seemed to be chewing on a
Freddy made Snape’s features curl unexpectedly into a winsome smile. The young wizard startled, clapping his hands to the floor. That was it!

Harry scrambled toward him on all fours. Freddy jumped, hands spread to meet him, face open if a bit puzzled.

“Read it! You! You read it! I’ll take your lead!”

The large man looked at him, then laughed. “You’ll do it if I do it, huh? That’s how ya end up in trouble. You’d know more about all this than me, anyway.”

They both sat cross-legged now, Harry having to look up at Freddy even while sitting down. He nodded earnestly, shook his head, nodded again, dizzy.

He didn’t know much more than the would-be Muggle. They were both, well, in the dark. What Harry knew was to follow his instincts, which right then, perhaps foolishly, insisted that Freddy’s version of the ward couldn’t be evil. This was confirmed when the man ran through the poem again.

“Coil,” which Harry translated as “squeeze,” as in the life from prey, became the wrapping of a mother python around her clutch of eggs.

“Bite,” which he read as “strike,” the killing blow, the sinking of teeth in flesh, became “feed,” the nourishing of one’s self.

Snakes already had “gods,” but “shipwrecks” went from the cracking of bones to the way small birds’ nests can be washed away by rain.

The poem itself was so reserved. When Harry had translated it, the cold reality of Parseltongue in his version made it sound sociopathic. Perhaps he didn’t have enough goodwill for snakes to pull it off.

Freddy did, though. He read, and Harry followed.

The two hit men drowned on their own blood. However, as the skinned one with throat slashed sank into suffocating dirt, his partner, skilled in a powerful rage, clung to just enough life to sight the blasted house down his wand.

He dropped said wand and plucked at it with numb, red-slick fingers. He picked it up and dropped it again. The man’s rage was impressive. He watched the group through the hedge roots, shaking with violence, struggling to attack.

The group whiled the morning away with reunion. First the git Harry Potter left the house, blocking the sun from his eyes. Behind him, a giant, and then a curvy woman dressed for bed. And finally, after so long, out stumbled the persevering filth: Severus Snape. He’d escaped him once, twice, maybe even three times counting the first peel away from the train station parking lot.

The Auror wouldn’t have it again...

He summoned hellfire as hot as he imagined he’d soon burn himself. It took three tries to cast the Fiendfyre, one for, “Fuck,” another for, “you,” and the last, catching one for Snape.
It burst forth like the woods were only so much tinder, racing across the wet yard to consume all of it, all of them. He lost his power and faded, smiling at the women’s screams. Screw the bystanders, child and all. Screw money he’d never see and bloody Malfoys—let the wife and brat burn, too.

Scum, all of them. He sputtered on one, sadistic hack, dribbling red on the grasping earth. He died, swallowed by the ground, before the head of the great snake rounded the house.

Narcissa grabbed her son and spun off as soon as she saw the first beast. Severus fell on his knees.

He had woken up at the kitchen table in his broken and cauterized home. He had walked out into the stark morning, saw the whole party intact, and even huffed, disbelieving. He couldn’t believe they had survived, and he couldn’t believe they might not have.

The ground underfoot gave softly. Everything felt so powerfully new. Then the Fiendfyre—then the snap.

Severus didn’t see much of it in the daytime. Black light drew dagged jaws, the edges of scales, and a colossal throat down which the Fiendfyre disappeared. Smoke leaked out of its working jaws until it swallowed the curse headfirst. Then it wrapped around the house again and blended into the siding.

Kneeling, Severus gawked at Potter. Flat on his arse, the boy stammered back, “Snape, i-it, I think it, uh, it’s f-finished.”

Ah, remember Quirrell?, thoughts mimed to him through mental gauze.

Zinnia sagged, rasping something. Collectively, the rest of them slid to the ground. The grass steamed following the burning dew. It worked them into putty as the lot of them passed out.

With a plastic clicking and a jingle, a hairless cat worked out of a bush. She pulled her sweater off with her back leg, seeing as it was ruined with blood, and purring with stress, curled up against the littlest Hedgerot in the yard. She’d have a new sweater soon if she played her cards right.

Her owner rarely dressed her, having no consideration for a naked cat in the cold.

Chapter End Notes

Having a full time job while writing this is not at all a blast. But there we are! The end of the Magus Night! The story still continues after this, but do consider this the end of its first major arc.

Hope you enjoy!
What Remains

Chapter Summary

Remus, Ron, and Hermione go in search of their missing friends. Meanwhile, Harry takes in the aftermath of the attack on Spinner’s End.

As soon as Hermione returned with the address and a beaded purse of potions, the group snuck out to the street. Ron led the way through a puzzle of forgotten tunnels, causing the witch to ask how he knew the way. He posed proudly, freckles shocking in his wand light, making the young woman titter.

Remus grinned at their antics. Who was he to discourage the fun of a secret tunnel?

Relaxing into their journey, he considered the house they planned to call on. He couldn’t help expecting little good from their reception. And the werewolf doubted he could convince Harry’s friends to stay behind at the Ministry, while he ventured into shark-infested water alone.

Please, Snape was never that bad, he tried to think, and maybe it was true. Remus was hardly afraid of the man. But Remus wasn’t afraid of most beasts. That didn’t dispel their danger.

The possibility of the group of them scattered and cursed to bits wasn’t a fairy he could wish away. Snape made—something—with either Harry and Ginny’s help, or to the pair’s detriment. They all felt the fistful of singed pages communing in Hermione’s bag as they walked. None of the hallways Ron showed them stretched enough to diffuse their energy. The papers hummed, like they were singing.

It might not be as bad as all that, was all Remus could manage.

Soon, they clattered upwards in an elderly lift hardly more than a tin can and string. It jumped to a stop only mostly on the street, the trio stepping up into Muggle London.

Remus stumbled some on the dismount, chuckling self-consciously and glad for the few draughts he’d swallowed. Embarrassing though it was, they were keeping him afloat. He hoped the potions would keep working until—well, through whatever awaited them. What with the standard quality of Ministry potions, he would be glad if they lasted the trip north.

They elected to ride the Knight Bus under glamour a few minutes’ walk from the Ministry. With some debate, they disguised themselves as a grandfather and his grown grandchildren, Remus’s pained stoop lending to the illusion. They told the driver Swinton and rushed to a seat.

Finding the Saturday afternoon bus nearly full, they shared an armchair between them, clinging like wet cats to the upholstery as it slid around the swinging carriage.

Thankfully, as the pack of commuters thinned spinning around London, they were able to spread out. They huddled three chairs together, talking though they dropped words in gagging at the frequent, sudden stops. They spoke at arm’s length to avoid knocking heads at every screeching halt.

“I think we can taxi from—hurgh! I-I have some Muggle money.”
“Hermione, I think—ack! Dammit, Ron, your head’s a boulder!”

“I try and tell hi—ugh! Merlin, w—no, n.”

Eventually, and with great relief from its passengers, the ride smoothed out after Manchester City. They disembarked at Swinton, legs thoroughly jellied, and made noises about hailing a cab. Dipping into a side street, they turned themselves into mill workers under Hermione’s careful instruction. Soon, three perfectly plain women lingered on the curb, dressed in drab factory jumpsuits and fanning themselves with scarves given the muggy day.

Remus piled them all into a taxi that stunk of fried fish and aftershave. He rolled down a window, blaming a hot flash so he could fan himself, head hanging out the car. Thirty minutes later, they paid and found themselves outside of Yellowind Yawn, Cokeworth’s tiny town hall.

All around them, silver-headed couples in Muggle clothes smiled and waved, enjoying the afternoon. At first, Remus was sure they’d gotten lost. Nowhere he expected to end up could boast anyone enjoying anything. The trio stood out in their jumpsuits among the cyclists in bright Lycra and white-short wearing pedestrians in their tennis shoes and polos.

“Alright, so we found the Muggle part of town,” Ron reasoned, gesturing to an elderly couple biking past. “Kinda cheery for Snape, though, don’t you think?”

Remus threw out something like agreement, more engrossed with the address in his hand. Hermione’s script curled around a more suitably Snapeish street name: Spinner’s End, in lesser Cokeworth. She’d plucked the last known residence of the “deceased” from Births and Deaths records, and one could dream up the spindly black spider, weaving, on the book she pulled it from.

In this imagined scene, the witch brushed said spider off, unbothered. Similarly, in real time, Hermione dipped into the town hall to ask for directions, hopping on the balls of her feet. She left Remus and Ron to smile nervously at one another outside.

“It doesn’t quite seem like this has hit her yet,” said the werewolf, crinkling his brow.

“That’s just an act,” Ron confided, chewing dead skin off his lip while he people-watched.

“She always needs to feel like she’s doing something before this, kinda, panic sets in. I know she’s dead worried about Harry and Ginny, though—obviously.”

“Obviously,” Remus nodded, uncomfortable.

He wished again that the two had stayed in London waiting for news. It honestly did worse to his nerves to plan on managing these two, plus two more, potentially injured, all while staying upright and dodging Snape.

Buck up, he told himself. They’re hardly defenseless.

He glanced sidelong at Ron, but only saw his middle-aged disguise, groping the fabric of his suit. The young wizard fancied the look of neck to ankle canvas, apparently. Hermione returned after a few minutes with a brochure already unfolded and annotated.

“We need to head east for most of two miles,” she explained, borrowed frown lines deepening.

“They need this main road tapers off into a bunch of abandoned houses that lead into forest. I think Snape’s house is around there. Here.”

She handed Ron the map to peruse, leaving Remus nothing to do with his hands while she
rummaged through her purse. He at least noticed the curious looks of the cheery retirees and urged the group onwards. They walked through the town square, surrounded by a quaint little inn, a flower shop, a boutique. He found them seats in a gazebo and squinted at their lovely surrounds.

*Is it odd to be even more put off,* he wondered.

“I’d rather get on with it if we can. This place is creeping me out.” Remus was glad for Ron’s grumbled complaint.

“Yes, please,” he concurred.

“One second, let me—alright, everyone, take four.” Hermione juggled glass vials from her bag, each a finger’s width and length, and filled with foamy orange and clotted red potions.

“That’s one Invigoration Draught and one Blood Replenisher per person. Whoever finds Harry and Ginny first, send up a spark: green if they’re fine, and red if they’re hurt. Dose them, and meet back at Number Twelve.”

“I think, if we’re separated from our wands,” Ron added, digging into his own glamoured pockets.

He pulled out three small pouches, opening one to show them the fringed bottle cap inside. He distributed them, saying, “Made these before we left. They’ll Portkey straight to the Burrow soon as you touch them. My folks know if anyone besides us three shows up, to shoot first and call the Aurors.”

The knot in Remus’s stomach loosened some. They were prepared—hastily, but better than nothing.

“Let’s start east,” he suggested, leading them off the gazebo.

He tweaked his glamour to read as more middle class, sprouting a pastel cardigan around his waist and a sleek grey bob with powder-blue highlights. The others followed suit and blended more seamlessly then. He felt eyes sliding off of them as he spoke.

“Hermione, you have the map, so please lead us there. Ron, take the middle, and I’ll follow behind.”

And so they walked, dropping their disguises as the streets began to empty. The charm-riddled shops and detached houses wasted and cramped and leaned into the ghost town of Lesser Cokeworth. Cold stacks of the textile mill thorned the hill overlooking the neighborhoods, and as the houses rambled vaguely downward, and the forest shaded the roofs, Remus realized the end of town pooled at the bottom of a great slope into wilderness.

Nearly two miles later, like Hermione described, they met the dead end.

There were no more houses, nor anymore road. They didn’t encounter any charms or glamours to suggest they’d entered a hidden wizard village. They were, the three of them, simply alone at the end of a rubbish covered street. The eyes of the hollow houses watched as they loitered along the abrupt start of the woods.

“It’s like they just stopped building,” Hermione said quietly. Spinner’s End was a line of trees cutting off the street, unfathomably thick and dark given how sparsely it started and the brightness of the high noon sun.

Remus thought he heard groaning branches and bird song, but nothing moved up ahead. The
general hush also reopened his ears to the humming. He’d lost the sound of Snape’s rituals at some point, overpowered by the chaos on the bus, his head stuck out of the cab, and the open town center. Now Hermione’s purse sang again, a soft, circling…

_Hmm-Mmmmm-mmm_, like a sommelier tasting a few, repeated notes.

“It has to be a spell. Think of the platform at King’s Cross. If we enter,” he reasoned. Remus broke their single file, which by then had gathered to an unhappy clump at the trees’ border. The werewolf took the lead, lifting a hand to warn the younger two back.

“We need a plan on how to enter safely.” Hermione cautioned, frowning forbiddingly. “Splitting up _now_ seems dangerous, if that’s where Ginny is. We won’t be able to track each other from out here.” She stared ahead, twisting the strap of her bag in her hands. Remus could see her brain at work.

“It’s definitely a ward. Eurgh, I _wish_ I knew more about Snape’s habits to try and crack them. This is way more advanced than his stores back at school—I mean, it _would_ be, wouldn’t it…”

“I’ll go first,” Remus meant to say, instead forging ahead with a vague, “Hm.” He nearly ran out of street, smelling grass, when the humming stopped abruptly. So did the birds’ tweeting and the creaking boughs. The woods ceased their swaying. Pointed silence pierced the hush.

He fell back, immediately on edge, breaking out in gooseflesh. It was like the street felt him and tensed.

Behind Remus, Ron cursed, and Hermione’s sneakers scuffed backwards on the cobblestone. The older wizard followed them in rescinding his handful of paces, assuring his tight grip on his wand by squeezing it until his knuckles popped.

His face pricked with the weight of invisible stares. He began to sweat, realizing they’d been spotted before they could even catch their bearings.

“What do we do?,” Hermione whispered. Remus went to shush Ron, hearing the inhale, but by the time he turned, palm out, the Auror already belted out:

“HARRY!? GINNY!?”

His shout echoed up the empty street.

“What’re you doing?!,” Remus hissed.

Ron only shook his head, “We’ve already been made!,” cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted again.

“HARRY! GINNY, WHERE ARE YOU!?"

“Mrrrwp!"

They all jumped when a round, pink and grey something puttered out of the woods. Remus eyed it as it tripped up to him on dirty, naked paws, and rubbed against his leg, rumbling. It looked like a piglet at first glance, until he really absorbed the ghastly paws and long, skinny tail. Of all things, a cat had shot out after them.

