For Want of a Mallory

by SirHiss

Summary

Follows the events of 'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.'

Mallory Hopkins is no ordinary eleven year old. At Hogwarts, she quickly realizes that her position as the only muggleborn in Slytherin is a precarious one, and it's up to her to put a stop to the bullying. That alone would be enough for any child, but the Chamber of Secrets is opening, and her teachers are whispering how she looks just like her mother. Meanwhile, Witches and Wizards are disappearing across Great Britain.
November 22, 1982

One early November evening in a small village on the edge of Dartmoor stood an old wizened man in bright purple robes and pointy hat. He was waiting patiently, nose twitching at the damp smell rising from the tall, uncut grass.

With a loud pop, another strange man appeared next to him. A small bundle, roughly the size and shape of a baby, rested in the crook of the man's arm.

"Albus."

"Severus." Albus replied.

"We'll be leaving it here then, with the muggles?" Severus scowled.

"It's the best we can do." Albus' eyes fixed on the cottage: brick and mortar, with its bright, unnatural muggle lights. Next to the cottage, some metal muggle contraption stood sentinel and silent.

Severus leaned in closer, hissing, "this is a foolish idea, I'd dare say even reckless. If they discover what we've done—"

"—we'll make sure that doesn't happen." interrupted Albus.

The old wizard then took the child from Severus's arms and walked to the front door of the small cottage, where two unsuspecting muggles lived.

The muggles were vetted in advance, both of them. Kind people who couldn't have a child of their own, and who desperately wanted one. It was the perfect solution to their problem.

"And if the child discovers the truth, what then?" Severus asked.
This time, the old wizard didn't answer his question.

March 21, 1992

Ten Years Later

Two bikes skidded to a halt in front of the low stone wall separating the dirt road from the Turner's property. Mallory Hopkins and Danny Pearce weren't supposed to be here. But cutting across the field was the fastest way into the village, and they were running late for dinner.

On this day, Mallory turned eleven years old. Her birthday party had ended earlier that afternoon, and after she'd eaten a rather large portion of her birthday cake, she and Danny had raced out of the house and onto their bikes. The whole ride out was spent debating on their adventure for the day — make-believe jungle explorers or Jedi? Indiana Jones or Doctor Who? When they couldn't come to an agreement on who got to be Luke, they compromised on completing their clubhouse, which was to be the pinnacle of their childhood ambitions: a secret place no grownup could enter, serving as a home to all their schemes and treasures. Once in agreement, they spent the rest of the ride cursing out old man Rogers down by the mill, who had the gall to cheat them out of good wooden boards, last time they'd traded with him for wood for the clubhouse. Past the main road and over two hills, they rode their bikes all the way to their favorite spot down by the banks of the river. Once they got there, they were so worn out from all the swearing and dire proclamations of revenge, that they spent the rest of the afternoon lazily basking in the sun by the riverbank.

But now it was getting dark and Danny said his mum would skin him alive if he was late, so they started making their way back. At first she felt annoyed, because it was her Birthday and that meant she ought to get whatever she wanted. But then Mallory glimpsed the dark clouds creeping across the moor and decided it was for the best.

They'd have to cut through Mr. Parker's farm, which meant scaling a wall and wading through rough unmanaged land that was unfit for play or farming, covered in scraggly plants that scratched up the legs something fierce.

The crumbling stone wall went up to their shoulders, and the two needed to climb over it. They got off their bikes and hefted them up over the wall, dropping them into the muck on the other side. Danny gave Mallory a boost, and they jumped down next to their bikes, landing in the mud with a splat.

It sucked at her boots as she moved to pick up her bike.

"Mum's going to kill me," the scrawny boy groaned.

She made a face. He was being dramatic, like always. The most Mrs. Pearce would do was holler at him. And from what Mallory understood, Danny's mum did that quite often. She didn't see how this time would be any different.

His mum didn't like mud, or the fact that he and Mallory went down to the river, which was dangerous. The parents in the village said once a child had fallen in the river and drowned. Mallory figured it was one of those stories adults made up to scare little kids.

And besides, Mallory wasn't afraid.

They plodded across the field, dodging brambles that caught on their shoes and bike tires. The wind was picking up, stirring the grass and rattling the whins. Twice they got her, leaving long scratches across her legs.
Dragging their bikes behind them, they squelched onto the main road. Danny nudged her shoulder and she glanced over to see the last two people she wanted to run into on her birthday.

The Turner twins.

The twins stopped in their tracks, eyes narrowed in disgust.

It wasn't her fault, not really. She hadn't meant to, it was just, strange things tended to happen around her when she got angry. And the last time that happened, Robbie Turner was dumping pencil shavings in her book bag.

She had wished hard for something bad to happen to him, because he was a giant knobhead and she knew she'd get splinters cleaning the stupid pencil shavings out of her bag. He had laughed at her while she shouted at him, drawing the attention of their entire class.

And then, suddenly, a clump of his hair fell from his head. It had hovered for a moment in front of his nose before falling to the floor. Robbie Turner frowned and stopped to run his hands through his hair, only for more and more clumps to be pulled away with every breath.

At the time, she'd laughed. He'd been shrieking and clutching at his scalp, only to watch as all his hair fell to the ground. But then she turned and saw her classmates' faces.

Now they were all avoiding her, not just Robbie Turner and his friends.

Danny stuck by her because he'd always known she could do things the other children couldn't do. He thought she was brilliant for it— like she was a real life superhero.

The Turner twins eyed Mallory and Danny for a moment, before turning around and walking back stiffly the way they came.

Danny snickered. "Bet they had fun explaining to their mum how Robbie's hair fell out."

She looked away. The sight of the twins just served to remind her that there was something very unnatural about Mallory Hopkins.

When she was little, she hadn't realized that she was doing anything extraordinary. Fairy tales and magic were in all the movies, and what she could do— turning lights on with a thought or animating toys just because she wished it— seemed like nothing special at all.

Mum and dad, however, were terrified of others finding out.

For a long time, their fear seemed excessive, and she couldn't understand why they wanted her to keep it a secret. But as she got older, she realized her parents were right. She'd read all the comics, *X-Men* and the like: when people found out someone had superpowers, they don't react positively. People called the constables. Then secret agents came to lock up the mutants and do horrible experiments on them.

She really really didn't want to be dissected, thank-you-very-much.

Not that any of her classmates would tell the adults, because no adult would ever believe them. But it still scared her, because she couldn't always control her temper or her powers. And what if it happened in front of an adult? What if the next Robbie Turner happens in front of a video camera?

Her parents would do everything they could to protect her, but they weren't gods.
Danny nudged her shoulder again. "None of that, not on your birthday." He swung one leg over his bike. "Come on, let's race back. I'll bet you a fiver I can get to the letterbox before you."

"No cheating!" Mallory hollered after him, but Danny was already off. She scrambled onto her bike, pedaling hard to catch up.

She rode on his tail, skidding around a corner and nearly crashing into the bins in front of their neighbour's yard. Her bike shuddered and jolted under her with every break in the uneven pavement.

The wind whipped her dark hair back as she kept low on the bike, trying to cut wind resistance. Danny Pearce was not beating her this time, not on her life.

A crack of thunder boomed as the approaching storm finally caught them.

She pulled up by Danny's side, legs pumping at the pedals furiously, as they rounded on the final turn. Danny slowed, but Mallory didn't, trusting her powers to keep her bike upright as she whipped around the corner full speed.

Except her powers failed.

The wheels slid out from under her and she didn't even have time to think before she hit the ground hard, tumbling across the street before skidding to a halt.

"Mallory!"

Danny pedaled back to where he'd seen her fall, but she was already picking herself up.

She held her hands up. "I'm okay."

Both knees were bloodied, though one was more scraped up than the other. Her shoulder would be sore, but that wasn't so bad.

"Dummy." He held out a hand and she took it, hauling her to her feet. They limped the last leg to Mallory's house, walking next to their bikes instead of riding.

No one mentioned who won the race. Danny knew her pride could suffer no further injuries this day.

The lights were on, and Mrs. Pearce from two doors down was waiting under the awning on the front step, arms folded. Mallory couldn't see through the rain, but she bet her face was cross.

She waved, just to make Mrs. Pearce feel obligated to wave back. Mrs. Pearce always made a funny face when Mallory tried being friendly, like she'd swallowed a lemon.

Mallory dropped her bike on the front lawn and said goodbye to Danny. She stomped up the steps and into her house, knees stinging with every step.

"Mum, Dad, I'm home."

There was a low murmur of conversation coming from the living room, which Mallory ignored in favor of walking down the narrow hall towards the kitchen. She was intent on patching herself up before mum saw her.

"Mallory, in here!" mum called, and Mallory groaned. She doubled back, past the creaky staircase and into the warmly-lit living room. Both her parents were sitting on the chesterfield.
Across from them sat the strangest woman Mallory Hopkins had ever seen. She was perched on the seat across from her parents, looking out of place in their ordinary house with her witchy-looking black robes and pointed hat. She was like something out of a storybook.

"Oh lord, Mallory, what's happened to you?" Mum got up, rushing over to fuss over Mallory's scraped knees, incidentally blocking Mallory's view of the stranger.

"I fell off my bike. And it was raining."

"Your knees!" Mum's voice did that thing it did when she was stressed and it went all high pitched. "What did you do to your knees?"

"I said I fell, didn't I?"

"Don't sass your mother," said Dad.

"And the mud— Look at it! Don't tell me you went down to that horrid river again."

"I won't, then." She tried batting her mum away so she could look at the stranger on their couch.

"Mallory, don't drip on the carpet," said her dad, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"S'not like I can help it."

"I said don't sass."

"I'm not sassing, and anyway who's she?"

Mum moved aside and Mallory gave the stranger a little wave.

"Hello, Miss Hop—," the strange woman froze with her tea cup halfway to the table. She stared at Mallory for a good long moment before she cleared her throat.

"Miss Hopkins. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hello." Mallory stood outside the living room, dripping on the carpet. Her shirt was sticking to her skin and there was dirt on her arms and legs from the fall. That was in addition to the bloody scrapes on her knees.

She carried with her the smell of the damp outdoors and muck from the river. Which was probably why the woman was staring at her, still staring at her. But a part of her feared that the real reason was something more sinister.

She made Robbie Turner's hair fall out, and now there was a strange woman sitting in their living room. The woman didn't look like how Mallory imagined secret agents would look, but then secret agents wouldn't want to look like secret agents. It would make keeping it a secret rather difficult.

The stranger cleared her throat again, and put her cup of tea down. "I am Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. I'm here as a representative of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As I was just telling your parents, you are invited to attend our school next September."

Witchcraft and Wizardry?

Mallory edged into the room, trying to be casual, like she wasn't in the room with a lunatic or secret agent.
"Mum?" Her voice wavered, just a bit, at the end. "What's going on?"

"Ask daddy, love. I'm getting the first aid kit. I don't want those cuts getting infected." Mum walked off, seemingly unconcerned about the secret agent or crazy lady in their living room.

"Dad?" She inched closer to him.

"Just watch the rug."

"Got it. What's going on?"

"Like I said," spoke McGonagall, "Hogwarts is a school for gifted children. I believe there were several occasions where you've done things that other children cannot?"

"Um. No. Definitely not. I'm ordinary. Very ordinary."

"Mallory, don't lie to the nice professor. Tell her about that time you made Nibbles float." He turned to the secret-agent-pretending-to-be-a-professor, "I couldn't believe my eyes, it was a miracle."

Her blood turned to ice.

She didn't understand. Mum and dad, who'd made her promise a thousand times to never tell anyone, not even Danny, told a stranger about her powers.

"Not helping, dad. And it was probably just your imagination," she was now edging away, back towards the kitchen where mum was under the cabinets digging out the first aid kit. She could run out the back door with a big enough distraction. And she knew Danny would let her hide under his bed for the night. But then, maybe that's exactly what a secret agent would expect her to do.

Mallory gave the Deputy Headmistress a winning smile. "You know dad, with his active imagination."

It sounded like the thing one ought to say when convincing someone that superpowers weren't real.

"What's gotten into you?" said her dad, frowning.

Mallory didn't know how long the secret agent had been here with her parents, nor why her dad let the cat out of the bag. But if mum and dad had taken leave of their senses—

"She's a secret agent! Dad, run!" With that Mallory took off, only to collide with her mum in the doorway.

"Mallory!" Mum gasped. She grabbed Mallory by the arms, preventing her from scrambling to freedom.

"Let go! She's a super secret agent and she's going to take me away and then you'll never see me again because they'll do 'speriments!"

"Miss Hopkins! I do not know what a secret agent is—" Professor McGonagall said secret agent the same way some people said pustules and taxes. "—but I am certainly not here to take you away from your parents. I am a teacher of Transfiguration, and if you'd just sit down I'd show you."

"Don't listen to her!"
"Oh for heaven's sake!" said the secret agent, and she whipped out a slender wooden stick and aimed it at their coffee table.

And then the table turned into a great big dog.

Mallory gaped, shrugged off her mum's now-lax grip, and walked onto the carpet to get a closer look.

"Mallory!" dad hissed. "You're dripping on the carpet."

She ignored him. It was a real dog, with soft golden fur, and a shiny wet nose. It even woofed when she poked it.

"Wicked. How'd you do that?"

"That is what you'll be learning at Hogwarts."

"Mallory. The carpet."

"Dad!" She said in her best dad-you're-being-embarrassing tone.

"Tony, no one cares about the bloody carpet," said mum.

"I do. It's my mother's and it's—"

Professor McGonagall flicked her wand again and Mallory was dry. Two more flicks and all the mud was gone and her cuts were healed.

She stared at the Professor, who was probably not a super secret agent or a lunatic, and wondered if she could go to their school early. Like, right now.

Mum raised her eyebrows. "I guess I got the first aid kit out for nothing, then."

"Mum."

"Well, now that we have that over with, there's a lot to go over and some forms to fill out. Though without anymore interruptions," the professor paused to give Mallory a look. "This should be done in no more than an hour."

This was, Mallory thought, possibly the best birthday ever.

Chapter End Notes

There is art for this fic on my profile.

Changelog:

Edited on 1/20/16:

- dropped Angela Winters Subplot
- British English Alert! I am not a native of Britain. Please do feel free to Brit-pick.

DICT:
- Whins: prickly/thorny bushes
- Chesterfield: sofa/couch.

Edited on 3/3/2017: running through and fixing spelling errors / phrasing on chapters 1-11. Presumably I'll do the rest at some point.
September 1, 1992 (Tuesday)

The first thing anyone said to her was, “Hi! Have you seen Harry Potter?”

“Who?” Mallory was in the side hall of the Hogwarts express, trying to find an empty compartment when the short blonde boy bumped into her.

She stood in the middle of the packed carriage, overwhelmed. Was she supposed to go to an empty compartment and sit? She didn’t know if there were separate carriages for different years, or if she’d get in trouble for sitting in the wrong one.

The train shuddered under her as another group of students raced down the hall. Older students brushed past her, knocking into her shoulder more than once on their way. Several students were having loud conversations in the hall, and she could hear the occasional pop and crackle of a spell being cast.

The blonde boy with the clunky camera had been going up to students crowding the hall of the train, poking into individual compartments to ask his question, until he reached Mallory.

And that was how Colin Creevey met Mallory Hopkins on the Hogwarts Express.

Colin gaped at her.

“You don’t know? He’s supposed to be on the train. He’s a year above us and he’s famous! I’ve always wanted to meet him, ever since I learned what he did. I even brought my camera—see? I’m going to get his picture!”

Mallory hesitated, off-footed and skin prickling with discomfort. She didn’t know much Wizarding celebrities, but she’d gotten in the habit of trying to find the muggle analogues to Wizarding oddities. She imagined it must be like the members of Take That or The Stone Roses attending her school.

“I’m a muggleborn, I don’t—”

“Oh, me too! I’m Colin Creevey.”

“Mallory Hopkins. Bit much to take in, yeah?”

“My mum and dad didn’t believe Professor McGonagall at first. Thought she was mental.”

“Me either. I thought she was one of those government agents, like the ones in X-Men.”

Colin giggled. “So there’s no witches or wizards in your family? Because we think maybe one of my Uncles was a squib.”
“No, I don’t think so.” She frowned. There was a brief but awkward silence.

“Have you been to Diagon Alley?” Colin asked, once it became to uncomfortable to stand in the corridor of a train staring at one another. "It’s absolutely amazing. They have brooms that fly, can you believe it?"

“And they actually make potions in cauldrons.” Mallory said, a slow grin spreading across her face.

“It’s like something out of a storybook— and to think it’s real and we’re going to a school to learn magic.”

“It’ll be brilliant.”

“Shame Wizards don’t have the telly, though.”

“Yeah. I asked, and Professor McGonagall said my mix tapes won’t work here. I brought my Walkman anyway, because she didn’t even know what a Walkman was, so how could she know if it’ll work? But she said electricity explodes around magic.” Mallory wrinkled her nose.

“Me too. I brought my game-boy. I haven’t tried it yet, though.”

“We should try when we get to Hogwarts. Bet you it works and they’re just saying that because they don’t want us playing games in class. The teachers did that at my primary school— they banned bandannas because they said they were gang symbols.” Mallory stuffed her free hand into her pocket, pressing her back against the wall as another group of older years shoved past them. The other hand was occupied with maneuvering her luggage out of the way.

“They don’t want us to be distracted from school work. Or maybe they think it’s unfair that muggle students can buy Walkmans and wizarding kids can’t.”

“They could just go to the store and buy one.” She scowled, glaring back at a few stupid older years who gave her and Colin a filthy look for loitering in the hall.

“My dad said they can’t because they’re iso—” he frowned, “Iso—something. Solitary? I don’t remember the word. But they’re on their own and they don’t want to join muggle culture. They don’t know ‘bout Walkmans or game-boys, so they can’t buy them.”

“Well, that’s stupid.”

“Maybe. Anyway, d’you know where you’ll end up?”

“Not really.” Mallory shrugged. She’d read about the Houses, and thought she might get into Gryffindor, what with her interest in superheroes and becoming a superhero, herself. But she didn’t know how they sorted the students. For all she knew, it was random and she’d get her heart set on Gryffindor only to end up disappointed.

“I want to be a Gryffindor,” said Colin. “That’s where Harry Potter is.”

“What’s he famous for at twelve, anyway?” Maybe he was some sort of wizarding royalty, like Prince Henry or William. Or he could be some kind of child star on the telly, only wizards didn’t have those.

“You mean you don’t know?”
“I—” A looming presence cast a shadow over her.

“Aw, ickle firsties.” said a red-headed boy. Another red-head, identical to him in every way, looped his arm around Colin and Mallory.

“Real wee ones.” said the other.

“Then I suppose it’s our duty, Gred.”

“Sorry?” Mallory hesitated, confused.

“You don’t want to go that way.” The twin to the left pointed at the back compartments. “And you especially want to avoid the toilets.”

“They’re vanishing toilets, you see.”

“Couple firsties went in one year and they vanished into thin air.”

“One was found two months later living in the forest with werewolves. Poor bloke was so traumatized he couldn’t remember how to speak.”

“Last we heard, he’s still in St. Mungo’s.”

“They’ve yet to figure out how he ended up out there.”

Both twins had wicked grins smeared across their faces, like someone just said the punchline to a witty joke. Mallory glanced at Colin out of the corner of her eye, mentally willing him to play along.

“Really?” she widened her eyes a tad. “But we can’t go to the front compartments, either. Someone tried to engorge a cat, but the spell went wrong somehow.”

“What?” Colin looked between Mallory and the twins, confused. She talked over him.

“All its hair fell out and it grew giant warts! They’re filled with pus and anytime someone tries to catch it they explode. It’s disgusting.”

“Right Colin?” She nudged him.

“Oh. Yeah. Right.” Colin said. He sounded the very opposite of convincing. Bollocks.

The twins looked at one another, and then at the two first years. Their faces split into identical grins.

“Almost—”

“—but not quite.”

“Well,” she shrugged, “it’s only my first day.” Her face burned with embarrassment.

They ruffled Mallory’s hair and went off, presumably to trick more first years into thinking the toilets were jinxed.

Once they were gone, she groaned, smacking her head against the wall. “That was bad.” They didn’t believe her for a second.
“Yeah, bit of a mean trick. Why did you tell them that?”

“It’s bollocks. They were just making it up to scare us.”

“Oh, why’d they do something like that?” Probably because it was funny. “And anyway, you shouldn’t say that word. Mum’d rinse my mouth with soap if I did.”

Mallory rolled her eyes. “We need to work on our signals if we’re going to be friends.”

Danny would’ve gotten it straight away, and he never cared about her cursing. But he wasn’t here, and she felt his absence like a missing limb. Danny had always been there.

“We’re friends?”

“Sure, us muggleborns have to stick together.” Colin was nice, and at least she knew he wouldn’t look down on her for not having magical parents. She remembered hearing about some prejudice against muggleborns, though she’d experienced none so far.

Wizards didn’t know what a telly was or how to use a Walkman, so they were unlikely to know anything about comic books or music. She didn’t have anything in common with them.

Sticking with Colin seemed safe, and right then she promised herself that she’d try to be in whatever House he was in, if she had a choice.

The hat had barely touched her hair before it shouted— “SLYTHERIN!” —putting her on the opposite side of the Great Hall from Colin. She sat down at the Slytherin table next to the boy who’d gone before her, Leland Harper. A couple older students nodded towards her, and Harper shook her hand.

The house of the cunning and the ambitious. She wouldn’t use those words to describe herself, but she never thought about it in this context before. Then again, it might be ambitious to want to become a hero, if one thought about it like that. Disappointing, though. She’d made a friend and intended to stick by him.

Graham Montague became the sixth new Slytherin, and sat on Harper’s other side.

Mallory glanced up at the professors’ table. The headmaster looked exactly how she’d imagine a wizard to look. His robes even twinkled like the Sorcerer’s robes from Fantasia.

And he was staring at her with a grave expression on his face, all serious and sombre, like dad’s face when grandmum died.

Mallory looked away.

Another first year, Darla Rowle, joined Slytherin and sat across from Mallory. One of the older students, a blonde boy with a pointy chin, started a whispered conversation with her.

Finally, after Ginerva Weasley was sorted into Gryffindor, the sorting ceremony concluded. Mallory almost jumped when food appeared on her plate out of thin air. She couldn’t wait to write to Danny about this. He’d flip.

Glancing at the Gryffindors, Mallory managed to catch Colin’s eye. She gave him thumbs up, and he waved. Maybe they’d have classes together. Just because they were in different houses didn’t
mean they couldn’t talk.

“I don't mean to pry, but did you expect you'd be a Slytherin?” Asked Rowle, leaning in to hear over the other conversations. The girl's blonde hair fell across her face, and she brushed the stray ringlet back behind her ear.

“Not really, you?” Mallory figured she ought to try to make friends right away, especially if some of the students knew each other beforehand. If she didn’t make an effort, they’d go back to their old patterns of friendship and she’d be left out in the cold.

“Oh no, don’t take on so! You’ll do very well, here.” Darla Rowle's lips quirked up into an impish grin. “My parents and grandparents were all Slytherin, so I should know. What House were your parents in?”

Mallory wanted to giggle at the funny way the girl spoke, but thought that might be in poor taste. Worse, she was talking about her parents and grandparents. No one back in South Brent ever talked about their parents, if they could help it.

“They didn’t go here,” Mallory said, evading the question. "So wait, that means you know some of the professors? They look as old as dirt. And I’ll bet they taught your parents, too.”

“Professor McGonagall did, I think. Professor Snape’s fairly new. He’s our Head of House. I've heard tell from my cousin that he’s frightfully strict.”

The blonde boy with the pointy chin nodded. “He is, but he’s fair. Professor McGonagall’s strict, as well. Flitwick’s an imbecile, though. And Dumbledore is an old coot. He hates Slytherins.”

“But he’s the Headmaster. Doesn’t he have to be fair?”

“That’s what my father said, but he can’t get enough support to get the coot sacked. My father’s on the board, you see.”

Yes, she did. Hogwarts Houses were like rival football teams, and the Headmaster supported his old team. Pointy-chin’s father was influential and rooting for the opposite team. But the Headmaster had more powerful friends than he did. She wasn’t sure what a board did, but she knew it must be important if they could sack the Headmaster.

“What’s he done to us?”

“He lets the muggleborns get away with anything, just because they don’t know any better. And no matter what, he thinks his pet Gryffindors are in the right.”

She started feeling a little uncomfortable. “The muggleborns?”

“You know,” he lowered his voice, “mudbloods.”

“Oh.” She felt funny, like her legs were leaden under the bench.

Harper shrugged. “Well, someone has to be their friend in it. Otherwise the muggleborns wouldn’t get any help at all.”

“What do they need help with?” Mallory said, trying to inject harmless curiosity into her tone.

“Well, they’re not capable of the same kind of magic we do.” said Darla Rowle. “It’s not their fault, but they don’t belong here.”
Graham Montague, the boy sitting on Harper’s other side, said. “Not t’mention, they always smell a bit queer.”

Harper snorted.

“I en’t having a laugh, they do. Like petrol or plastics.”

“Don’t be cruel, Monty. They can’t help it.”

So that was what they meant when they said that wizards discriminated against muggleborns.

“I don’t know. It’s a bit unfair to generalize, don’t you think?” Again, she tried for a light tone, but she didn’t think she quite managed it.

The blonde boy with the pointy chin frowned. “Excuse me, but I wonder if we might have your last name?”

Mallory felt sick.

“Hopkins.”

“Hopkins? That’s not a wizarding name.” Said Harper. “Are you a half-blood, then?”

She remembered all those moments of being an outsider in the village. And now she didn’t even have Danny by her side.

Say yes, tell them she was a half-blood. They’d leave her alone.

But she wasn’t ashamed of her parents.

Mallory squared her shoulders.

“No, I’m a muggleborn.”

Everyone at the Slytherin table went still. Then a spate of furious whispers began.

For a moment, just one moment, Mallory desperately wished she could take it back. Just kidding! My mother is a witch.

“There’s never been a mudblood in Slytherin.” said the blonde boy with the pointy chin.

Darla Rowle looked at her like she was some kind of insect. And Harper was discreetly wiping his hand clean on his robe—the hand he’d shaken her’s with—and didn’t that just sting. She felt an ache rising in her throat; tears stung the corners of her eyes.

Like flicking a switch, the regrets were gone. She would not be friends with these people, she didn’t want to be friends with them. She didn’t want to speak with them or even be on the same planet as them.

“I’ll be the first muggleborn in Slytherin, then.”

“—dirty mudblood in Slytherin—”

“I’ll go to the board! My father will—”

They talked over each other, ignoring her entirely. She seethed.
“—practically as bad as a muggle—”

“—a risk to the standing of our house—”

“—bloody creatures of dirt—”

“—next year you’ll see three, then seven, and soon Slytherin will be a House of Hacks.”

She wasn’t putting up with this. She’d go up to McGonagall after the feast and tell her that those redheaded twins spelled the hat, and that it’d all been a terrible mistake. The professor would change her house and then she and Colin would humiliate these bigots.

**Bloody creatures of dirt.** Were they joking? Did they really call people shit like that?

“Shut up, I’m no bloody creature.” They ignored her.

She opened her mouth to shout it, but she couldn’t produce any sound. For a moment she thought it was just nerves, but then she realized she physically couldn’t speak. Someone cast a spell on her.

The pointy-chinned blonde-haired boy had his wand out and was grinning. Mallory wanted to punch that stupid grin right off his face.


She wanted to run— out of the Great Hall and all the way back home— but she didn’t. Running meant admitting defeat.

By the end of dinner, most of the professors had left the table. It must’ve been some kind of emergency, because the professor with greasy black hair— Snape— ran out of the Great Hall cursing about someone crashing a car.

The prefects, Gemma Farley and some boy, Higgs or something, escorted them down into the dungeons. Professor McGonagall wasn’t in the Great Hall. She’d ask the professor to switch her house tomorrow. Mallory didn’t fancy having to find her way around the castle on her first night here.

It was only one night in the house of snakes. She’d manage the night without punching someone.

That’s what she told herself, anyway.

Through the secret door they went— The password was 'pure-blood.' Seriously. —and into the cavernous Slytherin common room.

The older students were arranged around the fireplace. Before she could join them, (the dungeons were cold and her fingers were getting quite a chill,) she was stopped by the other first years. A few students formed a rough ring around her.

“Are you truly a muggleborn?” asked Malfoy, the boy with the pointy-chin. He undid the silencing spell. “Speak.”

“Well ‘m not gonna lie about it.” She scowled.

At that, the peanut gallery erupted into mutters.

“Hat’s gone barmy. It’s never picked a muggleborn before, not ever.”
“Bet it’s been hexed, only explanation for it.”

Another, older boy, stepped forward and addressed Mallory, "Are you, indeed? Well, it is most desirable that we do without you, so you'll speak to Professor Snape and tell him you wish to leave. Tonight.”

“And if I don’t?”

“We’ll have you expelled.” said the boy, upper lip curled in disgust.

“So that’s why there aren’t any muggleborns in Slytherin.” She felt like ice water had been dumped over her head, and could barely keep herself standing still.

“You little bigoted pieces of shite try and intimidate them, yeah? Not because we’re unworthy, but because you’re all rotten ugly gits who run us off.”

“Oh look here! The foul mudblood speaks.” crowed Harper.

“You'll hold your tongues!” shouted the older boy, the one who told her he'd get her expelled.

But the younger students crowded him out, and the other older Slytherins made no motions to step in.

“Quite so, but what did you expect from a mudblood?”

“What, you want me to get creative?” Mallory hissed.

“It'd be most agreeable to me if you'd go back to the dirty hovel you crawled out of.”

“What?

“You talk like an arse.” Mallory laughed, "And my dad’s a doctor, we don’t live in a hovel, stupid.” She was so angry she couldn't even think straight. Her fists were clenched at her sides, knuckles white with fury.

“dock-tor? He labors on a dock?”

“He helps people, cures them. That’s what good people do, instead of of being ugly bigots.”

“No, my idea has more merit. He labors on a dock by the ocean. Lifts heavy things, a really important job for muggles. Requires all their brainpower, you see?”

“We don’t even live near the ocean!” She was so angry her words were slurring together.

“And he’s still trying to be a dock-tor? That’s so sad. You have to pity those poor doddy polys.”

“I heard muggle healers cut people open and toy with their innards. Is that what your dad does?”

“No, stupid, he’s a general practitioner. He treats colds and broken bones.”

“Teaches them to what? Light a fireplace? But wait— he can’t because he doesn’t have a wand.”

“You don’t need a wand to light a fireplace. And a cold’s a virus. It’s a type of illness, you ignorant arse.”

Her commentary was completely ignored.
“I heard tell muggles mend broken bones by cutting off limbs.”

“That’s bollocks and you know it.”

"Comport yourself!” shouted an older Slytherin boy, but he found his words had all the impact of a stiff breeze in the face of the growing spectacle surrounding the First Muggleborn in Slytherin.

“What do you know? You’re just some stupid muggle.”

“Not a muggle. Muggleborn. There’s a difference, idiot.”

“One’s a jarvey, and the other’s a jarvey that might be able to make a few sparks appear out her wand.”

“A what did you say?”

“They’re like ferrets, only they can talk. They can mimic speech a little bit, like how muggles try to mimic us. But you can’t have a real conversation with one since they can’t comprehend real conversation, you see? Just like muggles.” Harper’s mouth twisted into a grin. “Oh, and they have a foul tongue. A lot like you, really.”

Fine then, she’d use the dirtiest word she knew. “Twat.”

”’scuse me?”

“I said you’re bigoted little twat, you twat.” Her face felt like it was on fire and blood rushed in her ears. Her hands were clammy and her skin felt hot. “Your mum’s a twat, too. Your whole family is full of them. Bloody ugly ones. And I meant bloody as in the literal sense of the word. And hairy, that too.”

“What in Merlin’s name..?”

“Oh, and you have a twat instead of a penis,” snarked Mallory, ”just in case you didn’t understand what I meant, seeing as how you’re ignorant of everything else.”

She thought, distantly, that some of the Slytherins might be laughing. Those were the worst insults she knew, delivered to the stupid bigots of Slytherin House by the only muggleborn ever to get into their stupid house. She hoped they choked.

“I understood what you meant, you bate.”

She didn’t know what that meant, but she didn’t care.

Her mouth split into a sharp grin. “Yeah, so? What’ll you do about it?” The last time she was this angry, Robbie Turner’s hair fell out, and her classmates started looking at her like she was a freak. But these kids were magic, and dueling one of them and winning would shut Harper up for a week from shame.

“Alright then. You want a duel?” asked Harper. "Fine, then. Let’s have a duel. Wand out.”

Ill-considered move on his part.

She whipped out her wand— spruce wood and dragon heartstring, unyielding— but she wasn’t going to use it. She didn’t know any spells, but he probably didn’t either. He was a first year, just like her. He probably got his wand only a couple months ago, and students aren’t allowed to practice magic outside Hogwarts.
Mallory hadn’t known about this rule until Professor McGonagall showed up at their doorstep. She and Danny had been practicing for years. She’d levitate pencils and light candles with a thought if she only concentrated hard enough. And her magic did unexpected things when she was angry, so all she had to do was avoid getting hit until something happened to him.

That would give her the advantage over Harper, and teach these arseholes what’s what.

Even better, all of Slytherin house was watching them.

“Start on three.”

“Two.”

She let out a breath, she couldn’t put herself in the proper headspace in time to levitate anything, she was too angry. So her first move would be to—

“One.”

Mallory threw herself to the left, but halfway through the motion she found herself hurtling up into the air. She yelped in surprise, dropping her wand.

Mallory, dangling by her foot over the middle of the common room, swore loudly.

“Like I said, a muggle with a stick does not make a witch.”

“Fuck you.”

He sent a stinging hex at her.

“Ow. Stupid— put me down!”

“Maybe you should learn to hold your tongue and pay respect to your betters.”

“Twat!”

“Langlock!”

She let out an incoherent shriek of rage, tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Luckily, her hands were free to make gestures, all of which were undeniably crude and learned from the teenagers that lurk in the not so nice part of South Brent.

Harper just laughed, and sent something that stopped her from being able to move at all.

Petrificus totalus.

She panicked. She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, and there weren’t any adults coming to help.

Her breathing rate was the only thing she could control, technically, but she couldn’t help but breathe faster. Tears stung her eyes.

“Aw look, she’s crying.”

Fuck you.

Darla Rowle sent something that caused her skin to erupt in pain, and internally she shrieked. She couldn’t see what was wrong— something was wrong with her skin.
Another spell and she was blind. Terror streaked through her, and she broke into a sweat. Don’t let it be permanent. She couldn’t be blind.

Mallory couldn’t tell who was attacking her. She wasn’t familiar enough with the voices, and she couldn’t pay attention because something was wrong with her skin and she couldn’t see. Her heart felt like it was beating out of her chest and her fingers and toes were ice-cold and clammy. Pins and needles prickled down her arms and legs.

She couldn’t think. She couldn’t see.

Stop. She needed to get control over her breathing. In and out. She took a breath. In and out, again. But—

But she felt like she couldn’t get in enough air. Oh god, they were going to kill her. They’d done a spell, hadn’t they? So she couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe. There was a ball stuck in her throat and she couldn’t swallow around it. Something was compressing her chest. There was no air and she was going to die.

A moment of vertigo and then she hit the ground hard on her head. Lights exploded behind her eyelids. A bunch of students were talking over one another, voices angry. Someone shouted.

“Quiet! Now! Snape’s coming, you’ve had your fun now undo it before you get caught. He’s in a real mood tonight.”

Barely ten seconds later she could speak, see, and the boils—that was what was wrong with her skin—had vanished.

“Get up.” Montague dragged her to her feet and shoved her to the back.

“No mudblood has ever been in Slytherin, and never will there be.” Whispered one of the older boys. “Understand? Tomorrow, you leave or else.”

She just nodded, shaking too hard to do anything else.

Professor Snape might’ve given a speech, but Mallory wasn’t listening. She stumbled into her dorm, following Darla Rowle and a couple other Slytherin girls.

“I’ll just—” sleep here tonight and be out of your hair tomorrow.

“Don’t speak to me,” hissed one of the girls.

“You understand right?” said Darla Rowle. “We didn’t want to do any of that, but we must. If we didn’t, they’d do it to us, as well.”

Mallory opened her trunk, which was located next to the girl—she didn’t know her name—the one who said not to talk to her. She dug out her jammies.

“No I—” don’t have energy for this. Just leave me alone.

“And really, it’d be so much better if you went home. You’d be with your own kind, and that’s always nice.”

Mallory, whose temper was short on any other day but especially this night, slammed her trunk
shut.

“Piss off, you stupid bint. I’m tired and I want to go to bed.”

“No, you don’t!” Rowle snapped, before softening her tone, "do you expect to try to duel again? There’s no Professor Snape, here.”

“I’ll get better at dueling, and when I do you’ll be the first person to find out.”

Rowle sighed, tucking her blonde curls back behind her ears. “Look, I know how exciting it must be, first witch in the family. But you’re not going to get any better. It’s a sad truth what the Ministry does— they introduce you to this world and tell you you’ll fit in, but you won’t. You’ll never be able to do our kind of magic. You’ll never be one of us.”

“How about you piss off.” Mallory turned around and shoved on her pajamas, perhaps with a bit more force than necessary.

If she was feeling defeated before, she wasn’t any longer. *Fuck her.* She was going to be the best damn witch that nasty bint had ever seen.
The Slytherin Initiation Part 2

Chapter Summary

Edited by the lovely Vi

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

September 2, 1992 (Wednesday)

She didn't sleep well. Her brain kept replaying the events of the night in an endless cycle. She thought of all the things she could have said to her classmates, all the ways she could've fought back.

In the silence of her dorm room, there was nothing to do but think. Her shoulder twinged each time she shifted in the bed and the back of her head throbbed.

Mallory had taken to shutting her eyes and imagining she was back in South Brent with Danny, flying down the dirt paths on their bikes. She could almost smell the rich scent of fertile soil and honeysuckle. The icy damp of the dungeon became the chill of morning mist on the tip of her nose.

Those images only proceeded to raise a hard lump in her throat. She imagined mum, beckoning her over to the garden to pick weeds out by the hollyhocks. The smell of petrol as she and dad drove to the next town over, windows rolled down to let the cool air rush over sunburnt skin. Sharp stinging cuts on her fingers from holding too tightly to splintered wood while she and Danny were hammering planks together, building their secret clubhouse by the river.

They never did get a chance to finish it before she left for Hogwarts.

Finally asleep, her dreams were spattered with fragments of sneering faces intermixed with the sharp memory of pain.

She woke up drenched in sweat and shaking, a pounding headache behind her temples.

The damp sheets stuck to her legs, restricting her movements, and causing a momentary rush of panic. She made a little sound in the back of throat, a sorry attempt to check that she hadn't been silenced in her sleep.

She could move her legs. It was just the sheets. No one had paralyzed her. Mallory leaned back and let out a huff of air, bile rising in her throat. Scared of her own sheets. Fuck them.

Her roommates were moving outside the green silk hangings surrounding her bed. And she didn't want them to know she was awake. Mallory slowed her breathing, getting her nerves under control. She couldn't open the hangings while all stinky and damp. If she did they'd know how affected she was by their stunt last night with the levitation charm.

She knelt on her bed and found a dry part of the blanket to wipe off her skin, and shoved the soiled sheets under the quilt. She hoped that'd mask the sweaty smell.
The mechanical watch her mum had given her read 7:48 AM. Classes started at 9, so she had plenty of time to wait for her dorm mates to leave. She itched to get out of bed and stomp past them proudly. This was her dorm, too, no matter what Darla Rowle said. Mallory had been chosen by the hat to be a member of Slytherin House.

They hadn't intimidated her with their stupid prank last night. She was tougher than that.

Only, she wasn't—she couldn't make her arms and legs cooperate. And the thought of facing them so early in the morning turned her stomach. She wasn't prepared for a confrontation.

Twenty minutes of feeling like a giant coward passed at a crawl, until the dorm was finally quiet. She poked her head out of the silk hangings. Two beds were empty, but the other one had her hangings still drawn.

The dorm was awash in greenish light. Last night she'd thought it was just the tint off the green silk hangings, but she was wrong.

The Slytherin dungeon was under the Black Lake.

Their windows looked out into the the water. Greenish light filtered down through the murk, bathing their dorm in an eerie glow. It was possibly the coolest thing ever, like the lair of a supervillain or an aquarium.

A dark shape passed in front of the window, momentarily leaving the room pitch black. She grinned. The Slytherins definitely had style, she'd give them that.

Showering helped, and she put on her favorite pair of jeans and t-shirt under her robes. She felt weird about wearing the flimsy robes over her underthings. It felt like walking around half-naked, because the robes were so baggy.

The school didn't say what to wear under their robes, so she guessed it was alright to wear proper clothes under them. They also didn't specify what kind of shoes the students had to wear. Mallory took that as an invitation to wear her usual pair of scuffed-up trainers.

Professor Snape hadn't handed out their timetables yet, so she wasn't sure which books to bring to class. She tossed her journal, a notebook, and some pencils into her bag, and called it a day. If she got bored, she could start drafting a letter to Danny in her journal. There was no way she'd haul her heavy textbooks around a castle, not unless the professors explicitly told her to do it.

Mallory walked towards the common room, only to halt in her tracks at the entrance.

She hadn't really thought about it until now, seeing the rest of Slytherin, again. They'd seen her humiliated. For the next seven years she'd be having classes with Harper, the kid who'd dangled her upside down and hexed her in front of everyone.

A weight settled on her chest. This was so much worse than South Brent.

In non-magical Britain, no one outside the village knew she had a speech impediment as a child. If she'd grown up in London, she would've switched schools and that'd be the end of it. But in a little village like South Brent?

Back when she was in Reception, four or five years old, she had a lisp. Two doctors and speech therapy fixed it, but by then it was too late. To this day whispers followed her wherever she went, even into the grocer's when she went shopping with mum.
She knew that outside the village no one would be calling her backwards or developmentally challenged. No one would ask if her mum did drugs while she was pregnant. They wouldn't know to say it. The second she left the village, she was home free.

Mallory thought Hogwarts would be different.

But not one single person in Slytherin House told Harper to stop. She knew that didn't mean everyone hated muggleborns. No one wanted to be the first to step forward and face the ire of those casting their curses. Maybe most of the kids who stood silent thought it was wrong, but believed they were alone in in their disapproval.

Or maybe not. Perhaps they all stood silent because they all wished Mallory would go away. Disgust in their eyes at her defiance, disgusted by her blood.

Another House might not be so bad.

But if she did ask to transfer Houses, the Slytherins would think she was doing it because of what they'd done. They'd think they'd intimidated her into it. And they'd be right.

Worse, there was no guarantee the other Houses were any less biased than Slytherin. She didn't know enough to say one way or the other. When her new House found out she ran from Slytherin, they'd think her a coward, regardless.