It—she, telling from her belly rolls—meowed again, blinking glossy, wasp yellow eyes. She licked her muzzle with a shockingly red tongue and shook herself. This made the tag on her collar rattle.
Remus bent to read it.

It said simply, “C-A-T.”

“Oh! Is it—!”

“A trap?,” Ron cut in over his girlfriend. He shrugged at the witch in apology and stood between her and the cat.

Remus answered, frowning, “I’ll check what I can?,” and presented his wand. As soon as she saw it, the cat mewled once more and turned to saunter back into the trees.

“Wait, we—! Oh, really, you old man, it’s a bloody pet. It doesn’t speak English.” He let it go, set on reconvening by the town hall and reorganizing when he gasped.

As the cat came upon the forest’s edge, a pair of childish arms reached out to welcome it. They all gave various shouts of surprise. Remus surged forward again while the small, muddy hands pet the huge hairless ears, setting the wrinkly beast purring.

Whose child could be in the charmed forest swallowing this Muggle town? Was there a secret wizard village in Cokeworth, one even secret to other wizards? Could it be safe? If they could just speak to someone—.

But too quickly, the little hands scooped up the cat and both disappeared again in the foliage. And this time, when the tip of Remus’s shoe brushed the barrier, he was hit with a shuddering fear so sudden, sharp, and deep it made him cry out. It slid burning cold between his ribs. He’d literally felt stabbed by fear, such that he stumbled away, scrabbling at his chest.

He felt his companions’ hands on his back and shoulders, keeping him standing.

“Shit! Gods! Shit, shit!,” Remus hollered, pushing his hands into his robes, waiting for the wet, coppery tang to hit next, feeling for blood.

Nothing. He found nothing—rather, he was physically fine. No stab wound, no punctures at all, not even a scrape. He shook, gaping at the boundary still silent and watching.

“Bloody hell, are you okay!? What happened!?”

“Harry,,” he wheezed, voice breaking, never taking his eyes off the ward. He searched it until his gaze caught on one part where the watching might have thickened. “Ginny, Ha—! Who’s in there!? Give him back!”

Remus staggered into Ron and Hermione, throwing them back with all his weight. He pushed them, yelling for them to keep their distance as he frantically searched the tree line for the enemy. He didn’t want them anywhere near the ward. Whatever it kept in was obviously worse than the three people it wanted out.

“There’s something in there, s-something dangerous. I felt it! They aren’t safe!”

“Then we need to get them!,” Ron insisted, trying to muscle his way past. The werewolf latched onto the Auror’s robes and shoved him back, further and further, until the group stumbled away and up the street again.

Running—he was running away. They needed weapons, shields, reinforcements. They shouldn’t have come alone.
Harry followed Freddy into the small bedroom, his brother sighing at the dozen empty tanks.

“See? Must’ve escaped. Dammit.”

He’d felt compelled to trail the man upstairs after walking through the wreckage.

Everyone had come to around the same time, Harry first and the rest in quick succession. The sun was high in the yard, although blocked by the towering trees that seemed to overtake the square of land. Snape had slunk off into the bushes, Grace and Zed not far behind, all of them deathly quiet.

Laney resolved to wait for them on the back step, stroking—something. She must’ve found it in the woods. Unsure if it was rightly a cat, as it seemed terribly ill having lost all its hair, he left the girl to it and went with Ginny and Freddy inside.

A breeze cooled the stuffy hall. Sunlight streamed in from around the corner, which they took with a gasp. The destruction Harry and Laney had witnessed had torn the living room up and out. Spinner’s End spewed onto the sidewalk: a television smashed on the curb; the beige book pulp soaking in a few measly puddles; charred couch stuffing; and the innards of Laney’s grey console strewn among broken bricks.

“Fuck...what...,” Freddy breathed, hands going to his head.

“Was this the hit men or the Malfoys?,” Ginny mumbled.

Harry gestured, “Mrs. Malfoy,” and put on a hideous scowl, miming rapid-fire casting. They started at a crash of glass. Freddy backed away, boots crunching debris.

“And Snape let her in the house?,” Ginny retorted, aghast.

“Maybe they made up?,” he offered, brushing soot from the destroyed coffee table. Something fluttered off of it, and he saw the blackened glob of photo paper dusty with ash. “Aw, no...Ginny, the pictures...”

“No!” His mother’s angry shout sounded from outside.

With the open air living room, they could hear the conversation as it strode from around the side. Snape’s low clip was indecipherable, compared to Grace’s response: “It bloody better! It was self-fuckin’-defense!”

He ambled over the splinters and gravel to listen. As they came closer, he could hear the end of Snape’s answer: “—any trace, so there is nothing they can do without admitting to rogue Aurors. Potter’s influence can handle the rest.”

Harry glanced at Ginny, who stared worriedly back at him. He asked, “Aurors?,” and got back her baffled shrug. He stepped out into the open, snatching a peek of a bony hand with split, jagged nails.

“Because I can’t get caught up in killin’ cops. I’ll never get out, and with this—Christ, look at this mess.”

“You won’t be implicated. How could you.” Snape and Zed came into view, holding a portrait between them. The latter stopped to lean its face against the house and brush grass off of it.

“Rev, the fuckin’ house!” She swept an arm over their ruined things incredulously.
“Yes, I have eyes. I can see it.”

The nothing Grace said after overwhelmed the otherwise quiet afternoon.

This was when Freddy turned for upstairs, and Harry gravitated to him, flushing self-consciously. He felt like a duckling padding after its mother, but what could he do? The man’s impressive frame, dressed in all black, was deeply comforting. He was more solid than the house’s walls at this point, and after having only him and the unfeeling moon in that nothing, Harry preferred to stick close by.

While he hovered, watching Freddy poke through all of his tanks, he thought unexpectedly of Snape. Maybe it was his brother’s solemn expression as he turned over hide after empty hide. Or looking up, and recognizing the burns from games of shooting flies from Snape’s memories—that could’ve done it. He also suspected it was seeing the man fall silent circling the house.

The tight shoulders swimming in those rumpled, oversized clothes; the burn on his gaunt cheek; and the careful way he looked at no one. Harry thought Snape resembled him around when the Dursleys fled Privet Drive—feeling no good and guilty.

*How does it feel being bad luck,* he couldn’t help smirking, before the smile fell and became an awkward, heart sore reach, like-to-like.

*Creak!*

He looked to the doorway and saw Snape standing there, holding Harry’s book. Alarmed, Harry reached for it. Snape slapped his hands away, scowling down at the Potter register, flipping the pages with a pestered *thwip*. The ends of his tangled hair trailed over the embossed sides, dropping leaves and twiggy bits when he shook his head, frustrated.

“Here,” the thin man snapped, slamming it shut with a puff of ash. He hacked and tossed it on the desk, giving Harry the stink eye.

“Be grateful. Whatever charms are on it kept it intact. It seems your gaudy Potter ancestors are taking better care of it than you.”

“Thanks,” Harry grumbled, embarrassed for having forgotten about it. He picked it up and wiped the grit from it by way of apology. Hadn’t he last left the book on the same table as the photos? Snape must’ve pulled it from the rubble to bring it here.

He eyed the man. He now only held a wand in the fold of his arms, which seemed off.

“Where’s the other one, the Prince book?”

Snape’s fingers twitched and curled into fists.

“Burned,” the wizard bit out.

Harry let his mouth mold around, “Sorry,” but the word was caught in the traffic through his chest. From the hard, closed lines of Snape’s shoulders, if the younger man showed—anything, really—it might mean a fight.

“Well, least you got another.”

Freddy pushed his way out the door with a mumbled apology, and squeezing Snape’s shoulder as he passed. It was more condolence than Harry could fathom in a second-long exchange. Snape
didn’t react much. Harry shifted his weight, making the floor groan. The older man just frowned at the squeaky floor, ran his black gaze over the room, and stalked off.

“Downstairs,” was thrown his way.

“Alright,” Harry nodded, waiting until the stairs went quiet.

The whole household crowded on the front walk. The oldest of them pointed and muttered furiously, while Ginny held Laney by the shirt, the girl squeezing the cat to her chest. Fred barked something and jogged up the road. He spun, waving his arms like he’d done in the dark, prompting Grace to step off the curb, shouting nonsense. Zed and Snape hung back, passing a lighter between them.

“What’s going on?”

“I haven’t seen it yet, but your sister says she hears people. She yelled at them to get back, but I guess they can’t hear us,” Ginny explained.

She motioned with her wand and as she said it, Zed put her hand to her mouth. She coughed a cloud of pale blue smoke and sauntered down the street after Freddy and Grace. Snape went with. The young couple snagged Laney by a pink sleeve each when she tried to give chase.

“I want to see, too,” the girl whined in her own way, which was very softly, head butting against their arms. “Is it more killers?.”

“Why would you want to see that,” groused Harry. Ginny tugged her toward the house. The ten-year-old wiggled free, swearing when she dropped the cat.

“Dammit!” Laney broke out across the pavement.

“Oi! Don’t say that!”

Both girls took off. Harry spelled Laney’s bare feet as she ran, charming them clean and vanishing debris. They upset the cat stopped to groom itself as they dashed past. It yowled and shot away.

He wandered farther out. There he saw everyone else lined up and blocking the road, Ginny and Laney running up from behind. The cat slipped through Snape’s ankles, and though the man dipped down to grab it, it seemed to get away.

Snape just straightened, holding the line. And Harry just knew there’d be trouble from the way his head rolled up and stayed held high and the rest of him locked into place.

“Potter,” Snape said disdainfully. Harry felt his glower despite him facing away. “I am disgusted.”

“Not more of this shit!?” Freddy pressed.

“He reeks,” Zed complained nasally, like she’d pinched her nose. “Christ, what is that.”

Then the line of them jolted, and they all went quiet, Harry included, Ginny and Laney freezing.

“HARRY!? GINNY!?”

“Ron!?” blurted the Weasley witch. Then she threw wide-eyed panic Harry’s way. “Snape!”

“Potter!,” said dark wizard hollered. “Did you bring us all of bloody England! Come here and turn
them away!”

Ginny stretched onto her tiptoes to look over Grace’s head. Harry jogged as she came down, nodding, pulling at her lip. “Yeah, it’s him—him, Hermione, and Remus.”

“How are they,” Grace asked subdued. “They have wands, Zeddie. They want …?”

A scarred hand rubbed her arm, and the woman held it, looking to her eldest, face taut. Then she glanced back at Harry and his breath caught. The deep, burgeoning sadness welled up and he couldn’t figure why, as it’d come on so suddenly. He simply handed Ginny the registry still under his arm, needing to free his hands. He wasn’t sure what he’d do, he just needed them open.

He suddenly felt put to sea and needed to hold on.

Grace hooked an arm around his waist and squeezed him so tightly, he squeaked. Her other arm flew up and now he was being crushed into her. His mother breathed something and kept wrapping, until Harry flashed too warm. His eyes stung and over her shoulder he saw his friends and his father’s friend just a few feet ahead.

Remus was almost on them, unseeingly determined. Harry actually recoiled without meaning to, not wanting the man, needing him gone. And he suffered a shove of gratitude and guilt when Zed struck out, growling, “Back up!,” pushing Remus away.

He heard Ginny’s voice crack, “No, please, it’s okay,” and that was all for it. He found his own arms and hugged his mother, shaking, his face buried in her shoulder while she buried hers in his hair. It wasn’t a moment Harry consciously meant to have. He didn’t think either of them meant to cling as they did.

It was more so that the mourning he saw in her just then accompanied his strange, lifelong grief. At any moment, without warning, Harry would find himself attending a funeral of undone wishes. There he’d bury the things other children had that he learned to live without—handmade lunches, weekend outings, birthday wishes, summery family photos. And he’d leave his wishes flowers and move on, then hear a child crying on the platform or have Mrs. Weasley brush back his fringe. And in a snap, he was there again, at the graveside he carried inside him, covering his childish wants in dirt, so small and alone.

She saw that with eyes shaped just like his. She was there with him. She had her own, child-sized grave. And he couldn’t help it. He clung. He clung to her like the kid he was and tried his best not to cry.

“They can’t.” Grace croaked, rocking him. “They can’t take you.”

“They won’t! They can’t anyway, they won’t,” Ginny promised. “They’ll never keep him away, not even if they wanted to. Harry comes back, always, every time.”

“Who’s in there!? Give him back!”

Remus’s obvious terror pulled Harry from his spell. He unwrapped, making Grace squeeze tighter. Remus went on and Harry felt his mother coil, as if growing angry, hateful even. The young man cupped her ears, like she’d done his cheeks the day before, and didn’t move again. She laid her head on his chest and he held still, letting her recover.

“For fuck’s sake, just turn them away and come back! It isn’t brain surgery!”
Harry looked at Snape from under his fringe, really looked, while consoling his distraught mother. The family’s house stop behind them, wrecked. All of the man’s things were laid out with everyone else’s, so little of it salvageable. His ex-professor, the former triple spy, once so domineering and hideous and spiteful, stood there in loose Muggle clothes with a burn on his face, covered in dust and mud and leaves, glaring fiercely.

And Harry could only match his glare, thinking the man looked about as strung together as Harry felt. They were all hard eyes and slumped shoulders; snarling hair and dirt-smeared cheeks; run through and aching and Harry with his mum, with everything really, and Snape with, what?

“I didn’t think you’d want me back, Snape,” he tried.

“I don’t.”

Freddy sighed, “Rev, chill,” and nudged the other man to keep quiet. He rolled his eyes and motioned at Harry as if to say, “Alright, on with it.”

Remus and the others retreated now. By whatever measure, they knew *something* watched them, but Harry and the others were fully cloaked. It was kind of a trip. They were hidden within spitting distance of Harry’s three, war-tested friends, seemingly desperate to find them. All because of wards Snape had slapped together, they were safe.

*Whatever we made is stronger than Fiendfyre*, he recalled, regaining some confidence. *Hermione would die to see it. And she’d love to meet Grace.*

*Ron and Freddy would get right along*, he went on, taking a deep breath when his mother finally let go. He met Ginny’s worried gaze and made to look alright.

“Okay, okay,” Grace sniffled, giving him space, but only so much. She looped her arm with his. She looped the other around Laney who stuck by her hip.