Of course, there was always the option of going to the professors and telling them what happened last night. However, in her experience, professors just slapped the bullies on the wrist. Then you got a reputation as a tattletale and they really start picking on you. Which was exactly why she was tempted to stay in Slytherin and say nothing about the incident to anyone, even though she'd be miserable.

Mallory could leave the school, but that would be even worse. She was magic—Real Magic, like something out of a comic book. She wouldn't be writing home to tell mum she wanted to leave. No way, not her.

Fine. So that was it, then. She was staying in Slytherin House. Now she just had to convince herself to step into the common room. No big deal.

She felt like throwing up.

Change tracks, then. After class she'd dig into her trunk and try out her Walkman. And then when it worked, she'd turn the volume all the way up while playing Black Sabbath. She bet these purebloods never heard that before.

The thought didn't help.

Okay, fine. After class she'd grab her Walkman and her X-Men comics and head outside to sit by the Black Lake to read. Maybe she'd hunt down Colin and see if he liked comic books, too. She forgot to ask yesterday. She'd get through classes, and then she'd have hours of time to herself with no mum lecturing her to read real books, and no dad telling her to straighten up her room.

That was it. She could do this.

Mallory squared her shoulders and stepped into the common room.

One or two older kids glanced over at her when she walked in, but returned to their conversations. There were only a few kids in the room. Malfoy was having an impassioned rant with his two
goons. He was talking loudly, but his two lugs weren't audible over the hum of conversation.

"A car! He flew a car to school— no, they're not supposed to fly— he's obviously just doing it for the attention."

Flying cars? *Witches and Wizards had flying cars?*

"Stupid Potter. Spotted by muggles, too. Guess it's not enough to have the magical world worship him—"

Right. Nevermind. Who cared about celebrities when there were flying cars? *Actual flying cars!* She wondered if Colin knew already. Probably, because Potter was his hero or something. This was definitely going into her letter to Danny.

Wizards had flying cars. It was like the future, only with magic.

Just then a herd of older boys stomped into the common room. Mallory's face froze mid-grin.

The boys didn't look in her direction, not even once. For that matter, they didn't even look healthy. Their skin had a grayish hue and they had dark circles under their eyes like they hadn't slept. She recognized one of them as one of the boys who'd sneered at her last night.

The two older boys who'd glanced up when she entered the common room waved the others over. Mallory let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"Merlin. What'd you two do last night?"

She decided to take that as a sign to get out of the Common Room before anyone stopped her.

" Seriously? It's the first day of class. What'd you do, mix Angel's Trumpet with Euph—"

She slipped out the stone door before he finished his sentence.

The dungeon corridors were uniform gray stone, rough and damp. Each footstep echoed down the empty halls.

Mallory wasn't about to wait for someone to guide her to the Great Hall for breakfast. The whole point was to avoid the other Slytherins, not seek them out. Luckily, she was pretty sure the secret entrance to the Common Room was to the right last night, so she went left.

Five minutes later she wasn't so confident.

Mallory ought to have reached a staircase by now, but the corridor showed no signs of ending. Instead, it extended far into the distance, candlelight dimming when she tried to focus on the end.

She shoved her hands under her armpits. The dungeons were cold, even in September. She didn't understand how witches and wizards did it, wearing nothing under their robes.

Another minute or so of walking down the corridor and she realized the end of the hallway looked no closer than it had well over six minutes ago. Maybe she had a concussion?

Mallory gently prodded the back of her head. It stung and throbbed. She grimaced. But then, she'd gotten concussions before and never—

Stupid. This was a school of magic. Maybe the corridor was magic, or something. She turned around and—
A moment of disorientation

— she was in a hallway with tall windows, sunlight streaming in, warming stone. A couple students were walking past her, older years. Mallory ignored them and took a hesitant step towards the window, peeking out.

She was several stories up, looking down on the Quidditch pitch. Right. Magic hallway. How did that even— she'd been under the lake before! It was too odd, weird and a little scary.

The older students were gone, but a portrait on the wall was having a conversation with its neighbor.

"Hullo." Mallory said.

"Oh hello dearie. Is there something you need?"

"I'm a first year. And it's my first day. I want to go to get breakfast. Would you tell me where that is, please?"

The woman in the painting blinked behind her glasses.

"You're lost, dearie?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, such a shame! I remember my first day. I found myself lost twice on the way to breakfast, and that vanishing stair swallowed my whole foot. It was fearfully embarrassing."

"Did you get it back?"

"Pardon?"

"Did you get your foot back?"

The woman tittered behind her fan. "What are they teaching you dears these days? Now, you're on the second floor," the woman in the portrait pointed, "go in that direction and you'll reach the Grand Staircase. Can you find your way from there?"

"Yeah, thanks."

The Grand Staircase was a massive structure. What looked like tons of staircases were moving unsupported by anything, randomly shifting positions. It was like a death trap straight out of *Indiana Jones*.

Another group of older students were passing her. She followed them onto the stairs before she could change her mind.

At the second staircase down, they all jumped over one step. Mallory didn't, and found half of her leg sunken into the stair for her trouble. She squeaked out a "Help!" and one of the older years gave her a hand out.

The older students, who were third-year Ravenclaws, turned out to be very helpful. They cheerfully doled out generous helpings of advice on which hallways to avoid and where the traps were. Apparently, there was a room on the fifth floor that vanished on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the bathroom walls on the seventh floor oozed orange goo on alternating Sundays. But the goo came out of clothes with the application of vinegar and a few spells found in the library, so it was
The Great Hall's ceiling reflected a cloudy sky, dark gray hinting at rain later in the day. Mallory was unnerved. Two floors up the sky looked clear blue with sunshine. Hogwarts was weird.

Slytherin table was almost full, and Mallory squeezed herself into an empty space at the end of the table. She sipped her pumpkin juice, which was surprisingly sweet and just a little spicy, and wolfed down a proper breakfast.

No one spoke to her, but that was fine. She wasn't up to speaking with them, either. An older student, maybe a sixth or seventh year, was sitting next to her and having a loud conversation with friend.

"fault, pure and plain!" said the taller boy, who had a ruddy complexion. He looked like the sort to play sports, skin chaffed and hair ruffled like he stuck his head in a tornado.

"He was fine when he taught muggle studies," spoke the short boy with a nose shaped like squashed cauliflower. "He gave no homework and spent the entire class rambling on about some ancient muggle war. It was just like History of Magic, only he wasn't a ghost."

"Like I said, bloody awful."

"No, I'm telling you, it was that trip to Albania that did him in."

A third student, an older girl with brown hair and shrewd eyes, leaned in. "The circumstances under which he fled are suspect. I'm surprised none of you have made the connection, yet."

The tall boy with a ruddy complexion and the short boy with the cauliflower nose twitched the moment the older girl started speaking.

Mallory would've happily ignored their conversation, except the boys' reaction to the girl caught her eye. The moment she started speaking, they turned in her direction and leaned in. And it wasn't in the way older boys do when they think girls are pretty. This was something else, and Mallory couldn't put a name to it.

"Don't hold us in suspense, Farley." said the shorter boy.

Farley's red-painted lips curved up into a small smile, and she shifted in her seat to face the boys, "consider the timing of his disappearance. What else happened right around December?"

"Er— maybe, I—"

"Dumbledore's mad puzzle rooms," the tall boy spoke over the shorter boy, "I heard tell a bunch of Gryffindors tried sneaking in again, but all the duds were deserted."

Farley smiled.

"Oh, right," said the short boy, "weren't there venomous tentacles in there?"

"No, the Devil's Snare," said the other.

"Right," said Farley, cutting them off, "and why do you suppose the corridor's contents vanished the moment Quirrell did?"

The tall boy raised his brows, "oh, he's dead, isn't he?"
"Perhaps," said Farley, turning back to her food. They were very obviously meant to take away from it that Farley knew more and she wasn't telling.

"Oh come off it," the shorter boy rolled his eyes, "Hogwarts is one of the safest—"

"Not with bleeding Dumbledore in charge," said the other boy.

"Well, if it was so safe then why'd he leave halfway through the year?"

"The curse, obviously."

"Something'll happen at the end of the year, sure. But no one's died during winter holidays before."

"Speaking of, what do you expect will happen to Lockhart? Anyone started up a betting pool yet?"

Mallory took a forkful of her eggs.

The empty seat next to her, which had been previously and mercifully vacant, was now filled by none other than Darla Rowle.

Mallory took another bite of her eggs.

"Hello, Mallory. Are you alright?"

She swallowed the bite of eggs and narrowed her eyes at Rowle.

"I'm just coming over because we wanted to make sure you knew where Professor McGonagall's office is, to switch houses, you know?"

Gemma Farley looked over and and raised one imperious brow at Rowle. "You can't switch houses."

"She's a muggleborn. There's never been a muggleborn in Slytherin before. They'll make an exception for that."

"And they've never allowed a student to switch houses before, either. Forget it, Rowle."

Darla Rowle frowned at her, and turned back to Mallory. "Well then, you'll just have to ask to go home."

"No."

Rowle sighed. "I wish you'd rethink your decision."

"Nope." Said Mallory, eating another forkful of eggs.

Rowle scowled and opened her mouth to say something else. Mallory was about to smother the girl in her soggy breakfast if it weren't for the unearthly howling that erupted from the other side of the Great Hall.

"RONALD WEASLEY! HOW DARE YOU STEAL THAT CAR—"

A red-haired boy at the Gryffindor table was turning a violent shade of puce as bright as his hair while an animated letter screeched at him.

"—ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED — YOUR FATHER'S FACING AN INQUIRY AT WORK—"
There was a moment of utter silence in the Great Hall, before everyone burst out laughing. By the
time the whispers and giggling had died down, Darla Rowle was gone.

Gemma Farley gave Mallory a pensive look. Actually, Mallory recognized her. She was the prefect
from last night.

"You ought to have just told her that you would leave."

"But I'm not."

"I figured as much, but it'd buy you time. They'll get over it eventually, once you've proven
yourself worthy of our magic. And then you could tell them that— oh, that you'd gone to the
professors, but they didn't let you go home. Then they'll blame it on Dumbledore and leave you in
peace."

"Clever, but that's really not the point."

"I'd worry about survival first, and making a point later, if I were you."

Mallory shrugged, and went back to her eggs.

Professor Snape glided down from the professor's table, carrying with him a stack of timetables.

Potions, Herbology, Flying Class, and Astronomy. Mallory's heart sank when she read her's. It
wasn't that the classes were boring. Flying on broomsticks looked neat, and potions sounded like
something out of a storybook, but—

She'd been banking on going to two or three classes, and then having the rest of the day to herself.
If the classes were all in a row, she could just follow her classmates to the next one.

There was a big gap between Herbology and Flying, and another big gap between Flying and
Astronomy. Astronomy was at midnight. It was a little thing, having to keep checking her watch
for the time, but it didn't feel that way today.

Breakfast was over, and the students were getting out of their seats, milling about before ending
conversations, and wandering in the direction of the entrance. Mallory followed behind Rowle and
the other first year Slytherins. She stayed a few paces behind, wary of them noticing her.

A moment of disorientation and she lurched forwards, chin smacking onto the stone floor. There
was a smattering of giggles. Mallory blinked. Right, she'd been tripped.

She picked herself up off the ground, grimacing at her stinging palms.

Her Housemates were already walking away, glancing back every moment or so, giggling. Mallory
scowled at them and brushed off her robes. Arseholes.

She stomped past them, glaring. She'd be fine. There were directions scrawled on her timetable. If
other people could sort them out, then so could she, nevermind the vanishing stairs and unending
hallways.

The potions classroom was dimly-lit and smelled of strong chemicals. Along the walls there were
shelves of bottles and dried plants. Preserved animals peered out with lidless eyes from the confines of their jars. Mallory looked away.

Colin was sitting towards the back on the right side of the classroom. Mallory made a beeline towards him.

"Mallory!" His face, which had before been pale and a little green, lit up the moment he saw her.

"All right?"

"All right. Did you hear about Snape?" He hissed.

"No, why?" she frowned. "He's strict?"

"Beastly, I heard. Completely biased to Slytherin." he blinked. "Not that I have anything against Slytherin, mind, but you should've heard some of the stories! He's a nightmare."

She shrugged, and sat down next to him. "How's Gryffindor treating you? Has anyone ragged on you for being muggleborn?"

"No, not at all. Everyone's been great. Did you know I got to meet Harry Potter? He drove a flying car to school. It was wicked! And he almost got expelled."

"Yeah I heard. There was some pointy-chinned prick talking about it in the common room. But anyway, no one's said anything to you about being muggleborn?"

"Well, no, I mean, a few of them asked me some really stupid questions like, you know, 'what's a telephone?' and 'how do muggles keep their food preserved without magic?' But besides that they were great. They showed me warming charms for my robes, and how to tie my shoes with magic, and how to brush my hair with magic— they've all known how to do it since they were kids. It's really weird, 'coz I thought we all had to wait to get our wands when we turn eleven, but turns out they were all using their great-grandparents' wands for years. But it's okay, because they said they'd help me catch up."

Mallory felt an ugly, hot feeling growing in her throat but she swallowed it down.

"Neat! You'll have to show me those spells." If the words came out funny, Colin didn't notice.

"Sure, and then you can show me what they Slytherins taught you. It'll be a trade."

"They didn't. But I found out there's a spell you can use to give someone boils."

"That's awful. Why'd you want to do that?"

"Well, I wouldn't. I'm just saying I heard of it." Experienced it, more like.

Professor Snape stalked into the classroom with a bang, slamming the door shut behind him as he glared down the aisles of students. His gaze lingered on Mallory for a moment, before he spun around and started lecturing them in sharp tones.

The first five minutes of class were interesting, but then it turned boring fast. Mallory liked the idea of potions. They sounded wicked, but the process of making them looked to be both boring and difficult.

She fidgeted in her chair, glancing at her watch. Class wouldn't be over for a while, so she got out her journal and started crafting a draft of her letter to Danny while listening to Professor Snape with
Mallory's first act as a witch had been to break the Statute of Secrecy. She'd spent all summer bragging to Danny about how she was going to a secret magic school, and when Mallory bought her books, they'd both poured through them.

Mallory had wanted to practice some of the spells, but mum had confiscated her wand the day they bought it. Professor McGonagall went with them into Diagon Alley and told mum that absolutely no magic was to be practiced outside school. Mum knew Mallory well enough to hide the wand instead of trusting her to obey the rules.

That didn't stop her or Danny from trying to find it, though they were unsuccessful. They did discover that dad had been gambling again, and that mum had a couple bottles of vodka tucked away in the back of the car.

Attempting to blackmail either of her parents failed in spectacular fashion. She was grounded, and Mallory's mum told Danny's mum to ground Danny as well, since he was the mastermind behind that particular plot.

After that, they'd mucked about with potions. Unfortunately, none of the ingredients could be found in the shops, and replacing things like "knotgrass" with plain grass from the yard didn't work.

Danny promised to write her twice a week, and wanted to know all the details— because if he wasn't allowed to go to the cool adventure school, then he'd at least want to read about it.

Dear Danny,

My classmates are terrible. I want to come home.

She scratched that page out, crumpled it up, and tossed it into her bag. It made her sound like a baby.

Then, all the background noise, also known as Professor Snape's lecture, ceased.

Mallory looked up—

— and found Professor Snape staring straight back at her.

"Miss Hopkins," he paused, "you will not interrupt my class again, do you understand?"

There was an awkward silence before Mallory realized he was waiting for an answer.

"Sorry, Professor."

He went back to lecturing them on the cure for boils, though his gaze lingered on her every time she looked up. It was nerve wracking.

She scrawled in a few notes on the cure for boils. Porcupine quills, if used incorrectly, would somehow make it blow up. And it'd give people boils instead of getting rid of them.

"Yes, Mr. Harper?"

"May I be excused?"

Snape scowled. "If you aren't back in five minutes, I will mark you absent for the day's lesson."
"Yes, sir."

When he walked past Mallory's desk, he kicked over her bag and hissed "Mudblood!"

Colin spun around in his seat, gaping at him. Mallory nudged him with her elbow and hissed at him to be quiet. Last thing she needed was Snape to blame them for causing another disruption.

Snape, fortunately, was writing down directions on the board, and hadn't noticed. Mallory went back to her letter. The bottom half of her page was devoted to it. Mallory didn't feel confident enough in her ability to fool Snape to keep her journal out on her desk.

She didn't want to tell Danny about the bullies. He'd feel bad that he couldn't be there to help her. But she didn't want to make the magical school seem too great, either, because then he'd feel left out of the fun.

_Dear Danny,_

_Magic is neat, but kinda hard. The potions teacher is strict. The school divides the students into four groups, and my group has a snake mascot. I found out flying cars are real, and the friend I made on the train was sorted into another House. It's rotten, because my house is—_

Colin nudged her arm and whispered, "I'm really your friend?"

Mallory froze.

"Sure." she muttered.

"Cool!" he whispered back.

She felt a knot in her uncoiling. Colin might actually end up being a real friend. Well, so long as he learned to stop reading over her shoulder. Suddenly she really hoped he hadn't read her first letter.

She stopped writing the letter and doodled a bit on the corner of her page. Snape was still talking. She checked her watch. Ten more minutes. The time couldn't pass fast enough.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a shape approaching, but it was too late. Harper made an exaggerated show of tripping, _coincidentally_ knocking her notebook off of her desk. Snape stopped lecturing.

"Mr. Harper, collect yourself and return to your seat. Miss Hopkins, clean up the mess on the floor."

"But Professor! She tripped me!"

"Would you like me to deduct points from Slytherin, Mr. Harper?"

Harper blanched.

"Miss Hopkins, one more interruption and you will receive a detention."

"Yes, Professor."

Mallory picked up her notebook, brushed it off, and returned to her desk. She itched to tell Professor Snape after class that Harper had knocked all her books off her desk, and that he'd attacked her with magic the night before, but then they'd feel justified when they escalated the bullying.
She was on her own, here. There was no Danny to back her up, but by the same logic there was no Danny to get hurt if things went wrong.

On that note, who cared if they felt justified? They were bullies, and the professors should know it, and so should her classmates.

She was the girl who stood up to bullies in South Brent. Mallory planned on being a proper real-life superhero when she grew up. If she couldn't handle a few stupid bigots, then what was she even good for?

Class ended, and Mallory confirmed plans with Colin to go over some of the spells he learned later that day after lunch. Then she waited for the class to clear out before stalking up to Professor Snape's desk.

"Professor Snape, I want to report a case of bullying."

He put down the stack of papers he was leafing through and looked up. "Report it, then. But if it is some minor case of squabbling over name calling, then you are wasting my time."

"Are we allowed to use spells on each other? Like, say someone dangled me upside down, threw a bunch of stinging hexes at me, paralyzed me, and blinded me with magic. Would that be a minor case of squabbling?"

"No." He put down his stack of papers. "You're reporting that this happened to you?"

"Yes. And this morning Harper knocked over my books when he pretended to fall, and called me a mudblood."

"I see."

"And they've threatened that if I don't quit Hogwarts or switch houses they'll hurt me more."

"This sounds all very dramatic, but do you have any proof that they've behaved in this manner?"

"My shoulder's banged up, and so's my head. They dropped me on it."

"Unfortunately, that is proof of nothing, Miss Hopkins. For all I know you tripped."

"Right." the backs of her eyes burned a little. "Would you at least keep an eye out? If you see something, that'd be proof."

"Miss Hopkins, I have enough impositions on my time without monitoring the petty squabbles of first year students." He picked up his papers again, and she was dismissed.

Mallory spent Herbology fuming. Snape was an utter piece of shit. She hoped he got his face smashed in some day. As for the bullies? Well, Mallory had an idea. She and Danny had looked through her textbooks over the summer, and they had talked about the pranking potential for a number of the spells and potions. If she practiced enough, she might be able to deter them from bothering her.

Her experience with bullies was limited in South Brent. Classmates had called her names, sure. And on one memorable occasion, Robbie Turner punched her in the nose. But it was only a few of them, like the Turner twins and their friends. Once her parents got involved, the majority of the bullying ebbed off.
Sure, the Turner Twins glared at her and said some nasty things, like that her mum should've aborted her, or that she was a spaz, but Danny and Mallory would fire right back at them. And if anything got too intense, a teacher would usually step in and tell them to clear off.

Those were the rules in which Mallory, Danny, and the Turner twins operated, and those rules prevented anything too awful from happening to any of them.

Hogwarts was a whole different story. This was, Mallory thought, like living with Richard and Robbie Turner around the clock, only worse.

Herbology, at least, was in the greenhouses. It was a relief to not be sitting in a stuffy classroom. The smell of dirt and grass reminded her of home.

In spite of that, she was ready to kick someone by the time Herbology was over. Harper continued his little fun fest, knocking her pot of dirt over and smacking into her shoulder whenever he walked past her. Professor Sprout made them both go sit on opposite sides of the greenhouse as to not disrupt one another, even though Harper was the one doing the disrupting, not her.

On her way to lunch, Rowle stopped her.

"Are you going to leave Hogwarts, now? There's still time, you know."

So that was her game. Have her little minions annoy Mallory until she cried uncle. Well.

Mallory flashed Rowle a winning grin. "Not on your life."

She bounced on her toes with glee when Rowle's almost-hopeful expression crumpled into distaste. Mallory was thwarting a villain, all proper-like with banter and everything.

And make no mistake, Rowle was a super-villain. After all, the girl did have superpowers. Granted, Mallory didn't think she wanted Rowle as her arch-nemesis.

She'd always imagined it'd be someone cooler, a Doctor Doom or Magneto. Rowle was a spoiled brat too used to getting her own way. Bit pathetic, really.

Darla Rowle sighed. "Look, I'm trying to be your friend in this. You know they won't stop until you leave. Is magic worth all this? I mean, I know it is, but you've hardly been here for a day. If you leave now you'll hardly know what you're missing."

Mallory glared. "I'm not quitting Hogwarts, especially not because of you."

"Oh, that's what it is." Rowle grimaced. "So, you were picked for Slytherin, and you are a muggleborn. That means you must be cunning and ambitious, right? I mean, for the hat to ignore your blood."

"Guess you should just get over yourself, then, if that's what you think."

"No, I meant, you must respect cleverness and self-preservation. And you know we'd respect you more if you left, because staying here just means getting hurt until you can't stand it anymore."

"Right. That's definitely what you'd believe. Or maybe you'd just think how funny it was how you tricked the muggleborn into running home to her mummy."

"No, we'd respect you if you left. You'd be showing us you know your place, that you respect tradition and order."
"Go fuck yourself, Rowle."

And with that, Mallory stomped off to the Slytherin table. Unfortunately for her, that was where Darla was headed as well. It made it more difficult to make a dramatic exit.

She sat down next to a different bunch of older years, maybe seventh years; they looked pretty old. The student next to her had put down his paper (something called *The Daily Prophet*.) Bored, she picked it up and started leafing through it.

Mallory needed a distraction from Rowle's words before she went over there and socked the girl right in the nose.

There were moving pictures, like the portraits lining the Grand Staircase, but they didn't seem like they were aware of themselves. She reckoned they were more like videos stuck on repeat.

The older Slytherin's friend nudged him and gestured towards Mallory. The boy whose paper she'd been reading looked over at her.

"Sorry." She paled.

"I'm done with it." the boy shrugged and returned to his conversation.

*Well, it seemed not all Slytherins were completely terrible, then.*

The paper was boring and more than a little strange, Mallory thought. Mostly because she didn't understand what they were talking about.

It wasn't all confusing. There were some parts that made sense. "*Bathilda Bagshot missing since last week from her home in Godric's Hollow!*" was plain enough, but then there were paragraphs like this:

"A reminder that Occlumency is illegal Since 1752. All books And papers containing information on 'Occlumency,' Or the words 'Occlumency,' Or the words 'Occlumens,' should Be Brought to the Improper Use of Magics Office for immediate Burning. If Someone You Know is an occlumens, or talks About occlumency, please Report it to the Improper Use of Magics Office. Failure to do so will result in a stay at Azkaban."

She wanted to ask someone what Occlumency was and why it was banned, but the paper said talking about occlumency would result in some kind of punishment (the word "Azkaban" sounded ominous,) so she didn't want to risk it.

The front page was almost funny. *The Invisibility Task Force reminds You that it is inadvisable to talk Loudly about Magic at King's Cross Station. We Heard you, and so did the muggles. Thank You for your cooperation.*

According to this, flying cars were completely illegal. And the red head's dad, the one who's mum sent him a screaming red letter, had one in his garage. He was in all sorts of trouble, and everyone was terribly amused about the whole thing, since the father was supposed to be one of the ones stopping people from mucking about with muggle technology.

It was a bummer about the car, though. She would have liked a flying car.

Mallory finished her lunch, with more of the strange but tasty pumpkin juice, and went back to the dorm to get her Walkman.
She and Colin were going to try out their electronics and practice some spells. He also mentioned a group of muggleborn students that meet every Friday, so that looked to be a plus.

She sort-of remembered the path back to the common room, but she asked another portrait, just in case.

As it turned out, she didn't need to worry about which blank stone wall was the entrance. Darla Rowle, Leland Harper, and Graham Montague were standing outside the door in a rough semicircle, giggling over something.

She froze.

It was her trunk, and it was on fire.

She wouldn't have known it was her trunk, except for that it'd been upturned all over the stone floor of the corridor, and she recognized her things strewn across the floor.

They hadn't stopped at upturning it and lighting the actual trunk on fire. Her comic books were shredded. The Walkman was smashed to pieces, and her clothes and robes were likewise destroyed.

They were watching her, waiting for a reaction. The Watchmen comic books were Danny's. He gave them to her as a going away present. She clenched her jaw so hard her teeth ached.

She didn't quite feel like it was happening.

Tossed under one of her texts was a tuft of familiar black and white fur. Nibbles, her panda. It was nearly headless, fluff scattered on the stone floor. She ignored Rowle and the others, reaching for him, hand shaking. Someone said a spell and her panda went flying out of reach.

More laughter. Her throat felt thick. Again, panda, but it was knocked away, tossed down the hall spewing fluff.

Enough. She stomped over her things, standing right in front of Rowle, nose-to-nose. For a second she imagined punching her. Rowle fingered her wand, nervous.

"Don't you think I'll forget this. A week from now you'll wish you'd never touched my things."

She spun around to walk away. Mallory wasn't going to give them a reaction. They were doing this to humiliate her, to scare her back to her home.

Rowle snorted, and then started laughing.

Within a split second, Mallory's fist was cracking across Darla's nose. She staggered and squealed, clutching her face. Harper and Montague let out startled shouts. Mallory used their surprise to punch Darla in the stomach, snatch the girl's wand out of her hand, and throw it to the floor.

A spell blindsided her, and Mallory's head smashed into the wall with a sickening crack. She let out a hoarse scream, stunned, vision going black around the edges.

"One of the professors will have heard that." Harper said.

Mallory fought back nausea from her place on the floor. She'd fallen on the floor. When..? She needed to get out of the corridor, find a professor or an older student who wasn't a Slytherin.

"Don't tell me you're backing out, you nithing." Darla drawled, as much as the girl could drawl
through a bloody nose.

If Mallory was going to do something, she needed to do it now, while they were distracted. Mallory shifted her arm under her, leveraging herself up against the stone wall. She jolted when the movement sent burning pain down her shoulder.

"Oh no you don't. You're not going anywhere—" Darla picked her wand up off the ground.

Mallory's eyes settled on Harper. He was fidgeting, eying both ends of the corridor like a professor was going to come at any second. The weak link.

She sucked in a deep breath, ignoring the way chest protested at the movement.

"AAAAAAAAAH—!" Mallory screamed, high and loud, the noise echoing in the empty stone corridors.

"Shut her up!"

"Shite, don't be thick, run!" Harper yelled before running off himself down the hall. He was around the corner and gone before she'd even blinked.

One down.

Montague looked between Darla and Harper, face all twisted up like he was constipated—come on you know you want to go. Run away you fucking coward, go! —before chasing after Harper.

"Wait up!" he shouted, turning the corner, out of sight.

Two down. Just Rowle left. Rowle alone, hand cupped around her bleeding nose, face twisted in pain. Clenched in her other hand was her wand. Damn. Should've snapped it when she had the chance.

Adrenaline wasn't helping, narrowing her focus to Rowle and Rowle alone, making it hard to think. Mallory's head throbbed with every heartbeat and her shoulder hurt so much she had to fight down the instinct to tense up every time she took in a breath. Shouting had aggravated it.

Rowle was talking. White noise drowned out by Mallory's involuntary gasps of pain. Breathe in. Breath out. Flinch halfway through and whimper. Something was trickling down her forehead. Blood.

Mallory reached up with the arm that wasn't hurting, gently touching the side of her head and—

She gagged, doubled over. There was a piece of—breathe in through the nose—bone sticking—don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it—

Rowle's face appeared right in her line of vision, hand removed from her nose. Mallory jerked back. The girl was grinning, blood smeared across her teeth, coloring them pink. She had to get away—her skull—don't think about it—

She needed to get away from her. If Rowle tried tossing her around in the state Mallory was in, she might—don't think about it. Mallory got her arm under her, leaning against the stone wall, trying to leverage herself up.

Her ankle let out a sharp protest when she shifted it, and Mallory let out another involuntary groan
of pain, eyes sliding from Rowle. Focus on breathing.

"Hey! Hey, what's wrong with you?" Ears ringing, but she could hear Rowle's voice, rising towards panic.

_Breathe in. Breathe out. Don't flinch; do it slowly. Come on, you're fine. You're fine. Breathe, you're fine._

Good. With everything still, the only movement being her breathing, the pain went from a staggering eleven to a solid seven. Mallory's eyes flicked to Rowle, who'd stopped grinning and had gone pale, leaning over Mallory.

Mallory let out another groan, this time playing it up. Rowle grimaced, looking nervous. There weren't any older students to fix the damage, and she suspected this hadn't occurred to Rowle until just now.

Then she got a really stupid idea. If it got rid of Rowle—

Before her body could tense in anticipation, Mallory let her arm go out from under her, sliding to the ground. Her head thunked against the cold stone.

Mallory's vision went white and she _screamed._

_Shite, this was such a bad idea._ But past the haze of pain she heard Rowle's shoes smacking against the stone, running away.

It worked. She'd gambled and it worked.

Rowle was gone.

Mind blissfully blank, she focused on breathing slowly, fighting down the nausea that was bubbling in her throat. _Give it a few minutes._ She just needed a few minutes, and she'd be okay. She'd get up—she needed to get up. Her things were on fire.

Just another minute. She'd get up.

Chapter End Notes

_Lines from the Howler adapted from "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets," both the film and movie._
Mallory's eyes snapped open. She hadn't realized she'd closed them. The gritty stone of the dungeon floor pressed against her cheek and she grimaced. Still cold. If she'd passed out, it couldn't have been for long.

Her arm was squished under her ribs, chest burning and shoulder going numb. Numb was good. Probably couldn't use her arm to support her weight, though.

She stretched out her legs and rolled onto her stomach, avoiding jostling her ankle. The sudden movement sent blood rushing to her head and she groaned. Dizziness. Her chest was compressed, which upped the pain a bit each time she took a breath, but the weight was off her shoulder. It hurt, but she was thinking past it.

Someone might come. She was right outside the Slytherin common room. Someone might come and hurt her more. Her things were burning and she needed to get up.

She rolled, awkwardly, levering herself up with the uninjured arm. She was on her knees, then, upright.

Shuffling on her knees back to the wall, she used her good arm to brace herself against the wall. Tentatively, she put a little weight on her ankle to see if it'd hold. It twinged, but otherwise held. Good. That was good.

She deliberately did not reach up to check the cracked in her skull, with a piece of bone—don't think about it. If she thought about it, she'd throw up. Besides, she was standing, moving, thinking — if she could do that, then it couldn't be that bad. It probably felt worse than it was. It's fine.

Mallory limped to her trunk, snatching up one of her ripped t-shirts to douse the crackling fire consuming her comic books and new witch's robes. The t-shirt was tossed over the flames.

She cursed when it promptly caught on fire.

Mallory stomped on the burning t-shirt, grinding the heel of her trainer into the fabric. Yelping as a flicker of flame seared her shin through the jeans, she jerked back. She hopped on one foot, lifting up her robes to inspect the damage.

The leg of her jeans wasn't on fire, but a spot the size of an egg on the fabric was discolored. When she put her foot down, the jeans rubbed against the skin of her shin. She hissed in pain.

Hopping around had her head throbbing again, chest and shoulder complaining in tandem. She wobbled, but kept her feet under her. Focus.

Fuck it, she needed to get this fire sorted. A few more ginger stomps and the flames fizzled out.

Brushing aside the ruined t-shirt with her foot, she stared down at the embers. Her books were
blackened, comic books curled and crumbling from the heat. Flakes of singed paper had worked their way into the laces of her sneakers. She clenched her jaw so hard the veins on her neck stood out.

Mallory exhaled slowly. Now was not the time. She walked over to where they'd tossed her panda and scooped him up, clutching him to her chest. Nibbles was a little singed but mum could fix him with some needle and thread. The rest of her belongings weren't so lucky. The comic books that hadn't been burned were shredded. And her walkman lie smoking on the ground, tapes fizzling as they melted in their cases.

The walkman had been her birthday present two years ago, and she'd been collecting tapes ever since. Danny and Mallory would sit with their cassette recorders, waiting for a good track to come on the radio.

She balked at the thought of replacing them. She wasn't even sure if she could. The cassettes' value weren't in the songs written on them, but in the memories she associated with them.

The cassette with the Black Sabbath songs had sparkly purple stickers covering it instead of a label. Mallory won the stickers in one of those claw-games. Whenever she looked at it, she remembered the dim lights in the arcade, she and Danny elbowing their way through the carpeted maze of blinking machines and sweaty teenagers, hollering at one another over the tinny music.

She wondered how long it would take her to forget those moments, without the little physical reminders to jolt her memory.

The comic books were likewise irreplaceable. Half of the pages were doodled over, and there were pencil marks on some of the full-page spreads from the week Mallory and Danny decided they wanted to be comic book artists when they grew up. They attempted to learn to draw by tracing over pages from Watchmen. He'd given her his copies to her when she left for Hogwarts, a memento to remember him by.

The things that were replaceable likely were all expensive, and she dreaded having to mail her parents to inform them that her brand-new schoolbooks and robes were destroyed. Mum and dad hadn't let her see the prices when they'd bought them, but Mallory knew her parents.

When they didn't let her see the price on something, that meant it was very expensive.

Amid the tangle of textbooks and robes was her smoking trunk. It had been kicked on it's side, and the fire had eaten through the decorative fabric covering the slats of plywood that made up the lid. She righted her trunk with her foot, wincing when the movement irritated the burn on her leg. The back panel was cracked, but otherwise it looked like it would still manage to hold her things.

Mallory coughed and covered her mouth and nose with the sleeve of her robe. The chemical smell of burnt fabric itched the back of her throat.

She started dumping her clothes and robes back into the trunk, along with the ruins of her books and tapes. She had to do it one-handed, since moving her one arm sent throbbing pain across her shoulder and chest.

The cauldron was too hot to touch and she burnt her hand attempting to pick it up. She cursed and used the sleeve of her robe to lift it, eyes watering as the fabric rubbed against the burn. She held her breath to avoid breathing in the air.

In the back of her mind, the clock was ticking down, urging her to move. Mallory needed to be out
of this hallway and fast before someone tried entering or leaving the common room and saw her. Beat up like she was, she looked like a target. Weak.

Nothing was folded so all her things took up more room than they did before. That meant she wouldn't be able to close the lid of her trunk. Not that she could even if everything fit. The metal of the hinges must’ve warped from the heat, and attempting to close the lid resulted in an awful creaking noise that set her teeth on edge.

Fine. It was fine. The trunk didn't need to be closed to get herself and her things out of this stupid hallway. Mallory gripped the handle of the trunk, past the instinctive flinch as burnt skin met plastic handle—and tugged. The handle snapped.

A shriek fought its past the gorge in her throat. Frustration. She ran her hand through her hair, wiping the tangled strands away from her sweaty face. The hand came away bloody. Fuck it. Mallory's face drew into hard lines. Rowle was going to hurt for this.

She pushed the trunk down the hallway, since she couldn't pull it by the handle. One of the plastic wheels must have melted or something, and the trunk kept swerving to the right. Twice she almost gripped the trunk with her right hand to steady it, only to remember her shoulder when she went to move her arm. It send black spots dancing across her vision and she had to stop to gasp for air.

Her left hand just burned. It was blistering red, the pain impossible to completely ignore, but not quite so bad as moving her right arm.

Likewise, every step had the fabric of her trousers brushing against the burn on her left leg. Her back and shoulder were hurting her, as well. She was embarrassed to admit to herself that she was leaning on the trunk to keep herself upright. The adrenaline was wearing off and her injuries were sharpening into focus.

She'd almost forgotten that her ankle was twisted, buried under the sharpness of all the other pain. Now it was all coming back with a vengeance.

Focus on something else.

She imagined Rowle and Harper lurking around the corner, having realized no professors heard Mallory's scream. Would they have gone and gathered an audience to witness Mallory's humiliation?

Could they predict where she was planning on going? She didn't know, and the anxiety clawed at her stomach. She passed multiple hallways as she retraced her way up to the Great Hall. At each one her pulse pounded in her throat. She was waiting for Rowle to pop out of the shadows, but she never did.

It was odd that the girl hadn't shown up.

Thinking about Rowle was preferable to thinking about the crack in her skull. Or how she wasn't sure this was even the way to Snape's classroom.

The hallway outside the potions classroom was empty but for a gloom dim candles couldn't quite penetrate. She considered waiting for the class to be over. But it was just after lunch and she suspected their class had just started.

Mallory didn't think she could wait that long. Her vision was going blurry around the edges, turning the candlelight into indistinct blobs. They drifted in and out of focus.
Between her head and shoulder, she was lucky to be standing.

She knocked on the door.

A moment later after some muttering and the scrape of chairs against stone, the door opened. A confused-looking older Gryffindor wrinkled his nose when he saw her.

"What do you want?"

"I need t'see Profess'r Snape."

"Hold on a sec—" the boy turned around, "Professor? There's a firstie here for you, a Slytherin."

A moment later and Professor Snape was sweeping out of his classroom, glaring down at her in the damp of the dungeons.

Snape was the obvious solution to her problem. Back in South Brent, there were three main strategies for dealing with bullies: she could ignore them, intimidate them into leaving her be through force, or intimidate them by allying with someone they feared.

She doubted they'd get bored with her. By her reckoning, they didn't hate Mallory, but what she represented to them. Their insults weren't about anything she'd done. In their eyes, she represented muggleborn-ness. And they were disgusted by muggleborns, feared them even. That kind of hate wasn't going to disappear overnight.

But fear? That was a tool she could use. Remembering how it felt to have her classmates in South Brent fear her left Mallory feeling sick and uncomfortable. But the thought of Rowle fearing her sent a burst of sharp pleasure through her.

There was one major problem, though, with intimidating them into leaving her be. Accidental magic was unpredictable. She was out of her mind when Harper dangled her upside down, but her magic did nothing to protect her.

This wasn't the first time it failed her, and in the past she'd been grateful for that. If every time she got angry her accidental magic caused someone's hair to fall out, a muggle adult would've noticed and done something. Now it was inconvenient.

She'd practiced wandless magic for a couple years, with Danny watching on in awe. But that had its own drawbacks. She had to be in the right headspace for it to work, all calm and quiet so she could focus. It was hard enough to focus without any distractions, but to do it in a fight? That leapt straight into wishful thinking.

Proper witch's magic, using a wand, wasn't an option either. Her classmates all learned magic before they arrived at Hogwarts, so it'd be like getting into a fistfight against a group of teenagers. She'd lose, every time. Mallory didn't think she was any smarter than the average first year, and she didn't learn any quicker than her classmates, so trying to catch up to them now was out of the question.

And she needed to do something fast, because her classmates had escalated this from name calling to beating her up and burning her things in under 24 hours.

That left only one strategy open to her, intimidating them by allying with someone they were scared of— and they were afraid of Snape. She had been hesitant to use this strategy this morning, thinking things would only get worse if she were to snitch on them. But now they'd burnt her trunk and beat her up worse than she'd ever felt in her life. That changed the game. The normal rules
against snitching on classmates weren't in play.

Snape crossed his arms, peering down at her over his large, hooked nose. "Getting into fights, I see, Miss Hopkins."

"I defended myss'lf." She was already on her back foot, and they'd barely started talking.

Behind Snape, the sound of laughter reached them through the wooden door of the classroom.

Snape grimaced like he was in pain. "Stay here. Don't move."

He whirled around and entered his classroom, slamming the door in Mallory's face. She heard him telling the students— voice muffled through the wood— not to blow themselves up while he was gone. The door opened again, and the professor shut it behind him.

"My office. Now."

Two hallways down, a sharp turn to the right, and they were in Professor Snape's office. She couldn't help the grunts of pain that slipped out as she hurried to keep up with the professor's long strides. Walking after she'd stopped moving made the pain flare up again, worse this time around.

She was panting by the time they reached his office, shirt soaked through with sweat, skin cold and clammy to the touch. Spots danced in front of her eyes, and every breath sent a jolt of pain through her chest.

She coughed, grimacing at the coppery taste coating her tongue. She wiped her mouth and nose with the back of her hand, dread pooling her stomach when it came away red.

Was it coming from her nose or her lungs? How could she tell? Mallory clamped down on her panic. Magic can fix it. She'd ask Snape. Last night they'd made the boils go away, so they could make this go away, too.

Snape shut the door behind her with a click. Mallory's eyes were glued to the trunk in front of her, leaning most of her weight on it. It rolled forward a little and she almost stumbled when the trunk went out from underneath her.

The professor's shoes squeaked on the hardwood floor. She heard the creak of leather as he lowered himself into the chair behind his desk.

Mallory looked up as the professor opened his mouth, no doubt to continue scolding her for defending herself. She started speaking in a rush before he could start.

"I want t'report a case— ss'veral cases— of bullying. My houss'mates, since I've arrived, they've been'ttacking me, they—."

She could feel her innards shriveling under his cold stare.

"Name calling and juvenile insults are not an excuse to participate in a muggle fist fight. I don't care why you were brawling with fists, or how provoked you were, hitting another student is unacceptable."

A little part of her couldn't believe it. He was an adult. He was supposed to help her.

"I haven't even told you what's happened yet."

"I already know. Miss Rowle and her cohorts visited me not ten minutes ago, reporting how you
viciously attacked them in the hallway."

That's where the girl had gone. Damn her.

"That's not--"

"Furthermore, they say you verbally attacked them last night, using vulgar language unsuited for a witch of Slytherin House."

Fury lit her blood on fire, and Mallory stood up straight, body's protests all but forgotten in the face of this moaning sack of shit in front of her.

"They tell you 'bout th'part where they called me a mudblood, used spells 'nd paralyzed me? Or what 'bout this." She kicked her trunk with her right leg, hard enough that a couple books tumbled off the pile and landed with a dull thump on the floor. Her cauldron, which had been wedged between the books and some burnt robes, made its bid for freedom, rolling over the side of the trunk before Mallory could catch it.

The cauldron hit the floor with a clang, rolling to a stop at the professor's desk.

"And just what am I supposed to do with this mess, Miss Hopkins?"

"Arseholes did this 'nd you're letting them get away with it!" She practically spat at Snape.

"Mind your tongue." the Professor was looking at her like she was one of those specimens he had fermenting in jars.

"That's it?" Her voice rose in pitch. "That's all you have to say? Get them in here, give them detention. Do something!" she was shouting at Snape, and he—

"I've no reason to bother them," he interrupted, words clipped and precise. "There's no evidence they've done anything wrong."

"What, you think I did this to m'self?"

"For all I know, you might have. Salazar knows the the things children do in order to get attention." His lips were curled with disgust.

"You can't believe that, this's bollocks! You're juss taking their sides 'coz they're purebloods."

"Don't be foolish, Miss Hopkins. And mind your tongue before I'm forced to take points off from Slytherin."

"I don't give a rat's arse 'bout points. They wrecked my things and they attacked me! I'll cuss all I like!"

"Detention, Miss Hopkins. Tonight, straight after dinner."

In a magnificent feat of self-control, Mallory managed to restrain herself from kicking Snape in the shins. She clenched her fists, both of them, the sharp pain in her right hand driving out all thoughts of digging her nails into Snape's ugly face.

She felt reckless, willing to do something that dragged herself down with him. Didn't care about strategy. He was an adult, an authority figure, and he was breaking all the rules. Adults were supposed to protect her. If they weren't doing that then what were they even for?
"Right, 'coz that's what you're here for, protect them and keep the rest of us in line—"

"Keep speaking and I'll assign you another detention, Miss Hopkins." He ground out her name like she was a particularly vile bundle of ooze.

Well, then.

For the second time that day, she started shoving her belongings back inside her trunk, fighting past the water gathering in her eyes, blurring the the outlines of her burnt textbooks.

Professor Snape flicked his wand, and her trunk jumped to attention, all of her belongings leaping back into it. The lid creaked, attempting to shut. Mallory treated him to a sharp and burning glare. She grabbed her trunk by the lid and opened the door of his office, planning to slam it behind her once she'd left.

"Miss Hopkins?" The professor said, voice deceptively soft, like the hiss of a snake.

"What?" She growled. He was ruining her dramatic exit.

"You say, 'What, sir.' Watch your manners. Moreover, I did not say you were excused. Sit down."

Spine stiff with her back to Snape, she quickly wiped her eyes, disguising the motion as wiping sweat away from her face. He wasn't going to get the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

She stomped over to the seat across from Snape's desk and threw herself into the chair, glowering. The motion sent a spike of pain through her head, and she bit her lip suppressing a scream of pain. She waited in silence for almost a minute, vision blurring Snape in and out of focus. He said nothing, staring at her with unnerving black eyes. She realized, then, what he wanted.

He was waiting for her to say it.

Mallory's eyes narrowed. This was a power play, the same one he'd tried once before to her today.

"What, sir?"

"I trust you have a quill and parchment in that hopeless mess?" His voice was dry, amused.

"Yeah, so?"

"I expect that the next time I see you in class, you'll be writing on parchment with a quill. Failure to obey this instruction will result in more detentions."

There was silence, for a moment, as she absorbed what the profess— what that greasy bastard, said. Her body felt oddly light in her seat, yet leaden. She met the dour professor's stare, eyes insolent and blank. "I'll remember it for potions, sir." The 'fuck-you' was implied.

He was one of them. She'd said he was defending the purebloods to piss him off, to get him to react. Adults didn't like being called bigots, they wanted to be thought of as open-minded, but he— he was one of them. Another Rowle or Harper.

"You'll remember it for every class. You're not a muggle, Miss Hopkins. Witches and Wizards write with quills on parchment."

She stood, pain briefly flaring but ignored. She wanted to be standing while he sat.
"I'm not a muggle, I'm a muggleborn and I'm fucking proud of it, sir."

"Detention tomorrow evening after dinner, for cheek." His almost-smirk of amusement was gone, replaced that lip-curling sneer.

Right. Of course. "Am I excused?" She choked out, hating how her voice broke halfway through her question.

"Yes, now get out of my office and to the Hospital Wing, before you bleed all over the Dungeons."

She tossed him one last hateful glare and banged out of his office, grabbing the lid of her trunk to haul it behind her. The tail end of the trunk smacked into the doorframe, and once it was out of the way she slammed the door as hard as she could. Fuck him.

She was going to Professor McGonagall. This wasn't going to stand, she wouldn't let it. She didn't deserve to be treated like this, not by her classmates and certainly not by a teacher.

Mallory didn't stop to think where she was going, or how she was going to get there. The world felt off kilter, like someone'd drained out all the color. Her head was ringing and her arms felt possessed by constrained emotion.

The hallways passed in a blur, a tightness in her chest that was far from physical grew as she choked back tears. She hated him. Maybe more than even Darla Rowle and Leland Harper. He was an adult.

Worst part was, he'd probably done this to others. Other muggleborn kids, maybe. Because that's what you do when you're bullied like this, you go to the teacher. And she imagined other kids going to Snape, only to get turned away. She wondered what happened to them. Did they give up? Was that why there weren't other muggleborns in Slytherin? Surely not every muggleborn was sorted into the other three houses.

Was she wasting her time going to McGonagall? She almost halted at the thought, swallowing hard past the lump in her throat. No, McGonagall was strict, but she was a proper grown up. She escorted Mallory and her parents through Diagon Alley when they went to get supplies, and seemed to like her family.

Right before she reached the Great Hall, she stumbled into the two people who she just knew were about to make today even worse. Her heart sank.

"Hey look, Gred, it's the firstie!" said the twin to the right. It was the red-headed twins from the train. They were both standing in front of the entrance to the dungeons, stupid grins smeared across their faces. This was probably funny for them.

"Yeah, whatsername, Candace? Rita?" The twin to the left— Gred? shrugged.

"S'Mallory, you nitwits. Piss off." She stood up as straight as she could bare it, chest puffed out and face scrunched into the angriest expression she could manage. Go away go away go away—

"Hey now, what's got your knickers in a twist? Some muggleborn upset your perfect pureblood world?"

"Looks constipated, if you ask me. Bet the little snakey needs to find a loo."
She almost choked. "I'm not constipated, m'angry. Maybe you lot need glasses. And I'm a muggleborn."

"What? I didn't know they let muggleborns in Slytherin."

"Neither did the ress-of- Slytherin." She gave them a nasty look, silently begging them to move.

The twins looked from her to her burnt trunk. "You're not leaving Hogwarts, are you?"

"No." She wanted to, though. More than anything, more than magic, even.

"What are you doing out here with your trunk, then? It looks a bit… singed."

"Taking it to Professor McGonagall. Snape doesn't believe me."

"What about?"

"Th'Slytherins wrecked my things. They're bastards, 'nd I punched Rowle in the face, but she deserved it."

The redheads raised their eyebrows and looked at each other in unison.

"I think," said the twin to the right, "that we're going to get along brilliantly. But how about we take you to the hospital wing instead?"

"Yeah, you're a bit bloodied up there." The twin to the left frowned. "You know you have a great big lump on your head, don't you?"

Mallory rolled her eyes. "Yeah," she crinkled her nose. "they—" and made a vague gesture towards her head.

The boys grimaced, sympathetic. "We'll walk you to the hospital wing, alright?"

"No, I have't talk t' Pr'fessor." If she was all healed up when she went to speak with the Professor, then it wouldn't have the same impact. She needed to tough it out until she got to the woman's office.

"You need to go to the hospital wing. You—"

"I have t'talk to her. S'important!"

"Yeah, I reckon it is but—"

This time the other twin interrupted him, "Let's just take her to McGoogly. I'll bet she sends her straight to the hospital wing, anyway."

George frowned. "Did you see her head? Because that looks pretty bad."

"Alright. Then I'll get the Professor and you take her to the Hospital Wing." The twin turned to Mallory. "Does that work, little snakeling?"

Mallory almost stumbled over her own two feet. "She has t'see what they did."

"Sure, Gred'll get her and then you'll have Professor Pussycat on the prowl."

"Righting wrongs and punishing evildoers."
Mallory blinked. That might work. "Okay."

Forge turned around and headed up the Great Staircase, presumably to fetch the Professor.

Gred waved for her to follow him, and so she followed, limping. The burn on her leg felt worse from all the walking. Her shoulder was throbbing, and the palm of her hand looked woefully alarming. The skin was blistered and stung in a way that was hard to ignore. Not to mention the way her head was all— *Right. Not thinking about it.*

George grimaced when he saw her attempting to push the trunk. She'd automatically grabbed it with her left hand, only to hiss in pain when she realized her mistake. She went to switch hands but the twin stopped her.

"Hold it." He flicked his wand, levitating the trunk. She gave a sigh of relief. That burn had been killing her.

"So you're a muggleborn in Slytherin?" He asked. "You might be the first." She was thankful he didn't comment on her inability to continue pushing the trunk. Her pride couldn't take another blow today.

"Yep. Think there've been others, though. Said if I didn't quit school, they'd kill me. I'll bet there were muggleborns in Slytherin before, 'nd the pathetic bastards offed 'em."

"Right. What was your last name again?"

"Hopkins. Mallory Hopkins. I'm not lying. Why'd I lie about being muggleborn? 's not like I want to be picked on."

"I'm George Weasley, but you can call us Gred or Forge. It's easier that way."

She could see why. They were identical, down to every last freckle.

"Nice to meet you, then." She eyed the twin cautiously for a moment.

"And don't worry. I believe you. Have to have a name to use when we brag to all our friends about the first year that beat up a death eater's kid." He winked.

"What's a death eater?"

"From the Wizarding War, with You Know Who. They were his followers."

"I don't know who."

George looked back at her and frowned. "No one'll speak the bloke's name so they call him that — *You Know Who.* They're too scared. Stupid, really. Name rhymes with Mouldy Shorts."

She snorted. "You're joking."

"No, look it up."

She nodded and her head swam. She wiped her running nose, and in the dim light her blood looked black on her hand. Not from her lungs, then. Just a bloody nose. And ringing ears. And a cracked —

"Are you alright?" George asked.
"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Yep. Fine. All good."

She took a step forward and wobbled, but remained upright. Her balance felt a little off and she stumbled— George grabbed her by her shoulders, steadying her.

She couldn't—

Someone was saying something. Hospital wing? She blinked hard, clearing her head. The spots in her vision swarmed and—

There was something tickling her nose. It smelled a bit like sweat and Danny's gym bag. Mallory opened her eyes— when had she closed them? — and saw red. Specifically, ginger.

She burned with mortification.

George was carrying her in a fireman's hold.

She must've fainted. She didn't faint, not like some girly girl princess in a fairy tale. She was supposed to be a superhero like in comic books, not a—

"Here we are!" They'd stopped in front of a large wooden door. George nudged it open with his foot, balancing impressively for someone carrying a first year on their back.

Inside, she saw rows of white beds lined up neatly in a row and—

"—hit her head pretty bad. Said a bunch of Slytherins did it. Dunno what else, didn't ask."

After that, the world fuzzed out.
The Hospital Wing smelled like Snape's potions classroom, though it lacked the ambiance. Large windows let in golden light, warming the crisp white sheets of the hospital beds.

Mallory was lying on one such bed, pale and clammy. Madame Pomfrey started fussing over her the moment she'd come into the Hospital Wing. She was now over at the supply closet, getting medicine.

George was still here, slouched against one of the beds. He was waiting for his twin.

Madame Pomfrey rushed back to Mallory's bed with an armful of little vials. A moment later, the nurse shoved a vile-smelling potion under her nose. Mallory grimaced. "I need t'wait for Pr'fessor McGonagall."

"You'll do no such thing. Your brain is swelling."

"She won't believe me if she doesn't see."

The nurse ignored her. "Open up." Mallory shook her head.

"You need to drink this, right this instant." Mallory kept her lips glued shut. The professor had to see the cuts and scrapes, otherwise she wouldn't believe her.

"Young lady if you don't drink this potion right now, I will spell your mouth open."

Mallory's eyes widened in alarm, and she clenched her jaw shut tighter.

"Miss Hopkins!" said the most welcome voice on the planet. "What on earth has happened to you?" Professor McGonagall came bursting into the hospital wing, a ginger menace trailing behind her.

Mallory slumped with relief.

"Will you take your potion now?" snapped Madame Pompfrey.

Mallory opened her mouth and downed the potion, and then five more. They were all revolting.

"This is a blood replenishing potion. You've lost quite a bit of blood. Drink up!"

Mallory did, grimacing all the while. "Am I alright, now?"

"You'll need to lie here and rest, preferably overnight. I don't believe what you children get up to—fractured skull on the first day of school!"

"S'not like I meant to fracture it."
"Of course not, dear."

Professor McGonagall stood off to the side, lips pursed. Madame Pomfrey pulled her aside, presumably to inform the Professor of Mallory's condition.

Both twins were lurking about the Hospital Wing. Mallory was almost relieved they were present, just in case the magical healing worked too fast. They could prove that Mallory wasn't lying about her injuries. The question was why were they wanted to hang about the Hospital Wing. Mallory frowned, and the drying blood on her forehead cracked a bit.

"Miss Hopkins?" Professor McGonagall asked as she sat down next to Mallory's hospital bed. "Who did this to you?" Her voice was uncharacteristically soft.

"Darla Rowle, Leland Harper, and Graham Montague burnt my trunk and all my things in it, because I'm a muggleborn." The anger, which had drained away thanks to the combination of exhaustion and the twins' distractions, came rushing back.

"Last night they all dangled me upside down and hexed me— petrified me and made my skin break out on boils. Today they did something— um, it was a spell that flung me into a wall, I don't remember what it was called. Hit my head and—"

She took a breath, "And they said that if I didn't leave school or switch houses, they'd have me expelled."

Mallory left out the part about Snape. Adults tended to trust other adults. And she didn't know if Professor McGonagall was the sort of adult who, upon hearing that another adult said something, would immediately side with him.

"I see." Professor McGonagall looked grave. "Did you report this to your Head of House?"

"Snape, you mean?"

"Yes, Professor Snape."

Damn it. That meant she had to tell her.

"He didn't do anything about it. Instead he gave me a detention and told me to stop acting like a muggle. And when I told him I was a muggleborn an' proud of it, he gave me another detention." She swallowed thickly around the lump in her throat.

It wasn't straightforward deceit, telling Professor McGonagall that. but if the professor confronted Snape about the detentions, Snape would tell Professor McGonagall that he gave it to her for disrespect. Then Professor McGonagall might begin to doubt everything else Mallory said.

She'd have to say something about the cursing, then. Mallory grimaced.

"He said I wasn't being respectful because I cursed, but I wasn't cursing at him. I was just upset. All my books are new, and now my parents will have to buy new ones, and new robes, and Snape doesn't even care."

"I think you ought to be more concerned about the damage they inflicted upon your person, Miss Hopkins." The professor tapped her wand against her hand, pensive. "Do you know what spells they used to hurt you?"

"No, Professor."
"Do you know the names of everyone involved?"

"Harper, Rowle, Montague. There were others, but I don't know their names."

"I see." McGonagall's face was stern, giving Mallory no clues about what she was thinking.

Mallory bit her lip. "What're you going to do about Rowle and the others?"

The professor's face looked pinched. "I'll investigate the matter."

Mallory couldn't tell if she was brushing her off or would seriously look into it. She'd no doubt talk to Snape, if she did. This wasn't going how she'd planned it.

"Snape thinks—" she almost said that Snape thought she did it to herself, but changed her mind at the last moment, "that Harper and Rowle wouldn't do something like that."

For a professor to say that he didn't have proof of abuse was awful. But it sounded like the sort of thing a teacher might say, if he couldn't be bothered to help.

Telling a kid they fractured their skull and lit their own trunk on fire to get another kid in trouble was absurd.

It went back to how adults tended to trust other adults before they trusted children. Professor McGonagall would likely think Mallory was exaggerating. And if Mallory was exaggerating about Snape, then maybe she was lying about the bullies, too.

Or she'd assume Snape had access to evidence suggesting that Mallory lit the trunk on fire, herself. People just didn't believe eleven-year-olds were that diabolical unless there was something wrong with them.

The professor's lips pursed. "I'll have a word with him."

"I have two detentions from Snape, and Rowle got none. It's not right." _They humiliated her, bullied her._ They ought to be in trouble, Mallory thought. They ought to sit in detention for a month, or be expelled.

"Two detentions?"

"The first was for cursing, and the second was for being proud of being a muggleborn."

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, expression tight in a way Mallory had trouble reading.

Mallory could've smacked herself.

Now that she thought about it, telling Professor McGonagall about Snape's bigotry was a bad idea. It was true that Snape told her to stop acting like a muggle. And he did give her detention for being a muggleborn, _but adults trusted other adults._

She hadn't been thinking when she first opened her mouth to Professor McGonagall. She was stupid, too distracted by her anger.

Professor McGonagall was starting out with different information on Snape than Mallory. She'd be seeing Mallory's claim that he picked on muggleborns through the lens of her previous interactions with him. Snape likely wouldn't spout anti-muggle vitriol in front of the stern Professor McGonagall. Not unless he wanted a slap across the face for his trouble.
Professor McGonagall could be entirely unaware that Snape was a bigoted shithead. That meant she might be doubting the things Mallory said more than she would, otherwise.

The professor cleared her throat, and Mallory snapped to attention.

"Might I suggest you avoid using coarse language in the presence of Professors? In the meantime, I'll be having a word with him about his students' behavior. If they attempt to hurt you again, come to me first, and I'll present it to Professor Snape. Are we clear?"

"Yes, professor." But if her gamble with Professor McGonagall didn't go her way, then she'd be back where she started.

She hesitated, and then asked. "Can't I switch houses? I'd be fine in Gryffindor. I've already made friends with Colin and Fred and George, and I'm plenty brave."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I'm sorry Miss Hopkins, but it can't be done."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "The Slytherin prefects told Rowle that too, but I thought I'd ask just in case."

The professor paused. "Did Miss Rowle threaten you in front of the prefects?"

"Yeah, and Harper and them hexed me in front of them too. They didn't tell them to stop until they saw Snape coming."

"I see. Was anyone else there?"

"The whole House, basically. They blinded me, so I couldn't see who was casting. I know Harper did, and this pointy-chinned blonde boy hexed me so I couldn't scream—"

"You told Professor Snape this?" Her tone was dangerously low, lips pursed in a thin line. Finally, Professor McGonagall was looking properly upset like she ought to look.

"Yeah, and he said I had no proof."

"Did you tell him the prefects saw it?"

Mallory frowned. "I think so. I said they did it in the common room, and that a lot of people were involved." Actually, she didn't quite remember what she said to Snape. She remembered being furious and yelling at him after class. And she might've said something about a bunch of people doing it, but she couldn't quite be sure.

"How many—" the professor cleared her throat, "Do you have any idea how many of them were casting spells at you?"

"Harper at first." She grimaced. "He had me dangling upside down in the middle of the common room. I don't remember much after that. I had boils on my skin. And they kept hitting me with— I think it was stinging hexes— and someone paralyzed me so I couldn't move and blinded me. I think that's when the prefect stepped in, I don't know. Everyone was laughing, or at least, a lot of people were." Her voice was small.

"I wish someone would've done something." Mallory mumbled. Was she laying it on too thick? She didn't want to give Professor McGonagall a reason to doubt her, another reason to doubt her.

The professor looked away, face clouded with anger. "This shouldn't have happened, and I'm sorry
this was your first experience at Hogwarts."

Mallory, who's skull was tingling as the potions knitted her fractured skull back together, considered that it could've been a lot worse.

"I just don't want to send my mum a letter saying she has to re-buy all my things." Mallory didn't think the school would refund them the items she lost. Adults loved their money. But it could act as leverage. If she made it sound like her mum would sue the school or demand reimbursement, then maybe the school would take the far less costly route of putting Rowle and Harper in detention for the rest of the year.

"Well, let me take a look."

Her trunk was parked next to her hospital bed, singed and crumbling from the stress.

The professor stood up and waved her wand once. The trunk as well as the objects inside it snapped back together, un-charred and whole.

"How did you do that?" Mallory's eyes were wide with shock and wonder. Alright, so mum couldn't ask the school to pay them money, but this was so much better.

McGonagall's lips twitched upwards. "The spell is called Reparo. I suspect you'll be needing it again, so you might want to read chapter four of your Standard Book of Spells."

"Thank you!" She hopped out of bed and tore through her trunk to find Mr. Nibbles the panda, whole again. Hugging him tight, she bounced with glee.

"Now I need to speak to Professor Snape, and you need to be in bed, young lady."

Mallory nodded, and hopped back up onto the hospital bed, Mr. Nibbles in tow.

With that, the Professor turned around and addressed the Weasley twins, whom she had completely forgotten about while trying to convince Professor McGonagall that she was pitiable.

The two red-haired boys were leaning against a hospital bed, fiddling with a piece of paper. Upon seeing Professor McGonagall, they shoved the paper into their robes and straightened.

"Mr. and Mr. Weasley." said the professor, eyebrows rising to her hairline. "why are you still here?"

The twin to the right spoke. "Well, we found this little snakeling by the Great Staircase looking lost."

"I'm aware," said the Professor, voice dry.

"And we escorted her here, all proper and responsible-like."

"And she was one step away from an unfortunate and imminent demise, so we thought we ought to wait and see if she needed help getting back to her common room from the hospital wing."

Professor McGonagall looked between Mallory and the twins, lips twitching as though she wanted to laugh.

"Indeed, I see you have made friends among the Gryffindors, Miss Hopkins." said the Professor.

Huh. So she gained points in the professor's book for being friendly with the twins? She wouldn't
"They're alright, for gingers." Mallory said, half grinning.

"Oi, you little brat!" said one of the twins.

"Way to treat us, after we helped you."

Mallory stuck out her tongue at them, and they made grotesque faces in return.

"Well, I don't suspect Miss Hopkins will be leaving the Hospital Wing until tomorrow. Though, you may keep her company so long as you behave. Is that understood?"

But then, Mallory might be reading this whole situation wrong. Danny was always the one who got people, understood what they were thinking and why. Some of it rubbed off on her, but she was a bit thick when it came to that. The professor might not approve of her friendship with the ginger terrors. Or maybe she thought the twins were funny independently of what she thought of Mallory.

"'Course, Professor."

"When have we been known to be anything but completely well behaved?"

The twins were not well behaved. This wasn't a surprise to anyone who spoke to them for more than five minutes. As such, the moment Madame Pomfrey turned her back, they were breaking her out of the Hospital Wing.

Mallory was torn, honestly torn, on whether or not to stay in the Hospital Wing. There was the matter of being sure that her recently-fractured skull was healed. Or she could sneak out to have a spot of adventure.

The adventure won every time.

"If you really punched a Death Eater's kid," said Gred, "we might just adopt you."

They were heading down the third hallway to the right of the Hospital Wing. A twin was levitating her trunk, because her shoulder and hand weren't finished healing.

"Yeah, you're way cooler than our little sister. She mopes around, going on about boys, like a proper ghoul."

Oh. Something warm bubbled up in her chest, loosening the tightness that'd been strangling her since she left That Slimy Bastard's office.

"All we'd have to do is dye your hair red." Gred rubbed his chin, contemplatively.

She giggled. "I'd look stupid."

"That you would, which would only make it funnier, wouldn't it, brother-mine?"

"Indeed it would." said the second twin.

They were climbing steps now, and Mallory was never so glad for magic, because her ankle didn't hurt at all.

"Is this a shortcut to the Slytherin Dungeon?" she asked. The twins were fun and distracting, but
she didn't want to go there just yet. She had to find a place to hide her trunk, and learn the spell *reparo*.

"As a matter of fact, it's not." said a twin.

Mallory frowned. "Then where are we going?"

"We might've overheard your conversation with ol'McGoogly."

Her face burned. She couldn't blame them, not when they'd been right in the room with her and couldn't help but overhear. She tried remembering exactly what she'd said, and what they might think of her now.

She'd sounded awful pathetic, hadn't she? On purpose to garner sympathy from the professor.

They glanced around the hallways, as though looking for errant listeners.

"I don't think McGoogly can do much." began Forge, hesitant. "We've seen stuff like this before. Snape's your Head of House, so the final word goes to him."

"Why would McGonagall lie?"

"Because you're an ickle firstie, and you had your head split open. She wanted to make you feel better."

"Sure, I'll feel better for no good reason. That'll help."

"Don't get snappy on us, now." said a twin. "We have a proposition for you."

"What sort?"

"We happen to have products we want to test, pranks and that sort of thing."

"And we might have a deep and abiding dislike for several Slytherins."

"And it appears we have that in common, though not for the same Slytherins."

"If you agree to test our products on *our* Slytherins, we'd be happy to give some to test on *yours."

"It's not the same as getting them into detention, but—"

"—they'll certainly regret setting your trunk on fire."

To Mallory, this sounded an awful lot like a trap. Not the sort of trap someone would set up in order to hurt her. But the sort of trap where there was a high chance of something going wrong. The twins didn't have any reason to care if she were caught. They would see it as a win-win: if Mallory succeeded, they'd get what they wanted. But if Mallory was caught, then Slytherin as a whole would suffer when she lost the house points.

There was also another scenario to consider— getting caught by the older Slytherins meant she'd be creating new enemies. She already had enough of those.

But if Professor McGonagall couldn't help her, she'd need a backup plan.

"Maybe, but that sounds risky. I mean, I might get caught and then I'd be in even more trouble, with more people. So I'd need help with something else, too." She could go to Colin for help, but
Colin hadn't been at the school any longer than her.

"What sort of help?"

"My trunk, yeah? What's to stop Rowle and them from burning it all over again, or stealing my things. I need a place to hide it where they can't find it."

The twins looked at each other. "I think we can come to an accord, Miss Hopkins."

"We know a place to hide your trunk."

"Though you have to swear not to tell anyone about it."

Mallory's nodded. "Okay."

"If you ever tell anyone, we'll get you with our experiments."

"Three times worse than whatever the worst thing is you can imagine."

Mallory doubted that, but she got the gist of it. "Right. Well, I won't be telling a soul, then."

They continued down the hall in silence for a minute, before the twins stopped in front of a tapestry. They muttered a word, and beckoned her to follow them. She bit her lip, suddenly regretting going with them for a moment. This was obviously some sort of prank. Then she remembered the never-ending hallway and moving staircases from this morning and poked her head behind the tapestry.

"Wicked," she whispered. Upon whispering the password, the blank stone wall behind the tapestry shimmered, morphing into a narrow wooden door.

"It is. This should take us pretty close to the lair."

The door opened, revealing a passageway that somehow managed to loom, pitch black and silent.

The twin that wasn't levitating her trunk lit his wand up like a torch, and disappeared into the passage. Gred followed, and Mallory sucked in a great gulp of air and went after them.

Inside, her nostrils itched at the musty smell, fingers twitching as she passed fluttering cobwebs dangling from the ceiling. It was a narrow passageway, so narrow that they had to walk single file.

It was only slightly claustrophobic.

The passageway halted in a dead end. Mallory tried peering around Forge— had they gotten lost? Gred knelt down, tapping the floor with his wand. He got to his feet and backed up. Mallory realized why when a whole portion of the floor vanished.

"Going down!" The twin jumped, her trunk following him.

Forge went next, and Mallory didn't hesitate. She wasn't about to look like a wuss in front of them.

She leaped, falling a couple meters before Forge or Gred caught her with a muffled oof.

The twin looked down at her, face twisted with concern. "We could've levitated you down, you know."

"I'm fine now." She said. "I'm tougher than I look." And she was. Her head barely hurt at all. The
only thing that stung a little was the burn on her hand and leg, though the burn-paste was healing it as they spoke.

"Tricksome and slippery, these snakes are." said Gred. "We shouldn't underestimate her, even if she's only a wee little thing."

He let her down and she popped to her feet, dusting off her robes.

"Quite right you are, my twin. Why, I remember when we were wee little ones."

"Surely not!"

"Indeed I do! We braved the dank dungeons of Slytherin, the loathsome Lair of the Filch, even hung all our dormmates' underwear off the Grand Staircase one fateful evening."

She laughed, eyes flitting from twin to twin as they waved their arms about.

"Why, I think I do remember that! The scales have fallen off my eyes and now I see!" he halted in place, slapping his hands over his face and wobbled backwards on his feet.

Gred gripped his twin's arm, avoiding the flailing, gangly arms.

"You do?" Gred shook him. "What do you see? What do you see brother-mine?"

"The light! It's blinding me!" Forge sagged in his brother's arms. Gred dropped him, and the other stumbled before righting himself.

Mallory could barely move for awe. She thought to herself then, that she might have just found her idols.

"No, that's not the light, it's your hair." said Mallory. "It's ginger, did you know?"

"Oi, you!"

It wasn't a room, an abandoned classroom, or a hidden nook in a broom closet. It was a far, far better hiding spot than that.

Behind a mirror on the fourth floor there was a collapsed secret tunnel winding under the grounds and into Hogsmeade, a nearby village. Useless for travelling, the tunnel was turned into a rather narrow, cramped, but elaborate secret lair for the ginger pranksters.

It had a low ceiling and narrow width, but the twins managed to squeeze in a series of benches lined up in a row, which one could slide past sideways.

On the benches were scattered papers, textbooks, and bubbling cauldrons, lit by low flickering candlelight. There was even an apparatus that looked straight out of a muggle scientists' lab, copper and shiny with knobs and a glass beaker.

At one point they must've needed proper storage space, and added shelves. She could tell they'd done it themselves— the wood was newer and less worn than the beams that held up the ceiling. The shelves stored bottles of potions ingredients, some of which she recognized from the potions classroom. There were vials of pickled frogs' eyes, infusions of Wormwood, and fennel seeds; all neatly labeled and glimmering in the candlelight.

The ground under her feet was packed dirt, worn down in the middle from all the footsteps over the
years. As a result, the workbenches weren't level, so the twins had propped them up with old tattered books.

In other words, the place was awesome.

"This is the best secret lair I've ever seen," she grinned at them. They looked utterly pleased with themselves.

"Well, you won't be telling anyone about it, understand?"

"Yeah, I said I wouldn't."

"Just making sure, midget."

"I'm not a midget. I'm tall for a first year!"

"For a firstie, exactly."

"I might be taller than you when I'm older!"

The twin closest to her ruffled her hair and she glowered at them. Right. She couldn't kick them in the shins because they were helping her, no matter how tempting. She took a deep breath, sucking in the earthy smell of their damp lair, and releasing it.

No kicking the twins. Got it.

"Anyway, what's that?" She gestured towards the copper contraption on the table just past the hole in the wall. There were roots and dirt growing through the brick there. She hoped it wasn't the roots to that whacking tree.

Green fluid was dripping from the contraption into the beaker, smelling faintly of licorice. They smacked her uninjured shoulder when she leaned over to sniff.

"Nevermind what it is, don't touch it. Or sniff it."

Mallory slumped with disappointment. "Alright. So where do I put my trunk?"

It wasn't a neat solution. Quite frankly, it wasn't much of a solution at all.

Mallory imagined herself in the role of Rowle. The girl wanted to humiliate Mallory. She spent time watching her, enough to notice when she came into the Great Hall to eat breakfast.

That girl would find it odd how Mallory still had clothes to wear and books in class, given her trunk was gone. Curiosity peaked and dissatisfied with the amount of damage inflicted on Mallory, she'd follow her, all the way to the twins' secret lair and discover Mallory's deception.

She then imagined Rowle's reaction, upon finding out that Mallory had hidden it from her for days. She'd destroy the trunk properly, this time. One can't reparo ashes.

Usually when someone fought back against a bully and won the bully would back down. Rowle seemed like the rare sort to escalate the situation, which she'd done since Mallory met her. From name-calling to curses and destruction of property.

"This can't be permanent." she told the twins. She didn't intend on telling them why it couldn't be permanent. No need to scare them into retracting their offer if they didn't realize she was putting their lair in danger.
Uh, we definitely weren't intending it to be.

"We figured we'd put some wards on the trunk for you."

"Give us a couple days."

"Oh," her eyes widened. "shite, thank you!"

They laughed. "No problem, really."

"We live with a bunch of nosy brothers."

"You wouldn't believe our brother Percy."

"Always trying to get us in trouble with our mum, going through our stuff for contraband."

"Gross," she crinkled her nose.

"Exactly."

"Do I need to take my stuff out of the trunk, if you'll be working on it?"

"Yeah, well, unless you don't care if we go through it to get it out of there."

"We won't go through the pile of stuff, promise."

Yeah, right.

"I'll take it out. Thanks again."

When the twins looked away, she took another whiff of the green fluid. It did smell like licorice. Weird.

While unpacking her things into a cramped corner, Mallory flipped through her spellbooks. The Professor said it was in one of her books, though she couldn't remember which one.

"Do either of you know how to cast reparo?" she asked, absently.

"Sure. Just make this movement with your wand while saying 'Reparo.'" He demonstrated, flicking his wand.

The other twin ducked under the table and grabbed a copy of The Daily Prophet. She caught it when he tossed it at her.

"Try it on that. Light the paper on fire and then repair it."

"Don't worry if you can't," said the other twin, "paper's rubbish, anyway."

Mallory frowned. "I don't know how to do that, either. I don't know any spells."

The first twin pointed his wand at the paper in her hand and said "Incendio!"

The paper caught fire and Mallory yelped, dropping it. She stomped on the flames, putting it out. They were in a tiny corridor help up by half-rotted wooden beams for fuck's sake.

"Alright, now, you repair it."
Are you kidding me? She thought. But the twins were watching her expectantly and so she took the wand out of her back pocket, and pointed it at the still-smouldering copy of *The Daily Prophet*.

"Reparo!" she said, and the paper immediately exploded into a cloud of putrid sulfur.

The twins coughed and waved their wands about, clearing the air. One of them, maybe Fred, sat down on a stool next to the table with the cauldrons. George, meanwhile, was hunting down another of his things for her to destroy.

This time, it was a plate they stole from the Great Hall. Though now they wanted her to set it on fire herself, and then repair the resultant damage.

She'd lit things on fire before, down by the river with Danny. Mallory couldn't imagine this would be harder than that. Before, she hadn't even owned a wand.

Mallory pointed her wand at the plate, which still had crumbs on it from some dinner long ago, and cast.

"*Incendio!*"

The plate exploded.

After that, the twins tugged her over to the door, away from their experiments, to try again on a new victim.

She cast it again, and the goblet caught fire, burning for a little before dying out. Mallory kicked it with the heel of her shoe, and the metal bent inwards. Neat.

"I did it!" She pointed, grinning from ear to ear.

"Great! We knew you could. Now repair it."

"*Reparo!*" she shouted, and the goblet cracked straight down the middle.

After her second attempt at repairing the goblet failed, she felt too bummed out to go again. They told her to sit down and try again in a bit.

"You'll get better at it if you keep trying." said one of the twins.

And so she did.

It was rather close to the time when Mallory was supposed to head down to the Quidditch pitch for flying lessons, and she had yet to decide what to do.

On one hand, she didn't want to go. Rowle would be there, and so would Harper. They'd hex her again.

On the other hand, going to class healthy and grinning would show everyone that she wasn't beaten.

If switching houses wasn't an option, then the proper course of action was to—

At that, Mallory's brain drew a blank.

Danny would know what to do. He was good with people in a way that Mallory couldn't
completely emulate. She couldn't imagine what Danny would do in this situation, because he knew things about how people thought that she didn't.

Without that information, she couldn't guess what he'd think.

But Mallory had picked up on some of what Danny rambled on about. Once he'd made fun of this girl in their year for cowering everytime she walked by older students. Danny had laughed and said it was like she was inviting people to kick her.

Mallory had told him it was a mean thing to say, and that no one wanted to be bullied. Danny being Danny used that to launch into a tirade about the roles people play. She didn't remember most it, but the gist of it was how the average bully didn't like prey that fought back. Being all hunched over and afraid said "I'm scared of being hit, because I know I can't win a fight against you."

If Mallory acted like she expected to be hexed, she'd get hexed.

Not showing up to class said "I'm scared of being hurt again, because I can't fight back." Which was true. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't afraid, or that she could defend herself.

Mallory could cast the fire charm and have it work most of the time, if you counted 'exploding violently' as 'working.' She was much less proficient with repairo, which hardly ever repaired the target. Usually, it did exactly the opposite. Being unafraid of bullies was easier when you could defend yourself from said bullies. As it was, she might manage to light Rowle's hair on fire after three tries.

And she didn't think Rowle would stand still and let her.

On the 'run away and hide' side of things, going to flying class challenged Rowle's authority. The bullies believed they had the right to say who can be in Hogwarts. Hiding from Rowle only confirmed Rowle's role as a gatekeeper. Hiding from her would legitimize that belief, in a way. Her classmates would see Rowle telling Mallory to go home, and then Mallory seemingly obeys by not showing up in class. It'd make Rowle seem powerful, which would be bad for Mallory, in the long run.

It seemed that the ruling class in Hogwarts was the purebloods, and they could get away with a lot because people would believe them over the dirty mudbloods. Those kids didn't think up of that insult on their own. They heard it from their parents and the adults in charge. Which meant Rowle and the others didn't expect to be punished for picking on Mallory.

Further escalation was possible.

Mallory thought, as the clock ticked down towards the start of class, how calling to mind Danny's thoughts did end up being useful.

She also thought that she wanted to be a superhero, and that putting yourself in danger is a part of that. She'd already hid once today, first thing in the morning. If she started backing down now, she might end up hiding all the time.

There was always an excuse to hide.

And Madame Pomfrey demonstrated her ability to heal a fractured skull in a matter of minutes, so the actual danger was likely far lower than she'd been imagining.

It was then Mallory realized she was talking herself into going, and that she really did want to go, anyway.
And so, Mallory chose to go to her first Flying Class at Hogwarts.

Mallory Hopkins was floating four meters above the ground on a broomstick, and she couldn't be happier.

After they were taught the basics and no major catastrophes occurred, they were taken to the Quidditch pitch and allowed to fly around. They weren't supposed to fly higher than the stands, or outside of the pitch, but Mallory's enthusiasm wasn't dulled.

She was flying. Granted, she wasn't very good at it. The broom flew jerkily and some part of Mallory was convinced the thing would drop out from under her.

But the sky was bright-blue above her, with white puffy clouds low on the horizon, and she couldn't keep her feet on the ground.

The Slytherins and Hufflepuffs had migrated to opposite sides of the field, and there was talk of starting pick-up games of Quidditch.

Mallory was told by the rest of the Slytherins that she was not welcome to play with them.

Mallory's response was colorful, and involved the obscene things one might do with a broomstick, if they were so inclined.

The only reason it didn't devolve into a bloody brawl was due to Madame Hooch's hawk-eyes, which were firmly affixed to the group of Slytherins, and narrowed in disapproval.

Which was, in part, why Mallory was now flying low loops around the Quidditch pitch, close enough to the ground that the fall wouldn't be fatal. Just in case.

Flying, she thought, made up for Rowle's rude comments. She was in the air, and actually flying. This was definitely going in Danny's second letter. She sent the first one right before class, and was now regretting it. He would die to know how flying on a broomstick felt.

On her second loop around the pitch, she noted that the pick-up game between the Slytherins had begun. She felt a momentary pang at being left out, before sliding her eyes over to the Hufflepuffs.

The Hufflepuffs were also playing pick-up Quidditch. Though, there were two Hufflepuffs that hadn't been included with the rest, and were floating a ways off by the stands.

With the Slytherins distracted by their game, Mallory felt safe enough to rise a few meters up, and was treated to the stunning image of the sunlight glinting off the Black Lake.

Higher up, the wind whipped her robes around her legs, and her dark hair blew away from her face once she angled into the wind. Fingers squeezing her broomstick, she turned and raced to the opposite end of the pitch.

It was brilliant, the adrenaline pumping through her veins as the stands turned into a colorful blur. Her eyes stung with the wind and her hands were ice on the broomstick. She was grinning ear-to-ear.

Then she noticed that the two Hufflepuffs who had been lurking by the stands were heading her way.

They were a boy and a girl.
"Hi! Do you want to play a game with us?" said the girl with a toothy smile and bright eyes. She had a smattering of freckles across her cheeks, and the bridge of her nose.

The boy was frowning at both of them, sunlight glinting off his glasses. It made it hard for Mallory to read his expression.

"Sure." Mallory said. "what sort of game?"

"I, for one, don't want to play any kind of game." said the boy with the glasses.

"Don't be a bore, Felix." said the girl, still grinning. "We could play Bridge Monster. Not sure if we have enough for cops and robbers, or anything like that."

Felix wrinkled his nose.

"Bridge Monster?" Mallory said. "I'm a muggleborn. I don't know any wizarding games."

She thought that saying it outright would prevent the girl and Felix from finding out later and howling with disgust that they'd wasted their time with a mudblood. More importantly, it meant she wouldn't have to waste her time with them.

"Us too. You didn't have Bridge Monster at your school? Knees and Below? Friday the Thirteenth?" the girl fired off the questions in a row.

Mallory shook her head.

Felix cut in. "It's boring. You get on a jungle gym and the Bridge Monster can't climb on it—"

"Sometimes they can," interrupted the girl, "depends on the rules. They might be able to only step on the metal pieces, or only use the equipment that's painted blue."

"As I was saying, in the official rules, the Bridge Monster can't walk on the—"

"There aren't any official rules," the girl interrupted again.

"There are, too!" said Felix, drawing back as if he were struck at the very idea of there being no official rules to the game.

Mallory noted that time was passing. Soon Madame Hooch would be calling them down from the sky, thought to put and end to it.

"What're the rules, Felix?"

The girl rolled her eyes, but stopped interrupting.

"The Bridge Monster can only tag you if they touch your knee or below. If they grab your arm, it doesn't count. Then the person touched is the new Bridge Monster."

"So it's tag, but you can only tag their legs." Mallory said, deadpan. Felix was making an unusual fuss over what amounted to a game of tag.

"Exactly!" said Felix, "except, not the whole leg, only knees and below."

"Why's it called Friday the Thirteenth?"

"Because it's scary," said the girl. "obviously."
"I don't see it." Mallory scrunched her nose up.

"Like a troll coming out from under a bridge," the girl said, voice low and dramatic, like she was reading from a story. "It grabs your ankles, and drags you down into its lair! Only to make you into another of its slaves!"

Mallory's lips were quirking up at that, though she and the girl were the only two of them amused. Felix was rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"We don't have a bridge, though." Mallory said.

"No, but we could play tag— knees and below."

Mallory grinned. "That works."

The girl lunged forward with her broom, but Mallory was expecting it, and shot up.

Laughing with delight, she yelled up at Mallory, "I'm Kit Jennings! Who are you?"

"Mallory Hopkins!" she yelled back at her.

With that, the game was on.

Felix shot in the opposite direction towards the Slytherin goalposts, the moment Kit lunged at Mallory. No doubt he guessed that if he stuck around, Kit would go after him.

Kit chased Mallory, who was racing towards the Hufflepuff end of the pitch. She was riding close to the edge where she did her loops before.