Puffing up her chest, the woman braved the street again, blinked and asked, “Now, where the hell are they goin’?”

“Can we drop the,” Harry indicated their invisible wall, “so they can see us?”

“Who are you asking,” Snape grumbled, digging in his ear.

“Uh, everyone?” He gauged the group’s reactions. They were all loosely in agreement, counting Zed, who saw she was outvoted and gave her sour attention to her cigarette.

He gave another quick peek at Snape, expecting the man to protest or vanish. “Um.”

“What.”

“You aren’t leaving?,” Harry asked.

“They’re at my house, Potter. I’m sure you let slip that I’m alive. Just drop the stupid wards.”

“Well, then.” He checked everyone over one last time and set his jaw, willing them into view.

“Wait! Stop, stop! There he is!”

The young ones blew past him and ran down the street, shouting Harry’s name. The indomitable forest faded, revealing more than just the boy and his girlfriend. A handful of other people stood
around them, holding them hostage.

The cluster of bedraggled strangers closed ranks around Harry and Ginny as Hermione and Ron hurtled toward them. Shouting, arms and hands coming up, Harry saying, “Now hold on! One second!” and Remus, shocked still, watched one man tower over all of them and unleash a massive wingspan. One, thick arm barred Hermione from taking another step closer.

The witch yelped, surprised, and a girl darted around her, clutching the naked cat. It must’ve been the child whose hands he’d seen, but as Remus had this thought, more people moved. Two women folded around Harry, one blocked by the other in a filthy sweatshirt, shoving Ron to the ground.

At the ginger’s shocked grunt, the werewolf surged into action. He pulled his wand, a Stunner at the ready. Then he saw Harry awash with panic, fighting to throw his body in the way.

“Don’t!,” the boy pleaded. “Remus, they’re my family!”

And just like that, the scuffle ended. Hermione had already stopped to gawk at the giant man grinning down at her. He simply eased her away from the child clutching his leg. And loosed a thunderous laugh that punched the hideous fear from Remus’s gut.

“Harry, you got all these people willin’ to fight for ya scrawny arse! That’s a riot, that is! S’gotta be mum’s curls. Hullo, miss! Don’t mean to get rough.”

Hermione protested, “No, you’re fine! We were—! Christ, are you really Harry’s family? Well, obviously, you must be, but—!”

Remus slowed to a hobble, massaging a stitch in his side. There was no danger? These people, they must’ve been the other names on the map. He scanned the crowd for someone he recognized, counting Harry and Ginny. The child looked startlingly like Harry, if a bit younger.

The sweatshirt woman moved and Ron scrambled to his feet, matching her glare for glare. He looked down, presumably at the second woman, and cried out, “Her! The motorbike lady! Harry, mate, it’s your mum!”

“Heh, yeah, Ron, I mean, I know.”

“Merlin, you look just alike! You—er, sorry, ma’am. Nice to meet you.”

“Yes! It’s an honor to meet you, truly!,” Hermione said, mussing and flattening her bushy hair. “Oh, god, you must think us absolutely barbaric! We’re Harry’s friends, you see, I don’t know if he’s mentioned us.

“We...what...lord, what’s happened here?”

Remus had realized it as well. The last house on the block was in part badly destroyed. It looked victim to a terrible fire, blackened and scooped out. Seeing the state of everyone—soot smudged and exhausted—it seemed hardly the time for handsome introductions. It had been quite some time since he’d seen a family so in need of food, a warm bed, and sleep.

He approached kindly, stashing his wand with a hurried apology. “Please forgive the rudeness. If I’d known—we expected something different in coming here.”

He scanned the group for the danger he’d come dreading. Snape must’ve fled before the wards fell. Remus saw a few people sharing his likeness, but not the man himself.
His gaze lingered on one wasted man in a brown shirt and jeans, thinking he could be Snape’s brother. They looked terribly similar, like the giant jovial fellow next to him.

_I didn’t know Snape had brothers_, he thought, smiling his sorry.

The man froze, caught absently finger combing rubbish from his hair. He sneered at Remus—hm.

_No, couldn’t be_, he decided. He could never accuse Snape of looking so vulnerable.

“Forgive the presumption, also, but this. If something’s happened, please, we won’t hesitate to help. The man who did this, he—”

“What are you on about, Lupin.”

“I,” he started, and promptly stopped. The man in the brown shirt crossed his arms and drew himself up to full height. Remus gave him a once over, searching from head to toe.

_No? No...

“Snape.”

Bruised, sleepless eyes, black as the night. Wild, stringy hair. Crooked, yellow teeth. Thinner and browner and more dirt-streaked, but: Severus Snape quirked a brow.

“Merlin, man, you look terrible.”

“Y—thank you for your opinion.”

“You’re welcome,” he breathed, stunned. Snape, looking like that: human, real, in ruin. It was unconscionable. “Harry, Snape is in fact your...family?”

“Er.” It seemed even the Boy-Who-Lived wasn’t that brave. “Cousin—right?” The older woman beside the boy nodded. “Yeah...yeah, I guess. Maybe. We’re still working that out.”
The Perils of Possibility

Chapter Summary

Harry finds his place. Achingly, so does Severus.

Assessing the damages had been...tedious. He quickly tired of shaking the bushes looking for bodies, Grace and Zinnia following in brave silence. All he could find of the Aurors were mixing pools of blood, some funneled into summoned jars, the rest vanished.

He hated the quiet of others in their thoughts, ones unshared and too hot to touch. And so while he’d carried his mother’s portrait, abandoned in the grass, he was dedicated to thinking of what needs done. The house needed rebuilding. He would prove an academic, and not a carpenter, he was sure. He didn’t know who among them were builders.

Then Severus felt the weight of the frame lighten only to see his—sister—helping. It broke an unnamed seal in him that he had relegated to the dark annals of history.

An emotion unfelt and so unneeded crawled into him. It burrowed into his chest, where it found a cave of cold portraits and breathed on them, cleaned the glass, made them warm.

It tutted at the tiny space, there to hang more faces. Severus snarked something rude aloud, hoping to shake it loose. The two women only snorted. And the creature in him puffed another warm breath.

The brave silence quickly evaporated. The three fell into complaints and outrage and muttered handling of the picture. He felt the creature stretch its hairy limbs to make room. He reached for something sinister, like the clink of the shrunken jars in his jeans pockets. He shook the sound at the warm thing like to ward off an evil spirit.

Severus unwound, just enough, to round the house and be shown the wreckage.

He immediately regretted lowering his guard, but he couldn’t help it. It felt as if he couldn’t help much of anything—Zinnia’s shock, or Grace’s return to stony quiet. He glimpsed Potter dart into the house and tightened his fist some, felt the stretch on his knuckles, only to release it.

Because showing in rare form, the boy had helped more than hurt. Severus had brought this morning down on them. Without Severus, there would be no vengeful Narcissa Malfoy or murderous Aurors to lay waste. Without Severus, this would’ve been—kinder.

A family of four almost-Muggles would reunite with an annoyingly heroic former orphan, their long-lost fifth. They would be saved by the brat’s many fortunes and laugh and bid farewell to what used to be Severus’s house. And dingy, decrepit Spinner’s End would keel over into wood rot and cobwebs, and become more rubbish for the beetles and ants and rain and leaf litter.

Severus would be elsewhere, with his shriveled, nameless creatures and the cold space inside. All would very likely be well.

He’d spent too many minutes on the sidewalk.
He’d been staring at the gold station wagon across the street. Its driver side door had caved in and all its windows were stomped to glitter. Not even the car had gone unscathed. And Severus thought, somewhat practically, that he could have Narcissa fund the repairs, oversee the renovations to the house, goad a few extra thousands from the woman as her apology, and leave.

He didn’t even hear someone call him. He had been thinking he could find another little nook, maybe in Switzerland this time, or the Americas. He would brew and send the Wolfsbane every month, without need for pageantry. Perhaps, if invited, he could check on the girl’s progress in school, through Grace or, if needs must, through Potter. That boy was an open book.

Then he felt the bony, coughing body sidle up to him, and felt beside himself. Zinnia arrived in a pungent perfume of coppery mud and pine resin, and he sneered, and she hacked. They both looked at the car.

“Quite shitty of you to have our house wrecked, Reverend Snape. Stings, does it? The guilt. ”

He sucked in a sigh. “You talk so much.”

“Hm. So yer a screw-up, who cares. You got the lighter?”

He did, and knew it clicked against the jars of dead Auror blood in his pocket. Severus made as if to reach for it, but ended the move dropping his hand.

“Mm,” he offered instead. He wound up being rummaged through, Zinnia patting him down like a guard while he stood numbly. She huffed, digging the Bic from his jeans, nose wrinkled.

“That shit stinks. What’re you keepin’ it for anyway, weirdo?”

“Dark Arts.”

“Creepy,” and she lit a cigarette, and that was all on that for a beat.

She smoked, and Severus, again unbidden, relaxed, so much so he nearly gave in and sat on the curb. Of course, he stayed standing, waving his wand idly, swirling the blue-green dusting of smashed car window into a rough shape. Then he charmed it fixed, back in its frame, and popped the dent in the car door, and gave it a sweeping clean for good measure.

The old player car bounced, axels creaking, good as new. Zinnia huffed.

“See, we ain’t even have that. Magic fixes everything.”

“No, it doesn’t,” they then said in unison.

“Fine, I mean, it’s useful. When they came for me, the law or whatever,” she gestured behind them, at the rubble, “they made a mess. Raided the house. I—whatever—I was sellin’, drugs. I had moved out, but were visiting home for a holiday and they tore everything up, tossed the cabinets, cut open mattresses, every fuckin’ thing.

“And there I am gettin’ cuffed and havin’ to look my mum in the eye. I’m like twenty-five and engaged and shit, and mum’s pregnant again. I couldn’t even get cleared to see the baby, ’cause we didn’t have a proper address. They’d got kicked out over me.”

Severus glanced at her knotted mane and looked away, worrying the pommel of his wand. “Is that supposed to be comforting.”
“It’s what it is,” she replied. He heard her grinning and swore, rubbing his eyes. The weight on his chest had lifted. The creature sighed. How absurd. “We’re fuck-ups. Everyone is. I didn’t say it, but Fox—.”

“Yes, your brother said.”

Zinnia shrugged.

“I’m saying, it’s what it is. He burned a place down once, noddin’ off with a light in his hand. That’s why they all moved to Leeds. And Mum is Mum, she’s done her shit. So don’t pout, just fix it.”

“I wasn’t. I am.” Then he eyed her chewing on a pinkie nail. “You were willing to be arrested again for assaulting me.”

“Hm. Yeah.”

“Would you call that a ‘fix’?”

“You know who ya look like,” Zinnia snorted, unbothered. “If you could go back and kick the shit outta him, ya would.”

He grunted, frowning at the now gleaming car. He admitted that points were made. Then the wizard felt her head turn, and heard the werewolf mutter, “Who the hell…? Are they for you?”

“What?”

“That ginger walks like a cop,” and Severus, confused, looked up the street.

Unexpectedly, amid the shock and frustration and anger at Potter, Severus felt relief. This wasn’t the siege of battle-dressed Aurors he imagined, there to avenge their crooked compatriots.

And contrary to that gladness, it was an occupied street, meaning better occupied thoughts. He could appreciate a thing more than morning hush to distract him from the biting self-awareness, the glare of sunlight making him known, filling word-made warmth, and another guilty turn of his stomach.

Severus went inside—well, less outside—in search of Potter. He trampled the personal effects so lovingly transfigured to rubbish. He wobbled and nearly tripped on a board levered on something thick.

Severus staggered back and flipped the board with a peevish kick, revealing Potter’s glimmering gold heirloom underneath. The wooden parts of the cover should have burned in Narcissa’s onslaught. Grumbling, he worked the book out of nest of crisped paper, brushing off the fluttery bits.

Tucking the book to his side, he bent over, flicking through the ash.

*Might as well start counting the books, he figured. She’ll pay in entire vaults soon en…*

He barely recognized the scribble on one fluttering flake. It blew away when he touched it for a closer look, fell apart and took off light as a moth’s wing. He growled and shook apart the rest of it, beating the bits to powder and giving it up for lost.

His mother’s journal didn’t make it far in the limp breeze. The Prince family tree dusted the rest of
the trash. It settled in a few cracks and the rest coated the treads of various slippers. Severus didn’t flinch—much—as he could hardly read it as it was.

Where would be a better resting place? A book-shaped casket? An urn?

Instead he stalked upstairs, planning to give the boy the last free piece of his mind.

Irritated on the climb up, he pried open the Potter book, determined to flip until he saw something worthwhile. What made Potter’s book so much better than his? So much more fucking precious?

Severus scoffed. Some dead toff had penned an index in excellent, swirling calligraphy. No doubt many tutors had taught that curving, uncalloused hand. And that same writer had left a credit for the book’s various artists. One such name nagged him. Had he seen it somewhere else?

Severus proceeded to flip through the book, forwards and backwards, harmlessly agitated for the few paces down the hall. He couldn’t remember where in the gilded atlas it was that he’d last seen that one particular name.

Whatever. More little puzzles. The wizard judged himself for running away to petty problems. He wasn’t a child. He needn’t toys. Before long he was tossing the thing back Potter’s way, and taking in the boy in his entirety.

He wasn’t unlike the rest of them: messy, lost. Severus said a snide thing about neglecting his lauded belongings, ancestors and the like. And as if reading his mind—for only the second time in all their rivalry—Potter cut with idiot precision:

“Where’s the other one, the Prince book?”

*Why would you even ask me that,* Severus wanted to spit. Again, the canvas stretch of skin on his knuckles.

*What does it matter to you what I’ve got. More to take, you greedy twat?*

“Burned,” he said instead, wondering why he kept the rest. What use did he have for the evil, acid words his heart produced like bitter fruits? They weren’t filling, like a friend’s condolences—except maybe filling with rage.

“Well, least you got another.”

And again, his stomach turned too guiltily, and Severus wanted to spit venom at any body present. His mouth went dry as a beach before a tsunami.

Fred moved quickly without knowing to. Severus felt the squeeze on his shoulder and the creature stretched. His chest ached.

The man passed from view and he saw Potter, dumb and gawping, in the room of empty tanks. The night even spirited away the harrowing boa, gone with every slithering thing and not a stitch of furniture. All of anybody’s small, irreplaceable treasures, taken by one night of strange magic.