At the end of the pitch where she'd start heading back towards the Slytherins, Kit cut across.

She was catching up, and fast.

It was then that Mallory realized she was treating the pitch like it was a track or football field, and shot up into the air on a diagonal, putting distance between her and Kit.

She glanced back and saw Kit's face scrunched in concentration, and laughed.

A shrill whistle pierced the air, and Mallory glanced down to see Madame Hooch glaring at her. Oh, she'd gone too high up.

But Kit was waiting for her below, Cheshire-cat grin gleaming in the sun. She waggled her fingers at Mallory. Hi, I can't wait for you to come down.

Well, then.

Mallory twisted her broom and shot down almost vertically, speeding up way faster than she thought she could go. Kit was forgotten as she struggled to get control over her broom.

She leaned hard backwards, trying to slow down—

— a hand brushed across her back, flicking her hair—

— And Mallory leveled out four meters above the ground, narrowly missing both being turned into the dreaded bridge monster, and smashing into the ground.
Speaking of people who needed to have a run-in with the bridge monster, Felix was still on the other side of the pitch, safely lurking by one of the stands.

That was about to change.

Mallory sped down the middle of the pitch, Kit on her tail. She'd managed to get right in the middle, not too high or to low, not too far to the right or to the left.

Which meant if Felix tried to make a break for it to the other side of the pitch, all routes he took had about an equal chance of getting him caught by Kit. All Mallory had to hope on was that Kit was tired of chasing her, and would go after Felix, instead.

Felix did not take that lying down.

He dove into the Slytherin Quidditch match area, which until now they'd been avoiding.

The seven Slytherins were spread out around the hoops in a loose C, with the bottom of the C being the hoops. A dead-eyed boy with dark hair had the ball, and Montague was chasing him. Another girl with coke-bottle glasses and a severe hair cut was speeding to intercept Montague, but was knocked aside by Rowle.

Two Slytherins were guarding the hoops, Harper on one side and a boy she didn't know on the other.

Then Felix dove through the match and the dead-eyed boy swerved hard to avoid him, almost crashing into Montague. Montague took it as a sign from god and snatched the quaffle right out of his hands.

Harper, Rowle, and the girl with the coke-bottle glasses howled with outrage and started firing spells off at Felix.

Two fire charms, a menacing blue ball of fire, and an orange colored spell shot towards Felix. But he was too fast. Felix swerved hard to the right, narrowly avoiding the hot ball of fire that streaked past his ear.

A whistle blew, but Rowle and the others weren't stopping.

Kit took off like a javelin toward Montague, while Mallory slowed her broom and took aim. Four enemies were on Felix's tail. That they all missed was lucky, Mallory thought, and distracting even one of them would buy him time to get out of range.

"Incendio!" Mallory shouted, aiming for the back of Rowle's robes.

Rowle jolted forward on her broom, Mallory's fire-charm hitting its mark. She screamed and spun around, firing off three spells in quick succession.

"Langlock! Baubillious, Everta Statum!" Rowle cast, panting with sweat dripping down her forehead.

Mallory leaned out of the way of the Langlock, and straight into the yellow lightning. It smashed into her shoulder and she let out half a scream at the shock. It felt to her like shoving her hands into an electrical socket. Off balance, she couldn't avoid the third spell.

It ripped her backwards off her broom and into the air. As she tumbled, it occurred to her that it was the same spell fired at her in the hallway when she'd cracked her head open.
She flipped through the air twice before hitting the ground with a crack. Her already weak ankle snapped.

That wasn't the worst part.

Dead-Eyes' *tarantallegra* hit Felix's legs, and they started jolting around as though they were possesed, and then he shot off his broom straight into the air like was strapped to a rocket.

"Get down off those brooms right now!" screamed Madame Hooch, catching Felix with a cushioning charm.

Kit had been keeping Montague busy. She hadn't used any spells. Instead she dove at him like a living missile, forcing him to play a game of chicken she didn't think he wanted to win.

Now, only Harper and the girl with the coke-bottle glasses were firing at Kit.

"*Petrificus Totalis!*" shouted Harper, as Coke-bottles fired off a chain of *incendios*.

Kit froze in mid-air, stiff as a board upon her broom.

Mallory, frozen in horror, watched Kit shoot towards the ground, broom aflame.

A second later, the boy next to Harper managed to hit Dead-Eyes with a mis-aimed spell, locking the boys legs together so he couldn't steer the broom. Dead-Eyes howled in rage and aimed back at Hoop-boy, firing a yellow bolt *lightning*. It missed, and the boy by the hoops laughed.

"FIFTY POINTS FROM SLYTHERIN, EACH!" shrieked Madame Hooch.

But it was too late. Kit smacked into the ground with a sickening crunch, and Mallory couldn't think past the pain. Her leg and shoulder burned, and Kit was somewhere on the pitch. Kit needed help, but Mallory couldn't *move*.

In the end, every Slytherin first year besides Nerissa Brody exchanged jinxes over the Quidditch pitch that day. The result was a staggering loss of 350 points for Slytherin. Hufflepuff also lost 50 points for Kit's involvement.

And of course, all the Slytherins were blaming Mallory. But she obtained something far more valuable in the midst of their battle.

Kit Jennings and Felix Underwood, from that day on, could be counted among Mallory's friends.

Mallory was in the hospital wing. This was the second time in one day, and Madame Pomfrey was not happy about it.

"You are *never* to leave the Hospital Wing before you've been discharged, do you understand me, young lady?"

Her ankle had been set with a snap of the Madame's wand, and potions were working on fixing the broken bones. Sleeping in the bed next to her was Kit, with Felix holding vigil beside her.

Mallory promised not to leave, "the twins aren't even *here*," she said. The nurse narrowed her eyes and told Mallory she wouldn't be going anywhere, twins or no.

Once Madame Pomfrey was gone, Felix marked his place in the book and cleared his throat.
"Thanks for trying to help." His tone was clipped and precise, like it cost him something to say the words.

"You're welcome, but I think they went after you because of me, so I should be the one saying sorry," she said. It was true, she thought. Not only had Mallory acted with audacity in attending class and acting like she belonged, she then had the nerve to make friends and play games after Rowle and her mates rejected Mallory.

They'd been waiting for an excuse, any excuse, to go after Mallory and her friends.

"That's a bit conceited, don't you think?" asked Felix, eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

Mallory looked at him, and it occurred to her that he must be angry for what happened to Kit. And she was inadvertently redirecting that anger towards her.

"It's because we're muggleborns. They say I'm the first muggleborn in Slytherin, but I think they're lying," she said. "I can't be the first."

He nodded, and re-opened his book. Mallory let out a silent little breath of air. She was trying her best to avoid making any more enemies, given how many she already had in her own house.

Kit groaned in her bed and Mallory sat up, "are you alright?"

"I was on fire."

"Because you tried to fight a bunch of Slytherins." said Felix, lips curling when he said Slytherins.

"Am I an honorary Hufflepuff, then?" asked Mallory, tone deceptively light.

Felix gave her a flat stare, though Kit waved her good arm up into the air, and made a thumbs-up sign.

"I didn't need help." said Felix, "I could've gotten away, and then you convinced the Slytherin to help—"

"The Slytherin was happy to help, because she hates bullying." Mallory said, scowling at the back of Felix's head.

"You definitely did-so need help, Felix Underwood!" said Kit, pushing herself up in bed. Half of her face was covered in yellow bruises that were rapidly fading. Her arm was likewise bruised, and there were burns covering her shoulder.

Magical medicine meant there wouldn't be any scars, nor any lasting damage. It was also the only reason Mallory wasn't screaming and running for the hills.

"That's not important!" said Felix, voice going shrill, "you went and got yourself hurt when you didn't need to."

"I also rammed into that kid with my broom," Kit said, eyes crinkling as she smiled. "And you should've seen his face. He looked like he was going to piss himself."

"This isn't funny. You could've gotten really hurt." said Felix, arms crossed across his chest, book forgotten on his lap.

"I think," said Mallory, hesitant, "wizards and witches might look at danger different than we do, 'coz they can heal almost anything, you know?"
"Exactly, and the look on his face was worth every bruise." Kit said.

Mallory grinned, but was mulling over what Felix said. She couldn't figure him out.

Mallory tried to imagine the sort of mindset he'd be in to say that Kit had to convince the Slytherin to help, when he was being shot out of the sky. He might think Mallory was the sort of person who needed convincing to help people. Or maybe he thought Mallory's help was what made the Slytherins retaliate so violently.

"They're bullies, and they need to see we won't take it lying down." said Mallory. "People like that don't like victims who fight back."

"And I suppose you would know." said Felix. Of course it was Felix. Mallory's fingers twitched and she very deliberately didn't make a fist or punch the speccy git in the nose.

Kit pulled out the pillow from behind her back with her good arm and chucked it at Felix's head, which was almost as good as punching him in the face. It knocked him across the chest and the book fell off his lap. He snatched it up from the ground and glared at Mallory.

What.

She re-thought what she said, and realized that Felix thought that Mallory was a bully. He thought she knew what bullies didn't like because she was one. Which was a funny way to interpret her comment.

"I know because I was bullied." Mallory said, taking a gamble. "when I was younger I had a lisp and everyone made fun of it." She left out the part where Robbie Turner went home that day without his two front teeth.

Showing her squishy underbelly to Felix should make him soften up to her. She hoped. If not, he might use it to make fun of her. Having people talk about her lisp didn't bother her now, but it'd be kicking her when she was already down.

Felix looked at her for a moment, spine straight and eyes narrowed. It was the sort of look that made her want to elaborate, like he was waiting for her to say more or explain herself. Mallory didn't, and he was the one who looked away first.

She knew that tactic, and Felix's stare wasn't anywhere near as scary as Danny's.

Kit was watching the two of them like they were the crazy ones.

"What's the plan?" asked Kit, when the quiet started getting uncomfortable, and they both realized Felix wasn't going to contribute more to the conversation.

"There's a plan?" Mallory asked.

"You are a Slytherin." said Felix, absently glancing up from his book. "I don't believe you're going to take this lying down."

Alright, fuck Felix. Fuck trying to make him like her. She didn't get what he was thinking or why, and fuck even trying.

"Yeah, I've got something in mind. It's only been a day, and I'm still getting my feet, so."

"And you don't want to tell us in case we go to the teachers." said Felix.
"In part, yeah." Was he expecting her to act like a naughty schoolchild being confronted by the professor?

Felix’s lips twitched downwards. "I won't tell the teachers so long as they don't get badly hurt."

Oh. The little pieces that had been confusing her before clicked together into a whole. Felix thought Slytherin House was home of the bullies. And that Mallory was like them. She was torn between feeling offended that he thought Slytherin meant sack of shite, and delight that he thought her so fearsome that Rowle and her friends had anything to fear from her.

She also considered that Felix was the sort of person who cared whether or not his enemies were horribly injured. Right then she vowed to never ever introduce Felix to Danny.

That would be a catastrophe.

"Badly hurt?" said Kit cheerfully. "I want their heads on a pike." Nor would Mallory be introducing Kit to Danny. She had a feeling that Kit and Danny would get on like a lit match and petrol.

Mallory had to fight down a grin before Felix thought she was relishing the idea of beheading Rowle.

"I think I have an idea, and I want you two to help."

"No." said Felix, before Mallory even got to explain what she was thinking.

"Yes." said Kit, and Mallory grinned at her. She thought that would happen.

"Colin and I were talking earlier, and a bunch of muggleborns meet every Friday to talk. I think we should go to them all together, us and Colin."

"Colin Creevey?" asked Kit, frowning. "I thought we'd be doing something more—"

"We can, but—" Mallory bit her lip. "today Rowle and them, they lit my trunk on fire and cracked my head open. And last night they got the whole Slytherin common room to beat me up, because they want me to leave Hogwarts."

Kit was looking pensive, and Mallory considered that Kit might think Mallory was dragging her into her war.

"But they don't just want me to leave, they want all the muggleborns to leave."

"And you're making yourself harder for them to pick on, so they'll come after us, next." said Felix.

Mallory almost wanted to hiss at him for finding the worst possible interpretation of everything she said.

"No, I want to make it so they're too busy fighting each other to bother with us." said Mallory. She had a whole idea of how she was going to say this, too. It was snappy, and Felix ruined it by making her have to spit it out before he could take all the wind out from her sails.

"Which is why we're going to the Muggleborns United club?" said Kit, face scrunched in confusion. "I don't follow."

"My best friend, Danny— he's normal— he always said that the clever thing to do was to try a few things at once, so even if one plan failed, you aren't screwed."
He also said to divide and conquer, but she wasn't telling the Hufflepuffs that.

"You're going to have all the muggleborns report them as bullies, or call attention to the anti-muggleborn bigotry at Hogwarts." said Felix, who looked slightly impressed. Mallory didn't have the heart to burst his bubble.

"Yeah," she said, entirely failing to mention any of the other options Danny would suggest. Felix hadn't noticed, though. In reality, that was only one option, and not a good one. The better ones were to find older muggleborns who were powerful magic users. She could convince them to twist the arms of older Slytherins into shutting down Rowle and the others. Meanwhile, she'd go and see if anyone wanted to help her blackmail all the Slytherin bullies.

That wasn't even including her plans with the Twins or her gamble on Professor McGonagall's aid.

"But why will they be fighting one another?" asked Kit.

Time to capture their curiosity, "because I was thinking about the fight on the pitch, today."

"What about it?" asked Felix, brows furrowed.

"Hoop-Boy and Dead-Eyes. Did either of you see the two of them fighting?"

"Who?" a flicker of annoyance crossed his face, and Mallory suppressed the urge to deck him, again.

"There were two boys by the hoops. The blonde one was Harper, and the one next to him was Hoop-Boy. I don't know his name. He fired a spell at Dead-Eyes, the boy who was tall with dark hair and eyes—"

"The one who looked like he skins cats for fun?" asked Kit, lips quirked upwards in amusement.

"Yes! That one. So Hoop-Boy hit him with some spell, and the kid freaked and started throwing lightning at him. Before I thought it was an accident, a misfire, but—"

She paused, giving either of them a chance to join in, to see if they were following her train of thought.

"You think Hoop-Boy did it on purpose." said Felix. Thank you, Felix!

"Yeah, and it got me thinking how—" and Mallory rubbed her face, resting her forehead on her temples for a moment. She wasn't sure how to put it into words.

"It got me thinking how last night no one spoke up or stopped anyone from beating me up. And I wished someone would, and that's why I helped you, Felix. But, I think no one spoke up because they were afraid, not because they all approved of me being beat up."

Felix scowled at Mallory, and she knew then that she'd stepped on another landmine.

"This doesn't sound very fun." said Kit. And Mallory cursed whatever quirk of chance that had Mallory end up the magical one instead of Danny, because he'd know exactly what to say to get them both on board.

"Right now they think Rowle and Harper will leave them alone so long as they play along. What if they thought that Rowle and Harper would bully them no matter what?" Threats only worked so long as people thought that their compliance controlled what happened next. If they complied and
still got punished anyway, the incentive to comply goes away.

Felix was giving her a look like she was the scum under his boots, and Kit looked bored.

"It means we get to sneak around after curfew and prank Slytherins." said Mallory, expression deadpan.

"Oh," said Kit, perking up. "I'm game."

The next time Mallory woke up, she wasn't in the Hospital Wing.

Chapter End Notes

I will say this here before you start wondering: Mallory's opinions are not necessarily the opinions of the author. When Mallory says "adults love money", that is not commentary on the depravities of modern-day society. That is me imagining what an 11-year-old would think when she sees her parents fussing over bills. Mallory doesn't have much of a concept for "money pays for food."

There is art that goes along with this chapter. On ffnet, it can be found on my profile tagged under "chapter 5." On AO3, it's the second work in the series entitled "artwork."
Kit fell asleep shortly after Felix left, leaving Mallory to stare at the white-washed walls of the Hospital Wing. She was itching to do something. Sitting still like this for what felt like hours was torture.

She kept imagining that moment when Kit crashed into the ground.

Fiddling with her wand in one hand, Mallory considered what she might’ve done differently. 

Dodging faster wasn’t a good answer, since Mallory wasn’t a good flier and couldn’t steer well. She didn’t know how to dodge faster.

There hadn’t been enough time to come up with a strategy and tell it to Kit. But if she’d told Kit and Felix to avoid the Slytherins in the first place, that could’ve helped. Felix wouldn’t have dove into the Quidditch match, and—

And Rowle would’ve found some other excuse to start a fight later. But if the fight had occurred on the ground, then falling out of the sky wouldn’t have been a possibility.

Then doors of the Hospital Wing burst open. And Professor McGonagall stormed in, with Snape trailing in behind her. What followed was the twenty most infuriating minutes of her life.

Mallory hadn’t told Professor McGonagall about punching Rowle in the nose, or that she knocked the girl’s wand out of her hand. Apparently, this was a glaring omission. And Professor McGonagall was very disappointed in Mallory for making her look like a fool in front of Snape.

Snape, that black oozing pile of shite, looked inordinately pleased with himself.

"The next time another student threatens you with a wand, you run and fetch a professor." said Professor McGonagall.

"I’ll remind you," spoke the most greasy Professor Snape, "there’s no evidence Miss Rowle threatened anyone."

"I wanted to run away," said Mallory, ignoring the prick, "but I couldn’t."

"Hogwash." said the aforementioned berk.

"Harper can cast this charm that hovers you in the air by your ankle. If I’d ran, he would’ve cast it again and I’dve been worse off."

"You have no proof young Mr. Harper knows such a spell." hissed Snape.

"I, for one, have heard many reports of Slytherins casting that spell." said Professor McGonagall, giving the loathsome man a look. "Though hitting another student is never an acceptable course of action."

Snape sneered down at her from above his great greasy beak. "I have half a mind to have you expelled for this."

"Now, Severus, I’m not sure—"

"She’s my student, and I’m her Head of House. As it stands, she’s a disruptive menace. If I say she
ought to be expelled, she'll be expelled. You don't have the authority here."

Mallory's throat burned and her cheeks were hot. "You're playing right into their hands. A bunch of first years are tricking you— this is exactly what Rowle wants."

"You'll do well to be silent, Miss Hopkins." said Professor McGonagall, cheeks tinged red.

The Professor then turned to Snape, "Severus, I'm not saying you don't have that authority, you may do as you like. But it's only the child's first day here."

"Precisely," said Snape, "imagine what she'll be capable of with a Hogwarts education."

"What she'll be capable of?" gaped Professor McGonagall. "You're talking about an eleven year old girl."

"A violent troublemaker who's developed a grudge against several of her classmates, some of whom sleep in the same room with her."

Professor McGonagall bristled. "This conversation is inappropriate to be having in front of a child."

Snape stared at Professor McGonagall as though he wished she would melt.

"Regardless," hissed Snape, "the girl must be punished."


"Professor—" said Mallory, voice wavering.

"I'll not hear it, young lady." said the witch, "I spoke to Madame Hooch, and I'm appalled. She said it looked like a war out there, a war. Whatever this grudge is between you and these other children, it stops now."

"It won't stop. They won't stop. They're doing it because I'm mugglebo—"

"That's not an excuse. You keep engaging them, fighting them and making the situation worse." said McGonagall.

And Mallory sat there in stunned silence, swallowing past the lump in her throat. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. McGonagall should've protected her.

"You saw what they did to Felix," Mallory's voice was small and scratchy. "it was six against one. They really wanted to hurt him."

"Mr. Selwyn reports that Mr. Underwood attacked him." spat Snape.

I don't even know who that is! and this isn't fair! warred to escape her mouth. She took a breath and organized her thoughts.

"Six kids attacked him. Six. Hooch blew her whistle and they wouldn't stop. What was I supposed to do, sit there and watch my friend get blasted out of the air?" her voice rose as she spoke, tears blurring her vision.

McGonagall replied. "It's not your responsibility to protect Mr. Underwood, that's the Professor's job."

The words rushed out of Mallory's mouth before she could think. "Then I'll get in the habit of
never helping anybody. And one day when I'm an adult, I'll be just like you." she spat. "Unwilling
to help anyone because you always expect somebody else handle it."

Snape's lips split into a sinister smile. "Miss Hopkins, I believe you have now earned yourself an
expulsion from Hogwarts."

Mallory's face went blank, and her arms felt leaden at her sides.

"Severus," spoke an old wizened man by the entrance to the hospital wing. "perhaps we are being
too hasty."

Mallory's head snapped to the door.

Clad in lurid purple-and-green robes, with a long white beard and twinkling eyes, she recognized
him from the night before. He was the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Professor Dumbledore.

"Headmaster." said Snape, nodding. He didn't look surprised, only resigned. McGonagall, on the
other hand, did look surprised to see him there.

"Albus," said McGonagall, "I didn't realize—"

"Perhaps you and Severus wouldn't mind waiting out in the hall? I would very much like to speak
to the young Miss Hopkins." said the Headmaster. Mallory's hands remained at her sides, clammy
and cold.

Snape gave Dumbledore an absolutely vicious glare, and stormed out of the hospital, robes
flapping behind him. McGonagall followed him out.

A large squishy armchair sprung into existence with a flick of the Headmaster's wand. He sank into
it with a sigh.

"I see you've had quite the evening, Miss Hopkins." said Professor Dumbledore.

Most of her was silently screaming with betrayal and rage, but that didn't stop Mallory's mind
cranked into gear. Pointy-chin said Dumbledore defended muggleborns.

"First muggleborn in Slytherin and the first to be expelled on her first day of class." croaked
Mallory, "I'll be in the record books."

She didn't know if he knew she was a muggleborn before now. She didn't even know if Pointy-
chin told the truth. But here was an opportunity to get the Headmaster of Hogwarts on her side.
She was taking it.

The Headmaster chuckled. "A fine thing, a sense of humor."

There was a beat of silence, and Headmaster Dumbledore's silences were much worse than Danny's
silences.

"I think I'm glad," she said. "that I got expelled. I'm no good at being a witch, and no one wants me
here." Mallory looked down at her hands, wand at her side. It was bait, a hook. No one wanted to
hear a child so defeated-sounding. It even worked on her parents, and they knew all her tricks.

"The trials one faces here at Hogwarts are not always easy, but are always useful."

Mallory thought for a moment, trying to puzzle out what the Headmaster was saying.
"You think I shouldn't give up." a beat. "And you're going to stop Snape from expelling me."

"Professor Snape, Miss Hopkins." said the Headmaster.

"Right. That." she said. "but I don't know if I want to stay."

The Headmaster folded his hands on his lap, and looked sad. "I see."

"It's not that I don't like magic, or Hogwarts. But I don't feel safe here. And I think the only reason I didn't ask to leave before, was because I didn't want Rowle to win. She wants me to give up, and I want to prove a point to her that muggleborns are just as good as anyone else. But that's not worth breaking bones twice in one day."

" Acting even when you're afraid is a mark of courage, and a choice one must make for themselves, whether or not they're willing to risk their well-being for a cause."

"I'm plenty brave, Headmaster. I knew I'd get my ars— my butt kicked by Rowle today, on the pitch. I did it anyway, because my friend would get hurt worse if I didn't."

"Ah," said the Headmaster, as though what she'd said was deep and enlightening. "I see."

Mallory blinked in confusion.

"A great many Gryffindors would applaud what you did this day, Miss Hopkins." said the Headmaster. "Fighting evil has long been the mission of many a champion. But there is more than one way to fight evil, and the wise know that to strike your enemy down is false victory. Better to treat them with kindness and patience, to turn them into an ally if you can."

Evil? She wouldn't go as far as all that.

"Yes, Professor. But I— " speaking back to the Headmaster of Hogwarts was probably a terrible idea. "I don't think they want to be my friends."

Mallory was very confused. If she understood him straight, he was saying she wasn't brave. Then in his next breath saying she was, but not in the way he wanted her to be?

"The path of the righteous is fraught with difficulties, Miss Hopkins. I suggest against giving up before you've even started."

"Yes, Professor."

"Though," the Headmaster lowered his head and stared at her with his bright blue eyes. "I hear a different story from the young Miss Rowle and her compatriots. I would like to hear your own."

Mallory looked down at her lap for a moment, sucking in a deep breath and letting it go. If the Headmaster believed her, he might expel Rowle and Harper. And if Rowle and Harper were busy in detention or otherwise out of the game, Hogwarts would be wonderful.

"Miss Hopkins?" said the Headmaster, and Mallory looked up.

"It started last night. I told them I was a muggleborn, and they dangled me upside down in the common room and fired hexes at me. Today Rowle, Harper, and Montague burnt my trunk and all my things."

"Rowle baited me, so I punched her." The part of Mallory that operated under a silent rule that you never ever tell a Professor you punched another student cringed. "They smacked me so hard into
the wall that they cracked my skull open. The whole time, since last night, they've been telling me that if I don't leave Hogwarts, they'll hurt me more and have me expelled.

"And what occurred then at the Quidditch pitch?"

"I made friends with Felix and Kit, and we were playing tag. Felix cut through the Slytherin quidditch match, and this— er, I dunno his name." She couldn't tell Headmaster Dumbledore that she called him Dead-Eyes and that Kit joked that he looked like a young Hannibal Lector.

"I think you're referring to the young Mr. Roderick Selwyn."

The name wasn't familiar to her. "Sure. Then, he and a few others, Rowle, Montague, the girl with the coke-bottle glasses, Harper— they all started casting spells at Felix. Madame Hooch whistled, but they wouldn't stop, and Felix was going to get hurt."

"I believe you mean Miss Vaisey, the young witch with the glasses you described," corrected Professor Dumbledore, before he went on to say, "I have heard a very different tale from the other Slytherins."

There was silence, and Mallory tried not to fidget.

"They all have the same story." Mallory said. Said, not asked, because she knew getting their story straight was the first thing they'd do. It was the first thing she would do, after all.

"Indeed. Though the young Miss Jennings and Mr. Underwood have told me stories that sound remarkably similar to your own."

Right. So it was a classic he-said versus she-said. Only the Slytherin bullies far outnumbered Mallory and her friends.

"Then who do you believe, Headmaster?"

"Ah, it is not a matter of belief, but what action will prevent such fights from occurring again." said the Headmaster.

"That's what I want, too, Headmaster." she lied, "I want them to stop."

It might be easier for a professor to punish all the students involved, but it would only make it worse for Mallory. If Kit and Felix got detentions, they might blame her.

And then the bullies wouldn't believe the professors wanted to protect her. Further, they'd know Mallory had to weigh her decision to act against getting more detentions. If anything, it'd embolden them.

But if Dumbledore only punished the bullies, that gave Mallory a threat to use against them.

"This conversation is not about them, Miss Hopkins, but about you."

Mallory's fingers curled into fists in the hospital bed blankets. "I was only acting to defend my friends. Don't— do you want me to grow up to be the sort of girl who does nothing while her friends get hurt?"

The Headmaster frowned. "I would not wish that upon anyone, young Miss Hopkins, and I do not believe that is your fate. I only ask that you exercise the caution that House Slytherin is known for in your endeavors."
Mallory wasn't sure what to say to that. "I don't think I'm much of a Slytherin."

"I fear the Sorting Hat disagrees with you."

Mallory swallowed. "so I can't get my house changed?"

"Ah, no."

"Right." Mallory wiped her cheeks, "so, Kit and Felix aren't in trouble, are they? Kit, I mean, she was following my lead. And Felix had nothing to do with any of it."

She wasn't being kind. Mallory knew them for only a day, and didn't want them to resent her for getting them into trouble. She hadn't thought of that earlier, when she told Felix and Kit that they were attacked on account of her.

Mallory desperately didn't want more enemies. And any allies she made at this point were worth their weight in gold.

"The young Mr. Underwood asserts that he flew through the match on purpose, though not with the intention of injuring any of the participants, and that Slytherin students began firing on him. He also stated that Miss Jennings forced you to help her." said Professor Dumbledore.

Mallory scrunched her face in confusion. What on earth possessed Felix to give the Headmaster that story. It didn't make any of them look good.

"Then Professor Sprout interviewed young Miss Jennings," continued the Headmaster, "who stated that Felix lost control of his broom, and that the Slytherin students fired on him, so the both of you rushed to the defense of your friend."

"I wasn't made to do anything." said Mallory. It was worse than she thought. All of them had given the Professor different stories, which would make them all look like liars.

She thought back to what the twins said before, about McGonagall attempting to comfort her instead of telling her the truth. Professor Dumbledore didn't believe her, Mallory thought, he just didn't want to upset the injured child.

"I see. Well, the young Slytherins, besides yourself, all contest that Mr. Underwood was attempting to unseat Mr. Selwyn from his broom, and that they responded in self-defense."

"They're lying." said Mallory.

"That is possible, or perhaps they believe the young Mr. Underwood was attacking them, and responded in kind. Regardless, as Headmaster of Hogwarts, I cannot condone fighting, especially not while aloft. Duelling on broomsticks is exceptionally dangerous."

That, she thought, was a cop-out. Six students firing on one didn't mesh well with the situation.

"But all six firing on Felix at once? Right away? You don't think that's weird?"

"Indeed, that is a good point, Miss Hopkins. However, the students did not confer with one another on who ought to be the one to defend young Mr. Selwyn. In their zeal, they all acted."

Mallory thought that was utter bullshit. Last time the Turner twins started shit, no one stepped up to help them. It was like how no one saved her, last night. Or that time a teacher in elementary school collapsed. Mallory and every other student stood there frozen.
They all hoped someone else would take action, first.

"I think they planned it." Mallory said.

Felix flew by Dead-Eyes, and there wasn't even a moment of hesitation before they fired.

In Mallory's mind that suggested premeditation.

The question was why. Not why did they want to fire at Mallory's friends but why would they do it within range of a teacher.

Because they knew they could get away with it, somehow. They knew Mallory would be punished, and they wouldn't. Why? How?

The Headmaster looked at her with sad eyes. "I would pray you not believe the worst in your classmates, just as I choose not to believe the worst in you."

At that, Mallory felt very uncomfortable. It was becoming a pattern. Felix believed Mallory had sinister intentions. Snape thought she was a danger to her classmates, and now Dumbledore was saying he could believe the worst of her.

She didn't understand. How did two authority figures come to the same conclusion that a victim of bullying is a bad person? It was the first day of school.

But then- Snape was some sort of pureblood fanatic and he wanted her gone. Dumbledore… perhaps Snape spoke to Dumbledore? Maybe it wasn't an independent assessment.

Though that didn't explain Felix. Maybe he just didn't like any Slytherins, and Mallory was taking it personally?

"Ah, I almost forgot." said Professor Dumbledore, interrupting her train of thought. "One Mr. Colin Creevey in the company of Mr. Fred and Mr. George Weasley stopped me in the hallway this afternoon. They wished to inform me that your classmates were being most unkind to you, and that they were worried something might've happened. It seems you're amassing quite a collection of loyal friends, Miss Hopkins. Do treat them well."

Mallory then remembered that she had told Colin she'd meet him after class, then never showed. Rowle setting her trunk on fire was bloody inconvenient.

"I will." she said, narrowing her eyes. Snape had definitely spoken to Headmaster Dumbledore about her. That was why he wasn't surprised when the Headmaster showed up. But then why did he still try to expel her? He'd looked resigned when the Headmaster told him to tone it down, so he must've known how the Headmaster would react. Maybe he was proving a point?

A threat.

"Now, I believe we need to discuss your punishment. Professor Snape thinks expulsion is the proper course of action, but I believe in second chances. And perhaps, in giving you a second chance you may pass it on to your classmates. A week's worth of detention, I think, would do it."

"What?" Mallory gaped, "but that's not—"

"Naturally," he continued, "you and the rest of the slytherin first-years as well as Ms. Jennings and Mr. Underwood have lost your flying privileges. You will be sitting out the next two flying classes.
Perhaps by then you'll have worked out your differences."

Mallory wanted to scream. "Felix didn't do anything!"

"Perhaps, but six students have reported how Mr. Underwood dove straight at Mr. Selwyn, and even you and Miss Jennings don't deny that he flew into the match."

"Then give me detention for two weeks and make theirs for half a week." she said, "it wasn't their fault. They got caught up in my mess."

"Then next time you will consider your friends before you engage in violence."

Mallory wanted to say that Kit would've dive-bombed Montague anyway, but that wouldn't help Kit or Mallory. She clenched her fists and stewed.

"What's happening to Rowle and the others?" she asked instead.

"It's not your concern what happens to them." said the Headmaster. "Now I believe you are meant to rest. Goodnight, Miss Hopkins."

And with that, Dumbledore stood up, vanished his chair, and left the Hospital Wing.

Mallory eyed the door, waiting for McGonagall and Snape to re-appear, but they didn't.

She wanted Danny.

She wanted her friend's mind here with her, to bounce ideas off of— she missed the team they made. He'd know what to do.

As she fell asleep, exhausted, Mallory's mind skittered over the images of wands pointed at Felix, Kit's horrified face as she hit the ground, and the sensation of falling backwards off her broom.

Shock blasted through her and Mallory gasped— only to suck in water and heave it out, choking and spluttering. She panicked for a moment, submerged in water, only to feel ground below her and kick up, bursting through to the surface, coughing and sucking in great gulps of air.

Blinking water out of her eyes, the first thing she thought was how Madame Pomfrey was going to kill her. Mallory Hopkins was no longer in the Hospital Wing, she was in the Black Lake.

The water rose choppily around her, as she paddled. Was this someone's attempt at drowning her? It was the middle of the night, sky black as pitch.

Then she heard more splashes and spun around, teeth chattering. Four other people had been dumped into the lake. The culprits were on the shore, wearing hooded black cloaks. Where their faces should've been, there was only empty space. She shuddered.

Keeping the Hooded Figures in her peripheral vision, she glanced around, orienting herself.

It was worse than she thought.

They were on the opposite side of the shore, looking across the lake at Hogwarts. The lights were lit in the castle, scattering glimmering reflections across the lake.

The four people who'd been dropped in broke to the surface, kicking and screaming. Mallory expected to see the other muggleborns.
She was wrong.

Rowle, Harper, and the rest of the Slytherin first years were all treading water. She wasn't sure whether she ought to feel relieved, or more alarmed. What was going on?

The rest of the first years were yelping, coughing and cursing, spitting outraged cries towards the shore, where a group of tall hooded figures stood.

"Out!" one of the hooded figures shouted, in a voice that sounded suspiciously like a Slytherin prefect's.

"Get out of the water now! Don't make us come get you!"

Mallory considered swimming in the opposite direction towards the castle. But the water was freezing and now that she was waking up, she noticed how most of the other first years didn't seem too alarmed.

A hazing ritual, her mind supplied.

And so she paddled toward the shore, with its stupid hooded figures and looming forest. The rest of the Slytherins followed, sopping wet in their nightclothes and barefoot. Mallory was no better off, in her hospital gown. Her ankle, thank the heavens, was entirely healed.

Eight first-years followed a pack of hooded figures deep into the forest. Barefoot with their nightclothes sticking in uncomfortable places, they made a sorry bunch. Mallory's legs were caked in mud, and kelp was sticking out of Rowle's hair. They all smelled like lake water, rank and foul.

The tall hooded figures lit their wands like torches, and they winded through the trees. She pegged them as sixth or seventh years. Smaller hooded figures marched alongside the line of first years, to prevent them from running away.

Through gnarled branches and creaking trees they went, with only faint wand light to guide them.

Mallory would've been lying if she said she wasn't afraid. She knew she ought to be worried about where they were taking her, this deep in the forest. Except keeping her footing was taking up all her attention.

Bare feet crunched leaves as she picked her way across the soggy ground. Sticks, brambles, and pine cones laid in wait for her to trip over them.

She hunched over and kept her eyes on the path in front of her, hands shoved in her armpits for warmth. It was freezing out, bloody British weather.

Soon, past gaps in the branches, Mallory could see the flickering of firelight. And the path, which had so far angled upwards, was leveling out to flat, hard ground.

The trees gave way to a circular clearing, with a crowd of hooded figures lying in wait. Oh, she was definitely regretting not swimming away. A large bonfire was lit in the middle.

Some part of Mallory's mind imagined them tossing her into the flames. Her steps faltered.

She was shoved forward by her Hooded Figure, and stumbled into the clearing.

They formed a loose semicircle around the fire. Mallory stood next to Rowle and Hoop-boy, shivering. Her dripping hair curled at the nape of her neck, narrow eyes glinting in the fire.
Light illuminated the faces around her. Their expressions were tight, eyes wide open. Fear.

Mallory's eyes flicked to the hooded figures, talking among one another. Something in the tone of conversation, in the lilt of their voices, spoke of a wild sort of anticipation.

Mallory's gut clenched, and she shuffled from foot to foot. Couldn't stand waiting, not with this kind of energy choking the air.

One Hooded Figure stepped forward, and all conversation stopped. The night became deathly still, but for the crackling of the fire.

Mallory's hairs stood on end.

The crowd's attention was fixated on that one person, cloaked in black.

Any second now, they'd start talking. But they didn't. Mallory's eyes flicked across the crowd of hooded figures and first years. All eyes were on the figure, but some people were starting to look at one another. Fidgeting.

One girl stood hugging herself, Coke-bottles clutching her arm in what must've been a painful grip.

The Hooded Figure flourished its wand at the bonfire. And it exploded into green flames.

Wand still raised, the Figure spoke. "Today was your first full day as proper witches and wizards."

Female voice, familiar.

She walked slowly as she spoke, her gait smooth and unhurried. At ease with the setting, with the barely-constrained violence of the circle.

Her voice was soft, and Mallory had to strain to hear her.

"But more importantly," said the Hooded Figure, "tonight is the night you are welcomed as members of the Most Ancient and Exalted Slytherin House."

Now that she heard that quiet voice twice, Mallory recognized it. The prefect, Gemma Farley.

"For one-thousand-and-two years, Slytherin House has stood as a beacon of nobility and prestige. And now, that mantle falls to you."

Another Hooded Figure stood forward, "This is a heavy weight you must bear, and bear it you shall. For the traditions and secrets of our ancestors are fading. Much has been lost in the thousand years since Hogwarts was raised."

Farley spoke again. "We are the few, the powerful, the last bulwark against a rising sea of ignorance."

"But you," said the other Hooded Figure, "you are the lowliest of us, feeble-minded and foolish."

Rowle visibly twitched next to Mallory. She looked as though she'd love to smack that hooded figure across his face.

"In your homes and outside House Slytherin, you may be revered and loved for your ancestry and your might. But among us, you are the lowliest of the low. Of the secrets of House Slytherin, you know nothing."

"Of the ancient artifacts passed down from Slytherin to Slytherin, you know nothing."
"Of the secrets and mysteries of Slytherin House, you know nothing."

They were switching back and forth, and the effect was mesmerizing. Mallory wondered how many times they practiced to get down the eerie echo and timing right.

The male's voice was loud and bombastic, which contrasted well with Farley's quieter tone. Mallory couldn't help but get caught up in the rhythm of it.

The crowd of hooded figures were standing straighter. Their words were having an effect. Something was growing here, in this circle. Something magic. She could feel pins and needles crawling up her spine, the taste of iron in her mouth.

Standing straight but unable to stand still, wands twitching in their hands with half-aborted spell movements. This was a crowd that wanted blood.

The faces of her fellow first years reflected her own fears. Their wide eyes were flicking around the clearing. Looking for an opportunity to run. Prey.

"But this," spoke Farley, strong and sibilant, "this is why we're here. To train you, to guide and shape you into suitable representatives of our House."

"Every first year will be assigned a mentor from the second year Slytherins. If they order you to do something, you do it. I do not concern myself with the particulars of their orders. If they bid you to shine their shoes like a house-elf, you are to do it."

"However," said Farley, "should I find that you mentors are abusing your position, you will be punished."

But there was a good chance that the seventh years wouldn't give a shite when Mallory complained to them. Those same prefects were in the common room when her year-mates dangled her upside down and cursed her.

"Harper!" called the male Hooded Figure.

The fidgeting and twitching of the crowd ceased. Utter stillness. Mallory's breath caught in her throat. This was it, something was about to happen.

"Yes, sir." Harper's voice came out as a squeak, eyes so wide open the whites were showing.

"Your mother committed a most dishonorable betrayal to our cause." His voice was sharp and cold.

"Yes, sir." But Harper said it like it was a question.

"She taught you levicorpus, a Slytherin spell, which must not be taught to outsiders."

Mallory didn't know what a Slytherin spell was, but 'corpus' sounded like 'corpse,' and she knew the word 'corpse' just meant 'body.' She also recognized 'levi,' as it could be found in the word 'levitate.' Just last night Harper used a spell to dangle her by her ankle in the air. Levitate body. That wasn't a coincidence.

"Yes, sir." He had tried to show off, except now it was backfiring.

The crowd of hooded figures erupted into low mutters and angry whispers.

"Had you not been sorted into Slytherin, one more secret of our Sacred House would be lost to the masses. Are you ashamed?"
"Yes, sir." Harper sounded angry, and his face was scrunched up as though he were fighting constipation. It was hard for Mallory to catch his expression, with the eerie green light from the flames, distorting the view.

"You just revealed that your mother broke the rules of Slytherin, showing yourself not only a traitor, but stupid as well. Are you ashamed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell everyone why you're ashamed."

"Be-because I'm stupid."

"And why else?"

"Because my mother betrayed Slytherin." He didn't sound convincing.

Mallory had to admit to herself, that she was almost enjoying this. A large part of her whispered how it was very wrong to enjoy shaming Harper, and that publicly humiliating him was mean, but she thought the leaky arsehole deserved it.

"Say it again, and louder."

"I'm stupid and my mother is a traitor."

"Again!"

"I'm stupid and my mother is a traitor!" Harper shouted, voice wobbling like he wanted to cry. Oh, she did feel bad now. Though coupled with that was revulsion. She felt sorry for Harper. Surely hell was freezing over.

"All right, all of you, line up!" said the Hooded Figure.

They formed a line in place, with Harper at the front, facing them.

"Many of you," said Farley, "know spells. Curses, hexes, and jinxes. I want you to cast the strongest spell you know at Harper. He is to be shamed. Do you understand?"

The initiates nodded. But Mallory was at war with herself. What sort of test was this? In books, there was always the brave hero who refused to punch the victim. But that'd be a test for Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs. This was the house of cunning. What was the clever thing to do, here? Moreover, there were a hundred ways to embarrass Harper, why this one?

"And Harper, you're not to move from this spot." said the male Hooded Figure. "If they cast the killing curse at you, you stand there and take it."

Farley placed a hand on the male hooded figure's shoulder, and said "Things as they are, any permanent curses or unforgiveables will risk your standing with the school. Not that we believe you capable of casting such spells, but if you can, restrain yourself."

A second thought occurred to her. None of them had their wands. How were they supposed to cast jinxes without wands? A rising panic struck her in the throat. Mallory could light small fires and levitate objects for a short period of time, but that only worked if she concentrated for a while. She didn't know any real wandless magic.

Then a Hooded Figure stepped up, and withdrew a clutch of wands. Oh.
They were giving them their wands back.

The smaller hooded figures, her future mentors, were muttering among themselves, and Mallory was able to pick on words like "wager" and "money's on—." This was their entertainment.