Severus did all he could with the thoughts he had left, anchored to him by spite. He gave them to the creature. They were too much of him. The problem was too obviously Severus, and nobody would say so. Even Potter held himself so still, most likely out of self-preservation, yet an expression took the fool boy like empathy before being stuffed hurriedly away.

Severus wanted to be angry. He could be, if he tried.
“That shit stinks. What’re you keepin’ it for anyway, weirdo?”

This is miserable, he cursed internally. The beast of feeling hung more portraits in his heart.

“So yer a screw-up, who cares.”

He lost his grip on anger again and found it replaced with, among other things, the fact of eyes watching his every look. With no one deserving to hurl invectives at and hear the pretty crash, he threw the fight. He kept his resentments, but let the weapons drop.

He forfeited.

When his incendiary wants hit the floor, he even heard a creak. He frowned, then, realizing it was only Potter shifting his weight over the old floorboards.

He also realized as he snapped, “Downstairs,” and left, that it was a similar groan as earlier that morning. When the Aurors had Apparated into the house, they must’ve appeared in Fred’s small room. It did hang right over the kitchen.

The wizard returned to the street, accepting the breeze on this shameful face. Zinnia waited smoking on the curb, while the rest of her family took on the strangers.

“Well, does he know them?,” she asked, clearing her throat. She hawked a wad of grey phlegm on the sidewalk.

He curled a revolted lip at her, eyes watering. “Nasty woman. Does who know whom?”


“Oh, so you’ll remember his name with no problem. Consider it noted.”

She handed him the lighter with an eye roll. Severus plucked it from her fingers and shoved it next to his jars.

“Of course he knows them,” he went on.

“They’re his childhood chums and his blasted father’s pet people pleaser. Incoming: two irritants and the spineless wonder. A busybody, a slacker, and a joke in a knit jumper. If you threw three cats in a sack and swung it, you’d have the same effect: dizzy, loud, and too pitiful for words.

“Of course he bloody knows them!” This was good. He could vent. “You ought to have met his godfather, ragged cur that he was. Potter loves strays.”

Zinnia cackled, coughing a cloud of smoke. “Someone’s gettin’ a bit a badmouthing. Havin’ fun?”

“It is my passion.”

She walked off to see closer, Severus using her as a lead. He confronted the border of their place and the world at large. Weasley came, Potter came, even the cat came at some point. They all gathered in front of the shimmering ward line and Severus, like before, was glad for it.

It distracted from the warm press of things unsaid. His week had been torture. Perhaps the trio trudging toward them could end it.

He feigned disgust, sure no one could tell he didn’t mean it. He argued to himself that he could, if
pressed.

Far too many people knew of his house than he’d ever planned for. He yelled about that, and started to feel himself again. Yes, anger he knew.

He hoped in part that the intruders would turn away. He also hoped he’d have the mean pleasure of Potter turning them away, especially if Severus pushed it. Then he would pay on his debt, keeping the boy home—no! No, keeping the boy here, simply here, and the strangers, there, and the group of them all safe.

_Dammit_, he swore, wincing. The anger had gone again.

All he wanted was honest rage. He rubbed his chest and looked down the line of relatives—and Weasley—and there near the end of it were Potter and his mother in a mournful clasp.

_Gods, this is my personal hell_, Severus lamented.

He nearly bit through his cheek when his mother’s portrait came to mind against his every straining wish. In poured Dover, and the ocean, and the cliffs, and the Hel rite where deep underground he prayed her spirit went well. It was all too unbearably close.

Zinnia hunched on the opposite end of the line, guarding Potter and Grace with a scowl. Lupin blithely stumbled forward and Potter shrunk from the wolf like a boy half his size. The Hedgerot she-wolf lashed out, forcing Lupin back.

She only had her bitten nails and a cigarette, but the man clutched at himself like he’d been stabbed. Weasley practically whimpered her little friends’ case. Lupin began to holler, showing his distress.

Severus didn’t know Lupin for his dramatics. Zinnia recoiled, drawn in strength. Severus ticked another power off to the wards. Then, bothered by Grace’s stricken protests, said his piece.

“For fuck’s sake, just turn them away and come back! It isn’t brain surgery!”

He glared at idiot Potter, wondering when he’d think to end his own mother’s suffering. Then, for a third time, twice in a few minutes, the boy stared far too long, and cut into Severus’s most private concerns.

“I didn’t think you’d want me back, Snape.”

_I’ll kill him_, was his first thought.

“I don’t,” he retorted, more honestly, but perhaps only a little more, as revolting of a possibility that might’ve been.

Severus couldn’t say he wanted Potter gone, knowing how it’d upset the house. He wanted Potter quiet and out of sight, but not irreversibly. In another room, maybe. He wanted Potter’s friends gone, or, at least, was relieved by the task of making them leave.

But remembering the giant serpent swallowing the Fiendfyre—the boy could stay nearby. Severus didn’t mind him more than his Gryffindor posse, less even.

That realization hit hard.

The rest of the encounter passed almost boringly in comparison. For a forcible return to the
wizarding public, Severus thought it rather disappointing. Other than the one shove, there was no fighting or grand denouncements.

Granger tumbled into Fred and the two did a dance of good nature and manners. Severus found meaner snarls in his hair.

The elder Weasley attempted to out-scowl Severus’s relations, to a fantastic failure. Zinnia’s wrinkled nose bridge channeled more septic loathing than every bit of a Weasley combined. There ran Snape blood.

Is this pride? He gagged. Imagine, pride in others. Severus could see the old man twinkling at him from among his whistling doodads.

Then he glanced sidelong at Potter smiling wobbly at his Lupin, unable to escape Grace’s tight grip. Grace glowered up at Lupin, who tried to greet her through her gathering children. Severus quested not to think on Albus too favorably, given the circumstances. What Tobias Snape couldn’t do to put the steely set in the woman’s jaw, Albus had done and gladly.

The werewolf then met eyes with Severus and smiled apologetically. The wizard froze and sneered back. What was Lupin trying, softening his gaze as if Severus were the pitiful one?

He realized then that the werewolf had come dressed better than him. His robes were dull, but patch-free and possibly even new. In contrast, Severus’s shirt was older than half of the people present. Lupin was scruffy as per usual, but cleaner cut than Severus with his days’ growth of patchy stubble.

And he wasn’t even scar-free now—never had been, really, but not in noticeable places. Narcissa had scored his cheek with gusto. Now he and the other man both looked caught out hunting.

Between Lupin and Severus, the latter was the unfortunate. That was a far-from-welcome return to his school days. The wolf even had the nerve to pretend he didn’t recognize him!

“Merlin, man, you look terrible.”

Severus blustered, insulted. He had nearly died four times in five days. He was allowed to look any which way he pleased. The audacity of Lupin and his band of hero brats to come onto his property and disparage him, as if they had any right to be there—!

“Harry, Snape is in fact your...family?” The man said this in awe and no doubt disbelief.

Although he had been addressing Potter, the wolf’s eyes never left Severus’s person. He felt unduly laid bare, and resisted the urge to cover himself like a maiden caught undressing in her boudoir. He fumed with indignance while Potter stammered through their relation.

Privately daring the boy to say something overwrought and saccharine, he nodded at “cousins.”

Yes, an incidental thing, cousins. Yes, family was a question, not a fact. And the answer was, obviously...well. Potter had spoken well, was all. The boy knew enough about truth, liar though he always was, to know when to employ it.

Severus shooed the awful thing in his chest from hanging another portrait. This one he’d fight. Let it sit on the floor of his cave, growing mildew and moss until the wizard felt it worth hanging.

Potter peeked his way through his unsheared fringe like Severus wouldn’t notice. The boy dared a nervous swallow, and mouthed a useless, “Sorry?”
Severus looked off, lip curling, shielding his eyes.

“You couldn’t possibly spend the night here!,” Hermione exclaimed as they took in the house from across the street. Harry’s heart dropped.

“There are no, I dunno, emergency measures we can slap together?,” he negotiated, folding his arms.

He sighed at Laney clambering over chunks of couch and bricks. A lumpy neon backpack hung from her one arm, with Snape’s cat squished in the other.

She didn’t look upset, but she scurried past them, flats slapping on the pavement. He winced. That seemed upset to him.

“There’s obviously worse that’s been done to a place. Remember Hogwarts? All that only took a summer to fix!”

“Yeah, but—.” Hermione’s mouth puckered.

Harry squeezed as much pathetic helplessness as he could into the deep furrow of his brows. He knew that face. It was her, “I’m trying not to argue,” face. Perhaps, if he looked sad enough, she’d fold.

“Don’t give her the puppy eyes, mate. She’s right,” Ron interjected, wrapping the witch in a one-armed hug. Hermione sagged. “This place is falling apart. You can’t stay.”

Ron gave him a consoling tap on his shoulder. As if to make the Auror’s point, Harry’s mother stepped out, having changed into a copper caftan with a headscarf to tamp down her curls. So laden with duffle bags, she steadied herself on a piece of the outer wall jutting into the house.

It promptly gave way, raining plaster on the swearing woman’s head. Hermione rushed to help.

Flushing, Ron cried, “Look at that! Harry, c’mon! It’s even leaning with the wind! This ain’t the Burrow, mate, you’ll die! You sleep in there tonight and it’ll fall right on your head.”

“I’ll thank you not to insult my house, Weasley.”

The two younger wizards bit their tongues and nodded manfully at Snape. The surly git had just returned from around the back, slipping more shrunken things in his pockets. He glared darkly at them, then at Hermione walking Grace to the curb.

Harry’s mum chuckled the eager witch under the chin, and greeted Ginny, who played porter, with a friendly squeeze. Both younger women sparkled and went about primping their hair. Harry huffed, and addressed Snape absently.

“I say we can fix it up, at least a bit, so everyone doesn’t have to move.”

“Obviously,” Snape drawled, “we’ll be returning. However, loathe as I am to be agreeable, the house as is poses an unnecessary risk.”

“But—!” The dark wizard scowled. Harry scowled back. He wasn’t twelve anymore! “Then I’ll stay and help rebuild! I’m not entirely worthless. I’m pretty handy the Muggle way, at least.”

“Bully for you,” he was sneered at. “I’m sure that will be of great use in Black’s kennel, where you’ll be taking them. Let you play host for a week,” Snape challenged, “only a week, mind. I
wouldn’t subject them to that den a second more.”

“Yeah, compared to the Ritz.”

As he said this, he watched Ginny jump to load his mother’s bags in the gold station wagon across the street. The Chaser flexed a bit more than necessary as she did. Harry could see the curve of her bicep from a dozen paces.

“Oi! I’ve got an eye on!,” he warned, grinning despite himself. His girlfriend blew a raspberry and trotted off, braid swinging.

*We know the ground is safe,* he thought. They all must have felt the grass tingle when they woke. It felt wrong to leave it, after all that.

“Where are you staying, then?,” Harry asked, nodding to Ron. His best friend gave another light punch for good luck, and jogged after Ginny.

Snape hung over him imperiously. Although, now that they were shoulder-to-shoulder, they looked of a comparable height. And now Snape was in the baggy, oversized clothes. He truly didn’t scare him anymore. They were both adults.

Harry straightened, pushing up his glasses. His mother’s friend—both of his mothers’ friend, it seemed—didn’t puff up like he had expected. Instead, he glanced over Harry’s shoulder, pulled a face, and shook his head.

“Again, with the damn cat,” he sighed, exasperated. Harry raised his brows, wrongfooted. But Snape was back on him, eyes snapping, before he could recover.

“Where else would I be, Potter: here. Someone has to do the real work.”

“That’s not fair!” He flinched. He hadn’t meant to whine. He knew he’d given ground when Snape curled a lip in rude amusement and brushed him off.

“Write the Minister about it.”

*The bastard’s smirking.* Harry went to rebut, not sure what he planned to say except that he’d say it *loudly*. Then he heard the end of the argument carrying on at the car.

“...right here! It’s not hard to understand!”

“We’re going home!”

Ginny’s voice peaked over an engine turning over. The station wagon puttered to life, three dark heads leaning out of it to watch the Weasley siblings bicker. The Chaser shrugged, clearly deciding to ignore her brother if he wouldn’t hear her out.

Ron continued. “Mum’s going spare! Dad, too! Your hand on the clock has gone nuts looking for you! And you’ve got to be in Cardiff *tomorrow*. Ginny, you’ve got people thinking you’re dead!”

“Aw, yeah, that’s bad. Ya can’t do that to a mother,” Grace chimed in from the backseat, arms folded on the metal with the windows rolled down.

“Go on home, lovey. Tell her sorry from me.”

This slowed Ginny down. A beet red flush took over her freckled cheeks. She looked so sorely at the car and the house that Harry felt bad watching. Her searching look landed on him.
He threw his girlfriend a little shooing motion and shouted, “Go on! I’ll be fine!”

“We’ll look after your little boy,” Freddy chuckled, sat sideways in the driver’s seat, elbow propped on the wheel.

Ginny grimaced, still obviously unsure. Harry tacked on, “Tell your folks I said hi.”

“Mum’s looking for you too, you daft idiot,” Ron shot back. “I’ll tell her you’ll visit next weekend, and you better show!”

“I will, promise!,” he said, smiling through a wet flip of anxiety. Mrs. Weasley wouldn’t be even a bit pleased with him. If his family stayed at Number Twelve more than a week, she wouldn’t see hide nor hair.

It was too soon to explain Harry’s everything to those who didn’t already know. Ron had invited the Hedgerots to the Burrow, grinning widely, but was shot down with Snape’s, “And tell them...what?”

That said it all. Arriving at the Burrow with everyone in tow, the whole conversation had so few options. It either started with a lie, or with, “Hullo. Lovely weather today. Oh, why yes, I am adopted, actually, and while we’re on the subject, Snape happens to be alive. I promise you won’t like how that ties in. I most certainly didn’t!”

It couldn’t be done. The family decided, if they had to leave, it would be by car to London.

Of course, the fastest and most discreet way to move five people to London—particularly the one playing dead—was by magical means. To that effect, Ron, Hermione, and Remus spent several minutes trying to convince the Hedgerots to Apparate. They bragged about how quick it’d be, and employed bravado for a tick to no real advantage. Eventually, they resorted to honest begging.

“I’ve done it with my parents before and it went perfectly,” Hermione tried, but Laney adamantly refused.

“But driving is so slow! Dreadful dull, Muggle cars,” Ron tried next, throwing in a mournful slouch.


Now she lied on her backpack in the backseat, having lost interest in the Weasleys’ spat. She buried her nose in a foxing romance novel that survived the night in her room. Freddy still abstained. Zed elected to pack her things. And there was no version of vanishing that Grace would co-sign.

Harry and Ginny neglected to help as they jointly wished to stay. And now Snape wasn’t going, which should have bolstered their case.

“Whichever way! Just leave!”

Snape threw up his hands and fled for the yard. Freddy used the itchy hush to fetch a week of clothes. He turned the car stereo to the pops and let it play while he loaded everyone’s things.

To ease the way, Remus agreed to come with Harry to Number Twelve and help get everyone settled. And then departed from any reason by volunteering to return. He signed on to help rebuild Snape’s house. Said dark wizard aborted his heated retreat at, “glad to lend a hand.”
“Lend nothing lest you lose it, beast!,” he forbade. Remus tucked his hands in his mustard robe pockets, deaf to Snape’s vehement protests.

“I’ve some experience tinkering with this or that. It’ll be done in no time.” He said this with a genial smile and a pat on Harry’s back.

Then, quick as a sniffle, that pat morphed into a swift hug. It passed too fast to hurt but was shockingly strong, like a nip from a bear trap.

The Boy-Who-Lived froze and peeled away, surprised by the change. That was when he received a spontaneous talking-to: mostly a tired glare, and guilt, and a self-suffering sigh. Harry finally capitulated—“I’ll do better?”—and Remus let up. He summoned a smile from under a musty pile of many disappointed frowns.

“I know,” he replied.

After which, he asked Hermione for a stack of papers from her bag and ducked inside, smile slipping. Snape gave chase, biting at his heels.

Now they all stood outside aside from Remus and Zed. Even Snape shared the sidewalk. He paced in front of Harry, muttering insults, driving his heels into the pavement, shooting seething looks at every floor. Another minute passed with no Remus and no Hedgerot, and the man jerked to a halt, snarling, practically foaming to see them gone.

“LUPIN,” barked Snape. Everybody jumped at the boom and the resulting crash, maybe of falling pans or a kicked instrument.

Harry inched closer, growing even more uneasy. He looked at Hermione, who bit her lip, shaking her head. She braved a few steps nearer to the now irate ex-spy and called for Remus.

“Is everything alright? Do you need—?”

Finally, a scarred hand waved out of a second floor window on the end of a mustard sleeve. Remus’s head followed a moment later, shaking the dust from his hair and apologizing.

“Sorry, sorry!,” the werewolf laughed self-consciously. “I don’t mean to hold anyone, just hit a bit of a snag. Um, Snape, can we see you for a—well, no. Please calm down first.”

“Get out of my house, Lupin, and I’ll meditate by the stormless fucking sea. Get out!”

“Come up,” and Remus disappeared back inside.

Snape growled and the mangled grunts might have made words, although Harry couldn’t be sure. Hermione gasped, and even Ron and Ginny turned green.

“Say your goodbyes!”

The former Death Eater then bound into the house with his hands curved for strangling. Harry dogged Snape’s war path into the house, righting the shelves and furniture the man cut down in a rage.

He shouted, “Wait!,” and “Don’t you dare!,” at his tight back, failing to get ahead of him as they bullied their way up the stairs. Sad wood cried and complained underfoot, and soon they were thundering down the second floor hallway in a tangle.
Harry clipped a brown-burned cheekbone in the scuffle. Snape’s head snapped back, stringy dark hair flying. He spat like an asp and struck, winding Harry with a hard elbow to the gut. The younger wizard went down groaning, doubled over against the wall.

He swore, mouth watering, “Eugh, fuck you!”

Snape hissed, “It’s what you get!,” and, wand out, passed Harry to storm the last bedroom.

The winded boy caught his breath and rushed after. He just saw Remus opening the door, expression solemn, when Snape mowed the werewolf over.

“Remus!,” he cried. He made it to the door just as it was thrown shut and locked, stranding him outside.

“Snape, if you touch him!,” he threatened, pounding on the door.

“Why...crying!,” came a muffled shout from inside.

Remembering his own wand, Harry whipped it out. He hit the doorknob with a heave of wordless dread, and it sparked a jarring, neon green before vanishing the door entirely.

He bore a spike of fear, as it was suddenly him across from Snape, who turned in disbelief bordering on blackened, hell-scorched wrath—all with no barrier between them. However, almost imperceptibly, a finger tapped Snape for his attention. Whichever maniac wanted it had in full, as he flung a deftly dodged hex and seized a tweed vest parting yellow robes. The ex-spy shook Remus violently, bringing him in close to accuse with cold fury:

“What—happened.”

“I’ve not even had a second to explain,” Remus started, irritated and barely composed. He pointed for Harry to keep his distance. “Don’t you move. Gods, Severus, we only need to talk.”

“We are not schoolboy chums here to swap sweet memories. You do not call me Severus. That woman is upset and you can answer for that with words, or fingers will do just as well.”

“Hells. Harry, stay where you are.”

“But Snape is—!,” Harry said. He shuffled partway over the threshold for Remus to land him with a two-ton stare.

“I can handle myself,” the werewolf pushed.

He looked as rundown as Harry could expect in the days after a full moon. His nodding head was also tufted with free and fussy brown. The young man thought maybe he’d run his hands through it, or tore at it in frustration.

His glare softened a degree, and Remus nodded, suggesting, “Say goodbye to everyone, and maybe lead the way to London. I can meet you at Grimmauld Place like I said.”

“What about ‘leave me alone’ is pissin’ rocket science?”

Harry strained to see the skinny woman on the floor behind both men. Zed sat propped up on a scratched dresser, head in her hands. She looked to be in pain. Remus himself seemed anxious, more than he had when Snape grabbed him. And Snape looked ready to bite the next thing that moved, particularly if it was Harry.
“What’s this about,” Snape demanded.

“A territory issue,” Remus replied brusquely. “Harry, please tell your mother that Zed will remain here with us.”

His friend watched him expectantly. Harry balked, positive he was joking.

“I…” He shook his head. Remus wanted him to tell Grace to leave her eldest behind. With an unknown wizard, at that? He borrowed Laney’s poignant phrasing: “I’d rather eat glass.”

Remus sighed. He seemed to do that a lot. “Then I’m sorry, but please go. We—,” he went on, gesturing to Snape.

“There is no ‘we,’ you parasite!,” the dark wizard rebuffed, releasing the werewolf’s robes and moving to help his sister stand. “And you don’t make decrees in my bloody house. Potter can stay if he wants.”

“I can?,” the boy gasped.

“No, get out.”

“Please do,” Remus urged. Harry flinched, and the other man slid by Snape to speak lowly. “I hate to insist.”

“O-okay?,” and Harry was herded into the hall again before he could ask more. A new door popped into view and primly snapped closed, locked with a clunk. He heard mumbling and pressed his ear to the wood, only to yelp and rub it, peevved.

All he heard from then on was buzzing—a Muffliato. Any attempt to touch the door bought him another stinging hex.

Eventually, he had no choice but to wander outside and rejoin the others. His friends and girlfriend asked after Remus’s health. The other Hedgerots read or doodled boredly, taking the kind stranger for dead.

“Where’s your sister?,” Grace asked, reaching up to right his crooked glasses. He bent to help her, and was rewarded with a soft pat on the cheek.

Harry was split. On one hand, he enjoyed the fuzzy trip of the question, wondering if this was what the Weasleys felt all the time. He felt light and settled, and soothed as she changed to fixing his hair. On the other hand, he wanted nothing less than to answer his mother’s question. And he couldn’t think of a clever lie while he was being fussled over.

“She’ll be a minute,” he said, wiping the sweat off his nose. “She’s, uh, in the bathroom.”

“Yer a god awful liar, but that’s okay,” Grace snickered, tugging on a curl. “Don’t lie to ya mum.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And Severus? Where’s he? We wanna head off.”

Harry straightened up, guarding his fresh, new hairdo. He couldn’t see how much neater it was in his warped carside reflection. The right angle to see himself in the side mirror escaped him. It felt tidy, though, so he didn’t touch it.

He caught up to the question and coughed. “I thought Snape was staying?”
Grace tucked a scrap of scarf into the knot, raising her brows. “Says who?”

“Says Snape?” Now Freddy scoffed, and Laney resurfaced from her novel with giggle.

Grace shot back, “Pfft, no, he sure as hell ain’t! Wherever we go, we go together. That’s this family’s rule. Ya might remember that ya self. We stick together. Am I clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he saluted again.

“Good. Now go around and sit next to Laney. Girl, move. Freddy, beep the damn thing, the fuckin’—the horn! We gotta get movin’.”

*Let her and Snape have it out then,* he thought, shrugging.

Arms wrapped around his waist and he jumped at the sudden touch. Then he relaxed, recognizing her day-old deodorant, and hugged Ginny close, laying his head on hers.

“I’ll see you next weekend,” the witch swore, holding him tightly. “If you could stop at the Burrow tomorrow, distract my mum so I can sneak off to work, that’d be so very romantic.”

“Hmm, maybe,” he tried, rubbing her back. “If she smothers you to death, I’ll avenge you. Unless she cooks. Then I’ll avenge you after dinner—unless there’s dessert.”

“Yeah, alright, whatever,” Ginny huffed, letting go. She warned as she walked away, “One week, Potter!”

She stuck one finger up in the air. “One! No more adventures until I get back!”

“When has that *ever* been up to him,” Ron heckled.

The Auror motioned Ginny over, handing her a drawstring pouch he took from Hermione. The Chaser accepted it, and stole a last glance at Harry, sun sluicing over her copper hair. Then she poked into the pouch and Portkeyed away.

“Like, how d’you know she gets there safe? It’s a gamble every time,” Grace complained, ducking back into the car. “Fox, the horn!”

“Yeah,” Freddy grunted, still drawing in a pad on his knees.

He shimmied around and sat leaning sideways on the steering wheel. A car horn blared, and carried on and on, uninterrupted, as neither Freddy nor Grace seemed to flinch. Laney shrieked, yanking headphones from her bag and shoving them onto her head.

“Sorry, ducky!,” Freddy hollered over the horn.

Hermione spelled herself and Harry stone deaf, which terrified him for all of a second before she gestured, wiggling her wand. Once he realized, he mouthed his thanks and pointed to the car with an inquisitive brow. She shook her head, waved goodbye, and Disapparated.

He didn’t know the horn had stopped until he felt a tug on his shirt. He looked down, seeing Grace repeating something and lifted his wand. Only then, after wishing Hermione a good trip, did he realize he didn’t know the spell she’d used, and so didn’t know the counter.

He tried *Finite* and thanked Merlin when it worked. His other options were asking Remus or Snape for help.
Honestly, I’d do better deaf.

“Seriously, where are they?,” his mother pressed, growing agitated. “Is everything—oh, he’s alive.”

Harry saw she meant Remus, who’d just limped out of the house. He stopped with a hunted expression upon seeing them all there watching him. The younger man frowned when Remus swore, shook himself, and came their way.

“Oh-oh, he’s pissed,” Freddy grumbled, drawing his long legs into the car. He dropped his drawing pad and his pencil down the side of his seat, humming to the radio with assumed ease. He also turned the keys in the ignition and grinned fiercely at Harry.

“Get in, yeah?”

“He’s not dangerous,” Harry objected.

“I believe ya. Just get in.” He did, or at least opened the car door, and hovered just inside.

Freddy stepped out and grew to his full six and a half feet, grin fizzing away, thick brows bunching. Remus slowed his limp to a stroll, having to look up as he came closer.

Even as he did this, though, the werewolf didn’t look shaken. He went from hunted to harassed to vaguely neutral, with an edge from an unknown cause. One could guess Snape had said or done something. The potions master didn’t even do nothing to no effect. He let things brew, and then made use of them.

Maybe he’d done that to Harry’s friend. Maybe leaving them alone was a bad idea.

*Idiot, of course it was!*, he panicked, bright eyes bouncing between the men.


Harry prepared to jump in, but then wondered, in whose defense. Remus glanced at him and seemed to check him over, like he’d done when the wards dropped. A frantic scan from curl to cobblestone, and then his thoughts sunk below the patterned and unassuming face.

“Snape explained that you know about your sister’s condition,” Remus said. Freddy frowned and then a light went on, and crossed his arms.

Condition? Is Zed pregnant?, Harry thought, thinking of the photo of her cozied up to another woman. That seems...oh, but!

He also remembered the heartfelt talk Hermione had with him and Ron about women of different experiences. And then he remembered another talk, with Ginny, about women of varying preferences. He nodded to himself, shocked that someone as gruff as Zed would come by a baby in prison. However, knowing it was possible in any manner of ways, he supposed he’d have to wish her the best.

Wait, would that make me an uncle!?, he realized, horrified. However, soon the two men’s conversation re-entered his whirling mind.

“I don’t understand, and to be real as I can, if I don’t see my sister here now, we’ll have a problem. And that’s truly not what I want, I’ll tell ya. You seem like an upright bloke, and I’m not a brute.”
Knuckles were crackled, and forlorn expressions were had all around.

“Please, I understand that you’re upset,” Remus coaxed, holding up his empty hands. “She’s with your—Snape. There is only a bit of conflict, what with my being here, and having Harry between us.”

“Me!? I’m the problem!?”

“Gods, please.”

Harry shut his mouth and squished into the car, realizing his input might have been unwanted. He found a spot between the window and his mother leaning out of it to eavesdrop.

He looked around her to her other side, and saw her back foot stretched out the far window, holding it closed. Laney pushed against the other door a few times. The cat on her lap meowed, nudged awake by her efforts. Harry lent a levitation charm and pushy, floating novel to keep Laney seated.

The little girl gave up when Grace’s calf pinned her to the backseat. The book fell on her face.

Remus continued, “She and I share the same condition, you understand. Part of that, and sharing Harry as well, it gets complicated. We were only trying to work it out when some outside factors...I don’t mean trouble.”

“I can see that,” Freddy reasoned, buttressed up by the car. The whole cabin rocked under his weight. “I can see that, just, y’know. If we’re goin’ anywhere, so is my sister, and if you have to come, too, so be it.”