Roderick Selwyn, the one she called Dead-Eyes, went first.

He took his wand from the Hooded Figure, and flourished it at Harper, who flinched.

Selwyn laughed, and it was a cold sound. The Slytherin first years inched backwards away from the lunatic boy, who stood two meters away from the terrified face of Harper. Green light exaggerated the pall in Harper's expression.

Or maybe, thought Mallory, he was just that afraid.

"Baubillious!" shouted Selwyn. A yellow bolt of lightning spat out of his wand and struck Harper, who screamed. Selwyn giggled with delight.

Mallory winced. She knew that spell. It was the one Rowle used on her during the Battle on the Pitch. It caused a sharp burst of pain, like you were being electrocuted.

Harper trembled in place, and Selwyn swaggered to the back of the line. There was something bent in that boy's head.

Next was Montague, wearing a grim look about him.

"Everte Statum." he intoned, flicking her wand in the prescribed pattern.

Nothing happened. Montague looked up at the Hooded Figure, eyes wide with a sort of horror on his face that could only be described as a cross between mortification and mortal terror.

"Try again." said the Hooded Figure.

The boy nodded and cast the spell once more.

"Everte Statum!"

No one spoke, for he had failed again. The initates tensed in anticipation. Surely something terrible would befall him, the boy who failed the test.

"For the rest of this night," said the Hooded Figure, "you must kneel."

Montague nodded, and looked relieved. He knelt on the ground, which was covered in leaves and pinecones.

"Now go to the end of the line." It was obvious when Montague realized he'd have to shuffle past all six first years on his knees. His cheeks colored and eyes teared. Mallory gave him a little mocking grin as he shuffled past her. That was two of her tormenters, embarrassed in front of all the second, seventh, and first year Slytherins. The hooded figures were doing her work for her.

Coke-bottles was up next, and she marched up to Harper like she was on a mission. Armed with her wand, she fired her spell.

"Diffindo!"

It was as though a blade slashed through the air and sliced open Harper's cheek. The boy doubled
over, clutching his bleeding face. A few hooded figures in the crowd whistled and cheered. First blood.

Mallory's hands grew clammy at her sides. The part of her that found this whole event *awful* screamed. It wasn't funny anymore.

Next was a girl Mallory didn't know. She had long brown hair bound in a messy braid, and a nervous disposition.

She was shaking, and looked like she was about to burst into tears at any second.

"S-scourgify!" she said, and her spell did nothing. The girl let out a little gasp, eyes wide as saucers, and cast again.

"Scourgify!" It worked. Or at least, Mallory assumed it did, because everyone but her started giggling and the hooded figures gestured that the girl should go to the back of the line.

Hoop-boy went next. And he didn't even look at Harper when he cast. Instead, he flashed a sly smile at Selwyn and cast *locomotor mortis*.

Harper's legs snapped together and he fell over backwards with surprised *oof*! Several people giggled.

From that interaction, it wasn't hard to guess that Selwyn and Hoop-boy were enemies. Hoop-boy fired on Dead-Eyed Selwyn before, during the Battle on the Pitch. While casting the jinx at Harper, Hoop-boy looked at Selwyn, mocking him. Reminding him.

Darla Rowle gave Harper a bland smile, and fired "*Alarte Ascendare!*"

The spell made a loud *bang*! and Harper shot about a meter into the air, before falling to the ground with a heavy thud.

He groaned from his spot on the ground.

And then it was Mallory's turn.

The hero Mallory wanted to be would've refused to cast any spell. She would've stood there and said no, calmly and clearly so everyone could hear her. But every other first year attempted to cast a spell at Harper. She'd be the odd one out.

The silence grew as Mallory hesitated. They wouldn't think she was brave, they'd think her stupid. It'd make her look weak, like a victim they could kick around. Her fallback plans were limited to the long-shot with the muggleborn club and the twins. The professors weren't going to help her. And she knew she couldn't take a full week of being beaten down like today.

So Mallory made a decision.

"*Incendio!*" she cast, pouring her will into the spell.

Harper yelped when the spell caught his pajamas on fire, and immediately started rolling around on the ground. The flames spluttered out almost immediately.

Mallory expected to feel gratification, or a sliver of righteous justice at getting to punish her hated foe. But all she felt was shame.

The Hooded Figure nodded, and Mallory went to the back of the line. She didn't pay any attention
to the faces of her fellow initiates as she walked to the back.

It was wrong to cast that spell at Harper, she knew. More wrong than gluing Robbie Turner's shoes to his desk, and then stuffing them with sheep shit. But Mallory could imagine the sequence of events that would follow her refusal to participate. They wouldn't have the students line up to jinx her, they'd do something worse. Defection had to be punished harshly to prevent anyone else from following in her example.

But Mallory didn't want their acceptance. That was harder to remember, while she was going through the initiation ritual. And it occurred to her that maybe that was the reason for all the pomp and ceremony. It was to make the young students think Slytherin House was worth getting jinxed over.

It wasn't. It really wasn't.

And it was as though some part of Mallory knew in advance, because she wasn't surprised when the hooded figure called her name next.
"Stand where Harper stood." said the hooded figure. Mallory went, only a little afraid. The hooded figures healed Harper immediately after Mallory finished with him. They weren't going to leave her there to bleed out in the forest.

Another part of her whispered how that was exactly what they'd do, given the chance. Mallory hadn't been expelled, and hadn't chosen to leave Hogwarts, like they'd asked. She wondered if they'd use this ceremony to teach her a lesson. They could hurt her badly enough that she'd have to go home. And it'd be her fault for being foolish.

Mallory needed a plan.

Escaping the clearing wasn't even an option. There were at least ten seventh years and a gaggle of second years scattered around the edges of the clearing. She wouldn't make it more than a meter.

"Now, before we begin," said the hooded figure, "I will give you a piece of Slytherin wisdom. If you really used your strongest spell to hit Mr. Harper, then you're a witless oaf. Never give away your advantage if you don't have to!"

Ah, so that was their game. A challenge of strategy disguised as a simple punishment exercise.

"Likewise, if you rat each other out to the professors or to Professor Snape, you're a traitor and aren't trustworthy." He had his arms raised as though he were one of those religious cult leaders, preaching to a congregation.

The hooded figure twisted to face Mallory, an empty hole where his face should be, "why are you standing here, Miss Hopkins?"

There were several answers she could give, and she only had moments to sort through them. She wanted to say 'Because I'm muggleborn,' but that would only remind the Slytherins that she wasn't one of them.

Mallory gave her best Rowle-like smirk, "because I'm not trustworthy."

"That's right!" said the Hooded Figure, "You're a traitor, a rat, the scum of the earth. Incapable of solving your own problems so you go crawling to the professors for help. Too weak to defend yourself, and too stupid to know when you ought to bow down to your betters."

Mallory had a great deal of practice not bowing to those in power. In fact, it was her inability to respect authority that made her and Danny such great friends. They bonded over it. And whenever mum got called into a parent-teacher conference, with the words confrontational and disrespectful being bandied about, Mallory would feel a small sliver of pleasure, because she was no drone, thank you very much. Glad to have that acknowledged.
So she pulled that over her like a shield, and their words bounced off her like rubber bouncing off asphalt.

"What are you, Hopkins?" demanded the Hooded Figure.

The mentors, the rigid pecking order, there were several ways this could go, she thought. Right now she was at the bottom of the pile. *Only place to go was up.* Now was the time for risky gambits, and plays she couldn't make if she weren't in last place. But that wasn't her only reason for defying them.

*She never wanted to feel that kind of shame, again.* Mallory didn't want to grow up to be the sort of person who bowed under pressure. She didn't want to be the girl who hexed Harper, or the girl who saw Montague crawl on his knees and liked it. Mallory wanted to be better than that. And a better person would stand up to the hooded figures, even if that meant getting hurt. So, that's what she would do.

Mallory faced the hooded figure, a thin smile on her lips, and spoke, "I'm a traitor, a rat, and, uh, unwilling to bow. Definitely that." She knew what his next action would be. She'd practically begging him to do it.

"Well, you're going to bow right now," he said. "Bow to your betters, Hopkins."

And he fell for it. Perfect.

Mallory bowed deeply, waving her arms in an exaggerated fashion reminiscent of Fred and George, clearly mocking. *I will never seriously acknowledge you as my better. I'll always be fake, and I don't respect your authority.*

While the Slytherin side of Mallory howled that she was being stupid, the part of her that was convinced they were going to torture her regardless of what she did, didn't want to give them the pleasure of seeing her cower.

She still felt ashamed of her inability to stand up to her peers, and *not* jinx Harper. Once tonight she'd betrayed her sense of ethics. Mallory wouldn't do it again.

In addition to that, this was a play. The male Hooded Figure was trying too hard to be scary. He acted bombastic, loud, and *nervous*. It felt to Mallory like he'd never done this, before. She suspected if he stumbled here, it'd give give the first years momentum, encouraging them to disobey. *Disrupt the flow of the initiation.* It was hard to be the first to defy authority, she knew, but once one person stood up, others would follow.

A division between the first years and upper years would form, with upper years angered at their loss of face. They might even stop defending Rowle and the rest of the first year Slytherins. If it worked, she'd be depriving the bullies of their protection.

But then it all went wrong.

Farley stepped forward, placing a hand on the shoulder of the other Leader of Ceremonies. The male hooded figure stepped back, letting her take the stage. At once, the crowd of hooded figures stilled, as though they were bracing themselves.

"Clearly," said Farley, "no one's taught you how to bow."

"'fraid I'm not the bowing sort."
The hollow remained silent for a moment, not one person making a sound. Then Farley threw back her head, and laughed. As if on cue, the rest of the hooded figures began laughing, as well.

"We have a cheeky one, here. Can anyone tell me what we do to the cheeky ones?" asked Farley.

And Mallory was a hair too slow, opening her mouth just as another hooded figure answered.

"We make sport of them."

It sounded rehearsed, but that made it no less scary.

"That's right, we play with them. Mallory Hopkins, do you know what us seventh years do to children?"

There was a moment where she could've defused this—but Mallory missed it. Though— "You buy me an action figure?" Mallory said, injecting childish curiosity into her tone. Try to break expectations, keep her foe on her back foot.

"A wha— nevermind. No, we do horrible things to children like you."

Damnit. She'd thought to derail the conversation with—"Action figures are collectibles," she said. Fuck it, she'd try, anyway. "They're expensive, and—"

"What's the worst thing you can imagine, Mallory Hopkins?" the girl said, voice soft and sibilant in the night.

A trap, definitely a trap. "Oh, I can imagine loads of things. Like this one time, I glued my classmate's trainers to his desk, and he had to walk around all day barefoot. He felt like a real—"

"You know, I believe you've given me an idea," said Farley, tone deceptively light. And Mallory hoped, prayed that the girl had inadvertently picked up her suggestion.

"You're going to get on your knees and kiss the hem of my robes," she said, "and you're going to do it without mockery or complaint, or I shall curse you so terribly that you'll live in blackness and misery all the rest of your days."

A number of hooded figures twitched or took a step backwards, and Mallory wondered if that was rehearsed as well, like the laughing had been, or if they were really that scared of Farley.

It wasn't going according to plan.

She had hoped the girl would latch onto the word barefoot and have her kiss her classmates' bare feet. Mallory had planned on opening her mouth grotesquely and informing them how she was going to slobber her muggleborn germs all over them. They'd squeal with disgust and back away, further loosening Farley's grip on the situation.

But that wasn't what happened. Mallory sighed and flopped to her knees.

"No. Get up and do it again."

Mallory rolled her eyes and stood back up, brushing off her knees for effect. Then she straightened her hospital dress, picking off leaves and dried kelp. Stalling.

If Farley cast a spell on her at this point, it'd be a concession. And it might also weaken the hooded figures' general aura of scariness. Farley would know this, Mallory suspected, and hesitate to cast anything.
Far better to allow each individual first year to imagine what horrible things the hooded figures might do to them. Their own personal worst fears would motivate them to obey.

In a flash, there was a wand digging into Mallory's throat. "I won't ask again," Farley hissed, "kneel."

Or maybe Mallory was reading the situation wrong. She knelt.

"Good, obedient, little mudblood."

And it took all of Mallory's willpower not to roll her eyes or make a face. All of it.
But that wasn't enough. "Are you a good, obedient little mudblood?" asked Farley.

"Yes." Mallory ground out.

"Well, go on and say it."

"I'm a good mudblood." In truth, it wasn't the word mudblood that got to her. Before Hogwarts, it meant nothing to her.

It was calling her 'obedient.' Being called obedient or respectful made her shudder in the same way it made her feel vaguely ill to be called a 'good child.' It stunk of boring, of a life spent living up to everyone's expectations and never having an original thought or proper adventure, not ever.

And it showed. She was unable to make herself say the words. She imagined Farley smiling, shark-like behind the spell that made her face appear like empty space.

Farley knew there was blood in the water.

The Hooded Figure folded her arms behind her body, adopting the pose and intonation of a professor. "Are you a good, obedient child, Miss Hopkins?"

Mallory's skin itched and her stomach churned. Her mind twisted the words into sarcasm, and she grinned, "oh, absolutely. I'm the most obedient child there ever was. I—"

A spell hit her, and she toppled over into the dirt. Suddenly, everything felt wrong. The cloth brushing against her skin burned with every movement, and the cold from the air stung, like shards of glass.

freezing water carrying the cold to her core— she choked out a gasp —bones shnk-shnk-shnking as they scraped across wood—

"This is a supersensory charm," said Farley. "Right now, your whole body aches, and the effect will build until I release it. For this sort of disrespect, I should have my associates punish you," she paused for effect, "but I'm merciful, and instead of having my compatriots curse you with our most painful hexes, I'll allow your year mates to do it."

The girl's words stabbed her ears, and Mallory flinched at each consonant. The green bonfire felt like staring into the sun, bright and painful. Mallory almost threw up at the smell of earth, of rot and the sweet smell of decay, overlaid with lake water and unwashed students.

She couldn't think. Time warped oddly, her brain distracted by sensation.

Dead-eyed Selwyn stood in front of her, an empty smile twisting his face into a caricature of amusement. Mallory forced herself to her feet. Fuck this, she thought, fuck this so much.
"Give me—" she almost hurled, "your best shot, pimpledick." Bad idea, she thought, to taunt a clearly demented nutcase, but the bravado was necess—

"Everte Statum." the creepy boy hissed, and Mallory's world went white, pain crowding out every other thought.

She regained her wits while on her knees, gasping. The embarrassing truth of it was, she'd screamed like a baby. In the background, she heard them laughing.

"I— " Mallory cleared her throat, speaking up. "Well, that woke me up." Hunched over she tilted her head up, allowing a wry grin to color her face. More importantly, meeting the eyes of her year mates.

Unlike the seventh and second years, her year mates weren't laughing.

Lame joke, she thought, knowing it wasn't very funny. But Mallory had laughed in Selwyn's face, where Harper had cowered in fright.

Massively underestimated how far Farley would take this. First instinct that disobedience would be met with disproportionate retribution was correct. Overthought it.

Montague was next, still on his knees. Mallory staggered to her feet. Wouldn't remain kneeling in front of them. Sweat dripped from her brow at the exertion, mixing with the damp from the lake.

She met Montague's eyes and grinned. He was looking for retribution, she thought. Selwyn mocked him by correctly casting the spell Montague tried and failed to cast. He'd overcompensate, crack under pressure.

Kneeling on the forest floor, he cast, "Diffindo!"

Wrong, again.

Blood seeped through her hospital gown, the cut spanning across her arm. Her breaths turned frantic. It wasn't that deep, she told herself. It hurt terribly because of the spell, not because she was dying.

But the pain was only getting worse. Searing agony radiated from the cut, the rest of her skin prickling and burning where the wind and cloth touched it. Even her feet stung.

Mallory breathed out, attempting to focus.

Coke-bottles was up. Green light glinted off her glasses from the bonfire. Mallory squinted, shielding her eyes. It was too bright.

"Diffindo!" Across her collarbone this time, and Mallory staggered. The pain felt so sharp she gagged.

Mallory shook with the effort to stay on her feet, knees wobbling. Her hands were cold and clammy, smearing grit as she pressed against the cut on her collarbone. It wasn't deep, she told herself.

Next one up.

"Scourgify!" Met the girl's eyes and saw she was afraid, too— 'the cleaning spells were funny at first but any second now they'll realize I don't know any real spells. I'm so in over my—'
Mallory fell to her knees. Couldn't stand. She stayed down for a minute, maybe, eyes fixed on the ground. Blinking hard, she forced her gaze up, to meet her foe. She might not be able to stand, but she'd be caught dead before she bowed her head.

Hoop-boy was up, next. His face was pale, and she could tell by his expression that he didn't like doing this.

"Colovaria!" he said, and Mallory fought back a flinch.

No pain, she realized, and people laughed. Mallory looked down at herself — felt nausea, at the motion — and saw her skin painted bright orange. She let out a hoarse laugh. Hoop-boy was good people.

Crap, she wished she'd known the color-changing spell before she lit Harper on fire.

Then Rowle stood in front of her, and Mallory still couldn't will herself to her feet. Wouldn't work. She was doubled over, on the ground in front of Rowle for the second time in one day. Hated that. Hated how her gut was churning and her hands were shaking. Hated how she feared what Rowle would do.

"Did it on purpose," Mallory gasped out, "fell over. You were so scared, I wanted to laugh." She'd pretended to fall over, before, in the hallway. Revealing the trick might make Rowle angry, make her do something stupid, and distract her from casting.

Rowle whipped her wand forward with a flourish, lips curled into a mocking smile.

No reaction. Crap, she wasn't catching on.

"In the hall—" "Lumos maxima!"

Mallory's world exploded in white, like someone stabbing shards of glass in her eyes. She screamed loud and high, pressing her hands to her face to block out the light, but it wasn't helping.

Curling on the ground, face buried in the dirt with her eyes tearing and nose dripping, Mallory knew she looked pathetic.

Was Farley's point, she thought. Make her look weak and stupid. This was what defiance bought you.

Harper was next. She couldn't hear what he said, the white-hot pain drowned everything out—

Someone woke her up with a spell, and Mallory laid there, dazed for a moment. Everything hurt—everything. Each breath felt like someone was stabbing her back. The pine cones and sticks digging into her legs burned like fire.

She kept trying to take in shallow breaths, not moving a single centimeter, for fear of making it worse.

"I must hope you see sense, now," said Farley, leaning over her, "or would you prefer your classmates have another go at you?"

There was a piece of her that said no, but it was overridden by the horrible, terrible, burning pain that encompassed the rest of her.

"No." she whimpered.
"Good, we wait your convenience, Miss Hopkins." And Mallory waited a beat, expecting the girl to take off the spell now that she'd complied, but—

She had to get up with the spell still going. Her heart stuttered in her chest. Mallory inched upwards, pain in every joint, muscles screaming like she'd broken—

Farley laughed. "And so we meet the real Mallory Hopkins. Under all that talk, too weak to handle a simple supersensory charm. My my, what a shame."

The moment the spell was taken off felt like flipping a switch. Pain that was a solid eleven before was now a manageable five. She sat there for a moment, just breathing.

"You will bow to your betters, and then you will drop to your knees and kiss the hem of my robes. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Mallory rasped, voice hoarse from screaming. Her mind buzzed with static, strangely disjointed from what was happening.

She saw herself bow, and then get down on her knees and kiss Farley's robes. It didn't feel like her. Some other girl had done it, some not-Mallory, because Mallory didn't kneel and kiss people's robes.

"— should teach you a valuable lesson of placing your pride before reason. You all bow in the end. But you can do it screaming in pain, or in comparative comfort. Your choice."

Her classmates were laughing at her. She got up slowly off the ground, ignoring them.

Farley pointed to the end of the line, and Mallory went.

After that, the male hooded figure spoke, "And those of you who changed your spells to weaker spells the second time around? You're imbeciles, the lowliest of the first years, lower than the young Miss Hopkins. You just revealed to your classmates that the first spell you used was your strongest spell."

"Unless, of course," said Farley, "you switched to a weaker spell to fool us into thinking the previous spell your strongest spell. Mentors, that riddle is aimed at you! How cunning are your mentees?"

Mallory stood behind Harper, now at the back of the line. She couldn't stop shaking. Her muscles were clenched tight and she was breathing hard. Couldn't stand still.

The pain itself was gone but the memory of it was burned into her skull. Adrenaline, whispered a part of her brain that sounded a lot like her dad. Take deep slow breaths, try to relax.

"There are more of you here that have shamed Slytherin House. Darla Rowle, step forward!"

Mallory's head, stuffed with cotton wool and thankfully healed from the cutting charms, didn't register an emotion at that. She thought she ought to, that seeing Rowle get tortured would make her feel a little better, but it meant nothing to her.

"Darla Rowle, do you know why you're standing here, in front of me?"

"No, sir." The girl's face might've been carved out of porcelain for all the emotion she expressed.

"So you didn't instigate a fight that lost our House three-hundred-and-fifty points?"
"I only did it to protect our House's honour." Face lit in green, Rowle looked fragile, staring up at the looming hooded figures.

"You're a first year. You don't know anything about plotting, and even less about what one must do, to defend our House's honor. Tell me, why didn't you leave it to us to handle?"

She could feel it now, pins and needles crawling up her spine, again. This was wrong. It was all wrong.

"Because," her words crisp, "I thought the older years were disinterested. You all have such important problems, and—"

"Liar."

Rowle's face twisted with rage. "You weren't doing a thing about her! You—"

A commotion outside the circle drew her attention.

Snapping twigs and furious footfalls preceded another hooded figure bursting into the clearing. He huffed and panted with exertion. This one's hood was down, revealing a pale face, damp with sweat.

"Professors," the lookout gasped, "they're coming."

Everyone stopped what they were doing, murmured conversations halting mid-word.

"What do you mean, professors are coming?" spoke Farley, voice sharp with surprise.

"A whole lot of them by the lake! They're headed right this way, like they know we're here."

There was a moment of stunned silence while everyone absorbed the news.

From there, it devolved into chaos.

First years were barreled over by fleeing hooded figures. One shoved past Mallory, almost knocking her off her feet. Half a dozen disappeared in a wave, like a ripple spreading outwards. Not true invisibility, she realized a moment later, when she saw blurry outlines running towards the edge of the clearing.

She was supposed to be in the hospital wing, Mallory thought, as she backed up to the edge of the clearing.

If she got caught, she'd get more detentions. Mallory already had a week of detentions from Dumbledore and Snape's detentions for disrespect. At this rate, she'd be in detention from now until the holidays.

"Seventh years," Farley hollered over the mess, "split up, don't take the path, they'll be coming that way. First years, follow the seventh years! Everyone, follow the seventh years! Move!"

Which was exactly what they did, fleeing like rats from a sinking ship.

Heart thudding in her chest, Mallory tore off after the nearest hooded figure.

Five steps past the clearing, it became pitch black and almost impossible to see. She could barely glimpse the seventh year she was supposed to follow.
A flash of his cloak billowing, and Mallory darted right, muddy feet sliding on slick ground.

The snap of branches, glints of moonlight through gaps in the treeline, and the harsh rasp of heavy breathing were her guide.

They weren't on the path anymore. Brambles scraped across her legs as she stumbled after him. A branch whipped her face, slicing her forehead.

She couldn't see more than a few meters in front of her because the trees were so bloody close together.

Underbrush was getting thicker and she was falling behind. Shite. She put on a burst of speed and almost tripped over a fallen log in her haste.

Slipping on wet moss, she skidded into a small clearing. Her head flittered back and forth for some hint at where her guide went.

Nothing.

Fuck.

Mallory hunched over, hands on her knees, catching her breath. Needed a moment. Maybe the seventh year would realize his first year fell behind, and he'd turn around. No need to panic just yet, she thought.

Wood splintered behind her. Two footfalls came tumbling through the underbrush, and Mallory whipped out her wand, slinking into shadows beneath a tree.

Double fuck.

Darla Rowle and Leland Harper stumbled into the moonlight.

In the gaps between trees, Rowle's blonde hair looked silvery. Matted curls tangled and stuck to her face.

Harper panted next to her, lips down-turned and wand clutched tightly in his palm.

"Who's out there?" Rowle demanded, voice wobbling.

Mallory stepped out of the gloom and into the dim moonlight. She couldn't hesitate, not around someone like Rowle.

"It's just the mudblood," groaned Harper, rolling his eyes.

Rowle shoved past him, "the seventh year, you were following the seventh year?"

"Yeah, I lost him," Mallory said, eyes flicking between Harper and Rowle.

"Tell me where he went," demanded Rowle, mouth drawn in a firm line.

"I don't know," Mallory shrugged, "he was there one minute and gone the next."

Rowle let out a sigh, breath fogging the air, "I should've known better than to ask her."

A step behind, always a step behind. Mallory cursed her honesty. Should've just pointed and said he went that way, feign an injured ankle as the reason she'd stopped. Alone in the woods with

But she was bone-tired, still processing the last half hour. Some part of her was back in that clearing, tangled up in their energy, that thrice-blasted anticipation. Couldn't shake it off.

Eyes prickling, dry, she knew she should've been asleep hours ago. A low pounding headache was beginning, behind her eyes.

Harper turned to face Rowle. "now what?"

"I remember the last four turns," Rowle said, "and after that, it's straight from there to the clearing."

Harper raised an eyebrow. "You can remember? Because I barely can and I—" he broke off, "I have a really good memory."

Rowle's lips turned up in a sly smile, "I have a really good memory, too."

Strange emphasis on those words, thought Mallory, scrabbling to catch up to the conversation. Code for something, she thought, some kind of magic? A spell that gave them better recall.

"Sounds good." said Harper, giving Mallory a sidelong glance.

They couldn't talk about it while Mallory was here, she realized. Something illegal? Leverage she could hold over their heads later. Mallory made a mental note to ask Fred and George, when she got the chance.

Rowle clasped her hands behind her back and took two dainty steps towards Mallory.

"You're not going to follow us," she said, not a suggestion but a command. Her head was cocked slightly to the side, and her eyes were open wide in a mockery of innocence.

Mallory nodded, relieved, "fair enough, I'm good with that." She wanted nothing to do with Rowle or Harper, and their presence would only distract her.

Rowle drew back, blinking rapidly in surprise, "you are?"

Crap. She'd thrown Rowle off-balance. She hadn't meant to do that. She was still too slow, she realized, mouth opening before she had the chance to think. Rowle didn't want to agree with the mudblood. She was expecting a confrontation, assumed that Mallory would want to come with them.

"I mean, you're an arse, Rowle," Mallory backpedaled, "don't leave me in the woods all alone."

Her attempt at reverse psychology didn't sound sincere, though, not even to her.

"Right," Rowle said, eyes glinting with emotion. "you know which way he went, don't you?"

Mallory sagged, pretending to be caught-out, "I saw him go that way. But it's no use, now. He's long gone."

*Go back to the clearing, leave her alone.* She could re-group without additional variables gumming up the works. Didn't need to be watching her back in addition to being lost in the woods, Mallory thought.

"Darla," said Harper, voice strained and hesitant, "I think she should come with us."
"What? No, why?" Rowle spun around, her back to Mallory, facing Harper.

"Think about it." he said.

"I am thinking about it and I don't—"

"Hospital gown. Some doddypoll took her from the hospital wing. Probably think we're all out here, offing her in the woods."

"But we're not," she said, almost stomping her foot. Her arms were folded across her chest, like she was hugging herself. *Angry*, Mallory guessed.

She could only guess, because Mallory wasn't sure what the dynamic was between them, where things stood. The uncertainty wasn't a good thing, too many options, too many ways this could go down. Adrenaline shot up Mallory's spine. This could get *ugly*, an argument here and now.

"If she turns up dead in the woods tomorrow, do you know who they'll be interrogating? Us," Harper was either pushing Rowle to prove a point, Mallory thought, or didn't get her.

Rowle was pampered, rich, used to getting her way. When she didn't, she turned *mean*. She was the sort who'd do anything to win, and then rub your nose in it.

"This isn't the Forbidden Forest," said Rowle, sounding very cross. "Now come along and stop *arguing with me*."

Mallory shifted gears, wand gripped tightly in her closed fist. She knew all of two spells: the fire-making charm and the mending charm. If a fight broke out, she was screwed.

But if she got up behind Rowle and used her as a shield—

"She's a mudblood," said Harper, "weaker than us. She might actually freeze to death out here."

Rowle sighed, unfolding her arms, "you know, I was waiting to bring this up until later."

Shifting the topic, putting Harper on his back foot. And neither of them were paying any mind to Mallory. Instead of sneaking *toward* Rowle, Mallory considered, it might be better to sneak backwards into the dark.

She could slip away while the two of them were distracted.

Mallory took a step back and a branch *cracked*, the sound eerily loud in the dead-silence of the woods.

Rowle glanced back, and then refocused on Harper, "you've been trailing after me all day."

"*What?*" Harper drew back as though he were stung.

"That's not an insult, it's a compliment. You know I'm the only one in our year who can get you what you want."

Mallory stopped mid-motion, intrigued. *What?*

"What I want?" echoed Harper.

"Reputation, power, the resources to become a powerful wizard, in spite of your blood."
For a moment Mallory wondered if that was aimed at her, only to realize that Harper wasn't a pureblood, and she was so confused—

Harper stood there stiff as a board, "and why would you be willing to offer me help?"

"Because someone like you?" Rowle said, prim, "you're hungry. You'll be trying harder in every class, learning spells because you want power, not just to pass the test."

"You want me to be your hack," Harper's voice was dry.

Mallory didn't know what 'hack' meant, exactly, but she could guess. Rowle wanted Harper to be her minion.

A second thought crossed Mallory's mind. So this was what Rowle looked like when she was trying. Scary. Was this as much for her benefit as it was for Harper's? It would act as a display of power, if Rowle cowed Harper here, and made him her minion.

Rowle opened her mouth, "do you really want to keep debating this? For a mudblood?"

"I—" Harper stuttered, "no, but—"

"Alright, then. Let's go."

"Wait," said Harper, "what if she really does freeze to death? I mean, won't we get in trouble?"

Rowle looked back at Mallory, smiling, "maybe she does, maybe she doesn't. Whatever happens, if my father finds we're being singled out, he'll go to the board and complain."

In the long run, Mallory decided, her enemies being separate and carrying resentment towards one another worked in her favor. If a fight broke out now, it'd be bad. But in the long run— think fast, she ordered herself. She had to disrupt the flow of conversation, muck up Rowle's narrative.

"Money can't solve everything," Mallory said, mouth running as fast as her brain could come up with words. Harper had ambition, she mentally recited, cared about his reputation—

"Word gets out Hogwarts is funded because of a cover-up. If you ever go for some political career, people will look into that sort of thing, dig up dirt."

"Money," said Rowle, "can buy silence, too."

Mallory let out a sharp laugh, "you know what she's doing, right?" She talked past Rowle, right to Harper.

"Second she gets her hooks in you, she has you for good. That's how it works. One favor and for the rest of your life, you're her minion. A dog on a short leash."

Rowle was still smiling.

"She's right," said Rowle, "you would be my hack." She turned to face Harper again.

"But my family, we're generous with our favors, and I don't want weak allies. Or unhappy ones. A career in politics is yours, if you want it. And if you haven't thought that far yet, we can give you options. Tutors during the summer, access to books and—"

"I have tutors," said Harper, "we're not poor."
A missed note in the conversation, out of tune. Rowle wasn't perfect, she made a mistake.

"But you're not connected," Rowle pushed on, "we know better tutors."

Mallory almost relaxed. Rowle was coming on too hard, too soon after Harper was forced to tell the whole of Slytherin how his mum was a traitor. He felt humiliated, and she went and attacked his family's ability to provide for him.

"That's not true—" Harper broke off, "can we shelve this for later? I'm not saying that I'm not interested—"

"Maybe, but we need to get back to the clearing now," said Rowle, arms folded across her chest again. "If they're hunting her, I don't want to get caught up in it."

"Go on, then," Mallory said, a nudge. Hopefully she'd be too distracted to argue.

"I—" Harper looked between Mallory and Rowle, "we need to talk without her here, but with her in sight." He was talking to Rowle, not Mallory.

Rowle's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Because—" a branch cracked behind them, and they all froze. Silence.

"Who's there?" Rowle raised her voice, wand pointing into the black.

Nothing.

A moment passed before they lowered their wands.

"Look," said Harper, "it's important." He stressed the word like it was supposed to mean something to Rowle, but whatever it was, she wasn't biting.

Rowle shook her head, "we can talk on the way back to the clearing. We're wasting time, here."

"She needs to come with us," he said.

Dread crawling down Mallory's spine.

Something wasn't making sense, she realized. The sequence of events that lead up to this point didn't add up in a way that felt natural.

An initiation in the woods, one that took place every year for many years in a row. If the teachers knew about it, they wouldn't allow it. Hazing rituals were the sort of thing that could go too far and result in lawsuits. She knew that from stories on the telly. That was why there was a lookout stationed to watch out for professors.

But—

"Why are you pressig with such a ridiculous notion?" said Rowle, fists curled tight at her sides.

"Because there aren't any professors coming," answered Mallory, face numb. "It's a trap."

Harper whipped around, eyes wide with shock.

Mallory pointed her wand at Harper, "someone ordered you to take me to the clearing."
Snape had been a Slytherin, she reasoned. If some Professor noticed a Slytherin student was missing from the Hospital Wing, they'd go to Snape. And Snape would tell them to go back to bed, everything was handled. He wouldn't do anything to stop a thousand-year old tradition. The lookouts weren't worried about Snape, they were worried about professors from other Houses.

"No," Harper stuttered, panicked, "that's not—I'm not—but see?" he turned back to Rowle.

Rowle practically hissed, "what are you going on about?"

"Even she thinks it!" Harper squeaked, "that we're behind it, but we're not!"

Rowle's wand switched between Harper and Mallory, face twisted in confusion.

"Why do you want to bring me to the clearing?" Mallory asked, force behind her words.

"Just listen and stop—" he took a breath, "someone raised the alarm, but there's no one coming. Darla, you said earlier that the upper years weren't plotting anything, but what if they were, and what if this is it?"

Rowle's wand settled on Mallory, "you think they're plotting to get rid of the mudblood?" The excitement in her eyes was painful for Mallory to behold. Rowle, she realized, was quite disturbed. And Mallory couldn't help but feel revolted by her sadism.

"And they're going to pin it on us," said Harper.

"What?" Rowle shrieked, "no they're not."

Mallory reeled. Up until this point, she assumed that the upper year Slytherins didn't care about Mallory's blood. But maybe they were being subtle, she wondered, allowing the younger years to take the blame.

And who better to pin it on than the students who already viciously attacked Mallory? The teachers would be so busy feeling guilty that they didn't do more, they'd miss the real culprits.

It made sense.

Crap, she needed time to think. What actions can she take, what's the safest strategy? Was Harper twisting the truth, and if he was, why? She couldn't think up any ready answers, wasn't sure what to do.

"They are," Harper took a step forward, "because they hate us. Because we spent all day beating the spit out of her and it's an easy sell."

Rowle shifted her chin up, so she was looking down her nose at him, "quit yanking my wand. No one's ever going to believe two first years—"

"But they'll suspect, even if your father does what he does, there'll always be that one person who says we false-memory charmed ourselves."

Rowle rolled her eyes, "we can't cast false-memory charms."

"No, but the seventh years can. The professors might think we asked them to false-memory charm us, and then they memory-charmed themselves to forget they charmed us."

Rowle opened her mouth to argue, and then shut it. Then opened it again, "but if the professors think we're out here to hurt her, and we're found with her alive..."
"Then they can't do anything, exactly!"

"No," Rowle shook her head, "it'll make it easier for the plotters, with us all in one place. If the Professors find us with her, they'll think we were planning on getting rid of her. But they might not be the ones who get to us first. If the seventh years find us, they'll hex her and false-memory charm us into believing we did it."

Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose with her free hand. Too much, too many pieces of information to fit into the puzzle. And she knew she couldn't make them stop or slow down to explain, because that'd make her look weak.

"If we leave," said Harper, "they'll do something to her and it'll come back on us."

"It sounds to me," Rowle's eyes were narrowed in thought, "that if something happens to the mudblood, they'll make it look like we did it, no matter what. Even if we get to the common room without being false-memory charmed, they'd find us in our rooms and do it then."

Harper slumped in despair, then straightened, "but if we get her to the common room before—"

"Then they'd try again tomorrow," said Rowle, "or the next day, or the day after that."

"I—"

"But if we leave her here now, then they might pick someone else to be their scapegoat, go for whomever's nearby," her eyes locked with Mallory's. "In the end it doesn't matter who did it, so long as she's gone."

Something, Mallory thought, something here still didn't make sense. She could feel it, a prickle in the back of her brain. It felt like the echo of bones sliding, shnk-shnk-shnk, against wood.

The sound of snapping twigs and cracking wood sent Mallory spinning around.

"That's happened more than once," Mallory said, voice tight.

"Four times," observed Rowle, "twice since we stopped." Her tone was breathy, just this side of afraid.

Someone was stalking them. Mallory took a step to the right, putting Harper and Rowle in her peripheral vision. If they turned their wands on her, she'd see it.

*Limit the number of unknowns.*

But how could a *specific* someone lure her away from the clearing? she wondered. The thought came unbidden, as she stared into the pitch black forest.

Harper thought someone came up with a plan to hex Mallory in the woods, to let her freeze to death overnight or leave Hogwarts too injured to stay. That, she realized, required *control.*

No one picked which seventh year Mallory chose to follow. The assignment was random, and completely out of a would-be plotter's control. But someone might've followed *Mallory.* A stalker.

Still, she reasoned, it was a risky plan. Too risky, when they could've pulled Mallory aside at any point on the walk to the clearing. Or yanked her back into the woods while everyone was distracted with the punishment game. This plan was messy, uncoordinated.

Mallory turned around, looking to make sure the stalker wasn't sneaking up behind them.
"We need to get out of here," whispered Harper.

Rowle nodded.

It would be too much to expect them to stick their necks out for her, she knew. But Mallory didn't like her chances alone. Suddenly, Mallory felt relieved her first attempt at reverse psychology failed. One seventh year could take out three first years, she reasoned, but it'd be more difficult than attacking one first year. If they all stuck together, the seventh year might leave them alone.

"The second you leave," Mallory muttered, "they're going to strike."

Rowle glanced over at her, "it was nice knowing you, Hopkins."

Mallory smiled coldly at Rowle, "they don't need to false-memory charm you. You're making yourselves look like the bad guys right now, leaving me here when you know I'm going to be attacked."

It was a bad situation. If they stayed, they'd be attacked by the stalker, too. If they left, they were making themselves complicit.

Harper shook his head, "no, they'll erase this conversation. Memory charms. We won't know any of this even happened."

Harper and Rowle inched out of the clearing, wands trained on Mallory. And there was nothing she could do about it.

They vanished into the dark.

It was different from how the seventh year had vanished, she realized. He'd been there one moment, and gone the next. The two first years bled into the dark slowly, bushes and twigs rustling as they passed.

Mallory whipped her wand around, eyes narrowed. It was where she would strike, from behind.

Nothing.

*It would really be funny if all the fuss was over some deer or rabbit.*

A small part of her noted that she wasn't nearly as afraid as she ought to be, given the situation. It was like how during the Initiation, Mallory felt nothing when Rowle was getting torn a new one by the seventh year prefects.

She felt off somehow, since that supersensory charm. Like she got torn apart and put back together wrong.

Terror was the appropriate response, she thought. Someone was planning on hurting her badly, maybe even killing her. But every nudge she sent at her brain came back dull, a sluggish thread of fear where it should be a roaring pipe-explosion of visceral terror.

Eyes fixed on the edges of the clearing, Mallory ordered herself, fearful of distraction.

The stalker had followed them from the Initiation Circle to this clearing, intent on hurting Mallory, maybe. *Why hadn't they attacked yet?*
If it was a seventh year, they had nothing to fear from Mallory's spells. They knew this, and she knew this. So why hesitate?

Moreover, they were silent, which meant they weren't moving. Every stupid step in this forest generated noise. The crunch of leaves under feet, a rustle of branches.

It was utterly silent.

Now that she took note of it, the silence seemed wrong. She hadn't noticed before, too preoccupied with Rowle and Harper. But outside there were always noises. The rustle of small animals scurrying through the underbrush, the hoot of an owl and the whistle of wind through branches.

The wind didn't move, leaves didn't rustle.

'Menacing', if asked for a word to describe the forest. The mist curling at her ankles, thick gnarled branches became threatening shapes in the gloom. Moonlight filtering through the leaves, all wild and without a human's touch.

The trunks looked gray, a likely side-effect of dim lighting. Low bushes and scraggly brambles hugged the ground. Up above, vines and moss hung off drooping branches.

But above all else, the silence contributed most to the atmosphere.

Every muscle in Mallory's body tensed, heartbeat speeding up. Ah, there was the fear. Not broken, after all.

She kept turning around, eyes peering into the blackness.

It would be like this until sunrise, she realized, maybe a bit later since the light would take time to rise over the treeline and shine on Mallory's little clearing.

Staying here wasn't smart. Rowle and Harper might lead the plotters back here with their really good memories. However, her prey instinct kept her paralyzed, standing in her small patch of moonlight.

The sensible part of her brain argued: staying in the light felt safe, but it made her a beacon, a target. If she wanted to hide from whomever was hunting her, slipping into the blackness would make it hard for them to find her.

A more sensible part of her brain argued that she was dealing with wizards, not average humans. Supersensory charms and their ilk existed. Just because she couldn't see or hear her enemy approaching didn't mean they couldn't sense her.

It wasn't a strong argument. Yet, somehow she knew that the moment she stepped out of the moonlight, she'd be dead. An overbearing weight pressed down on her, every time she stepped into the darkness.

She felt watched.

Mallory whipped around again, trying to be random about it. The muscles along her neck and shoulders started to feel the strain.

But the stalker wasn't her only worry. By the fire, her damp hospital gown hadn't been an issue. Now, though, she was shivering. The sweat she generated while running cooled her skin. Her feet, buried in mud, were so cold they ached, and her hands weren't fairing any better.
The cold pierced her ears, tips burning.

While it wasn't below freezing, she was only wearing a sodden hospital gown.

She didn't know how cold it needed to be for someone to freeze to death. *Didn't know how fast it could set in, nor if the fire-making charm would work on damp wood.*

What if the stalker left, and she was wasting her time?

Maybe they heard Harper and Mallory figuring out their plan, and decided if first years caught on, then adults would, too. Or maybe they heard Rowle's speech about how powerful her daddy was, and thought better of it.

But— it would be stupid to assume that her enemy ran away, if she wasn't sure. It seemed like the best thing to do was to act as though her stalker was the cleverest amongst the seventh years, that they were here and waiting—

'But *why?*' she wondered.

*Why haven't they attacked yet?*

Maybe they went after Rowle and Harper first, modifying their memories. And were coming back for Mallory.

But that didn't make sense, either. Mallory could run off in the time it took to grab the two and cast spells on them.

Unless there were more than one stalker.

A conspiracy, she imagined, a group of students acting with coordination. One followed Harper and Rowle, another stayed behind to keep an eye on Mallory.

*But why haven't they attacked yet?*

Maybe they messed up, she reasoned. Someone chickened out or— *don't assume your enemies are doing convenient things, like making mistakes.* Danny used to tell her that, and the part of her mind that chided her sounded a lot like him.

*Then why haven't they attacked yet? What were they waiting for?*

Mallory scowled angrily into the forest. It wasn't cunning to assume her enemies never made mistakes, either. But guessing what people were thinking was Danny's department, not her's. She was just half-remembering the things he told her, trying to apply those bits and pieces to her own problems.

It didn't help that she was facing an invisible enemy. No expressions to read, or words to analyze.

But that in itself was a clue, she thought. Who would go after Mallory Hopkins, what sort of person or persons cared enough to hunt her down and stalk her through the woods.

What did she know?

*That Slytherin as a whole didn't want her in their House. They thought her presence cheapened their House's name.*

Mallory spun about again, flexing her wand hand. It was getting a cramp.
Even worse, Mallory continued her mental narrative, she was an outsider. Not a real part of their culture, and at the bottom of their hierarchy. With only a single day to observe, there wasn't enough time to get a grip on the structure.

But there were some things, she knew, that ought to carry through from one culture to the other.

Reputation.

It was why Mallory was having such a hard time sussing out Rowle's motivations, or her Stalker's.

Rowle's actions today, and Harper's, they carried with them weight. Like Harper said, people might think you weren't at fault, but they'll always wonder, in the back of their minds.

And professors don't like bullies. Snape served as a glaring exception, but the rest of the professors wouldn't trust Harper or Rowle. They lost valuable currency, attacking Mallory in front of a teacher.

Rowle might be trying to send a message: look, we can attack you and get away with it, but with that action, Harper and Rowle lost a lot of goodwill. Rowle used that good-girl imagine too often make such a gigantic mistake.

A little girl who pouted, wore her hair in ringlets, knew just the right tone to use to get every grownup wrapped around her finger. That girl didn't twist herself into that shape, just to muck it up on the first day by dueling.

Mallory's breath formed a cloud in the air on every exhale, as the adrenaline slowly slipped away. Freezing water dripped off branches and slid down her cheek. She shivered.

Her feet were numb, the hospital shift sticking to her skin and heavy with moisture.

Still, no movement.

And yet, she couldn't take her eyes off the black spaces between trees. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was out there.

Rowle's act was just that, an act, a good act, and Mallory was intimately familiar with a version of it.

Back in South Brent, she and Danny were masters at leveraging the currency of teachers' approval. Or more accurately, Danny was. Mallory could never quite pull it off, wore her disdain for authority like a badge, and it showed.

Danny had no such compunctions. He wore neat khakis and tucked his shirt in; looked proper and respectable. Showed just the right among of deference to the teachers, interjecting it with earnestness. Sometimes he even stayed behind with the teacher during recess, babbling about how excited he was for the lessons.

What the teachers didn't realize was that his excitement was a distraction so Mallory could slip into someplace she ought not be, creating mischief.

He quite enjoyed playing the role. And their double-act let them get away with near bloody murder.

Rowle was like a cheap, knock-off version of Danny. But even she should realize that giving yourself a reputation for beating up other students wasn't on. Not if you wanted to maintain your
role, she thought.

Crackling branches snapped Mallory back to herself, and she raised her wand a tad. Getting tired, letting her arm droop and her mind wander.

"We're going in circles." It was Rowle's voice, and getting closer.

"What?" said Harper, "no we're not."

"We are. Don't you recognize this tree?"

"Maybe?" Harper sounded uncertain, "I wasn't looking closely at them."

"I thought you said you took memory potion, you liar."

"I do, but I wasn't paying attention to the stupid trees!"

Mallory aimed her wand towards where she guessed they'd come through, but flicked her eyes behind her a couple times. *Wouldn't be good to be caught off-guard.*

Rowle and Harper stumbled into the clearing a second time that night, and startled in surprise.

"You lead them here," Mallory accused, eyes bright and *furious*. She waited to see if there was a change in their expression, some kind of confirmation.

"No I—" "What?"

Nothing. They hadn't lead any seventh years to the clearing.

Mallory lowered her wand and shook her head, "I don't get it."

What were they doing back here, she wondered, if not to turn her over to the seventh years? Unless they'd been bespelled to forget about their earlier conversation, she didn't understand what'd happened.

"You remember our talk earlier?" she asked, voice low. "What was the last thing I said to you?"

Rowle tilted her head, tone dry, "you said we were leaving you here to die."

That sounded about right. Couldn't remember her exact words, but—

"And before that?" Mallory asked, just in case.

The blonde girl's lips curved into an amused smile, "do I need to give you back your exact words?"

Mallory shrugged with one arm, teeth chattering, "it'd help."

Harper rolled his eyes and stepped forward, "you guessed the professors weren't coming. We argued about whether or not you ought to come with us," he glanced at Rowle, "memory charms and false-memory charms, using money, and—"

"Alright," Rowle's voice was forceful, "I get it. Are you satisfied our memories haven't been tampered with, now?"

Mallory shrugged again, too tired to try and poke holes into their proof that they hadn't been memory charmed.
She wanted to put her head down. Rest. She settled for sitting on her heels, crouched above the mud.

"You didn't go back to the clearing," she stated. They were probably here to hex her, she thought, or brought someone with them. Maybe she was too tired to read faces right.

Rowle moved further into the little clearing, shaking her head, "I'm sure I remembered it right."

"Me too," said Harper, "we both—"

"Take memory potions?" Mallory said, a tad too slow to remember that she ought to pretend she didn't overhear them. It was becoming a pattern. A step too slow, she cursed herself. Felt like she was stumbling, scrabbling to keep up with her stupid mouth.

She stood up and raised her hands. *Peace.* "I don't care, alright? I'm tired. It's—" she ran a hand through her hair, attempting to brush the loose strands from her face. Smeared mud across her forehead and hair, instead.

"No," Harper shook his head, "I'm not letting you hold that over our—"

Rowle spoke up over him, "that's not important right now. We both were following our memories but we ended up here."

Harper turned to face Rowle, "you think someone lured us here."

"I think there's something wrong," Rowle's face scrunched in concentration, "maybe someone did memory charm us when we got to the clearing, and then left us here."

They were silence for a moment, and Mallory's brain skipped and stuttered before finally dredging up a useful comment.

"Why'd they do that, though?" she frowned, "this whole time, we've been waiting for someone to pop out of the bushes. Maybe they want us all to freeze to death, make it look like an accident?"

"Warming charms," answered Harper.

Crap, *of course there was.* Forgot. She didn't know how to cast it, anyway. The fire-charm might work on damp wood, though, and she was freezing enough to try it.

"I don't—" Rowle spoke up, hesitant, "I think we're missing something."

Mallory glanced over at Rowle, "the silence?"

"It's too quiet," she nodded.

"I think," Mallory's tone careful and level, "we're the only ones from school left out here."

It didn't make sense for a seventh year to wait this long to hex them, she reasoned. Even if there were magical forensics, an attacker could always hit them in the back of the head with a rock.

Then again, she knew very little about what magic could do. Maybe the magic police could tell it was Professor Plum that did it with the candlestick in the library, and not Colonel Mustard.

*Fuck.* If she hadn't lost that stupid seventh year, she'd be back in her dorm right now in bed.

"Yeah," Harper's voice was contemplative, "I don't think anyone would stay out here this long..."
unless they had a really good reason.”

"A magical creature," said Rowle, then shook her head, "but they don't leave the Forbidden Forest. They're bound there."

Harper's voice dropped, "it might be someone pretending to be a creature."

"Do either of you," Rowle asked, "feel an impending sense of despair or hopelessness?"

"No?" Mallory's brow furrowed.

Harper shook his head, "dementors are owned by the ministry, and besides, you wouldn't find one in this part of the forest."

"Are you fucking with me, now? What's a dementor?" She was too tired, muscles aching and head pounding, to deal with this.

"It's a creature," Harper answered, "a magical creature. It makes you feel despair, and everything goes cold when it's near."

Mallory glanced around, noting the freezing water on her feet, her hairs were on end and she kept violently shivering. If this situation couldn't generate despair, she didn't know what could. Mallory tucked her hands in her armpits, conserving heat.

"What counts as despairing, exactly?" Mallory asked.

"If you have to ask, you aren't feeling it," said Harper, tone dry.

Mallory shrugged. It felt unnatural, having an almost-civil conversation with the two of them.

Another drop of freezing water landed on her cheek, and Mallory brushed it off with the clean part of her hand. It's just water.

It felt like it ought to be blood, though, or something more sinister. She felt like this was a horror movie, and she was about to find out that the bog monster was leering down at them from above their clearing. Surprise!

She glanced up, just in case. Nothing.

Rowle prowled the edge of the clearing, face twisting into a frown. Harper lit his wand, brightening the area substantially.

But that feeling, the sort of feeling she got when watching a scary movie, tension and anticipation, knowing something bad was going to happen at any second—

Her mind drew a connection. Because in those movies, a silent forest always meant something scared all the other critters away.

"Anyone really creeped out right now?" Mallory asked. "Like, we've been transported on-set to a horror movie?"

"What?" said Harper, who's eyes were on Rowle's slow, methodical pacing.

"Nevermind. It's like— I feel like I'm being watched."

Harper's eyes snapped to her's, "us too. The whole time we were walking, it felt like there were
eyes on us. I thought it might be a seventh year, but…” he trailed off.

"Yeah," Mallory echoed, "but it doesn't make sense."

Rowle stopped, and lit her wand.

"Well, I don't see anything, but," Rowle's eyes narrowed. "I think there's something here."

"Fucking stop with the dramatics. I heard it too, earlier."

There was the sound of branches breaking, the shnk-shnk-shnk of bone sliding across wood.

Rowle whipped her wand out, pointing into the black. Harper kept his wand pointed up, turning in a slow circle, searching.

For her part, Mallory's wand never left her hand. Not that she would be much help.

"Okay," Mallory's voice turned soft and controlled, "so how did you guess that would happen a second before it did?"

"I didn't," whispered Rowle, "it's just— there was this moment earlier where I tripped in the woods, and it felt almost like a gap, and I felt it again."

Mallory pointed her wand out. An enemy in the woods wouldn't know Mallory didn't know many spells, necessarily. She slowly circled around, sticking close to Harper.

"I think I know which moment you're talking about," Mallory said, thinking of that moment where the seventh year vanished, "what do you think it was?"

He was there one moment and gone the next. She'd felt an odd lurch, before, like the whole world stuttered for a second.

"I think we were moved," said Rowle, "I think something's here, and—"

There was a wet sound, like stones on something slick, and Mallory turned towards the sound—

"Oh my god, Jesus fuck" "—Darla?! Merlin— oh, Merli—"

Her brain went blank, utterly blank. She didn't understand what she'd seen.

"Move!" Mallory screamed, grabbing Harper's hand and shoving him back, her wand pointed at the thing.

It wasn't Darla. It couldn't be Darla. There wasn't enough time to do that to her. It was like something had—

Gorged her. It stood up straight with twigs and stones woven through her, like some twisted exoskeleton, keeping Rowle's corpse standing upright. Her torso had been reduced to meat.

Fuck.

Rowle's wand was still in her hand, arm extended outward, supported by a lattice of twigs and thin branches. Larger branches had been used to prop up the body. Horror clawed at Mallory's chest, she wanted to scream.

Half of Rowle's face was gone. Her eye— Mallory could imagine how they'd shoved stones under
her skin until they'd burst out—

She gagged, tearing her eyes away. But it wasn't any use — she could see the body in her mind's eye, all the gory details of it burned into her retinas.

*The lattice of stones and branches that held up the body were turning red as blood trickled out from between—*

*Jesus.*

"How— how, what—" Mallory choked. *What does that?*

Her mind caught up, churning past the horror. The monster was still *here.*

"We have to run," she said, backing up further, and *tugging* on Harper's arm.

"I can't— I can't—" said Harper, high pitched and *broken.* His wand shook so hard in his hand he couldn't—

"RUN!" she screamed into his ear, pulling him hard. She ran, Harper a step behind her, stumbling and stuttering in shock.

Racing through the woods now, heedless of scratching branches and brambles.

"I can't," he sobbed, "I can't—Oh *Merlin,* we're going to— she's—"

Mallory hurled herself over the bushes, jumping and twisting in midair, barely avoiding a low-hanging branch. They practically tumbled downwards, skidding down a gully. The water was low, but she could see the torpid stream icing over. The water burned cold when they splashed through it.

Climbing out the other side, she pulled herself over a fallen branch. Frost rimmed the trunks and fallen branches. Mallory swallowed, almost certain there hadn't been frost here, before.

"Think!" she gasped out, once they were on flat ground, again. "I need you," another breath, "to think!"

Hard to focus on *thinking* when barreling through the woods, she griped, ducking under vines and tearing through brambles.

"I can't— I—"

"You have to! Come on, you know about—"

"It killed her!" His voice was high and tremulous. He dug his heels into the ground and they stopped, wand light flickering in the dark.

"We need to *go* what are you—"

"There's no point!" The words burst out of his mouth, a shriek. His eyes were wild and unseeing, "it's going to kill us, it's going to— there's *nothing* we can—"

"What is it?" Mallory had one hand gripping Harper's arm. The other gripped her wand, pointed out into the night, *useless.* Her heart was beating out her chest and she was shaking. *She couldn't get that image out of her head.*
"I don't— I don't—" the kid was crying, sobbing, shaking so badly it was hard to hold onto him.

"We need to know what it is." She demanded, squeezing his arm. Her legs were jittering and her eyes prickled with tears. *Fuck, what was the bloody point in being strong. It didn't matter, they'd die anyway—* Shut up. *Shut up.*

"I—" he sniffed, "I can't thi—"

"There's no *time,*" she hissed. Any second now, it'd catch up. *Broke it's holding pattern and attacked, why then?*

"Holly," he croaked, "Holly stops— some— some creatures. Running water. The patronus charm. I don't—"

"Okay," she said, "that's good. Keep working. It's a predator, yeah?"

"I—" his breaths were slowing down, he swallowed, "predator."

"Good, yeah, a predator." Mallory prompted, "something that hunts, hunts in the dark."

She didn't wipe her cheeks, didn't want him to realize the wetness on her cheeks wasn't from the rain. She forced herself to speak slowly, too, because if she spoke any faster he'd hear the hitch in her voice. *Had to stay calm. If both of them panicked—*

"Gy— gyrtrash. Only moves in the dark. Horse."

"It's a gyrtrash?"

He crumpled to the ground, head buried in his hands.

"No, come on, look up. It attacked when we weren't looking, *look at me!"* The last part came out as a desperate shriek.

He did, eyes so wide the whites were showing. Face damp with sweat, snot dribbling out his nose and shaking, he looked as scared as Mallory thought a person could get.

"We need to keep each other in sight." voice still calm, panic bubbling under the surface. "It attacked when we weren't looking at her."

He nodded, shaking, "you think—"

"Come on," she grabbed his hand, "we need to move. I don't know how fast it is, or what it can do."

He stood up, arms still shaking visibly, the light from his wand jiggling around. She could see his fingers, caked in grit. Mud, twigs, and crawling bugs were tangled in his hair.

"Keep me in *sight.""] she said, keeping one eye on him, herself. *Couldn't hack this alone.*

"What's the spell you're using to light you're wand?" She couldn't rely on him to keep it lit. He was falling to pieces, and if it got him next, she'd be *blind.*

The boy started giggling, high-pitched and off-key.

She tugged, "the incantation and wand movement! Now!"
"Lumos, lumos, just— lumos."

She lit her wand with a jab, staring at the giggling, half-mad boy that was her only bloody tool in this— fuck, there was no point. They weren't going to see dawn.

They broke out into a jog, not picking any direction, just away. The tree canopy above them provided no direction, only the drip-drip of fat water droplets, plunking into pools of water.

_They were fucked._

After she didn't show up all day for any classes, someone might send out a search party. Colin, Felix, and Kit would definitely notice she was gone, and tell a teacher.

By then, it'd be too late.

"Think while we walk," she reminded Harper, squeezing his hand painfully. Had to get a reaction from him that wasn't panic or crying.

"I don't—" he was panting, "a gyrtrash can't—"

"It's a horse," she said, guessing what he meant. It couldn't do that to Rowle.

He wheezed out air, a half-sob, "I don't know what could do that."

"That's okay. We're going to figure it out," she didn't believe herself. She didn't believe they'd live until morning.

"Darla said— she said—" Harper stumbled over a log and she tugged him hard, pulling him upright.

— And straight back into the clearing, with Darla's mutilated corpse.

They were right back where they started.

Mallory felt all the blood drain from her limbs, mouth open.

Harper let out a keening noise, "Merlin, Merlin, it—"

"Lured us here," Mallory muttered, eyes wide, "we never got away."

Chapter End Notes

I wonder, did Voldemort copy the Death Eaters' hooded cloaks and secret ceremonies from Slytherin's Initiation Night, or are the students playing at being Death Eaters?

-Thank you to the people I've hounded this past week to read this chapter/check it for errors. It is much appreciated.

-Hooded Figures are a Night Vale reference.
The Slytherin Initiation Part 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A predator that strikes in the dark, always just out of sight.

Harper collapsed in the mud by her feet. His head hung forward, limp, the skin of his neck stretching his shirt's fabric unpleasantly. The shirt, she realized, was one of those old-fashioned night-shifts. She'd read about men wearing those to bed in the 1800s, and had thought they looked an awful lot like her granny's old nightgown. Funny, she thought, how people noticed the strangest of things, when they're under pressure.

Harper, oblivious, went on hugging himself, gibbering. Mallory flicked her eyes between him and the thing, Darla Rowle's corpse. Just as quickly, she directed her gaze away, in horror. Rowle's cheek had started to sag, the single remaining eye staring ahead, blank. Mallory felt her brain go blank, with it. Her brain wasn't fast enough. She couldn't think, couldn't come up with a plan. She had no idea how to save them.

Rain was falling in earnest, now. Fat drops tracing their way down her face and neck. The wide tree leaves collected the rain. And when the weight of water became too heavy, they crumpled, unleashing their load of freezing water in spats.

The ground was oversaturated, the rainwater settling in puddles. The individual pools merged together, sharing the same fluids. Mallory realized, with a start, that she was standing in Rowle's diluted blood. Harper was kneeling in it.

She took two steps to the side before throwing up, bile burning her throat on the way. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, smearing grit. Grimacing, she wiped that hand on the back of her gown. Focus, she needed to focus.

The ground back at the Initiation Circle had been dry, she recalled. Then she'd followed the seventh year deep into the woods, and the ground had become slippery. Some part of her mind insisted this was a clue, and that the sudden shift from dry packed dirt to slimy mud was part of a larger puzzle she needed to piece together.

Or, Mallory reasoned, maybe that was just a coincidence. The trees were thicker, the further you went into the forest. Less chance for sunlight to reach the floor, drying the ground. It sounded entirely reasonable when she put it that way, in her mind. Yet, the reasonableness was belayed by that nagging sense of wrongness, a silent scream of superstition that incessantly tugged her attention to the gap. One minute, the ground was dry. The next, it was wet and slippery.

She wasn't even sure her rule about always keeping eyes on each other was real. Her brain kept trying to find patterns of behavior, habits and vulnerabilities she could exploit. Simultaneously, she was trying to keep Harper calm and avoid panicking, herself.

It wasn't working. She couldn't do it.

Always thought that in a crisis, time would slow and she'd be able to do the impossible. That's what having magic meant. Being able to produce miracles, be the hero, escape any bind.

A choked noise forced its way past her throat, little gasps and shuddering breaths. She couldn't cry, now, she told herself. One of them had to be useful, one of them had to think.
They weren't going to make it out of here alive. The thought slipped up on her like a knife between the ribs, stealing her breath. It'd been there, all along, that thought. She'd been avoiding it, much like how she'd ignored her misgivings about going to Hogwarts. She'd preferred the fantasy, let herself get caught up in the momentum of everyone's excitement. And now, she realized, she was going to die for her mistake.

Rowle's murderer was toying with them, letting them think they were getting away. They wouldn't, because the murderer was a wizard, more than capable of outwitting and out-hexing two first years.

Mallory swallowed, briefly shutting her eyes to take a deep breath. These thoughts wouldn't help her. She couldn't get dragged down in despair. That'd be like giving up without a fight, something Mallory couldn't do; not when there was another first year relying on her, another first year who didn't deserve to die. Even if their loss was inevitable, she intended to fight to the end, and give everything she could to this fight. If these were to be her last minutes on this earth, she wouldn't spend them despairing.

A glance back, and she realized Harper was sitting in the bloody water, staring at his feet.

"Harper!" she snapped, "keep your eyes on me, Harper."

He did.

Another drop of freezing water landed on her cheek. Running had warmed her, but now she was standing still, again. The sweat and the damp were rapidly cooling her, and the forest was only getting colder.

She didn't know much about freezing to death, but she knew that once you were so cold you stopped shivering, that was really bad.

She was that cold.

There was some television show she vaguely recalled, something about an arctic adventurer who survived a winter storm. He said how once you got hypo- something, your brain gets fuzzy. It gets hard to think, and you stop caring about whether you live or die.

She didn't know, had no idea whether or not she could freeze to death if it was above freezing out. It seemed to her like you wouldn't, because the body was made of a lot of water, right? Water froze when it was freezing out.

Yet Harper thought it was an option, earlier. He said she might freeze to death. He might've been him using that example for effect, but—

She couldn't be sure. And she felt very cold.

Which meant she had a time limit on how long she could think. Even if they managed to outsmart Darla Rowle's murderer, they'd have to make their way back to the castle. She really didn't have the time to sit around, kicking herself for her past mistakes or despairing at their fate.

And then it hit her, a sudden realization that made her want to smack herself upside the head. Mallory Hopkins was a witch.

"Incendio", she pointed at some damp twigs. They lit. Mallory and Harper didn't need to find the castle. They needed Hogwarts castle to come to them. It didn't make sense to keep running. The killer would just pop them back to this clearing. Better to stay put and conserve their strength.
Better to stay put, she reasoned, and make a really big fire. Someone would notice a fire, and come running. 'cause the creature, person, whatever it was, wouldn't want them to call for help if they were plotting to kill them. She might be pushing it to act faster, kill them faster.

*But Rowle's murderer would kill them for sure, if they did nothing.*

"*Incendio!*" She pointed at a big tree, and then at another on the opposite side of the clearing. "*Incendio!*"

Flames crackled and wood popped, thick guttering smoke spluttering into the night. Two big trees were on fire, one behind them and one in front of them. But the fire was having a hard time staying lit. The twigs at her feet were already out, courtesy of the rain.

Harper still stared at her, bug-eyed and trembling. Whether from the cold or from terror, she didn't know.

She lit up another tree, and sent more fire to the trees already burning.

Smoke joined the heavy scent of blood and viscera. Mallory coughed.

"Are you going to help?" her voice shook. Too much adrenaline, she thought, heart thumping a mile a minute and vision tunneling.

He shook his head, eyes red from crying, "I— this isn't— isn't real."

"I know," she croaked, attempting to sound soothing, "I don't want to be here, either. But we can't just give up."

He shook his head harder, "not real. Ill— illusion. Can't be dead."

She drew back, surprised. She hadn't considered that. The possibility didn't even cross her mind, because she didn't know that was an option.

"We don't know that," she whispered, fighting against the part of her that desperately wanted to believe it was true. That there was nothing to fear. That it was a hallucination. Because if it was, she could stop fighting. And she wanted to stop. Mallory wanted to wake up in her bed, to see Danny and her parents, again. She wanted the relief of being allowed cry and scream, wished someone else could take charge so the responsibility wouldn't fall to her. Mallory desperately, desperately, wanted this to not be real.

Instead, she lit another tree on fire. A circle of waning flames surrounded them, their reflections shimmering in the puddles.

"C-cant be dead," Harper shook, repeating himself. He meant Rowle, who was likely dead, unless this was some kind of sick extension of the Slytherin hazing ritual. She wouldn't allow herself to pretend it was, for the same reason she wouldn't pretend any of this was an illusion.

Rowle's corpse sparkled, blood and rainwater made reflective in the light. The gorge rose in her throat and she looked away. Swallowing hard, she tried to ignore the sour taste of bile in her mouth.

"So, it's smart," her voice trembled, "and it doesn't want to be seen."

"It can't be real—"

"Shut up! Listen, It's a predator, and it's playing with us, guiding us in circles, it's—"
"If this— If this is real we'll d— die here."

That's not helpful, she thought, before speaking, "think, think— why the game? Why drag us around in circles? It killed Rowle but let us stand around for god-knows-how-long—"

"This isn't— I can't—"

Useless. Not contributing.

"I need you to keep your eyes on me, come on," fuck, she was crying. She knew she couldn't be the one to cry, right now. She'd cover her face, but her hands were shaking too hard to hide it.

"We're going to die—"

"I know!" she screamed, and instantly regretted it. She took a breath, attempting to calm herself. *If they both panicked—*

"I know," Mallory repeated, keeping her eyes on Harper, the rest of the clearing remained in the periphery. Two trees weren't on fire anymore, she noted.

"*Incendio!*" it caught fire, but the rain was making it difficult. She'd need Harper to cast, too, if they wanted all the trees to stay lit.

She knelt down next to him, mud sucking at her knees. Freezing water rushed into the sinking sludge, chilling her legs. *So numb they burned.*

"If we don't try," she croaked, "then we'll— for *sure.*"

It thrived on fear, she thought.

Cause and effect. They get shaken up, scared, blood pumping. A monster or person that fed off of fear, she guessed, one that was smart and capable of *magic.*

Harper shook his head.

"I need you to help keep the fires lit," Mallory spoke, swallowing. "You can do that, right?"

He nodded, shaking, and Mallory pulled the boy to his feet.

"*Incendio,*" he choked out, and nothing happened. He let out a broken, croaking sound.

"It's alright," Mallory said, trying her best to sound comforting, "try again."

"*Incendio!*" The tree caught fire.

"Okay, good," she nodded, more to herself than to him, "we need to figure out—"

"I can't hear anything over the fire,*" he muttered. "The cracking."

They'd heard it coming, before. She could almost hear it, in her head: the *shnk-shnk-shnk* of bone sliding over wood. Now, they couldn't hear anything over the crackling fire. They'd have no warning.

But they were warming up, and there was light flooding the clearing. She coughed again, the smoke irritating her throat.
He was looking around, as though he might spot it.

"Don't!" she said, drawing another connection. He looked at her.

"Rowle— she said she saw something. Maybe it doesn't want us to see it."

At least he'd stopped crying and stuttering about how they were going to die. He hugged his arms to himself, "I don't know what it is."

"Okay, but you've read lots of books, yeah?" Mallory spoke, thinking, "you said you used a potion, to make yourself remember better."

"Memory potions," he corrected.

"Right, so if we think out loud, you might remember something you read somewhere, something half-forgotten."

He shrugged with one arm, shifting from one leg to the other. He was decidedly keeping his eyes in the circle.

"Rowle said something," he spoke hesitantly, "about a— a gap. In her—" The boy was blinking back tears.

A gap in memory. In perception. She knew exactly the moment Rowle had spoken of, because it was the same moment her own mind kept going back to, the tugging superstition. *Fuck, thank you Rowle. She'd been right, and something had happened in that moment. For all she knew, it might've been a memory erasure that made hours seem like minutes. From here, she needed to limit the number of possible suspects. Who or what could trick them into going in circles?"

"Any monster that can mess with time?"

He shook his head rapidly, water flicking off in a spray.

"Fear, things that feed off of it. Something that—"

"No," he croaked.

"Okay," Mallory said, nodding. They were definitely dealing with a person, then. She hadn't been entirely sure, before. For a while, she'd considered that their enemy was some sort of magical creature, one of unusual malice and intelligence. But if no such creature existed, then their enemy was a person.

Rowle must've figured it out, seen their face in the gaps between branches.

And the bastard responded by *butchering* her.

"It's a wizard," said Harper, realizing it seconds after she did.

*Fuck.* She didn't want him saying that out loud. If the murderer was nearby, then they could *hear* her.

Mallory shook her head, a bit frantic, "no it's not. It's a monster, a clever monster."

The killer wanted to hide their identity. But why respond with *grotesque murder* instead of slitting her throat, or any number of less horrible ways to kill someone? *This was a message.*
Harper squeaked, "they used a wizard magic. That's how they're— there aren't any magical creatures that can do this!"

Mallory squeezed Harper's arm as tight as she could.

"Stop," he swallowed, "you're hurting me."

_That's right I'm hurting you, you stupid buttmuncher._ He wasn't getting the message. _Too scared to think straight._

The third tree was still on fire, but it was getting weak.

No point in pretending any longer, she realized, "so it's a person," she said, and squeezed his arm again, "someone who can hear every word we're saying."

She felt more than saw Harper go stiff. But now, she was addressing their stalker.

"You can hear every word we're saying," she projected her voice a bit, hoping it didn't sound too scratchy.

"What are you _doing_?" hissed Harper.

She tried to remember what they said out loud since they arrived. They mentioned that the professors weren't coming, so their stalker knew that they knew no professors were coming. She couldn't use the grownups' arrival as a threat, but there was another tactic she could employ.

"We figured it out," her voice was a little softer, a little steadier, "two first years figured it out, yeah? So— so the professors will, too." She didn't say exactly what she'd figured out, allowing the murderer to hopefully assume she knew more than she did.

She cast another _incendio_, relighting a fire that had fizzled out.

She didn't know why Rowle's killer was hesitating. If they were a wizard, they could've killed Mallory and Harper twenty times over in the last minute. A good _diffindo_ across the throat would do it. They weren't waiting because they feared what two first years could do to them.

That was why she'd originally leaned towards _monster over human_. Some part of her brain felt the dissonance. If you wanted to implicate _a first year_ for murder, you cut Rowle's neck with a _diffindo_ or burned her to death with an _incendio_, first year spells they were capable of producing.

Which meant the killer had some other goal, like an insane psychopath who got their jollies off terrifying and butchering kids.

The choice to _terrorise_ them and the ritualistic butchering were distinctive. Those were clues, the sorts of clues Danny would be able to use to build a picture of the murderer.

Mallory, alone, couldn't connect the dots fast enough.

In spite of that, she was _desperately_ glad Danny wasn't here. Harper and Mallory wouldn't survive the night, but at least Danny would—

A hitch caught in her throat.

It was then she realized she picked a losing argument. He or she had already killed. If Mallory had figured it out earlier, before the person killed Rowle— _fuck, the killer had nothing to lose._
Harper spoke, "you have to let us go." His voice cracked in the middle of the sentence.

Mallory didn't know much about psychopaths, only what she saw on the telly. And mum said most of those shows were dramatizations. The telly wasn't always truthful.

*The facts. What did she know?*

The killer was someone who took pleasure in fear, and enjoyed the *hunt.*

"Because," Mallory continued, before Harper could start talking and mess something up, "who's going to spread the word? Three students go missing in the woods, their corpses found by professors. There's no story, no narrative."

Bloody bodies mutilated with sticks and stones got peoples' *attention.* She suspected this killer wanted a spectacle.

Harper caught on. "You're—" he swallowed, "you're really scary. Three dead, if we're all dead, no one will know how—" a choked exhale, "—how scary you are, they'll— because we're young they'll want to imagine it wasn't so terrible—"

Harper might be brilliant, she thought, once he stopped panicking and started using his head. This was the argument they needed, and he'd caught on.

Mallory spoke, "people always imagine children are safe. If something happens to one, it's awful. But kids *suffering* a lot? They'll tell themselves we didn't feel anything. I don't know, but us coming back and telling this story, how we had to watch our year-mate die. You want fear, right? Terror, panic, people quakin' in their boots. That's how to do it. But we have to be alive to tell your story."

Of course, the murderer might kill Mallory regardless of what she said. Whomever sicced this mad dog on them, they might've given specific instructions. 'Kill Mallory for being a muggleborn,' they'd say. 'Leave Harper behind to tell the story, about how going against the hooded figures means death.'

But there was always a chance, she hoped, a small chance that this murderer was motivated by something other than blood.

She might be deluding herself. Wishful thinking, trying to make up excuses in her head, reasons to keep hoping that she'd make it out of here alive.

"And I'm a good storyteller," choked out Harper, "really good. I—"

"Better to be more mysterious, though," Mallory talked over him. "Why not spare both of us? Sensible thing to do is leave one messenger, but two alive? It'll confuse them, and that'll scare them *more.*"

A burst of flame filled the clearing.

Mallory and Harper *screamed.*

The light blinked out and in its place stood Headmaster Dumbledore, with a large and fiery bird perched on his shoulder.

All the air rushed out of Mallory. *Shock.*
"I have searched far for you this night and—" He stopped when he saw Rowle's corpse. His gaze shifted back to the two of them, eyes practically glowing with rage below his bushy eyebrows.

He met their eyes. A beat.

And his face twisted into grief. 'Too late,' she could almost hear his eyes say.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts muttered a word, and there was another flash, this one consuming her.

She wasn't in the forest anymore.

Beds were lined up in rows, lamps flickering at regular intervals between them. The uneven stone floor beneath her felt warm, compared to the freezing mud from the forest.

Her mind raced, unable to believe what she was seeing. They were in the hospital wing. In Hogwarts. Safe.

"Poppy," the old man's voice was hoarse, "there's been a terrible accident."

She tuned him out, heart thumping in her chest, arms shaking.

Oh, god, was it really over?

The killer messed with their perceptions, she knew, was— was she being turned into a corpse-sculpture like Rowle, hallucinating safety in her last moments?

She pulled herself into a sitting position, scraping mud, blood, twigs and leaves across the floor.

The stone was smooth, even under the beds. It had been worn down, grooves where people stepped on it in the spaces in between them. Her legs and feet left ugly smears.

Rowle's arm, straightened and held up with branches, sticks skewering the arm in a sick mockery of a splint. Mallory could imagine the stones being shoved through the cuts, shifting the flesh under her skin until—

She blinked hard, still sitting on the stone floor of the hospital wing. The nurse was fussing over Harper, tears on her cheeks. The Headmaster stood in the back, hands clasped and face grim.

Heart still stuttering in her chest, her legs jittered and her hands shook.

Was it over?

The nurse touched her arm and she jumped with a strangled yelp. Was it over? It had to be over, she thought. But she didn't want to engage in wishful thinking, didn't want to start believing in an illusion. If it wasn't over, she needed to fight. If it wasn't over —

A potion was shoved into her mouth, and everything fuzzed out out of focus.

More potions were guided down her throat, spells were said, and Mallory drifted out of consciousness.
The bright sun flooding through the window woke her up.

Mallory shifted onto her side and pulled the covers up over her head.

Darla Rowle was dead, she remembered. That happened last night, or this morning if she wanted to get technical about it. There was no moment where she wondered whether or not it was a dream, no confusion.

She was in the Hospital Wing. The sheets were white and crisp, and they smelled of antiseptic and citrus. A quiet part wondered if wizarding hospitals used the same cleaning formulas as normal hospitals. It seemed ubiquitous, but then pens seemed ubiquitous before Snape plucked her's from her hand and replaced it with a quill. She thought she ought not take these things for granted. Light filtered through the fabric, and she noted that her hands and fingernails had been cleaned. Her skin was scrubbed pink. Magic.

The sensation of air tickling her nostrils, warm sheets, and the hazy outline of her hand clutching the blanket over her head, consumed her attention. Anything else would be hell, she decided.

She took a shuddering breath, and re-focused on her breathing. **Nope, not thinking about it. Definitely not.**

Some time passed, or maybe none at all, and she poked her head out of her cocoon of blankets.

There was a line of windows in a row, and another line of beds, underneath them. Bright yellow morning light came in on an angle, creating narrow rectangles of sunlight along the wall across from her bed. The shadows cast by the sills reminded her of prison bars. She’d spent a lot of her childhood imagining prison bars, imagining what’d happen to her after the authorities found out she had powers. She decided, after some thought, that the resemblance was born out of mental habit. She’d done nothing wrong, she knew. **No matter that she’d failed to save Rowle.**

Mallory sucked in a sharp breath, shutting her eyes for a moment. **She wasn't going to think about it.** She opened her eyes and settled her gaze on the rickety table by her bedside. It reminded her of a prison, with its dull color and functional design. She told herself, again, that the resemblance was only a mental habit, and that she didn't belong in jail. **She'd done nothing wrong. It wasn't her fault, she did everything she could.**

The thoughts sat leaden in her stomach, and felt like a lie. She forced her gaze elsewhere, skimming over the porcelain basin and bouquet of flowers, to settle on Headmaster Dumbledore, sitting beside her hospital bed. She would've quipped a joke, something about two times in as many days, but—

Darla Rowle was dead.

He knew she was awake, and she ought to say hello, but she didn't speak. The words wouldn't come.

"You've suffered through an unimaginable ordea—"

"Who was it?" she croaked, interrupting him.

The Headmaster paused, folding his hands on his lap, "a dark, terrible creature."

"You don't know," her voice was flat, eyes fixed on his own.

He broke contact first.
"Indeed, I do not," he looked out through the window, gaze contemplative, "nor do I know how you found yourself to be in the Forbidden Forest, when all your compatriots were stationed across the Black Lake."

Mallory said nothing, even though she knew his silence was an invitation for her to explain. Too tired, wrung out, to bother.

She stared at him, mind blank and limbs still. Her brain crawled and for a moment she felt paralyzed.

"I see you do not know this, yourself," the Headmaster of Hogwarts looked away, suddenly seeming very old.

"Is Rowle really—" she trailed off, unable to get the words out. It hurt her to ask.

"Yes, I'm afraid she's passed on."

Mallory flinched. Darla Rowle was dead. It wasn't a hallucination, or some kind of hazing ritual. Some part of her had still hoped, the part of her that had wanted to believe it was all an illusion, last night.

She said nothing. Her insides felt hollow, like small creatures were whittling holes through her chest. It was persistent, a low buzzing static in the back of her mind that wasn't letting up. She didn't want to be in this room, right now, having this conversation. She wanted to let the silences stretch out like salt water taffy, to fill her head with cotton and forget.

"I wish to commend you," spoke Dumbledore.

Mallory stared at her nails, neatly trimmed and cleaned while she was sleeping. They didn't look like her fingernails, which usually were dirty and chipped from play. She didn't deserve his praise. It didn't even seem like a thing the Headmaster ought to say, in this situation.

That thought left her wondering for a moment, if this was real. She still suspected some part of her was back there, in the forest, with bloody feet scrabbling for footing and the cold pressing in on her. Her feet were warm under the blanket and there wasn't a scratch on her. No aches or pains beyond stiffness. It felt too good to be true, like a miracle. The Headmaster had saved their lives, rode in at the very last minute, like a gift from a god. Things like that didn't happen in real life, she knew, not even when life contained magic. It didn't feel real.

"I spoke to young Master Harper this morning," he prompted again.

She said nothing. The cogs and wheels in her brain were gummed up, rusted in place.

"I'm heartened to see that in times of peril, you're able to overlook your quarrels with your housemate."

Her breath caught in her throat.

The notion that she'd leave Harper behind stunned her. That wasn't her, she thought. The Headmaster didn't know her, at all. And that he would assume she'd just abandon Harper to that monster would've prompted a furious tirade, any other day. But right now, she couldn't even look at Dumbledore. Outrage was well beyond her.

"Such an event will not happen again," said the Headmaster of Hogwarts, "there are Aurors investigating the murder of your classmate, and the perpetrator will be caught."
"It was someone in Hogwarts," Mallory said, stating the obvious.

Dumbledore frowned. She forced herself to meet his eyes, because she needed to see that he understood.

"I was—" the one being lead into a trap. It's my fault. She cleared her throat, "they're after me."

The Headmaster gave her a sorry look, "I wish— ah, I wish you never experienced something like this, at such an age," he looked down at his lap, sad and old, "I've lost many people, Miss Hopkins, and I know deeply the temptation to blame yourself. You wish to have done more, and think that if you might go back in time, you could avert catastrophe."

That wasn't what she was getting at, but it was one of the feelings she was resolutely not thinking about.

"There was nothing you could've done," the Headmaster insisted, "not even the brightest of first years would've walked out of that forest unscathed. If anything, it is my fault, and the fault of the professors as a whole, for not realizing the danger."

She wanted to ask more questions, but they hurt to think of, no less ask out loud. Instead she fiddled with the blanket, and let her brain go blank.

Dumbledore stood up, and Mallory looked over to see what drew his attention. Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, and two of the oddest figures Mallory had ever seen were walking towards her hospital bed.

The first figure was a wizard with a peg leg and a fake eyeball. The eyeball whirred around in its socket. A good chunk of his nose was missing, and his face was covered in scars. She got the impression of battle-hardened weariness. He reminded her, she thought, of some of the doctors her dad used to talk about, the ones who'd seen too much death and had turned callous, in the aftermath.

The second was a young woman with dull purple hair, and a nervous disposition. She looked pasty, like she'd recently been sick. The young woman hurried after the scarred man, lips pressed in a thin line. She clutched a clipboard and some scrolls to her chest.

Each of them wore red robes, with a shiny badge affixed to the fronts. The girl's robe was mis-sized, and a bit large on her. Mr. Peg Leg's robes were a bit worn out, with a singe mark by his left cuff.

Dumbledore sighed and beckoned them away. The three adults then moved to the side, where Mallory couldn't hear.

Mallory sat up in her bed, eyes flicking between the peg leg wizard and the Headmaster. She caught only a few words: investigation, witnesses, and veritaserum. It was enough for Mallory to guess that the witch and wizard were Detective Inspectors, here to investigate Darla Rowle's murder.

The wizard DIs conjured chairs and sat down next to Mallory's hospital bed. The man shuffled a bit, huffing and rubbing the stump where she guessed the peg leg met flesh.

They didn't ask her if they could sit down. In fact, they didn't seem aware that she was a person, at all. She suspected they saw her as a prop, or perhaps a tool to get them to the next stage of their investigation. They were doing their due diligence; they didn't expect anything from her. She
couldn't blame them. They likely wanted to catch the murderer as soon as possible, in case he struck again. On the telly, the DIs don't stop until they've chased down every lead. So it should come as no surprise that their minds were on the murderer, and not their bedside manner.

The purple-haired witch took out a roll of parchment and a quill, "noting for the record that the witness has her Headmaster, one Albus Dumbledore, present; and Head of House, Severus Snape, present."

The quill wrote by itself, parchment suspended in mid-air. Mallory stared.

"Witness, are you Mallory Hopkins of Devonshire, and a muggleborn?"

"What's me being muggleborn have to do with anything?" she asked, a spark of indignence working its way past her dull indifference.

Peg Leg interjected, "if you had magical parents, they'd need to be here. Now answer Trainee Tonk's question."

"Er— yes, I am."

_Snape or Dumbledore could stand in for her parents? Her parents couldn't make big decisions for her, here?_

"Mr. Snape, could you state for the record that you have legal authority over the witness, Miss Mallory Hopkins, and consent to the administration of veritaserum prior to questioning the witness about the death of Miss Darla Rowle?"