At this, he shifted and bent back into the driver’s seat.

“But she’s not staying here to have it out over an adult who can make his own choices on who he likes. She’s not even built like that, personally. She doesn’t chase love from anyone.”

“Yes, no, she said,” but Remus seemed flustered now, tired and back to hunted. “Merlin, I wish I could explain better. Some other time, when I’m more...together...I hope you’ll let be explain again.”

“No, yeah, as long as ya see my point, too. I mean, it sounds like a nature versus nurture thing. I'm not here to judge.”

Harry figured they weren’t talking about pregnancy and flushed at thinking they ever were. Grace and Laney both listened quietly, the latter gradually returning to her book. Meanwhile, their mother covered her mouth, eyes narrowed. She ran a finger back and forth over the top of her nose, deep in thought.

A werewolf..., the wizard mused. He had known one since he was thirteen. He’d never shared blood with one, though. It didn’t feel much different, except for ebbing disfavor that still clung to his impression of her.

He imagined Dudley being a Muggle-turned-werewolf and the fit he’d have. She wasn’t that. She had her own problems, apparently, and seemed to like having them on her own. And unlike Snape of years past, she probably wouldn’t deign it her business—no, her right!— to make Harry miserable. He hardly saw her or talked to her after she chased him. She only did what Harry had for the last few years: holed up and kept to herself.
He didn’t like Zed. He also didn’t like Snape. However, if neither killed him, there lingered a “yet.”

“Y’know, he’s known you all way longer than us,” Freddy finished, scratching his beard. “Fighting seems...eh.”

Harry’s brother flexed his fingers on the parking brake, then fiddled with the radio until he landed on R&B. Harry found he liked it, despite never really hearing it growing up. To no one’s shock, the Dursleys never had a taste for “that music.”

He liked the background vocals. It sounded like if humans wrote mermaid songs.

“See, my days are cold without you...”

Freddy pulled off of the curb, one-handedly spinning the wheel. He u-turned and stopped, cutting the engine. Now the passenger’s side door framed Remus’s knees.

Freddy seemed to struggle with himself for a moment. Harry tracked his sour faces in the rear view mirror. It was all drawn in Snape’s features, so he only recognized frustration, irritation, and distaste.

“I dunno why—know what? It’s fine,” he settled. “Mum, are ya good?”

Grace knelt on the seat, having nearly spilled over thanks to her precarious perch. She maneuvered to sit square Laney’s feet. The girl hardly noticed.

She gave Freddy a thumbs up. “All good. Pack him up.”

Harry perked up as Freddy nodded once, stretched across the car, and opened the door.

“Get in.”

“I...mhm, uh. Thank you.” Remus crouched low and fell into the passenger’s seat with a hiccup. “Damn, dammit, my, uh, my knees. I’m sorry, this is just so embarrassing.”

He looked back at Harry, who smiled.

“I can at least enchant the car to fit everyone. It’s the least I can do,” the werewolf offered, readying to leave again. Grace caught his sleeve and held him in his seat.

“Don’t,” she ordered. Harry saw the edge of Freddy’s smile in the rear view.

“Later, maybe, but how about for now, no magicking the car?” Remus looked at Harry again, and agreed solemnly.

“Fox, the horn.”

“Yep!”

Severus levitated Zinnia’s box of clothes to save her the burden. She seemed to age as they walked, stooping, joints popping. He witnessed the changes, morbidly fascinated. Glad that his more curious mind could return and supersede the worry, the ickle warm things, and the guilt, he asked:

“What does it feel like?”
“Hurts,” she grunted, and his questions stopped there. He expected something vulgar and flippant, but just, “Hurts,” throttled the rest of his curiosity.

Severus mourned its dying gasp and helped her walk.

“Here,” he said, offering his arm, which she took swiftly.

His bones creaked. She was strong, terribly strong. The weakness her posture prescribed was actually a full body tensing, leaving her wracked with tremors.

Lupin had explained as best he could, convincing Severus for a few minutes that he might’ve been decent teacher. He was made to remember the end of Lupin’s professorial aspirations. The sick flip that gave him made the potioneer promise two blessings a month, instead of the one he’d already planned.

“My is better than that Ministry swill,” he shelled. His new emotions were killing him.

Regardless, Lupin accepted and explained this theory using Severus’s sketches.

“Where did you get those!?”

“They were sent through a Floo. I can smell Floo fire all over this room and downstairs. What have you done here?”

“That is this house’s business.”

“Sure, this house and all of England’s.”

Lupin had spoken at length, explaining that very rarely did two werewolves from different “families” share a member. Severus had thrown out “pack” to see the man cringe, only for Zinnia to shout: “I’m a fuckin’ person!”

For the rest of the time, he curbed his tongue and listened.

This wouldn’t normally be such a physical problem, Lupin had supposed. Uncomfortable, yes. It wouldn’t make them great friends, to nobody’s heartbreak. However, Zinnia felt every minute, lycanthropic twinge like a spasm.

Most instincts knocked. Hers bucked.

The power of the Fenrir rite had drawbacks, ones Severus never predicted or else he wouldn’t have given it to be performed. Lupin lectured on the wolf gods of the werewolf camps. He said how Fenrir Greyback had chosen his name, in a call to be worshipped.

“I don’t think in your spying that you’d ever heard his speeches. He was a deluded child predator, but he saw the bite as a breaking of chains—the great wolf’s chains. Greyback was a monster, however, worship of Fenrir is real. To call that destruction into a person is…”

They made slow progress past the master bedroom. It was open to the hall, and Severus, glancing over, saw it filled with all its trinkets. Some might have disappeared, but it was difficult to tell. He muttered something, strode to a box, and pulled a blanket from it that he returned with. Once back, he promptly lost inspiration.

For several moments, Zinnia eyed him from against the door frame, unimpressed. He held the blanket out in a jerky sequence: folding, unfolding, reaching, retreating, all in half measures.
“What d’you plan to do with it, swaddle me?,” Zinnia snarked shakily.  
Severus remembered her on the basement floor after the change, teary and freezing. He paused,  
gripped by that first shock. Then he came back to himself and tossed the blanket over her head.  
He spelled it into a wool cocoon. She gave a stymied middle finger, now wrapped to her side.  
“The hell, Rev!? It’s August!”  
“You’ll live. Enough dallying. Come, shuffle this way.”  
Severus added a Featherlight charm to the blanket, so as not to ruin her careful balance. Lightening  
her load was a small measure, perhaps, but it got them to the curb.  
“Alright, alright! Lay off, I’m here!”  
The blasted horn finally stopped. The station wagon was already stuffed. Grace and her youngest  
took up most of the space, although with cramming and lap sitting, there was room for one more.  
He let the wool cocoon shuffle in with a litany of muffled swears, grumbling, “Yes, in. In. Yes, in,”  
until she was settled.  
When the door shut, the blanket filled most of the window, blocking any glimpse of the  
others. Potter poked his head out of a window, saw Severus and, wisely, ducked back in.  
“Uh-huh, and you, too,” Grace instructed from somewhere past the wool.  
He thought to put on a show of, “I’ll be staying,” and “No, you won’t”s. But he was tired and glad  
to go.  
“I’ve opted to ‘teleport,’” he said. “I already know the address. We will meet there.”  
Severus looked in the passenger’s seat. Lupin stared through the windshield, mortified.  
Severus supposed he should be, having been overcome by his bestial nature. His inner wolf had  
gone and attached to Potter like the senseless thing it was, as if the boy was one of its own cubs.  
Zinnia’s enhanced nature was to ward off and protect, lest Lupin steal the him.  
She would destroy Lupin to keep the boy or destroy herself to give him away. And she didn’t even  
like Potter. Severus felt her embarrassment.  
But for Lupin, he sneered.  
“You look ridiculous,” and he did, sitting enrobed in a Muggle car, seatbelt on, gripping his wand.  
The other man closed his tawny eyes in a quiet relinquishment of dignity. He could look forward to  
an evening of negotiating visitations. Severus dearly hoped it drained him.  
“I’ll see you in London, then, Snape,” the werewolf replied, avoiding his eyes. Severus smirked  
and conjured a ruby red handkerchief, to bid Lupin and his relations \textit{bon voyage}.  
They rolled up the street and he stopped waving well before they disappeared over the hill. Soon  
he was alone, and the smirk fell. He tossed the square of silk away, transfiguring it back to singed  
paper. Severus took in his house, assessing the ruin, and felt akin to it.  
\textit{Destruction}. The word echoed.
Luckily, he had family to meet later that evening, and work to plan, and a friend to guilt. He had two Wolfsbane potions to brew, and as well as a draught of Polyjuice. After a visit, he had seven wards to study in exhaustive detail. He also had to win back a cat from a ten-year-old, as events made clear. There was Potter, existing, as well as two Ministry try-hards he’d need to scare into secrecy.

Severus wouldn’t be happy, but he would be busy. And if he stayed busy in quite this way, there lingered in the hollows of his chest a flickering “yet.”
Chapter Summary

Narcissa is glad Severus is alive. Remus has a vested interest in families.

August 24th, 2002: Malfoy Manor, East Sussex (late afternoon)

“Seven hells!”

Narcissa dropped her lemon balm tincture, the glass bottle slipping from her stunned fingers and crashing on the floor.

“Tippy!,” she screeched. A house elf popped into her chambers, eyes as round as dinner plates. As she addressed him, a forked tongue licked the web of her thumb. The pureblood shrieked and threw herself from her vanity.

“Catch it! Catch it!”

Tippy rushed forward, his wrinkled bat ears flapping in a panic. “What is ‘it,’ Mistress—oh, my!”

She tripped onto an ottoman left out of place and curled onto its quilted cushion, yanking her now lemony toes from the Persian rug. Her eyes watered with her distress, nose pinched against the strong haze of alcohol.

Wand completely forgotten on the floor, she covered her eyes, distraught, as the house elf leapt onto her vanity stool and grabbed the wriggling thing around its belly.

“Hssssss!,” it said.

“Throw it out! Off the balcony!,” she replied, eyes squeezed shut.

Tippy hopped to it, shushing the thrashing beast, wrestling it out the balcony doors. She could only watch through her fingers. As small as the elf was, it could coil around both of his arms and still have room to strike backwards, tagging his knobby knuckles. Tippy yipped with each nip and eventually, with a whistling shriek, he cast it down from the ledge.

There sounded a rustle and a shake, and Narcissa ran over on tiptoe, careful of the glass. She made it to the railing just in time to see the horrid thing unknot itself from a branch and slither into her best bush of camellias.

Her skin crawled. Not since that monster Nagini had stalked her halls did she suffer the presence of a serpent. She was glad most days that England proved too cold for too many. Three or four types to the whole bloody country felt more than enough.

The witch turned to Tippy, standing pigeon-toed and blowing on his bit knuckles.

“Clean this glass!,” Narcissa snapped, pulling the edges of her dressing gown over her slip. “And order me another vial of lemon balm when I’m done with you!”
“Yes, madam,” Tippy nodded, ear tips bouncing. Then he shuffled forward ruefully, like she was a child having fallen and scraped her knee. “Is Mistress Narcissa in need of potions?”

“Don’t patronize me! Who let that vermin into my home!?” Her cheeks flashed bright hot. Now ashamed of her earlier outburst while incensed by the cause, she railed: “I’ve said time and again: no snakes! I won’t have them, and in my chambers no less—ugh! Atrocious! Unacceptable! Whichever of you is responsible for pests will see this docked from their pay. Bring them here this instant!”

“Yes, madam,” Tippy nodded again, ashen. He snapped his fingers smartly.

Another elf appeared with such immediacy, the wind from her arrival ruffled Narcissa’s robes and the hem of Tippy’s repurposed blouse. She had arrived facing the chamber doors and so spun around and fell prostrate, trembling.

“Hettie’s apologies, mistress!,” the house elf cried. “The beasts sneak in, but Hettie doesn’t know from where! She is redoing the traps by hand!”

“There are more!?”

“Yes, mistress, in the foyer and in the east gardens, mistress. We are catching them, but t-there’s one that we elves are...,” Hettie gulped and the witch looked down her nose, her already nonexistent patience thinning to a wisp.

Her eye caught the pale gold on her wand grip poking out from under the bed skirt. She swept it up, and held the wand against her hip with the tie of her gown.

“So you mean to say that you’re afraid? How good are you at your job as an exterminator if you’re afraid of the problem!? Where’s Draco? None of your fumbling better have woken him.”

Now both elves shuffled their feet and traded nervous glances. Narcissa squinted suspiciously. Eventually Tippy nudged Hettie to speak, throwing her into the line of fire. Apparently he’d already suffered the one serpent and would rather avoid another.

“Well?,” she snipped at the quailing servant.

“Master Draco has already seen the b-biggest pest, madam. It snuck into his room—.”

Narcissa couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The Manor was overrun! She wouldn’t abide it. Her outrage must have shown on her face, as Hettie rushed to explain.

“We elves have locked it in! Only, Master Draco has already gone to sleep again in the library. Oh, mistress, it really is a beast!”

Hettie balled her fists in Narcissa’s worn cashmere scarf, a tenth anniversary present knotted and knit into a tiny paisley jumpsuit. The elf trembled on the verge of tears. Narcissa, angry as she was, knew she wasn’t that fearsome of a sight. She’d been preparing to return to bed, and so stood before them in her sleepwear and a ruffled bonnet, stockings with slippers as her legs tended to get cold.

With no husband to witness her, she’d succumbed to stranger and stranger garb. Catching herself in her mirror, she had a grease spot on her chest from bruise balm seeping through her slip; a dollop of night cream still on her hand, unused; and dribble of white wine sticking satin to thigh.

She couldn’t startle a curse from a Jarvey.
House elves could up and unionize now if she was too strict, in any case. Besides, she hardly enjoyed hexing the help.

All in all, this snake of interest must’ve been enormous, as it was sending Hettie into wracking shivers. Tippy looked pale from her reaction alone. Narcissa thought instantly of the night before and hardened back to the last serpent of unpardonable monstrosity.

She wanted them all vanished, but had to think of the mice and toads running rampant. This she tolerated far less. Narcissa looked over the servants, miffed and rubbing her crawling skin.

“Wrangle the ones in the garden and lock them in with this beast. Whatever survives until supper can stay on the outer grounds,” she ordered, dismissing them.

They nodded earnestly and popped away. Soon after, the high, frantic shouts of scurrying house elves floated in from outside.

_Awful_, the witch shivered.

If not for the gurgling screams from the trash-laden woods, she would’ve thought this another stunt from Lucius’s bullies. She wouldn’t put it past Severus, either, to decide their spat wasn’t over and plague her with snakes. She would have to write him to stop, or visit—.

It was in forgoing sleep for picking robes that she remembered the fire. Smoke as black and thick as mud, and chimaeras borne by rapacious flame gobbling the ground between their claws and her, and her son.

She Disapparated as reflex. She had grabbed Draco and tore away, mind wiped clean of anyone but him; and then arriving and passing out in front of the manor gates. It had been hours since, and Severus hadn’t followed.

She’d only been thinking of the dead Aurors, having Draco promise to admit nothing. How could she have forgotten Severus in the slide into unconsciousness, when one of her scattered thoughts cited her gratitude.

She had handled Lucius—no power, no funds, only prison for him. And Severus had killed Lucius’s men, which she appreciated. It was frankly more than she expected.

Lucius had always been far more ruthless than her friend, something she learned scanning obituaries while Severus healed. Among many things, it surprised and gladdened her that Severus borrowed from his most entrenched store of violence. The fear felt finished. And she’d assure that no word from her lips or Draco’s ever incriminated him.

_How could I’ve forgotten_, she asked herself. The lace-edged folds of her dressing gown slid from her numb fingers, pooling on the bed. _He could be…_

Narcissa gasped and fell into a coughing fit, still recovering from breathing the cursed smoke. Bending to sit, she felt the tender ache of her still healing rib and held it, aghast.

_I have to check. I have to know_, but then, she was afraid of too terrible an answer.

_Don’t be foolish. You’re no mewling, sweet-hearted little girl_, she chastised herself, fingers bunching in the duvet.

_If he’s dead, we’ll…_ but like in a dizzy spell, the thought faded into a sinking heart. Her freezing cold hand moved to her chest, over the yellowing bruise.
I have to check. She stood slowly, hugging herself, and went to her dressing room.

It was dark inside. She had drawn its thick curtains last night to stop the light wicks reflecting in the glass. The witch had wanted to prepare in solemn darkness save a handful of lamps. Now she hesitated, and looked at herself in the vanity again from across her room: a pale column contrasted with black.

She entered, quickly spelling the curtains open. However, in the wince before daylight returned, the lemon-mint fragrance from the broken tincture collided with the cologne of treated dragonhide. The new scent was like aging upholstery, and brought her to a different scene, a similar horror, a body in the shadows.

She didn’t see the Shrieking Shack in her rich, lacquered wood furniture, pastoral hand painted silkscreens, and curving lamp covers smooth and clear as water. But she felt it around her nonetheless.

Narcissa changed into loose, olive drab robes and her one pair of brown, beaded flats, promoted from the very end of her monthly rotation. Afterwards, she passed a few minutes in front of an armoire pitch black dresses, running a thumb along their hems. She’d worn them to mourn Bellatrix and hadn’t touched them again.

Too much. She palmed her forehead checking for fever. Dabbing dew she wiped on her skirt, she glanced about, with no one there to see. Again she caught her own eye in the mirror, and realized she’d yet to apply makeup.

Why delay any longer, she sighed, resigned to heartbreak. Let’s get on.

Her path out of the manor carried her by her old chambers, now stripped and open to the hall. The elves had vanished the mess she’d made of it. Slowing to look over the bare wood floors, now washed and waxed, and the naked bars for the curtains, she gave it a tempered nod.

Then she wafted down to the library, although she didn’t think it stalling. She only worked the door open a crack to see Draco, blond head tucked into sheets no doubt conjured from his room. He leaned, asleep, in an armchair by the unlit fireplace, an iron poker sliding off of his lap—likely meant for fighting snakes.

She charmed it to stay put before it fell on the marble hearth and rattled the boy awake. Thinking again, she banished it to stand with the others, scoffing. stayed for another snuffling breath or two, and slipped away.

To the gates—one foot before the other. To the road, powdered in soot. Twisting, lashes caging even a hint of rogue tears, and with a snap, there she stood again on the street before Spinner’s End.

“H—no, that’s not right.” Narcissa arrived at the edge of a thick forest.

“Hmph. Come to see if I’ve burned to a crisp?”

“Se—oh, hells.”

She saw him standing there at the edge of the woods, alive and plain, and had to turn away to not embarrass herself. She gave him her pin-straight back and gazed up into the eerie canopy. The witch took care to rearrange her face—an annoyed furrow to the brow, a lowered lid here and there,
a relaxed mouth with a barb already loaded. No wet lashes, no welling eyes, no scarlet cheeks.

Calming breaths, and readiness seeped in. She released her half-formed shouts unuttered.

*Good.*

“What’s this? Remorse? You’ve already flown off, so don’t play the shrinking violet now that your ‘one’ friend’s a charcoal briquette."

*Damn him.* Narcissa patted her blazing cheeks and summoned her most superior tone. She faced him with her nose turned so high as to pop through the treetops. Again, there he stood, rude and ragged and—most effectively—unroasted.

“I knew you’d be well enough,” she retorted. Staring him down, she added, “You’d be an idiot to make *that* your grandiose exit. It isn’t to your taste.”

Severus blinked slowly, making her wonder if he’d survived by dumb luck. Otherwise, he would’ve scoffed at her obvious relief. Rather, he snorted, “And what would you know of my tastes.”

It astounded them both that she had a ready reply: “Please. If you could, you’d die by drowning, probably in an old witch’s trial, except it would prove your useless Muggles never taught you how to swim.”

She shocked him into laughter, a genuine, “Hah!,” that died shortly in a rush of warm air. Then he bit his tongue and bled spite, twitching, and she finally noticed the canvas rucksack he held by its last, desperate strap. She raised her brows at the ugly sack, wondering what barrack he’d burgled for it.

“You look scavenged. More of your father’s things, I suspect?”

“Blast, and I so hoped to impress you. What a pity. But as long as you’re here, you might as well take this with you,” and like that, he threw her the rucksack, smirking when she stumbled away from the filthy thing.

“What’s in it,” asked distastefully.

“Potions ingredients, a few supplies.” She levitated it to eye level and heard the jangle of pots and pans. She groped its bulky side and made out the stout shape of a couple glass jars.

“Muggle potions supplies? For what ingredients?”

“The less I explain, the less you might be implicated in should we be discovered.”

“I’m hardly skittish, Severus,” she derided, feeling sorry to transfer that unfortunate sack to her own shoulder.

“Obviously,” but he didn’t explain further. When his surviving the night quit dazzling her, she’d make her offended pride clear. “I believe I’ll be brewing at the Manor this next month, if I am welcome.”

“Don’t act coy. Of course, you are. So it’ll be Polyjuice, then? Who for, the murdered guards?”

His superficial regard deepened, she felt, with the birds singing in the trees. Who put a forest at the end of the block?
She stared back, confused by the change. They watched each other, lapsing into weak barbs while Narcissa saw Severus realize his looks and attempt dignity. He had it, of course, more today than last night. His bearing spoke of purpose, which always suited him. Even in the tired, brown clothes, the calling out of defiance from debility lent him some aplomb.

Second rolled by since either spoke. Narcissa mused, unconsciously stepping back. There was something about Severus and his company of thoughts, there brewing in the lines bracketing his mouth—not like Lucius and his interests, but the unbending quality of the potion master’s causes. Irritating, and often ridiculous, as everything was an effrontery, even eating or the time of day; but at its best, so dignified.

“I’ll be going,” Severus said lowly, finally breaking their joined stares. He picked lint from his clothes, until he found too much to make a difference, and folded his hands in front of him. The harried yet casual airs returned.

“Don’t return here looking for me for some time. I won’t be around.”

“Where will you be?,” she asked.

“Elsewhere.”

He must have given up on the house. The Fiendfyre would have demolished it. Where is he meaning to go? The Manor? No, leaving for another country?

Her thoughts circled again to the profile of dignity. Could he be making some point? The snakes—obviously him—and now leaving? She tried to speak, and without the click of her boots, didn’t register taking another step back. Her heel touched grass and grew warm...hot...

Burning! Her heel burned.

“Stop!,” Severus said, surging forward.

Narcissa, sure now she’d entered a dream, arrested her retreat. She slid her feet off of grass and onto stone, but the damage was done. She stared in numb shock as her shoe caught fire. The spontaneous flame flickered purples of all shades, enthralled her, as the dream fire had facets, like jewels. It raced up her robes, casting off blistering heat.

Belatedly, she came to her senses. She screamed, more in shock than pain at first as the fire took to her loose robes and dangling sleeves. Only after running up her side did it then threaten to split her skin.

At the sudden clap of Severus’s hand around her burning ankle, she screamed again, feeling the sting now. Narcissa flung out her wand, heard a metal bang, and with the first, second, third-fourth-fifth hot jab to her ribs, thought, nonsensically, of a fireplace poker stabbing her again and again. And suddenly, she and Severus and the sack of pots she dropped and a few clippings of grass twisted away in a column of fire.

They spewed out on baked marble, crashing through a fire screen, blasting the ivy woven metal clear out of sight. She fell on her belly like a beached whale and arched, still feeling the fire, but the flames, now used, fizzled out.

Severus’s knees hit her back as he kneeled over her, spelling this or that jar from his sack. She squinted through her running eyes as, like some home-war field medic, he poured on juices and slapped on creams, smothering her screaming skin.
“What—Mother!” More hands were on her and she batted them off, all of them—off! She crawled to a chair and climbed into it, fighting for breath.

“Boy! Bring her water and a cold compress!”

“But wha—what’s happened t—!?"

“Now!”

Draco choked and yelled for Beadle, an old house elf who tended to the books. Books—she realized given a minute of calming skin and the familiar cherry of the wood engraved with peacocks on the chair, the bookcases, the reading stands over Severus’s shoulder. They were in the manor library.

“Catch your breath,” came a tight order and she waved the man away, leaning around him.

Yes, they had come through the Floo. It still sparked with amethyst heat. Vials and rubber stops scattered in the grate, some rolling onto the rug. Droplets of potion evaporated into glittering mist.

Beadle popped in, blocking her view. With a waspish, “Move!,” the elf grumbled out of the way, repairing line of sight to the strange fire. As the last sparkle fizzed, icy wet licked the fine hairs of her neck. She jolted and slapped away an arm, knocking down a compress to hang, assaulted, from the chair’s arm.

“I said don’t! Are you deaf!?,” Narcissa snapped.

Then behind her, she met the flashing black eyes. She doubled down, pushing the freezing hand towel to the rug where she kicked it toward the hearth. Fire! She’d been on fire! She didn’t want a bloody compress!

“You’ll find I’m not one of your house elves,” Severus ground out of clenched teeth.

“You’re a menace is what you are! First, you set snakes loose in my house! Then you, what—make a point about last night? Set me on fire!? Get out! You’re no longer welcome!”

“That wasn’t my magic. That was simply a taste of the people you’ve actually offended. And so, Madam Narcissa Malfoy neé Black, esteemed mother of the Malfoy scion, it’d serve you not to piss off your only ally, as lowly as he may be.”

Their watching reduced to glaring, Severus gripping the arm of her chair, Narcissa settled into peering coldly up into his face. She knew him as the spotty urchin harbored in the shadows of his betters. So what if he became their betters, with vitriol and time. He didn’t scare her, and she didn’t believe him.

“I said get out,” she seethed.

“Again, woman, I am not your servant. If I leave, I shan’t return.”

“Th—.” She stopped. She fumed, but she stopped, and forced a gusty sigh.

“Why the games!? We don’t need tricks between us, as clearly it’s done more harm than good. No codes! No curses! Just tell me how to fix it.”

The stuffy library buzzed. A shy pop and a click of the door latch later, Narcissa knew the two of them were left alone.
“...What snakes?,” Severus eventually asked. She bristled and he stayed her with a flat hand pressed to her balling fist. “One moment: what bloody snakes, Narcissa? I’ve not sent any. I’ve hardly thought of you all morning. What snakes?”

Narcissa shook her head at his awful lying. “Severus, the snakes! They’ve infested the house. They’re in Draco’s rooms and the grounds. One stole onto my bedroom vanity—.”

“Is there a Floo in Draco’s rooms? Or—no, not on the grounds…” His eyes lit up, and he sprung back with a bolt of energy. She eyed his busy pacing. He started a circuit from her to hearthstone, like he’d been bit, but it was beyond her by what.

“There better not be a Floo anywhere in his suite,” she protested.

“Not even to sneak his darling girlfriend into the Manor without his mother’s knowing? Oh, quit it. You bragged yourself that you’ve just made him head of the house. He has the authority to have it done.”

“But that’s indecent! To play with the girl, fine, but if he’s courting her—!” She thought little of Astoria Greengrass but could worry for the girl’s reputation. Narcissa had raised a young man, not a dog!

“It’s hardly dalliance when he plans to marry her. He hinted at it in all of Lucius’s letters.”

“He—! On my grave, he’ll—!” She was glad her son had scurried off. She couldn’t think to mind her tongue—a Greengrass! For a daughter-in-law!

Severus only rolled his eyes and continued pacing. Of course, scandals of blood and marriage were lost on him. His circuit broke to one side and brought him to the fireside view of the east gardens. He paused.

Finally feeling her legs again, Narcissa followed to see what gripped him. He pointed at a wisp of smoke waving in the distance, “What is there?”

“A hundred, wasted Galleons of Lasting Lobelias. Those thugs’ curse fire suckered to the flowers’ enchantments and won’t go out. It’s nothing serious. We keep the fire contained, and the flowers can be replaced.”

She crossed her arms and shivered as a breeze from Severus’s parting blew across the wet patch on her neck.

“Where are you going?”

“Your son’s chambers,” he answered in a rush. His rucksack sailed from the fireplace to his upheld hand. The wizard layered it in expansion charms as he sped to the doors. “You say there are more snakes on the grounds?”

“They’ll be brought into that room soon if they haven’t already—Severus! Why would you want them back!?”

“I never brought them here!,” and he was out and down the hall.

_I’ll not chase him all over bloody England_, she forswore.