"Yes, I do," Snape's tone was crisp and formal, expression cold. He looked disgusted, as though someone had pissed in his morning pumpkin juice. Between the sour expression and dark circles under his eyes, she was left with the impression of an incontinent panda-bear. She guessed, after a moment's thought, that he must've been up all night. He'd probably been interrogated, too.

Trainee Tonks withdrew a small vial from her robes, "for the record, I'm administering one drop of veritaserum, which should be sufficient given the subject's age and weight."

"You don't need to keep saying 'for the record,' Tonks," said Peg Leg, managing to sound both irritated and resigned at the same time, "we know it's on the record." He said this as though he'd said it a hundred times, and didn't expect his chiding to change Tonks' actions.

Mallory took the break in their official script as an opportunity to interrupt them, herself, "what's veraserum?"

"Silence!" hissed Snape, speaking so abruptly that the other grownups' heads spun around to stare at him in surprise, 'you'll do as your told."

"Truth serum, kid," Peg Leg said, voice gruff, "just a drop." He glanced back over at Snape to give the man a disgusted glare. Mallory noted to herself that she wasn't the only one who found Snape's behavior strange and disturbing.

"You're only going to ask me about last night?" she asked the DI.

"You doin' something illegal?" Peg Leg's voice rose, bushy eyebrows drawing together in a rictus frown.

Mallory froze, immediately regretting her question. She'd told Danny about Hogwarts, breaking
the Statute of Secrecy. Her parents had all kinds of plans that would break the Statute. Damn her, she thought, for asking before thinking.

Mallory looked away, as though she were trying to remember whether or not she was doing illegal things.

"No," she said, "I don't think so. I mean, I'm not breaking any laws that I know of." Lies sounded more realistic when the liar seemed uncertain, like she needed to search her memory for instances of law-breaking. The self-correction and side-glance would go away towards convincing Peg Leg, where her words wouldn't. With any luck, he would forget to ask her about her law-breaking while under truth serum.

She hoped.

"Good," Peg Leg nodded, facial muscles relaxing, "one drop, now. Open your mouth," he prompted, sounding twice as gruff and even more impatient.

She wanted to argue, to make up some reason why shouldn't take truth serum. If her parents were here, they'd tell Peg Leg to go get stuffed. But her parents weren't here, and she couldn't think of a good reason to refuse them, not without drawing attention to her secrets. The more she fought them, the more they'd wonder if she really did do something illegal. They would ask, and then she'd be forced to tell them about her parents' plan, and about Danny.

She didn't know what would happen, then. She didn't know, and she never wanted to find out. It was up to her to protect them from bigots and truth serums. She couldn't fail, here.

So Mallory opened her mouth, and let one drop of veritaserum be deposited on her tongue. It didn't taste like anything, though she imagined it should be bitter or cloyingly sweet, in equal measure.

The effect was almost instantaneous. She felt light and floaty, like her body wasn't tethered to the bed. She'd float away, light as air, with a single thought.

They wanted to know what happened, and she wanted to tell them. Wanted that more than she wanted anything.

She saw it in her mind's eye, "I woke up in the Black Lake. All the first year Slytherins were there. We were told to come out of the water and follow the hooded figures."

"Hooded figures?" Peg Leg's brow furrowed, sounding suddenly alarmed, as though the presence of hooded figures carried some special meaning. She suspected he wanted to know who the hooded figures were, and what their role was in the ceremony.

"Seventh years, Slytherins. One of them was Farley. The second years were there, too. They were running the ceremony, Farley and another one. But the other seventh years were in on it, too. They'd rehearsed."

Snape, standing back by Dumbledore, curled his lip. His face reflected disbelief, and she clocked it as disbelief that she'd recognize the rehearsal. But she wasn't sure what else to call ten people, laughing in perfect unison.

"Did you recognize anyone else?" asked Peg Leg.

"Cokebottles was there," Mallory listed them off, unselconscious of her private nicknames for her classmates, "and Dead-Eyes Selwyn, and—"
"Cokebottles?" Peg Leg's frown penetrated the fog; he glanced over at Snape and Dumbledore. "Who's Coke-bottles?"

"I don't know her name," Mallory answered, desperate to answer a question, any question, even one not directed at her. "She's another first year. And there was Hoop-Boy, too. And Montague, and the girl who kept casting cleaning charms, and —"

"I believe she's referring to Miss Vaisey, another first year Slytherin," interjected the Headmaster.

"No," Peg Leg shook his head, gesturing for Mallory to stop speaking, "I meant anyone else besides the other first years. Did you recognize anyone else?"

She shook her head, "no. Maybe," she corrected, "the other hooded figure, the other master of ceremonies, he sounded familiar." She wracked her brain, unable to properly make the connection, "maybe a prefect? I don't know."

"Alright, so you went into the forest. You were across from the Black Lake?"

"Yes," she nodded.

Tonks had her quill noting everything down. She wasn't asking any questions, though, and was uninteresting to Mallory, as a result.

"Okay," said Peg Leg, "did you see who killed Rowle? When were you lead off from the main group?"

Her tongue stuttered over the two questions.

"Did you see who killed Rowle?"

"I never saw the murderer," she said, "it was dark. We lit our wands, and a fire, but we were afraid to look. Branches kept crackling, and when Rowle went to look they killed her."

"When did you leave the group?" he pressed.

"It was— someone said the professors were coming. Everyone ran. We were told to follow the seventh years back to the school, and I followed one. And, then they disappeared. There was another clearing. Rowle and Harper followed me."

The Detective Inspector turned to talk to the Professors, and she listened for questions. She wanted to answer questions, wanted to answer any questions, really.

"I don't think they wanted to be seen," she said, catching the tail end of a statement that could be interpreted as a question.

"The murderer? Why?"

"When Rowle died, she said she saw something. She didn't say what, but next thing I heard was this sound, like bone on wood, and then she was dead," Mallory blinked, almost surprised at the ease at which the words came, "Harper said they wanted to kill me. That's why Rowle's dead, because the seventh years wanted to kill me. It's my fault."

Those were the words she'd been trying to avoid, even in her own head. *It was her fault.* They couldn't hurt her, like this. They couldn't hurt her when she didn't feel anything beyond the buoyant light of the truth serum. Before, they'd been like a punch to the gut.
"Nevermind that," said Peg Leg, "did you notice any changes in air pressure or humidity, a sudden change in weather or lighting?"

"It started raining and it got cold," Mallory thought, "the woods were noisy before, but then they went quiet."

"When?"

"I don't remember. I think— maybe when I was trying to make Harper and Rowle not become friends?"

"Not become friends?" Professor McGonagall interjected, "why would you—"

A question, and Professor McGonagall's first question. Mallory had largely been ignoring her until now, because she hadn't asked any questions.

"Because I wanted them to fight each other, instead of me."

"That's not relevant," said the detective, glaring at Professor McGonagall, "now, tell me when the woods went quiet."

"After we lost the seventh year, when we were in the clearing."

Peg Leg the detective made a face, and muttered something to Dumbledore. He nodded, and gestured at Trainee Tonks.

Trainee Tonks then poured another viscous potion down her throat.

Almost immediately, the fog lifted, and she didn't want to answer questions anymore.

Holy fuck that was scary, she thought. She had no control, like someone flipped a switch and shut her brain off, with it. She never ever wanted to be treated to truth serum, again.

And now that the light buoyancy was gone, she could feel the solid punch in her words. *It was her fault*. She wanted to cry, but that would require breathing, and she wasn't sure she could get in enough air, right now. She swallowed once, twice, and thrice, feeling as though some of the antidote got stuck in her throat. It hadn't.

The grownups hadn't noticed, too busy talking to one another, as though she weren't there. *A prop, a piece of furniture, a tool they needed to get to the next level of their investigation.* She wished to scream. She wanted her parents, wanted Danny. She wished to have not been made to talk about what happened to Rowle. Mallory hadn't wanted to interact with those feelings. She never would.

She sucked in a slow breath, taking in the citrus scent and antiseptic. Her eyes, roving for any distraction, fixed on the porcelain basin. Someone had filled it with water, and placed a white washcloth next to it, on the rickety table. She'd seen such a set up, before, on the telly. She could never work out what for — *not for drinking, if you were going to dip in a washcloth. And you can always get a cold compress from the fridge, so what's the point in having lukewarm water by the bed?* She didn't care about lukewarm water or cold compresses, but the thoughts served as an adequate distraction, enough that she could breathe past the lump in her throat.

"Okay," Mallory interrupted the grownups, voice shaking, "can I go home now?"

She hadn't planned on saying it, hadn't really thought about it.
The adults turned towards her, a bit startled, as though they'd forgotten she was there. Well, all except Snape, who'd been staring at her the entire time, as if she were an dangerous felon who needed careful watching.

"I believe," said Headmaster Dumbledore, "that you should rest a while longer before returning to your common room."

"No, I meant I want to go home. To my parents."

There was silence from all adults present, at her proclamation. Their expressions were a mosaic of disbelief (Tonks and Peg Leg), disappointment (Dumbledore), shame (McGonagall), and vindictive glee. For not the first time, Mallory wondered who disguised their dump as Snape's breakfast, this morning.

"You want to quit school?" asked Trainee Tonks, voice incredulous.

"I—" Mallory's eyes flicked between incomprehending faces, "I almost died. I watched my classmate die. Yesterday, bullies threatened to kill me because I'm muggleborn. They knocked me off my broom, cracked my skull open, and lit my things on fire. Yes, I want to go home."

She wasn't cut out for this. Already, one person died because of her. What happened, she wondered, if next time, Colin got involved? Anyone around her would be in danger, too. Mallory wouldn't be able to take it, if someone she loved died because of her. She didn't know what she'd do, and she didn't want to find out.

"Now, you listen here," said Peg Leg, "do you know how many children would love to go to Hogwarts? I know it's tough. But you gotta be strong for your classmates. They've lost their friend, too."

His words hit her like a sucker punch to the stomach, but Mallory rallied.

"Rowle wasn't—" Mallory broke off, "I'm not leaving because she died. I'm leaving because all yesterday, kids were telling me how they were going to kill me, and then I end up in the woods being hunted down by some psycho," her voice gained power and anger as she went on, "she died because of me, because someone wanted to lure me out there!"

"Miss Hopkins!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall, aghast, "this is not your fault!"

She sat down on the chair next to Mallory's bed, face grim and pale.

"You don't need to fear being hurt," she said, completely missing how Mallory was more afraid of her friends dying, than she was of dying, herself. And Mallory didn't miss how McGonagall couldn't even bring herself to use the word 'death.' Rowle died, she didn't get 'hurt.' She died. I could've died.

But McGonagall wasn't privy to her internal stream of consciousness, and blithered on ignorantly, "that's why we're here. If the students keep bullying you, you must come speak to us. The professors and staff are here to help you."

McGonagall thought this was all about bullying. Mallory wanted to laugh, but that'd be inappropriate. Even if it were just about bullying, Mallory remembered what happened after the Battle on the Pitch. Professor McGonagall couldn't do anything, and Snape wouldn't do anything.

"This is not about some kids bullying me," Mallory said, tired of dancing around the issue, "they were trying to have me killed."
"Hey kid," said Peg Leg, interrupting another of McGonagall's platitudes, "no one's trying to kill you. And if someone is, that's my job to worry about it."

"Someone is trying to kill me. You're not listening. The seventh years said so!"

"Alright, who's the someone?" he was humoring her.

"I don't know their names. It was one of the seventh years. They said if I didn't quit school, they'd have me expelled or worse."

The man with the peg leg frowned, "you know something? The best thing you can do right now, to make yourself safe?"

"Go home," Mallory quipped, voice flat. She didn't want to hear any more useless nonsense about how going to class and taking tests would somehow save her. 'Go to school' was simply the standard response adults were supposed to say to children who talked about quitting school. She wasn't talking to another person, she was interacting with a script.

"No," he said, "you stay here, and learn how to defend yourself. You think this is the only time in your life there'll be something out there that wants to kill you? Go home with no magic and one day one of those big bads will come for you and there'll be nothing you can do, and then—"

"Alastor Moody!" hissed Professor McGonagall, "that is an entirely inappropriate topic of conversation for—"

"Kid needs to toughen up. There's dark things out there, Minerva, and these kids aren't prepared to face them."

"Face them?" she looked aghast, "they're children!"

"I quite agree with Professor McGonagall," said the Headmaster, "now, Alastor, I believe you wished to speak to the seventh year Slytherins?" His tone was chiding, a prompt for Alastor Peg Leg to back off.

Moody grimaced, and stood up, "alright alright, I get it and I'm going."

Mallory, for her part, sat back, stricken. Alright, she thought, that hadn't been the exact script she would've expected. And if she'd been more together, more with it, she might've asked Peg Leg Moody what he meant by 'dark things out there,' and how doing classwork would help her fight them.

But the rest of the adults were married to the script, and practically scrambled to get out of the Hospital Wing and back to their offices. The Headmaster practically chased Moody out, with Tonks scurrying behind him like a particularly anxious shadow.

That left Mallory alone with Professor McGonagall and Snape.

Mallory sunk down in her bed a bit. She didn't want to speak to either of them.

"Miss Hopkins," spoke Snape, sounding as though the consonants her her name were dipped in poison.

She glanced up, "sir?"

"Students have a tendency to gossip after such events, at Hogwarts. They use heroics to garner
popularity and prestige amongst their peers," he crossed his arms, and his robes flared out behind him.

"You will not speak on this event to your classmates. And if I find you have, you or Harper, you'll face detention. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," she said, dully. She failed to summon any surprise at Snape's awful assumptions about her. She saw how most of the other adults looked at him, with thinly-veiled contempt and disgust. Even Professor McGonagall, for all attempts at professionalism, failed to entirely repress a grimace in his presence.

Snape turned to leave, but stopped mid-step, "if you find your schoolwork too demanding in your first year, you'll be ill-suited for the real world, when you're an adult."

"I'm not quitting school, I'm quitting Hogwarts," said Mallory, quietly furious. Leave it to Snape to interpret her statements in the most unflattering and pathetic way, possible.

Snape smiled without any humor, "I'm afraid you're not in the position to quit anything, Miss Hopkins."

And then he was gone, out the door with his robes swirling behind him, like a great ugly dungeon bat.

"Miss Hopkins," said Professor McGonagall, eyes still on the door from when Snape left, "I wish to apologize."

Mallory stared at her, puzzled. It wasn't Professor McGonagall's fault.

"If your classmates continue to harass you, and Professor Snape isn't willing to help you, I want you to report them to me," she said this quietly, in undertone, as though she were doing something not-quite-by-the-books and didn't want anyone to know.

"So you do think they're after me," Mallory said, hoping the professor was only pretending to think her dissatisfaction was related to bullying. She'd think Mallory to be very astute, guessing from so little data.

"No, Miss Hopkins, I don't," said McGonagall, proving herself to be a disappointment, "however, I found out about what happened last night, with those students all hexing each other and— this has gone too far."

Mallory nodded, still trying to find the words to express what she wanted to say.

McGonagall continued on, while she thought, "you need to have faith in yourself. You're a bright young witch with your whole life ahead of you."

"I don't want to quit because my classes are too hard, it's because I don't want to deal with people who— they hate me. I don't want that. I don't want the people I care about to — to get hurt, because of me."

"Miss Hopkins, I'm afraid you'll find people out there who will hate you, no matter where you go. And— pardon me, I don't mean to say that you deserve their hatred, only that there are people out in the world who are unkind, and will always be unkind."

"So what, I just need to toughen up, like that constable said?" she didn't think that's what McGonagall meant.
In fact, she was pretty sure McGonagall was trying to make her feel better. But Mallory wanted to hurt her, because McGonagall didn't get it. She wouldn't help her, none of the adults would. They wouldn't even listen to her; they just kept reflecting their own assumptions back at her. 'Here lies a student who doesn't wish to go to school, therefore I must give the standard pro-school sermon,' and 'here cries a student who fears those who hate her, therefore I must give the pre-approved speech about handling adversity.' Nowhere in there was an original thought, nor any attempt at sincere empathy. They wanted to appear empathetic without doing any of the work. They weren't listening to her.

And maybe she was being facetious and unkind, but she found their inaction infuriating.

They were the grownups, the ones with the power to help her. And they refused.

Mallory wondered if she could make the school expel her. If she stopped going to all her classes and lit the tapestries in the Slytherin common room on fire, would that be sufficient?

Professor McGonagall sighed, and shook her head, "of course not. Miss Hopkins, I've suffered through many losses, and I understand how you must be feeling right now, but you cannot scorn the concern of those who wish to help you."

The old lady patted her leg and stood up, leaving Mallory to sulk in silence.

It was almost midnight, and Mallory was still in the hospital wing.

It was testament to how badly The Initiation and What Followed messed her up, that she hadn't noticed Harper was on the bed next to her own.

Not until Montague visited, did she remember him. Something like shame had crawled across her skin. She'd spent half the day hating the adults for treating her like an inconvenient prop, and all the while she'd been doing it herself, albeit unintentionally.

Montague only stuck around for a few minutes. They boy was suspiciously red-eyed, like he'd been crying. She spent that visit staring at the empty bed across from her, trying very hard not to think. Because Montague had lost his friend, last night. She couldn't imagine what she'd have done, if it had been Danny who'd died, out there.

Montague didn't have to imagine. He was living it.

Now the Hospital Wing was silent. Both she and Harper were awake, but neither of them were saying anything. She was nervous, fingers tapping rhythms out on the metal headboard.

The silence bothered her, now moreso than ever.

She wanted to ask him half a dozen things. But it hurt to think of the questions, because thinking meant going back to the forest.

Twice already, she found herself having the Draught of Peace shoved down her throat, because she forgot she was safe in the hospital wing.

Nurse Pomfrey said she'd switch her to calming potions after tonight, which were less numbing and worked better to quell sudden afflictions of panic.

Harper was on a different potions regimen. She suspected it was because he'd thrown up. Whenever his potions started wearing off, he'd start trembling like someone possessed, eyes flicking between figures that weren't there. She didn't know how to help him; she could barely help
herself.

The acknowledgement did nothing to ease her guilt.

Mallory snuck another look at Harper. He caught her eye, and looked away. His face was still like chalk, and he was having a harder time staying in the now than she was, even with the potions. He kept losing track of where he was. She could tell, because every time he did, his face went funny and he started reaching for his wand.

"The potion for your memory," her voice sounded off in the dark, too loud and out of place.

He huffed, and shook his head, turning his back to her in his bed. Not the reaction she was going for. Her brain was too slow like this, everything jumbled up.

She realized he thought she was asking for information on likely-illicit potions, right after a girl died in front of them.

"M'not askin— I mean," a note of nervousness colored her tone, "if I'd had it, would I've been able to make that not happen?"

She'd spent the day wondering what she might've done differently, asking herself what sort of person she needed to become, if she never wanted something like that to happen, again.

Harper turned around, "no." There was a pause, "maybe, I don't know."

"You don't know?" Mallory asked, prompting him to continue.

His voice was turning confrontational, "no, I don't."

*Misinterpreted again, damn it.*

"I didn't mean, I meant— there's something I could've done, then?"

He looked down at his hands, "I don't know. Rowle and I, we both took it. I thought when I started — it's supposed to make you sharper, you know? Think faster, make connections."

"Yeah," Mallory said, when he stopped for a few seconds, trying not to sound like she was prompting him.

"It wasn't enough, but— you can tell the difference between people who take the potions and people who don't, you know?" he whispered, "they're sharper, better under pressure. But you kept going when I— I don't know."

Mallory didn't say anything. She understood. It should've been her who cracked under pressure, in his view. He couldn't square with being the one who faltered, when the situation demanded he step up. But Mallory understood why — he cared about Rowle more than she had. *Emotionally compromised.* If it had been Danny, *she'd* — Mallory wrenched herself away from that thought. She knew she couldn't go there, not even in the privacy of her own mind. But she understood why Harper had broken down, like that. She didn't expect she'd manage, any better.

"You're a freak," he said, without fire.

She didn't reply. *She understood.* He couldn't square with it, needed someone to blame. *And it was her fault.* The medicine dulled her senses, pulling her towards comfortable numbness.

Her fingers tapped against the railing, filling the silence.
Tap-tap, tap-tap.
Harper didn't speak another word.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, you can die of hypothermia if it isn't freezing out. Freezing to death has to do with your body failing to maintain homeostasis, running out of energy to burn.
He got the call at seven forty-eight in the morning.

Alastor Moody didn't need to be told where to go. He had followed this case for years.

The Cracklewood Carver.

First time it happened was in 1978. Three dead children were found in this grotty little clearing in the Forbidden Forest, mutilated. Local kids from Hogsmeade, too. The Aurors working the case didn't catch any leads and the file ended up in a drawer, collecting dust.

For any other Auror, it'd just be another case. Kids went missing all the time. But this one had been different, uglier. He'd remembered it, though, and the image of those three kids seared itself into his memory like etchings on stone.

Seven years later, it happened again. Same clearing, three kids killed and mutilated the same way. Still, no leads. No one had a clue how the kids ended up in the Forest.

And now, seven years after the second attack, it was happening again.

Alastor Moody apparated into the clearing with a loud crack.

First thing to hit him was the smell. Charred flesh, the thick smell of blood, shit, and rot. His eye scanned the circle, taking in the details.

It wasn't in the top 20 worst things he'd ever seen. But his protege was off to the side, throwing up.

It was expected. First time you see a scene like it, you get sick. At least the witch had the presence of mind not to vomit on the evidence.

Alastor limped around the edge of the clearing, taking it in. At the center of the circle was what at first glance appeared to be a small tree with two charred bodies huddled at its roots.

But it wasn't a small tree, it was the mangled body of a little witch.

Her hair was matted with blood and gore. Wood, twine and strips of flesh held her in place. The intestines and viscera bulged through the gaps in the bindings. Chunks of flesh were outright missing, half her face a yawning wound. The witch's remaining eye socket was stuffed full of sharp stones.

Auror Moody looked away, feeling weary.

He was three months away from retirement, and hadn't planned on taking any big cases. He wanted to devote his time to training Tonks. More to the point, he knew how these things went. Last couple months you get sloppy, attention on the finish line. You slip up, only Dark Wizards don't forgive mistakes.

But this was his last crack at the Cracklewood Carver, at the person or thing that's been out there for 21 years doing this to kids.
"What are we looking at, here?" he asked Tonks, who'd finished throwing up. She couldn't learn if she refused to look. Aurors saw worse than this, and you had to be able to think through the fear and revulsion, to look into the black without flinching.

"Kids," she said, wiping her eyes, "they're kids." She sniffled a bit, hair a mousy brown instead of the usual blinding array of neon colors she favored. Witch was still soft, got it in her head that bad things didn't happen to innocents.

"I know they're kids, trainee. Now we got a job to do, so let's get to it. What d'ya see?"

"I— uh, well. One, she's all," Tonks pointed at the blonde. "I don't know what that is."

"Yeah," Alastor hobbled forward. He drew his wand.

"Wait!" Tonks said, "Professor Dumbledore said not to examine the bodies until he came back. No magic."

Of course he did.

His eye could see a lot, but not everything. Needed spells to tell when they died. And to get an idea of what spells killed the blonde witch burnt the other two to a crisp.

The other two likely died of hypothermia, like the other Carver victims. One would be turned into some kind of sick sculpture of meat, sticks, and stone. The others would burn at the sculpture's feet.

Alastor cursed.

This wasn't supposed to have happened. Aurors set up protection charms in Hogsmeade after the second Carver attack. They checked them every year. And it had occurred to the department that the Carver might go after Hogwarts students, if the murderer couldn't get to the children in Hogsmeade. They warned the school about it.

There was a crack of branches and Alastor's eye swiveled to see Dumbledore, standing at the edge of the clearing.

"Ah, Alastor. Right on time, I see," the old wizard looked tired, the way good wizards look when filth attack little kids.

"You went back in time," stated Alastor. He didn't need to ask. It was the obvious conclusion to make, when Dumbledore was one of the few to have personal use of a time turner.

With any luck, the three bodies in the clearing were just transfigured logs. Which was why Dumbledore didn't want Alastor or Tonks examining them before he went back in time.

The trick to changing time was for there to be no difference in what they perceive before and after someone went back in time. Otherwise they'll cause a paradox.

"I used it once too many," Dumbledore's eyes were sorrowful. "I had only enough time to save two."

Alastor grimaced. "Which one is dead?"

"Young Miss Rowle."
Child of Death Eater scum. *A revenge killing?*

"The live ones?"

"A young Miss Hopkins and Master Harper," said Dumbledore.

Now wasn't that curious, he thought. This very well could be a case of someone pretending to be the Cracklewood Carver. All of magical Britain knew the Carver struck seven years ago, and seven years before that.

If someone was hankering to hide a murder, copying the M.O. of a well-known serial killer was the obvious way to go about it. It'd be lazy Auror work to take the scene at face value.

It was also suspicious that the young witch Dumbledore couldn't save was the child of a Death Eater. He gave a moment's thought to the consideration that Dumbledore let her die, and then dismissed it. Dumbledore was a forgiving wizard, believed in second chances.

_He's not going to blame a little witch for the misdeeds of her parents._

Alastor flicked his wand. The two charred corpses untransfigured into lumps of mud. Another spell determined that the time of death for the young Rowle was 4:11 AM.

The two kids Dumbledore saved were lucky.

If Dumbledore _hadn't_ gone back in time, they would've died here. Seeing their corpses was what prompted Dumbledore to go back in time.

"What time did you get here?" he asked Dumbledore.

"Which time?" Dumbledore asked, voice grave.

"Chronologically, for you." The more information he had, the clearer the picture. And he'd be better able to tell if people were distorting the truth, when their stories didn't match up.

At his side, Tonks conjured up a notepad and took out one of those fancy self-inking quills.

"Ah, it was seven thirty," the wizard stroked his beard in thought. "Severus was alerted by several concerned students that their classmates were missing, so of course he determined to inform me. I set out and found this," Dumbledore's eyes fell on the dead child, "horrific display. I went back as far as I could to prevent it."

Great. Dumbledore's pet Death Eater was involved.

"Which students told Snape about the missing kids? And what time did you go back to?"

"I believe it was 4:16 when I arrived in the clearing, and a young Miss Gemma Farley and Terence Higgs reported the children missing."

"I'll need to speak with them," said Alastor, "and the other two."

"Remember to be compassionate, Alastor. These children—they will shoulder this terrible burden for the rest of their lives."

"I've got to ask them questions, can't go easy on them. More I know, the faster I can catch the filthy bastard that did this."
The so-called concerned students who reported the kids missing were Gemma Farley and Terence Higgs.

He interviewed the witch, first.

They were seated in an empty classroom, a teacher's desk conscripted for Alastor's use. Scattered papers and a collection of dusty textbooks were stacked in the corner. A thin layer of dust had been displaced from the wooden surface, where the books had been dragged out of the way.

Gemma Farley sat across from Auror Moody, hands folded in her lap. She had straight brown hair that curled at the ends, and met his eyes with a small, sad smile. She'd put on lipstick this morning, but it'd worn off through eating or other activities. He mentally noted down her habits — concerned with appearances, but affects muggle fashions. Defiant, in an unspoken way.

Her book bag was placed down next to her chair, metal buckle gleaming in the light.

"Hello Auror Moody," Farley raised her hand up, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, "I'm sorry to have met you under such disagreeable circumstances. I've heard many stories about you."

He met her gaze with a flat stare. From his cloak he withdrew a small vial, and placed it on the desk. The smoky glass glimmered in the candlelight, and Farley's gaze flicked over to it.

"Ah, that," her lips quirked up into another humorless smile.

Alastor stared her down, face stern enough to make a grown wizard sweat. He needed to get an estimation of her, figure out how she ticked. What would she do, how quickly would the silence get to her?

She looked down briefly, clasping her hands, "are we going to continue this conversation under veritaserum?" She sounded idly curious, unconcerned.

The young lady didn't give a hint of fear. There was almost always a tell, he knew, from experience. The sweat on someone's brow, a twitch of emotion, defensive posture and overly formal speech, the tells of a liar.

Potions could account for her cool, some cocktail of calming and wit-sharpening potions, to dull the nerves. Or she was naturally unflappable. He was betting on the potions.

"A kid died last night. You're not even sweating," he decided to be blunt.

She glanced away, candlelight exaggerating her features, "it was a ruse."

"You knew about the murder?"

She gave him a sidelong glance, lips quirked up in a small smile. "I thought the children would be safe if I had them follow the seventh years. I suspected something was wrong. In six years not once did a Professor interfere with our tradition. Someone's made us look like fools."

Alastor scowled. The witch adopted some small mournful smile, like the fucking Mona Lisa. She wanted him to believe that she felt guilty for not realizing the disruption of their event was a ruse. Either that, or she really did feel guilty. Somehow, he doubted she did.

"The Slytherin Initiation," he started.

"Why haven't you asked me to take the veritaserum yet?" she interrupted, gently.
Because he wanted to ask her these questions again when he could be sure she wasn't lying. Often what people chose to lie about was more interesting than the list, themselves. It said something about their character, about how they wished other people see them.

Even if she gave the same answers, it spoke to her foresight. But there was more to it than that: what blows did she soften, how did her wording change?

But he could tell already that this tactic would get him nowhere, with her. A Slytherins got more schemes than a dragons got scales, and he suspected this snake had more than most.

"Trainee Tonks is going to administer the veritaserum." he said, allowing the witch to think he was conceding ground. Tonks stepped up from where she was slouching against the wall.

Three drops later and Farley's eyes were glazed over, smile fading into a blank stone-faced stare.

"Did you know about any plots to murder people?" he asked, starting with a more general question.

"No," she said.

That meant nothing. She might've been a pawn in someone's game, and then they obliviated her once her usefulness ended. He had to ask, though.

"Why did you order the students to follow the seventh years?"

"Because I felt certain the seventh years knew their way back to the castle. The first and second years weren't familiar with the paths, and I wanted to avoid anyone getting lost."

"Why were all the students out in the woods last night?"

"We were taking part in the Slytherin Initiation Ritual, a tradition that's been maintained for over a thousand years."

"Do you know anyone who would want Harper, Rowle, or Hopkins dead?"

"Yes, I imagine several people would. The Malfoys, Selwyns, and Notts all wish for Miss Hopkins to leave Slytherin House, and I've no doubt they'd use violence to achieve that end. Rowle's family is disliked by Parkinson, Bole, and Bletchley. Harper is disliked by the Malfoys, Selwyns, and Notts."

The Malfoys, Selwyns, and Notts were all rabid blood purists, so it made sense they'd detest the half blood and the muggleborn. If they feared the weakening of Slytherin Magic, they'd act accordingly.

He had no clue what was going on between the Parkinson family and Rowles. Bole and Bletchly, if he strained his memory, there was something about a business deal gone wrong.

Alastor glanced over to where Tonks was standing, diligently writing this all down like it was the solemn truth. He almost grinned.

_Time to teach young Trainee Tonks a lesson._

"How would you evade veritaserum?" asked Alastor, flicking his eyes back to the witch under the truth serum.

It was a question all good Aurors knew to ask. Though in this case, he was mostly asking for Tonkses benefit. Even if the witch had no idea how to evade it, someone _else_ might. And the
culprit would erase her memory regardless of whether she asked them to, or not.

It was best to assume a witness or suspect’s memory was a lump of Swiss cheese, with false-memory charms and obliviations layered on top of one another to create a confusing muddle designed to mislead Aurors.

"I'd have someone obliviate me, after I wrote down what I didn't want to forget."

Which meant when she went in for questioning, she'd appear innocent of any crimes. Once she got back to her room, she could pick up her papers and read all about what she forgot.

It also suggested she was highly sentimental, controlling, or was doing something that required continuous knowledge of illegal activities. Usually people would just elect to have the memory vanished with no record.

"Who would you ask to obliviate you?"

"Myself. If I couldn't do it, I'd have Higgs or Stimpson obliviate me. They'd then obliviate themselves, I suppose."

So far, it was the garden-variety protection most people used to protect themselves against veritaserum. But that she chose to hold onto the information spoke to her naivete.

"Where would you hide the information you didn't want to forget?"

"In a lock box behind a mirror on the fourth floor."

Exactly, because the same mind that generated the hiding spot in the first place was being asked to re-generate that path. Even if she obliviated her memory of hiding the information under her bed, it was still her brain that decided to hide it there.

And if he was right, she spent a lot of time thinking about how to hide information. The ghosts of those memories were lurking around the edges, to the point where some random hidden room seemed like the obvious place to hide something, to her.

Now for the true question: whether or not she realized this, herself.

"Would you guess I'd ask these questions, before you were taken here for questioning?"

"Yes."

"Can you imagine how you'd protect the information, given that I'm going to check that lock box?"

"Yes."

"How would you protect the information?"

He suspected she'd mention a variety of notice-me-not charms, or a lock keyed to her blood. Some of the more cautious criminals would put their hideouts under the fidelius charm, though he doubted she could cast that.

"78 cards are in a tarot deck. Each one corresponds to a location in Hogwarts. I'd pick a random card and hide the information in the location keyed to the card. Then I'd obliviate myself of the locations and the random card I picked. When enough time has passed, an enchantment will be triggered to transport the information into my care."
Oh, *fuck*. This method started appearing among dark wizards and criminal types some 50 years ago. It was still fairly rare, given how effective it was if the criminal did it correctly. You'd expect everyone to adopt the method, but those who used it weren't sharing.

Top Death Eaters like Lucius Malfoy, known members of Mancini's Cabal, The Golem Forger, and several others used a variant of this method. Farley's version was weak — a time-locked variant meant to return the knowledge to her, after a given period of time. Her strategy made him suspect she didn't expect to be detained. She thought the case would be solved before anyone found her secrets, and that the Aurors would lose interest in her, once they caught the murderer.

He eyed the witch, still stone-faced with her hands folded neatly in her lap. There were cases where people thought of this method on their own. It didn't take a genius to do it, only someone who read a book or two on muggle cryptography.

Gemma Farley was a half blood, and might have access to books like that. It didn't mean she was necessarily in contact with the most dangerous and elusive criminals in the wizarding world.

But her knowledge of this method opened that up as a possibility.

The *real* method involved over a million random locations across the world, with a key split into pieces and distributed across at least a hundred of them. Only the completed key could reveal the true location of the information, preventing someone from finding it by chance, before the allotted time. Typically, the pieces of the key would reveal themselves to the criminal's associates, in case the criminal remained incarcerated and unable to keep the key away from law enforcement.

Farley's method was weak, in comparison. She came up with the 78 hiding spots in Hogwarts, herself, and hid the information in one of them. She could probably even think of all of them again.

And Aurors could search each and every one, until they found her hidden information.

The *pool of potential hiding places* was what protected the information. Pick a large enough pool of potential places to hide the information, and it becomes impossible for someone to search them all.

You can't force a mind to re-generate the location, because the location came from a shuffle of a tarot deck.

The second strength of the real method was, of course, splitting the key to the location into multiple pieces, and assigning those pieces to be revealed to different people. With Farley's method, an Auror could simply wait her out.

"And how long will it take for the information to make its way back to you?"

"I would've used the tarot cards for that, as well."

However, he shouldn't judge her too harshly for her methods. She was a seventeen year old witch, and her plan wasn't entirely brainless. If he were a professor or another student, this method would be more than enough to protect her secrets. Unfortunately, he was an Auror with the Ministry of Magic.

Still, if she was sufficiently clever enough to come up with this on her own, he'd be foolish to assume the rabbit hole only went so deep.

Someone else might hold the key to Farley's memory. *She* might remember thinking of using her tarot card randomizer, but that could be a false-memory, as well. Say, someone else came up with a better idea, and then the students used *that* method to hide her memories. They then erase her
memory of replacing her old idea with the new one.

In other words, she might think she'd use 78 different potential hiding spots in Hogwarts. In the process of refining this idea, she asked a friend for help, and they said 200 hiding spots was better. And they should make the pool of potential hiding spots across Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, instead.

Her mind would re-generate her old 78 hiding spots idea, but wouldn't come up with her friend's idea unless she spent a lot of time thinking about it—so much time that an obliviation wouldn't wipe all traces of it from her mind.

What really got him confused was her use of tarot cards, at all. Farley was no seer. Was this misuse of cartomancy a fuck-you to the Averys and Trelawneys of the world, or a sign of some new alliance?

"What sort of information would you hide with that method?" Alastor asked, tearing his mind away from speculation.

"I don't know," she blinked, thinking hard. "Blackmail, secrets, rule infractions, that sort of thing."

"If you committed a murder, would you use this system to protect the memory of it?"

"No, I'd erase all record of it. This isn't secure enough to be trusted with something so serious."

If she realized that, then she likely didn't put anything related to the case in her lockbox. This was likely also why she didn't expect him to persue her, he realized.

Now for the question that'd make his job easier or very very difficult.

"Who else did you tell about your method?"

"I don't know."

"Would you tell other people about your method?"

"Of course. I care about my friends and allies."

Great, just great.

"Do you remember who told you about this method?"

"No."

He hated Slytherins. Her memory was riddled with holes and false memories. Worse, he'd get similar responses from whomever else she told about her method.

The ones too stupid to have those kinds of contingencies in place wouldn't be trusted with anything important. Pawns, at best. And the ones who were clever would erase their memories, for them.

That wasn't even mentioning the students who knew occlumency, and who would be able to fool veritaserum without the use of overly-complicated schemes. Worse, he'd be hard pressed to go up against them, even with the law on his side.

It also meant that asking her further questions was useless, since they were probably fake memories, if she had anything to do with it. Still, he had to be thorough.
He flicked his eyes over to Tonks, who's brow was furrowed with irritation. Her arms were crossed and she was glaring at Gemma Farley. Right, he recalled, Tonks graduated last year. She probably knew Farley, or knew of her.

"Did you know about any of this?" he asked Tonks, gesturing at Farley with his wand. The trainee's dark eyes narrowed.

"No," Tonks said, "she was a prefect, a bloody annoying one. Always so polite and kind while she took points off—" here Tonks broke out into a high falsetto, "'Oh I'm so sorry to spoil your fun, but —' you know?"

"You breakin' rules, Trainee Tonks?" He squinted at her angrily with one eye. A joke.

She laughed, threw her head back and grinned, "firewhiskey, all the firewhiskey." But there was a dark undertone to her laughter, an off-key note of fear. Interesting.

He snorted and shook his head, "no chance you know anything about what she's up to, then?"

Tonks shrugged, evasive, "there were a lot of things going on in the castle, I don't know."

A half shrug like that indicated that she didn't believe what she was saying. Arms crossed meant she was on her back foot, but her arms were folded before he asked. Probably uncomfortable about the entire situation, rather than her position in some Slytherin's hidden information.

Her face gave away far more. A twitch of emotion that might be contempt or fear. She was trying to hide something from him.

"You knew what was going on in the Castle, Tonks," he corrected. He was disappointed, really. Trainees should know better than to try and fool him.

"I don't know," she insisted, angry, "or at least, I don't think it has anything to do with Rowle's death, or any of this."

"No," he pushed his chair back, "you thought of something, just then. A hint or a clue, something rang a bell. What was it?"

There was a bit of a pause, while Tonkses face did some kind of complicated motion. He suspected she wasn't happy to be caught out in a lie, and feared getting into trouble with the Ministry. Eventually, she spoke.

"A few witches or wizards sell potions in the castle. One of my roommates was getting some mixture— it smelled like apples— wit-sharpening potion."

He nodded, catching on to what she was saying, "you think Farley's behind it."

"I think— I don't want my old roommate to get into trouble. And I don't know if it was Farley who sold them, but I do know she's a whiz at potions."

Official policy condemned potions-use as cheating, unethical to use them to get ahead. But every crook and wannabe dark lord in the wizarding world used potions like that. If the good guys didn't use them, they'd forever be at a disadvantage.

"I won't say a word, but tell me quick what you remember," he intended to keep inviting Tonks to confess minor infractions, promising immunity. Figured one day she'd work up the courage to tell him about her family's covenants. Though, he didn't think he'd get anywhere with her, really.
Tonks was far too afraid of breaking the rules. She wanted to do everything by the books, had something to prove. He suspected she feared being lumped in with her Death Eater relations. *Too bad*, he thought.

"I don't remember much. It just—it strikes me that if someone was selling potions to students, they'd need a way of protecting their client list and stock."

Alastor nodded, and then hit Farley with an obliviate, wiping the conversation between him and Tonks from her mind, as well as his questions on her method of protection.

No need to have her on guard, once she was out from under the spell's influence. She might suspect he asked her those questions, but she wouldn't be sure.

"What happened after you ran back inside the castle?" Alastor asked Farley, as though they never stopped with her interrogation.

"We thought they were lost in the woods," said Farley. "It had been over an hour, so Higgs suggested we go back out and start searching."

"You didn't find them?" he asked.

Farley shook her head, "we used *homnium revelio* every few meters. They weren't anywhere to be found, so we went back in. I thought they might've gone back to the Common Room while we were out searching, but they weren't there, either. After that, we realized something was wrong. We decided to report them missing to Professor Snape."

"Do you know of anyone who told outsiders about the Slytherin Initiation?"

"No."

"Do you suspect anyone of telling outsiders about it?"

She blinked, "Flint, or maybe Derrick. Their magic has been weak of late."

"If you were going to kill Rowle, why would you do it?"

"If she was about to become the next dark lady, or if someone was threatening my family unless I did."

"Have you been worried about your family lately?"

"No."

*If* Farley wasn't lying, it was a clear explanation for why Farley knew the kids were missing.

Which left only a dozen unanswered questions and mysteries left to solve.

How did Dumbledore know where to find the three students, before he went back in time? The Forbidden Forest wasn't on the Hogwarts maps, so he couldn't have used them.

Why did Dumbledore use his time-turner, before he went back in time? Dumbledore was being entirely to reticent about the matter, suggesting to him that it either had something to do with the Dark Lord, or something to do with Darla Rowle's murder.

If someone plotted to murder the young Rowle and knew about Dumbledore's time turner, they'd force him to use it earlier. Then he wouldn't have the chance to use it to save the children.
What's worse was the suspect pool.

Every Slytherin alumni and current Slytherin knew about Initiation Night. Chances were, not all Slytherins kept their initiation a secret, in spite of the magical cost.

That meant the number of potential suspects just shot through the roof.

Which brought him to the Hospital Wing, where two little kids sat on their respective beds. The young wizard was short with blonde hair, and had a hollowed-out look to him. The black-haired witch was stone-faced and huddled in her blankets. Her face looked familiar, but he couldn't place it.

The young wizard—Harper, he had his eyes fixed on the Professors, worrying the fabric of his blanket with twisting fingers.

Traumatized, likely. They both were.

The witch went first, which wasn't ideal. She likely didn't know what she saw, being a muggleborn. Didn't get raised around magic or have an understanding of magic, yet. Kid would learn in time.

But Harper's parents needed to be contacted, since the Ministry wanted to use Veritaserum. It was legal for Ministry-approved purposes on those of age. But underage students needed consent from their parents or guardians.