However, she also summoned Tippy and Hettie and instructed them to give aide. They disappeared for the bedrooms, while she summoned Beadle back to the library and ordered him to neaten their
mess. The surly elf set to it. Narcissa resumed her seat, weighing if she’d order tea or greet Severus with her chilly displeasure.

The wizard flew in minutes later, shaking and sweaty, lugging a sack of writhing snakes.

“I’ll return tomorrow,” he practically whispered. She frowned, then lost the expression, and cupped a hand around her ear coquettishly. He growled louder the next time, “Do not visit Spinner’s End unless you’ve a craving for self-immolation. Even if by some chance you’re itching to test it, still. Don’t.”

“I’ll try to restrain myself,” she drawled before having him shown out.

“I know the bloody way,” he snapped at a harassed Beadle before strolling away.

She felt another, delayed wave of relief. Severus lived. His death wouldn’t be on her conscious.

Narcissa slumped down in her chair, forgetting posture for a few minutes, only a few. She spent an hour watching the smoke trail to the east billow at the passing sun.

A thought came for keeping and rolling about, gathering snow: she might have been unfair to Lucius all those years ago. Just the once; because, returning for a friend made sense now.

Imagining the guilt from a different life, she shuddered. Then she called for tea, choosing to take it in the library. She would oversee the arrangement Severus’s rooms later, but for now she mothered herself with rose tea and sandwiches, grateful for the August afternoon.

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**August 24th, 2002: Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London**

Two hours to Manchester and four hours back. Remus bounced in the passenger’s seat, pulled awake by a burst of laughter.

“He did! I had to regrow all of them overnight.”

“Your bones,” gasped the little witch. Remus yawned and stretched in his seat.

“Yeah, all through my arm. I mean, that was—whoa—ten years ago? Heh, it’s not rubber now, Laney, you can’t bend—ouch!”

“Cut it out ‘fore ya snap it in half!” The werewolf chuckled, thinking this a pleasant way to wake.

Grace nipping at her youngest never failed to remind him of Teddy. He looked forward to henpecking his own boy into bed. A four year old had no right being so crafty, but then, most four year olds weren’t prodigies in disguise.

*Gods, I hope he becomes an artist,* Remus prayed, using his beige seatbelt to pull himself upright. *No more police.*

“Alright, stow the drugs. We’re almost there,” rumbled Frederico—Fox. Remus had only known him as a point on a page. The nickname still escaped him.

Remus made a show of cleaning up and mimed locking the glove box and swallowing the key. Fox glanced at him and back to the road, shaking his head.

“A riot,” the man grinned. He got a kick out of his attempts at humor.
“So, what’s the deal?”

Remus smiled blankly. “Excuse me?”

“Yer a werewolf, but you act like, I dunno.” Fox gestured to him with the hand not on the wheel. “A kingpin.”

“A—!” He threw back his head and laughed. “All the names I’ve ever been called, I’ve never been told that. You mean a drug kingpin!?”

“Or a hitman.”

He laughed till tears came to his eyes. “I’m usually called mild-mannered or—.”

Snape’s brother drove, a grin splitting his face. “Naw, I don’t buy that shit.”

“Ahah!”

He enjoyed the ride down from Cokeworth more than he hoped. The gold station wagon squeaked rhymically, rocking him to sleep as the wheels spun over the highway. They stopped twice for food, both times for the wool cocoon now snoring the ride away, reeking of cola, mustard, and burger meat. Now Remus glanced in the rear view to see the family carrying on in the backseat.

Zed slept soundly, face mashed against the jittering window. Her brother hadn’t lied when he said she wouldn’t chase affection. Most of the drive showed dead air between Harry and the she-wolf. The two clearly had no love for each other. There wasn’t much to set Remus off.

Despite this, whenever he tested the waters, addressed Harry, maybe reached out to emphasize a point by offering a palm, the woman snapped to. Her eyes would peel open from the mouth of the woolen worm, and she’d snarl:

“Don’t touch him.”

The curl of her lip was remarkably Snape-like. Adding the wolf, he opted to leave her be.

Remus didn’t know many women who survived the bite, mostly because those with families avoided the camps like the plague. A lone woman or two would frequent the tents, or in austere packs, although those never stayed more than a few moons. Mostly embittered young men conceded to Greyback’s tyranny.

Remus could guess they were all once his quarry, as he’d been. He could only wonder how Zed came by the curse.

“Can I ask how—?,” Remus tried.

“No.”

With a few rebuffs, Remus and Zed came to an understanding. She had no intention of stealing Harry away. Nor did he. So as long as Remus refrained from reaching for anyone else in the car, kept his hands to himself, sat on them if need be, they’d have no issues.

Moony grumbled in the far reaches. Every time Remus cowed to the younger wolf, Moony tugged.

What else am I to do? Every day, I help heal people’s families. I don’t rip them apart. Think of Harry’s needs!
He foolishly tried to reason with the curse, and of course, failed. Only growls stuffed down into chests for them. Some days he didn’t even fear the wolf. They were rare, and he mostly wanted it gone. Simply, on some days, he wished he could sit it down, and have a sensible conversation.

He counted out what he would say, like counting sheep.

*Point One:* Our loved ones’ viscera are not the cure to our overpowering bloodlust. Take a nap.

*Point Two:* We do not challenge the werewolf channeling an elder god, especially if she’s related to Snape and Harry. Even if we win, we lose, understand? Again, a nap? It works wonders.

They entered London with the evening traffic, bringing in ribbing and stories to combat the grating honk of cars. They inched along with the catering vans and buses prepared to unload young excited partiers from out of town. The music filling the car switched from light songs for humming the words to, to bacchanalian club hits.

He loved Muggle radio. He thought of Sirius, and then Fox changed the station and he really was brought back.

Hard rock blitzed and thrummed.

“Hck! Turn it down,” complained the blanket, jolted away.

“S’just one song. We’re pullin’ up—soon.”

A hitch in the baritone made Remus look over and away. Frederico had lost his grin and now stared ahead with hard, black eyes. Then he blinked, face contorting, like he’d caught a sneeze. And again, the slack and the hard stare.

Is he...crying? Remus had never witnessed a truly dolorous Severus Snape. Perhaps that was why his brother’s face journey looked so alien.

This wasn’t true for the rest of the car. Fox’s mother worked her fingers around the headrest to touch his hair. Zed went quiet, as did her sister. Even Harry, who glimpsed Fox’s expressions in the rear view, asked, “Are you alright?,” in a soft, wincing way.

It was a bizarre thing for Remus to not know the man was upset. A staple of his job was people crying. He felt off guard, and wanted to make up for his slow response. He wanted to give Fox a pat on the arm, and then didn’t think it his place, and then felt lupine eyes bore into his back, and knew to keep to himself.

So he bounced in his seat, limply holding his seatbelt, while Fox eased them over speed bumps and potholes, blinking and choking back tears.

They rolled to a stop between Numbers Eleven and Thirteen, but saw nowhere to park. Just as Fox prepared to circle to block, Remus tried to do some favor. Toting his wand, which had ridden comfortably in his sleeve, he magicked two dark cars to suck in like guts, making space for the gold wagon to sidle up to the curb.

Luckily, no one drove behind them to see the display. He cast a quick repellant charm, hoping not even the cars’ owners would think of the street till morning.

“Thank you,” Fox croaked. Remus nodded, brow furrowed.

“Of course,” he assured him, unbuckling his seatbelt. The robed wizard realized then that he had
been the only one to wear it, besides the girl, who had to be goaded into one.

“I’ll help you bring everything inside.”

Harry wiggled like he meant to lead them all in. Unfortunately, he’d ridden boxed in by the rest and was, in fact, the last to hit the street. He couldn’t even shuffle his feet first, as the cat had wedged her wrinkly body between his ankles to sleep. The young man had to scoop her up and carry her in lieu of bags until they all reached the fence.

“Er, welcome,” he mumbled flattening his fringe against his scar. Harry looked at all their faces, and swallowed, pleading to Remus with his big, green eyes.

Why did he and all his friends assume Remus had the answers? The werewolf thought his many awkward truths disabused them of that notion time and again. He wasn’t their teacher. They weren’t teens.

But apparently they still needed the occasional push. He gave Harry a smile and a thumbs up, knowing the young man would be fine. He was already loved, so there was nothing for him to worry about.

“You’ve got this. You’re great,” he whispered.

Harry slouched like instead he’d been promised pure misery. The older man chuckled—the boy could be such a pessimist. He opened the gates and waved the group in. Remus charmed the luggage lighter and followed at the back as the boy led the way.

There, he heard the Hedgerots’ little comments.

“Well, par-don me. Would ya look at this?,” muttered Grace, impressed. “It’s a bit gloomy, but check out the size of it!”

“It looks haunted,” sighed Marisleny. “Why can’t we ever stay at a house that doesn’t look haunted.”

“It looks fuckin’ cold,” shivered Zed. “But hell, I won’t complain to not sleep in a bloody basement for a week. How many rooms, d’ya think?”

“I give up. If Laney’s cussin’ at school, that’s on you,” Fox declared, bucking up some.

“Fuck if I care? Listen, I wanna room with a window I can leave open. Just so we all know. Look, write it down.”

“Let’s stay all on the same floor, at least,” their mother replied. She closed the gap to Harry and the two linked arms again. Finally, Remus saw him relax.

“Where’s Rev? He said he’d be here.” The werewolf looked at the other werewolf, confused.

She asked him this directly, and he truly wanted to answer. Her asking him anything felt like progress. However, he didn’t know who she could be talking about.

“She means Snape,” Harry supplied from in front, with a half-smile. “I was confused at first, too.”

Now Severus has a nickname, he thought, agog. Something new every day.

“Him? I couldn’t tell you,” Remus answered, amused. “He could be anywhere. It’s a part of his charm.”
“Don’t go claiming familiarity with my charms, Lupin, or I’ll have your head on a pike by moonrise. Peddle your lies somewhere else.”

“Ah, Snape. Good to see you’ve made it.”

“Back to your den,” Snape said, twiddling his fingers.

He stood at the end of the walk, scowling up at Number Twelve before kneeling open the gate. Aside from one hand holding his dark wood wand, the other towed along a floating backpack, hissing and writhing. It looked very much like something Remus wanted no part of, and so he gladly stepped out of the way to let Snape pass.

The man seemed to fare a tad better than earlier that day. He’d regained a great deal more life in his demeanor, animated in how he gestured at the group to part and stomped through them all, bounding up the stoop.

Remus sighed as he spoiled Harry’s nervous welcoming, blowing through the door, leaving it swinging behind him as he marched into the house. In three long strides, he left the foyer—here and gone.

“Well!?,” Snape shouted, out of sight. “Are we playing scarecrows, or are you all coming in? Potter, tell me you’ve exorcised that wretched elf. If it so much as sniffs at me, I won’t hesitate to rehang the Black’s decorous trophies. Fred, I’ve something for you.

“Potter!”

“I’m coming in! Christ!,” Harry swore, nerves washed away by irritation. He was already inside, dropping the cat in the doorway, laying down his book where Remus didn’t see.

It was as if he’d lost all self-awareness when Snape hustled past, looking the drab Santa with a mystery on his back. Remus knew nothing egged Harry to intervene like Severus Snape up to something.

*Cousins?*, he pondered, still disbelieving. That meant Snape and James were once cousins. Then again, so were Sirius and Bellatrix Lestrange. And so were Teddy and Draco Malfoy.

Cousins could mean complete strangers, and Snape and Harry weren’t that. Potentially, one day, maybe even one day soon, “cousins” could make sense.

The growing bubble of tension popped noiselessly, with only Remus the wiser. The rest of the group crowded inside, some with gasps at the chandeliers and high ceilings, some with a shout at the drafty hall. He trailed in last, keeping quiet as he closed the front door behind him.

The chatter, which had moved to the parlor, suddenly stopped. Remus looked and startled when Fox fell on his knees on the ancient carpet with a slam that clinked the crystals in the watching chandelier.

“Where did you find them!?,” the man sobbed. The rest of the family hollered and gasped in chorus.

Snape stood by the fireplace, arms folded, shining with sweat. The bag he lowered to the ground had floated in, so it couldn’t be sweat from exertion. Remus then figured he understood, as the man’s brother dug shakily into the canvas, wrought with emotion, and began unwinding scaly, muscled coils with a tenderness that bespoke real love.
It reminded Remus a bit of Hagrid.

A toad plopped onto the carpet after a few serpents, to the little witch’s cry of, “Bleppy!” The toad, seemingly another beloved pet, was patted delicately and placed in her curls, like a warty tiara. Beside her, Fox nuzzled the hefty head of a boa, hissing excitedly alongside the snake.

“Thank you!,” cried Fox, and Remus guffawed. Snape looked at his brother with big, shining eyes, like he’d never before been properly thanked.

Remus knew this wasn’t true—he’d thanked the man personally for the Wolfsbane every day of a week, once a month, for almost a year. However, he also knew it was a different draw entirely to be thanked for a good deed by someone that mattered. He only hoped the man could handle the punch.

What did he know—Snape might breezily accept causing someone effusive joy. Remus had never seen him do it enough to know. Snape could be an emotional savant.

“I’ll be scrubbing off the stink of serpent for the next few hours. Do not disturb—what’re you snickering at, Lupin?”

He didn’t even last ten seconds! Remus waved him off. He needn’t take a single mote of attention off of Snape right then. The man’s reaction was too well worth it.

“Nothing at all. I only realized it's time I went home myself,” he beamed, cheeks aching. He waved to the parlor, mostly for show. Only Grace had eyes on to wave back. “Goodnight all. Thank you for your company. Harry, I’ll call again in a few days?”

“Yeah, no, yes,” Harry nodded, flushed. “Yeah, I’ll, uh, write first, maybe. Tell Teddy hullo for me, please.”

“Mhm, I will.” He wanted—but he didn’t risk a hug. He wanted to leave his stalemate with Zed on a high note.

His last peek before Apparating home was Snape, not quite leaving, and Harry, both unable to tear their eyes away from their surrounds. For a moment, it was like they’d forgotten each other and only saw the room. In a chair, on the couch, on the carpet, there was family.

He wondered, and on many levels felt, how long it had been since they knew that comfort. Remus was happy for them. And thinking of Teddy, he left better knowing Snape could smile.

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