Snape could act as Hopkin's guardian, since she was a muggleborn, and he was her Head of House.

The young witch looked up at the vial, "What's veraserum?" she asked, voice hoarse.

Then Dumbledore's pet Death Eater had to open his damned Death Eater mouth. The wizard was sweating bullets, scared shitless about something. Alastor didn't know what about, but he sure found it shifty. Only things to ever scare that sack of doxy droppings were Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. Given the latter was off possessing some half-wit defense professor, he suspected Dumbledore had some scheme cooking. And this scheme? It had that Death Eater chewing his nails down to the quick.

"Truth serum, kid," Alastor said, focusing his attention on the little witch, "just a drop."

"You're only going to ask me about last night?" she asked.

Alastor wanted to laugh. Little Slytherin, one of the few muggleborns ever to get into Slytherin. Meant she was crafty or ambitious in some exemplary way. Likely thought he was going to ask her about her trunk stuffed with cheating quills.

"You doin' something illegal?" Alastor's voice rose, cracking what he thought would be a funny joke.

Dumbledore coughed loudly behind him. A reminder that he was dealing with traumatized children and not Dark Wizards or other Aurors. Alastor wasn't around children very often.

It showed.

Hopkin's face twitched, and she looked away before sputtering out a half-arsed lie. It was telling in it's own way. A twitch of repressed emotion meant she was hiding something.

But then the kid's eyes broke contact with his own.
Contrary to popular belief, liars tended to look you dead in the eye when they lied. Glancing to the side often indicated they were trying to remember something. Of course, cunning liars might realize an Auror knows that, and look away. Important part of Auror work is figuring out how crafty your suspect is, whether or not they're capable of hoodwinking you.

This kid was no master of misdirection.

She glanced away too slowly, a practiced response instead of an automatic one. *Further*, the kid practically repeated his damned sentence back at him. And her wording became stiff. *Another* mark of a lie.

"Good," Alastor nodded, allowing her to think she got one over on him, "one drop, now. Open your mouth."

'course, he didn't give a damn about kids with their cheating quills and fanged frisbees. He was here to catch a murderer, not to sort out Albus' snool-pickled approach to discipline.

She opened her mouth, and one drop of veritaserum, the appropriate dosage for someone her age and weight, was deposited on her tongue.

First thing he had her do was recount the events leading up to Dumbledore rescuing the two of them in the woods, and ask if she saw Miss Rowle's murderer.

Alastor turned around in his chair to look at McGonagall, "who told you that the Slytherins were in the woods?"

Professor McGonagall clasped her hands. "A Gryffindor prefect, Percy Weasley."

Kid wasn't helpful, just like he expected.

Alastor was frustrated after he finished talking with her.

Kids tend to want to believe the world is against them. They want to think the authority figures in their lives are holding them back with *rules*.

Usually they get over it.

Problems started, however, when the kid was onto something. Then they started thinking adults were always lying or plain ignorant.

When you're a muggleborn in Wizarding Britain, half of the population is out to get you. Her classmates probably *did* want to hurt her. That didn't mean she ought to quit school.

There were bad people all over. Only thing a person could do was toughen up and be prepared. Easy to start blaming other people, vilifying the ones who wanted to help but aren't perfect and don't always agree with you.

He knew he didn't get through to her. Kids don't want to listen to experience.

Telling a kid they'd regret it twenty years down the line didn't work because they lacked a sense of *scale*, how fast things go, how little time you really have.

He wasn't going to make her understand, and he didn't have the time to teach her. Alastor Moody had a case to solve.
Two hours later Harper's parents responded to the Ministry's owl, agreeing to permit the usage of veritaserum. Not that they had much of a choice, but protocols must be followed.

Harper knew more, in terms of noting magic performed. Kid also was using a number of potions to augment his wits and memory. While the potions themselves weren't illegal, using them in school was against policy.

Adults buying those potions for children was illegal, and Alastor was going to enjoy writing up a citation for Mr. and Mrs. Harper.

He was also going to be writing up citations for the use of underage magic for most of the first year Slytherins. It was very unlikely that Harper and his year mates all learned multiple spells in the span of one day.

In fact, the level at which Harper described the casting suggested that some of the first years had formal tutoring in magical theory. Also illegal, for kids under the age of eleven.

At any rate, it looked like neither Harper nor Hopkins were at the center of this plot.

The target of the killer was most likely Miss Rowle.

Two days later, Alastor had a few ideas of what happened:

The first was that some student thought to play a prank, and alerted the professors to the Initiation. The Cracklewood Carver, unable to attack Hogsmeade, used the chaos to kidnap three students.

The second was that someone was pretending to be the Cracklewood Carver to draw attention away from the identities of the children, one of whom was the real target of an assassination.

The third was someone wanted one of those students dead, and apparated them to the Carver's habitual ritual ground. Just in case, they obliviated the students and cast false-memory charms on them.

But the killer and their allies left no magical trails to follow. Farley and Higgs had only the same possibly-fabricated story. The crime scene itself was subtly different from previous Carver cases, but that could easily be explained by the murderer being interrupted, halfway through their ritual. Whomever it was, he decided, had intimate knowledge of the Hogwarts grounds and habits of the school administration.

Of course, half of wizarding Britain fit that bill, and a little legilimency or veritaserum could easily fill in the other half.

When he tried having Farley generate all her possible hiding spots, he found nothing. He would be waiting for the enchantment to return her little black book of illicit information, though. It wasn't even about catching the killer, with her. At this point, he doubted she had anything to do with it. Mostly, he just wanted to turn her damn book into her professors, see the shocked look on her face when she realized all her schemes had failed.

Attempts to check the Hogwarts Homunculus maps turned up nothing, as well. Dumbledore kept a close eye on them, never letting them out of sight. And since he owned the only copies, the Aurors were reliant on him for surveillance, in the event of another attack. Another hurdle to make his job more difficult. He had no idea what Dumbledore's play was, or if the close eye he kept on the maps had anything to do with Snape's bizarre reactions during Hopkins' interrogation.
Alastor wasn't stupid, and those two were acting mighty suspicious.

But he also knew that Dumbledore ran fifteen different games at once, and wasn't the sort to murder a little witch for her parents' sins. It was far more likely that Dumbledore and Snape were concerned with the theft of the philosopher's stone, and Voldemort's return.

All of these setbacks meant Alastor had to attack this from another angle.

At the very least, he could verify that it was the Carver.

Seven was a powerful magical number. Repetitions of seven were even more powerful. And seven was used three times, first in 1978, then in 1985, and finally for a third time, this year. Equally portent, three was the most powerful number next to seven.

He was no expert, but three repetitions of seven, with three children slain each time but this one? That pointed to dark and ancient magics.

There were a handful of people in this country knowledgeable enough to perform that magic. But if Alastor was right, and the Carver was using a ritual to summon something, then he'd need more specialized help.

Fortunately, one such person with specialized knowledge coincidentally rang the Ministry up today, requesting a favor. Even within his own mind, he thought the word 'coincidentally' was stretching it. This was no coincidence. The favor was mild, and the wizard, a man by the name of Corvinus Blackthorn, gave into the Ministry's demands with only a token protest.

Alastor Moody didn't like this, one bit.

Other countries taught certain sorts of magic, the sorts that were banned at Hogwarts and other civilized institutions. One such country was Siber, with its Koldovstoretz School of Magic.

Those blighters thought teaching students necromancy was a bright idea.

Professor Corvinus Blackthorn was one of the few experts in Necromancy in the world, and taught the Dark Arts at Koldovstoretz. The wizard was near the top of a very short list of potential consultants, as most were either too volatile, retired, or dead. But Blackthorn's need of a favor and his relatively cheap consulting fee guaranteed him the job.

This left Alastor with a conundrum. Pulling up the ICW's files on him, Alastor noted that Blackthorn had largely avoided Britain, which was why he wasn't rotting in a cell in Azkaban, where he belonged. He'd visited only twice, before. The first time was in 1959, during the Midlands Affair. Hunted down some cursed object in a muggle part of town, almost getting himself arrested for his efforts. Second time was in the late '70s, on some business with the Black Family. The exact details were redacted, but knowing that family, it was nothing good. Going by his own spotty memory, he thought it might've had something to do with reining their mad dog, Bellatrix. Otherwise, Blackthorn had largely stuck to Eastern Europe, involving himself in The Fall of the Cloud City of Mojipar, and later declaring a one-man war against the Solomonari, over their practice of sacrificing muggleborns.

Alastor had almost laughed, at that. The necromancer fancied himself a moral man. Hah, what a joke.

That blasted wizard raised up inferi and summoned demons to do his bidding. Made covenants with them, offering up slivers of his soul in exchange for power. People like that weren't trustworthy,
and at some point they stopped being human. Moral? Not a chance.

For this reason, and many others, Alastor didn't want Blackthorn putting one foot onto British soil. He'd no idea what the bastard really wanted in Britain, or what his interest was with the Carver case. All he knew was that Blackthorn wasn't being straight with them, and had some ulterior motive.

But Blackthorn would come, the Minister demanded it. He'd insisted they bring in a specialist, the cheapest and sanest one they could find. And Fudge, who didn't care about the schemes of foreign necromancers, saw Blackthorn's offer as sheer serendipity. It didn't hurt that the Rowles were paying Fudge a lot of galleons to bring in a specialist, so Blackthorn would be coming to Magical Britain, whether Alastor liked it or not.

Alastor Moody, for the sixth time that day, cursed that entire goddamn House.

Chapter End Notes

"Mirror on the fourth floor" is not an error. I didn't forget that the twin's hideout is behind the same mirror.

As usual, opinions of the author do not necessarily reflect that of the characters and vice versa. Every once in a while I feel compelled to remind the readers of this, as the story ventures into darker waters.
September 4, 1992 (Friday)

There were experiences that challenged a person and made them stronger for it. Others did the opposite, hollowing one out and leaving them *diminished*.

Which one was The Forest and What Followed?

Truth was, she wasn't sure, yet. She'd faced down a monster and hadn't cracked, not even when the odds of escaping seemed impossibly grim. Yet, Mallory knew that without the Headmaster's help, they would've never escaped. She wasn't the hero she imagined herself to be, and no special powers revealed themselves to her, no last-minute insights or surges of power she could use to take down the murderer. She'd never felt more fragile or human in her life.

A girl her age died.

She'd known before, that horrible things can happen to children. She knew from the telly that bad things happened all the time. But nothing like that ever happened to her, before. Now it felt real, because someone she knew died, instead of a random face on a screen. Even though she didn't *like* Rowle, it still had more impact on her than a hundred late-night specials on child abductions.

Even scarier, Mallory almost died. Luck of the draw, for all she knew.

An owl soared by, tapping at the window. Mallory stared, blank. The potion Madame Pomfrey gave her made her numb. She thought it was better than feeling—

*Terror. Waiting for the murderer to walk through the doors of the Hospital Wing and finish her off.* She saw Rowle's corpse every time she shut her eyes.

Only downside to the medication? It left her without the will to get up out of bed.

The nurse saw the owl and opened the latch, freeing the bird to settle beside Mallory. She gave Mallory another worried look, but scurried off when another patient started groaning in the back. Mallory couldn't find it in herself to feel anything about the nurse's pity, or her own lack of feeling. The medication numbed it all out, left her peering through cotton.

The owl hopped over to Mallory's bedside and held out a leg. The envelope wasn't thick parchment, but bleached-white and thin.

A spark of *something* penetrated her bubble of numbness. Only non-magicals wrote on normal paper. It had to be a letter from Danny, she realized, feeling something just shy of excitement.

She took the letter, and undid its seal.

She was right, it was a reply from Danny. She had sent off his letter after she met with the twins. It had detailed her dealings with the bullies. Pre-forest Mallory wanted advice on how to beat them.

She decoded the letter and read it once, and then again, three more times.
Mal,

You're worrying too much. You're acting like these kids are us. It's the first week, they're establishing a pecking order amongst themselves, so they have extra reason to show off and get creative. In a couple weeks they'll get lazy and stick to insults. Unless one of them has some kind of mental issue. Then you might have a problem.

Tell me if you have a problem. I'll get creative.

The Darla girl's made her point: she's tough shit and will fuck people up if they mess with her. Same goes for Harper and Montague, though I think they've made themselves her henchmen on accident, which is sort of hilarious.

Play it cool for a couple days. Kids that angry? They'll be tearing each other apart before you know it. You won't even have to do anything.

Also: FLYING CARS?! YES! Screw legality, we're getting a flying car.

-DP

Danny didn't write like an eleven year old, she thought, he wrote like a smart-arse. Establishing? Very funny. He knew she wouldn't know that word. Mallory read comics, not fancy grownup books. It was fine when she could turn around and ask him what he meant. But now he lurked in Dartmoor while she was all the way up in Scotland, with no handy payphones nearby.

She could figure it out through context. Maybe he wrote the part about the pecking order so she could guess the meaning, while still getting to show off how he'd memorized the bloody dictionary — Danny was tricky that way.

But he wasn't all-knowing.

Darla Rowle was dead.

Worse, it wasn't over yet. The professors thought they could protect her, but they believed the danger was over. It wasn't, and next time someone she loved might end up in the crosshairs, with her. The thought that Rowle had died because of her made her want to sick up all over the white hospital sheets. She didn't know what to do with this guilt, besides protect the people she loved and keep this from ever happening again.

The grownups, of course, weren't taking her seriously. Even Professor McGonagall didn't think Rowle's murderer would come after Mallory. Either that, or they didn't want her to think she was in danger. They had to realize the murderer would consider Mallory and Harper loose ends. But the people in charge wanted Mallory to feel safe. They would handle the scary murderer, and Mallory was free to cower behind their robes. Yet, it wasn't their lives on the line if they failed.

The sound of someone clearing their throat drew Mallory's attention.

She turned her head and Colin was there, standing in the doorway to the Hospital Wing. He looked flushed, like he'd run all the way down here from the Gryffindor Common Room. His face read to her as frantic, the look of someone who dared not let himself hope for a good outcome.

Then he caught her eye.

"You're okay!" His face lit up, bright as the sun still rising outside her window.
"Sure," she croaked. At that, his smile crumpled. He'd caught the expression on her face.

Her gaze shifted away, and she scooted herself up in bed. The pillow was propped between her back and the metal headboard. She still felt hollow, like someone scooped out her insides. Fuck, that made her want to throw up.

Wood, twine and strips of flesh held her in place. The intestines and viscera bulged through the gaps in the bindings.

Mallory drew her legs up, tucking them under her chin, arm covering her mouth. Easier not to throw up, in this position. Her arm smelled like citrus and antiseptic, and she could even smell a bit of spittle, where she must've drooled on herself while she slept. She recalled Rowle's dead face, in the forest. Focusing on other thoughts, she found, wasn't helping her as much as it did, before.

The potion Pomfrey gave her must be wearing off.

"I heard," his voice was hesitant, "you were in the Forbidden Forest. Professor McGonagall said something bad happened?"

She wasn't looking at him. Couldn't see his face, eyes fixed on the empty bed across from her's. She didn't want to look and see—

Emotion, feelings, things.

She wanted to stay wrapped in cotton, numb. Numb was better than the guilt gnawing at her insides, better than the fear and panic clawing up her throat.

"And someone died?" he asked, "I don't know— Professor McGonagall wasn't clear—"

"Remember the girl with the blonde ringlets?" her voice came out muffled behind her arm. Couldn't remember if he'd met her or not.

Blonde hair matted with blood and chunks of gore—

"I— no?" he said, "is that the one that died? Holy smokes, someone really died?"

"Yeah," she replied, eyes fixed on the bed. The footboard was metal with vertical bars welded into a horizontal one, and the sheets were tucked in military-style, like how dad made the bed. It was one of his habits, left over from his time in service. Dad was fussy, that way. He couldn't stand a mess.

"Did you see it? Like, the body?" Colin's eyes were as wide as saucers, mouth gaping a bit.

—chunks of flesh were outright missing, half of Rowle's face was a yawning wound.

Mallory hadn't realized she'd turn to face him. This incident, she thought, would create a gap between them. Any sort of friendship would be stunted because Rowle's death was only an adventure to him, a story.

She cringed.

Wasn't his fault. A good thing, that he thought that way. That he hadn't been there.

She swallowed down the sour taste in her mouth, "no, I didn't actually see— I—" Didn't want to say she saw bodies, saw death. Didn't want to make it apparent because she knew he'd draw back. Wouldn't be able to hide his revulsion and it'd hurt.
She dropped her head back on top of her knees, breath slightly wetting the meat of her arm when she exhaled.

Colin took that to mean she was okay. He got up and shoved himself onto the bed, scooting up next to her. His robes went all askew, and she saw his muddy trainers tailing dirt all over the hospital sheets. Dad would flip if he did that at home, she thought. It was an unrelated thought, entirely unnecessary. She knew her brain wasn't working correctly, right now. It felt more apparent, than ever. She wished it'd go back to normal. She didn't want to be like this.

"You weren't in class yesterday, so you missed it. Professor McGonagall can turn into a cat!"

Didn't have the heart to tell him to go away. But the chatter wasn't hurting, she realized. It made a nice distraction from wanting to throw up, from the left-over panic and the horror.

"I had Charms with Hufflepuff and Transfiguration with Ravenclaw, but we still have Potions and Defense together."

Mallory gave him a sidelong glance. His voice was too cheerful, topics too trite.

She'd guessed wrong. He didn't believe she was okay.

He knew she was upset and was trying to comfort her. Only, he didn't know how, and was prattling on about classes, instead. Her lips quirked up, a twitch, a sliver of warmth penetrating the cotton in her brain. It was far better than the professors efforts, because he wasn't telling her what to feel. He was doing his best to treat her like everything was ordinary, just another day. And she suspected it would've worked, too, had he been a better liar. But even the poor fake cheer was nice, she thought.

"And we have prep after classes every day. It wasn't even on the schedule, can you believe it? We have to spend a whole ruddy hour in this room next to the library. It's to make sure we do our homework," he flopped back against the headboard with a huff.

He turned his head, meeting her eyes. "I think we have prep together, today."

"Okay," she croaked. The lump in her throat was back. She didn't know why it was there, again. Colin wasn't doing anything wrong.

"I met your Hufflepuffs, Felix and Jennings. Felix sat next to me in Transfiguration. Did you know none of the Hufflepuffs like him? Or Jennings? Isn't that odd?"

She noted how he used Felix's first name, but stuck to calling Kit Jennings. The thoughts were a welcome distraction from the frog in her throat.

"You don't like Kit," she stated. Talking was easier than she thought. The words linked themselves together on their own, and she could say them safely behind her bubble, disconnected.

He opened his mouth, hesitating, "she's a bit much." A pause, "but, I mean, she seems nice."

A choked little sound that might've been a laugh made its way past her lips.

Fuck, she was so glad it had been a Slytherin Initiation that put them all out in that forest. It could've been her, Colin, and her Hufflepuffs out there. She might've lost someone she liked.

And like a soap bubble popping, she buried her head in her hands, tears filling her eyes.

An arm reached around her back, hugging her from behind. She sagged into it.
Colin was a shitty hugger.

He leaned on her, heavy and squishing her shoulder. She was already slumped down on the bed, which was the only reason he was tall enough to manage it. She could feel herself sliding further down the bed, because the bloody idiot kept putting all his weight on her. She wanted to laugh. It was ridiculous.

Instead, she hiccuped twice, wiping her snotty nose on her arm.

Something cloth slapped against her leg. She blinked away the moisture in her eyes.

The washcloth. He was handing her the washcloth from next to the basin.

"Thanks," her voice sounded scratchier than before. Maybe that's what it's for, she thought. Wiping your eyes when you're done crying.

She elbowed him lightly in the ribs, and he took the message and leaned back. The washcloth went on her lap.

"You don't have to talk about it," he said, hesitant, as though he wasn't sure that was the correct thing to say, or if there was a correct thing to say, at all.

"I don't want to," she confirmed.

"Okay," he nodded, "we can just sit or— I don't have anyplace to be until Potions."

She blew her nose, then wiped her eyes with the not-gross part of the washcloth.

"You like Felix?" she asked, picking up the earlier thread of their conversation.

"He's an honest sort of bloke. Upright, you know?"

"He—" doesn't like me and I don't know why. She'd brought enough negativity to their friendship, already, she thought. Enough negativity and he wouldn't want to be her friend, anymore.

Mallory knew that people didn't like it when other people brought up unhappy things. If Mallory kept talking about death and how kids didn't like her, Colin would eventually associate Mallory with bad feelings. He wouldn't want to see her anymore because she'd only remind him of things that made him sad. Moreover, she didn't want to keep telling him about all the people who didn't like her. Colin might start to wonder if Mallory had done something mean to them.

"What?" he was staring at her, confused.

"Nevermind."

Colin cocked his head to the side, and Mallory blinked hard, a new wave of nausea hitting her. She looked back at the empty bed. The way he tilted his head reminded her of Rowle's—

"You got in a fight on broomsticks," his voice was a little softer, "I heard about it."

Mallory raised her estimation of his sense of tact, again.

"Yeah, 350 points." Lost, and some Slytherin seventh years wanted to off her. Was that even true?

"Well," he folded his arms behind his neck, looking quite pleased with himself, "guess who's house is winning the cup this year?"
She let out a bark of laughter, "not Slytherin?"

"On the bright side," he said, grinning widely, "it means you can get into all sorts of trouble now, and no one'll get mad 'coz you've got a snowball's chance in hell of winning the cup, anyway."

She glanced back at him. Colin was still smiling, though the grin wasn't quite reaching his eyes. Pretending, still. For her.

Her heart warmed a little, at that.

"Squint like the sun's in your eyes," she instructed, studying his face. They were both sitting upright on the bed, Mallory underneath a pile of blankets, and Colin dangling half-off the edge. The bed wasn't made for two people, not even two first years. The sun came in at an angle, bars of light warming her her feet and shins through the sheets. The warmth on her toes made the moment feel more real. She was here, not in the forest. She knew that.

Colin's fake smile morphed into real confusion, "what?"

"Do the smile again, but this time make your eyes scrunch a little," she tucked one of her legs back under her chin, displacing the snotty washcloth.

His face fell, like he'd been slapped. Another misstep. Damnit.

"I'm not faking—"

"It helped," she cut him off, before he could come to the wrong conclusion, "it helps that you're trying to make me feel better."

*Defusing it before it could become an argument.*

He nodded, fingers twitching awkwardly like he was—oh. She was still staring at his face. He must feel like he was under a microscope, she thought. She looked away.

"I didn't mean to—" he started, hesitant.

"You were helping. It's fine. I was trying to—" she met his eyes again, "I was trying to help, too?"

"Help?" his face scrunched in confusion.

"You were distracting me from—" she took a breath, deciding not to finish that sentence, "and that's good. But if you want to be convincing, you have to smile with your eyes. It doesn't look real if the eyes don't scrunch a little." She firmly skirted past the part of her brain that reminded her of what she was distracting herself from.

She continued, "if you want to get better at making people feel better, in the future, it works better when people can't tell you're pretending."

"Oh," he said, and then tried smiling again, only now, she could tell he felt self-conscious about it, and his ears turned red.

Mallory snorted, a wet sound from all the stupid crying.

"What? That bad, too?" his indignation hit the mark and she giggled.

He made an outrageously silly face, eyes scrunched like he was being blinded by sunlight, a smile that showed too many teeth.
He spoke through it, words slurred, "Sshlike sshthish?"

She outright laughed. "Better," she said around a giggle, "totally a realistic grin."

His expression changed from grinning to serious in a second, "you have odd hobbies, you know that?"

"Sure," she said, shrugging with the shoulder Colin wasn't holding hostage, "my best friend taught me that."

"The one you were writing that letter to?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "I was—" thinking about him the other night. She steered away from the thought. The Initiation and What Followed dragged her down like a mass with gravity, pulling her towards it every time she stopped paying attention.

Danny's reply letter had never left her hand, and she folded it in half. Didn't want someone trying to read it and wondering what all the squiggles meant. She didn't need anyone getting suspicious. After all, telling Danny about magic broke the Statute of Secrecy. It was a testament to her skill as a liar that the Auror never asked her what she needed to hide from the truth serum.

"You were..?" he trailed off. Waiting for her to fill in the gaps.

Right, they were talking about the other night.

"My head keeps going back to the forest, you know, and it's like—" hard to talk about it without thinking about it, "bad. It's bad. So—"

"You want me to distract you?"

"Yeah," she breathed out, relieved.

"I told you about Harry Potter arriving in a flying car," he stated more than he asked.

"Yeah."

"Gosh darnit, okay," he stopped for a moment to think, "so I found out who his friends are. The smartest girl at Hogwarts, and the twins' younger brother."

"Fred and George's brother?" she twisted her head to look at him again.

"Yeah, the ones from the train. And you want to know what the best part is? The smartest girl at Hogwarts is a muggleborn and a Gryffindor."

There was a note of defensiveness in his tone, centered around the word muggleborn. Someone had teased him about his blood, in her absence.

"And she's Potter's best friend?" she asked, sounding more normal than she felt.

"Yeah, I already said that," Colin grinned, "she's not really girly, though."

Mallory raised an eyebrow, "okay?"

Was he saying that he thought it was weird that a girl and a boy were best friends? But that it was okay because Harry Potter had a girl best friend, too? Mallory didn't think it was odd at all, and was quite confused about why he thought so.
"I mean, in the same way you're not girly. You don't wear bows in your hair or—" his eyes widened. "Oh."

"What?"

"She was the girl with the ribbons in her hair, at your table. The blonde."

Her blood turned to ice, caught off-guard.

"Sorry!" he backpedaled. "Sorry, anyway, I meant it as a good thing. The girls at my old school, they all were sort of frilly and they didn't make sense."

She struggled to switch gears from the forest to find some indignation. "Girls don't make sense?" Her tone failed to achieve the sarcastic drawl that line deserved.

"That's not what I meant! I mean, it's just, they're dainty and don't like— they wear perfumes!" His ears went red and his face turned blotchy.

Mallory made a face, and rolled her eyes.

"They do girl-things!" Colin continued, digging his hole deeper with every word.

"I will sock you in the nose," Mallory said, a statement of fact.

Colin made a garbled noise in the back of his throat, and grabbed his bag.

"What?" Mallory said, eyes narrowed. She expected some sort of token defense, or even more flailing.

Instead, he withdrew a lump of black robes, wrinkled and squashed, from his bag.

"Fred and George asked me to give them to you. They have your robes, for some reason?" It was a pathetic attempt at changing the subject, to avoid being socked in the nose. He looked confused about the last part. He didn't know about the bullying or Rowle stealing his trunk.

"They're putting protection charms on my trunk, coz—" Rowle burnt it. "because it got burnt."

Yesterday, Rowle had been her arch-enemy. She'd have given a great deal to get one over on the spoiled girl. Today, the frame had shifted. All she saw when she thought of Rowle was the dead girl, one blank eye staring lifelessly into the night.

"Holy smokes!" Colin exclaimed, drawing her from her thoughts with a start, "someone burnt it? Why?"

He didn't even stop to think it might've been burned on accident. Either he already knew her too well to be fooled, or he guessed she was a regular target of bullies.

Neither of those scenarios were ideal.

"Slytherins aren't too keen on muggleborns," again, she was drawing the attention away from targeted bullying. This was an attack on both of them, not just on her.

She knew it wasn't fair to him, that what she was doing would set him up to be bullied right along with her. Worse, she feared that if he spent enough time around her, he'd end up a target of Rowle's murderer, too. But in the moment, she couldn't make the decision to alienate him. The thought of being alone made her shrink up inside. She'd just have to protect him, leave Hogwarts before he...
could become a target. Either that, or catch the murderer before they struck again.

"So they burnt your trunk?" his tone was laced with incredulity and horror.

"Yeah," Mallory fiddled with her robes. The twins even thought to include a pair of trousers and a jumper. She felt sort of weird that they went through her underthings and picked out her clothes, but then it was an unusual situation.

Luckily, her bag was by her hospital bed from the other night, when she ended up back in the hospital wing after falling off her broom.

"Are you coming to class?" Colin asked.

Mallory picked up her bag, leaning halfway off the bed to grab it without having to get up. She tucked Danny's letter inside her notebook, and checked to make sure her wand was there. She took a deep breath.

She spent all last night thinking about it, putting off making a decision.

Mallory wasn't stupid. Rowle's murderer might strike at any moment.

Hogwarts was dangerous, and there very well may not be another chance to leave. All it would take was a letter home to her mum and dad. If they found out she was being hunted by a child-killer, they'd want her home immediately.

*Someone tried to kill me for being muggleborn. Another girl was murdered, too.*

But who was she kidding?

It'd take maybe a week and a number of letters back and forth between the professors, her parents, and Mallory. They wouldn't just send her home the moment she requested it. Leaving school wasn't *Mallory's* choice to make, it was her parents'. And her parents would want to speak to the professors to make sure Mallory wasn't telling tall tales. Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins were *assured* Hogwarts was the safest place in the world for their daughter. All the shopkeepers her parents met in Diagon Alley raved about how wonderful Hogwarts was— how *safe* it was, because Albus Dumbledore was the Headmaster.

In that context, Mallory imagined sending them a letter with an outrageous story about a student being brutally murdered in front of her, and how the murderer was now targeting Mallory.

They'd want a second opinion.

Not necessarily because they wouldn't believe Mallory, but they'd assume Mallory only had part of the big picture. Maybe a student was murdered, but the target wasn't *their* little monkey. Or maybe Mallory *believed* a student was murdered, but someone was playing a mean joke on her.

They couldn't take a child's word for it, especially if it turned out that it was all a big joke. Dad would be embarrassed, and there were so *few* stories of little children being murdered in schools. That *couldn't* be what really happened, they'd reason. Her parents would want to convene with the other grownups to get the full story. And that would take time, a lot of it. Letters, meetings, and more meetings after those meetings.

And while the adults were in meetings, Darla Rowle's murderer would strike again, killing Mallory.
Getting expelled would take a lot less time. If the murderer's goal was to get her out of Hogwarts, any means necessary, Mallory would very much prefer to leave alive. She was tempted to start lighting tapestries on fire until the Headmaster agreed to expel her.

She might win, she might get to go home. This school was a madhouse and Mallory almost died. Magic wasn't worth that.

But there was a cost to leaving, the same cost that had her terrified when Snape threatened to expel her, earlier.

Her wand would be snapped and she would be banned from ever using magic, again. She'd never get to be a superhero, never get to help her parents with their plans, and her family wouldn't be safe.

If her parents or Danny were ever hurt, as a witch she could do something about it. And Mallory wanted to be able to help more people than just her parents and Danny. A witch who was sympathetic to normal people and their plights could do a lot of good.

But there was a murderer, here. And that murderer, they wanted Mallory gone.

She would die if she stayed.

If she died, she'd also never get to be a superhero, with the bonus penalty of not getting to live, either. Her family would be just as vulnerable, but with the added tragedy of losing their only daughter. She couldn't help anyone if she were dead. Even as a muggle, Mallory could do more good than as a wand-wielding corpse.

But if the murderer was caught in a day, or if it turned out that Mallory wasn't a target of the killer, then she'd be throwing away her chance to be a superhero for nothing.

"Which class is it?" Mallory asked.

"Potions," Colin said.

If Mallory decided to stay, she'd need to go to class to learn magic. If Mallory decided to get herself expelled, then pissing off Snape was the easiest way to go about it.

Either case required her to go to class.

"I need to close the curtain to get changed," she said.

Colin shrugged, stepped off the bed, and shut the curtain for her. She could barely see his outline through the thick fabric.

"What are people saying?" she asked, as she shucked off the hospital gown. It was more like an old-fashioned nightdress than a proper hospital gown.

"There's just rumors," Colin's voice came muffled through the curtain. "Dumbledore was missing at breakfast, and all yesterday. Snape was gone for half the day, and Harper. And so was— well, you know. Everyone's making up stories."

Mallory shoved on her jeans, slipping her feet into sneakers. The twins forgot socks, but she'd manage.

She'd have to get the trunk back from them, if she decided to leave, she realized.
"What kind of stories?"

"All sorts," he sounded uncomfortable.

Shirt on, all she had to do was put on her robe and she was ready to go.

"I'm going to find out anyway," Mallory said. "And if it's bad, I want to be prepared."

"It's not bad. A lot of people saw you fall off your broomstick on Wednesday. So most don't think you're involved. So outside us—"

"And Slytherin," Mallory interrupted. "They were there for some of it."

"Okay, then outside that, no one knows you're involved. They know something happened, and rumor is some first years vanished in the middle of the night. They're making up stories about why the first years are gone— that they flew off on a dragon or were kidnapped by merpeople. But a few, and it's just a few, they're saying that you and this girl got in another fight, and that she was hurt so bad she had to be shipped off to a hospital."

"Did any of the Slytherins say anything?"

"No, or at least, not where I heard."

She glanced out the window, at the far-off forest. It felt unreal. She guessed Snape gave the Slytherins the same speech he gave her and Harper on not telling people about what happened.

"Are you decent?" asked Colin.

"Yeah."

He poked his head in, "so, you're coming to class?"

"Yeah," she took a deep breath and sat on the edge of the bed. She felt like she wanted to throw up. A side effect of considering whether or not she ought to light a teacher's robes on fire or otherwise create a ruckus.

"Okay," he gave her a dubious look, "are you hungry?" he asked.

Mallory narrowed her eyes, equal parts hopeful and suspicious, "why?"

"I brought a biscuit from breakfast. If you don't want it, I'm eating it."

She held out her hand, palm facing the ceiling. He deposited a biscuit wrapped in a napkin, and she grinned.

"You're the best."

*She wouldn't be able to beat up bullies for him.* If she left, he'd have to deal with them on his own. More guilt crawled up her spine, at the thought. She wanted to be here, protect her friends from bullies. Surely, it'd be entirely unheroic to run away and leave him to fight on his own, she reasoned.

There was another angle to this she hadn't considered.

"Can I ask you something?" Mallory took a bite of biscuit while Colin sat down next to her.
What if her decision, here, had larger implications?

What if choosing to run away from Hogwarts developed into a pattern of running away from scary situations? She didn't want to become unheroic, and Mallory had already acted unheroic at the Initiation Ceremony.

What if she ended up turning into a villain?

"Sure." said Colin.

"You've read comic books, yeah?"

"A few, why?"

"What do you think the X-men would do if they had a choice between doing something scary, and doing another scary thing, and there wasn't an easy way to pick which one they ought to do?"

"Er, well," Colin glanced at her, brow furrowed, "that's sort of vague."

She didn't want to tell him about it in detail, largely because she wasn't sure how he would react. If she told him she was planning on running away, he might decide that he'd miss her, and demand she stay. He might not even realize how much danger she was in, and go tell a Professor that she planned to do something stupid to get herself expelled.

In that case, she'd have to escalate far beyond her comfort zone in order to convince the Professors to expel her. It wouldn't do to have a student win, after all. Expelling her would then be framed as giving the rebellious child what she wants.

"I— okay. Imagine you're someone who wants to do something heroic. But first you have to do this other thing, but the other thing is really dangerous, so you decide to run away, instead. Can you still be a hero if you run away?"

"Heroes do dangerous things all the time, though. That's their job, isn't it?"

Mallory slumped in her seat, feeling even worse than she did, before.

"Maybe I'm just not ready to be a hero, yet," she mumbled. She'd certainly failed in the forest. Maybe, she thought, she was asking too much of herself. She was only eleven, after all.

"There'll always be a reason not to be a hero, I guess," said Colin. He gave her a rather concerned look, like he'd spied a confusing puzzle.

He was right, though. She could use that excuse until she was a hundred and eleven years old. There'd always be a reason to avoid danger, and a real hero didn't run away from the threat of death. That's what made them extraordinary. Mallory always thought that she was born to be a hero.

It was just what you did when you were born with superpowers.

But Mallory wasn't living in a story. Life didn't have a plot, and even if it did, Mallory wouldn't be the main character. She was able to die, and no mysterious last-hour miracle would save her if she messed up and made the wrong choice. Last night was the exception to the rule.

"But what if your excuse is a real reason? An extra-special reason," she asked. She knew, in her heart of hearts, she just wanted him to say yes. Yes, she could run away. She wanted permission to
stop being a hero, wanted someone to tell her it'd be ok. And that someone couldn't be a grownup, because most grownups were callous and didn't even believe heroing was a thing real people did.

"Then, well, you'd have to promise that this'll be the only exception. Otherwise you'll keep finding reasons to avoid being heroic."

Which was in line with what Mallory was thinking. Only, she could imagine finding a dozen loopholes in that rule. Almost any situation could be twisted into an exception if she tried hard enough.

"I don't know if that'll work," Mallory said.

"Okay, maybe we're going about it the wrong way. Er— when do you think you'll be ready to be a hero?"

He didn't say it like he was humoring her. When Mallory told her parents she wanted to be a superhero, they patted her head and told her that was sweet, but naive. Real heroes were doctors and researchers, they said. Even Danny had some reservations about the idea. Colin acted like it was a perfectly ordinary thing to want to be a hero when she grew up.

In that moment, he was possibly the best person in the world to her.

"I don't know," she said, because she didn't. The comic books showed training montages and solemn vows to protect people, but they didn't give her a clear idea of what she needed to be a hero.

"We are eleven, so I don't think we need to fight bad guys, yet. I think we can try to be heroic in other ways, though," Colin frowned, thinking, "we can speak up if we see someone being picked on, or help other students with their homework. It's not fun, but it'd be the right thing to do."

That wasn't what she meant, but he had a point.

"Okay, but—" she broke off, "what if you have the option to put yourself in a lot of danger, er— but one day, because you did, you might be a real hero. The sort in comic books. But if you try, you'll likely end up dying before you ever get the chance to be a real hero, and if you decide to do something easier, instead, you can still be heroic, but it won't be as cool."

And Mallory thought, right as she said it, that once she put it that way, the answer seemed rather obvious. There were good reasons to to run away, and being murdered by Rowle's killer wasn't a heroic death. She wouldn't save anyone, dying that way.

It wasn't jumping in front of a bullet to save mum or Danny. It wasn't even like jumping in front of a cutting charm aimed at Colin. Nothing would be gained, and her life might be lost.

"I'm being stupid, aren't I?" she laughed, shaking her head.

"Confusing, more like. I thought we were talking about imaginary people. You really want to be a hero?"

Before she could reply, the nurse bustled into the room, effectively killing the conversation.

"Miss Hopkins!" said Nurse Pomfrey. "I see you're up and about."

The nurse gave her two potions. The first was to heal mental wounds, and the second was a calming potion. She had to take the first one under the nurse's supervision, but the other one she was supposed to keep on her, in case she had another freak-out.
She hoped the nurse hadn't lied when she said the potions would help the memories of the forest fade faster. She didn't want to remember.

She was fixing her hair while they walked to the potions classroom. The twins hadn't thought to include a brush, which meant she had to use her fingers. The ends were all sticking up and it needed a wash.

They walked at a leisurely pace, down a corridor Colin believed lead to the potions classroom, but her mind wasn't on directions.

She wanted to pick up their conversation from before, but it'd be awkward to bring it up again. Colin might start to think something was really wrong. *More wrong than a student dying in the woods, even.*

Moreover, Mallory had come to a decision. She was going to leave Hogwarts, because *not having magic* wouldn't impede her ambition to become a hero. She could become a doctor or volunteer at hospitals. She could even get really rich doing something boring and buy cancer-curing potions for muggles. That's what her parents planned on doing, after all. She didn't need a wand to be a hero.

She felt bad, though, leaving Colin behind. She reasoned with herself that Colin wasn't the first muggleborn in Gryffindor. He wasn't going to be murdered in a forest, or threatened into leaving Hogwarts. He'd make other friends, and would be just fine.

Mallory suspected she wouldn't, though, because after today, she'd likely never see him again.

The door to the potions classroom had been propped open with a chair.

Mallory felt her steps falter, even with the calming potion running through her veins.

Colin squeezed her shoulder, trailing behind her.

Her eyes took in the scene, mind switching into gear. This was her playing field, the realm of strategy. Even better, this was her chance to create a *combustion.*

The potions classroom was dank and dark, the foul odor of vitrified flesh curling the hairs in her nostrils. The very air had a damp taste to it, like standing water behind Mr. Banks' barn, back home. Any time they went back there, the air always left a bad taste in her mouth, like something musty and rank crawled into her mouth and died. She and Danny had always joked that Mr. Banks kept dead bodies back there, though the joke wasn't so funny now, in retrospect. Here, the only dead 'bodies' were the critters Snape kept in jars, lining the walls. For the students, there were five rows of wooden workbenches, two abreast. At the front of the classroom was the teacher's demonstration table, where a cauldron was already set up and bubbling.

Professor Snape was nowhere to be found.

The Slytherin first years were clustered together, and they all looked up when Mallory and Colin passed through the door.

Mallory gestured at two seats in the back, and she and Colin sat down without a word. Her classmates returned to their conversations, though a couple were still watching Mallory.

Word hadn't gotten around the castle about Rowle's death, yet. Colin said as much. But Montague visited Harper last night, so Slytherin House had to know what happened, even if the rest of the
school was still in the dark.

Could she use that? How were the first years handling the news? The thought of using Rowle's death to benefit herself struck her as sick, but she wasn't sure what else to capitalize on.

The Slytherins looked tensed and confused. It was first thing in the morning and their side of the classroom was filled with nervous gestures and narrowed eyes. Their expressions were tight, angry and afraid.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted movement. It was the girl Mallory called Cokebottles.

She marched up to Mallory's workbench, lips downturned and muscles tense. The candlelight glinted off of Cokebottle's cokebottle glasses. Several Slytherins stopped what they were doing to watch, heads following her as she walked to the back of the classroom.

"Where's Rowle?" she demanded, once she stood in front of Mallory's desk, foot almost touching her bookbag.

Oh, god.

Cokebottle's voice trembled, "Harper won't say, but you're going to tell me."

Oh god, she didn't know.

"Montague," Mallory cleared her throat. "he— I thought Harper told—" she shook her head. Couldn't get the words out, brain struggling to switch tracks from cold strategy to this. Being comforting to someone who just lost a friend.

Cokebottles faced Montague, head twisting so fast, Mallory thought she'd get whiplash. He ducked down in his seat, shoulders hunched and ears red.

"You know where Rowle is?" she rounded on him, stepping away from Mallory's desk to loom over the boy.

Fuck. Mallory felt a pang of empathy for him. He wore the look of someone facing their worst fear.

"I really shouldn't," said Montague. "I promised I wouldn't."

"You really should," hissed Cokebottles, wand clenched in her fist.

His eyes were flicking between Cokebottle's face and the wand, hands fumbling with his quill like he didn't know what to do with it.

The Gryffindors, half asleep and struggling with some severe cases of bed-head, were catching onto the mood. Their foreheads were furrowed, lips twisting into frowns. Confusion. A couple boys glanced between each other and shrugged. Do you know what's going on? Me neither.

The Slytherin side was no better.

Hoop Boy, who was sitting at the bench in front of Mallory, inched down in his seat. He was caught between Montague and Cokebottles, and obviously didn't want to be there.

"Tell me where she is!" Cokebottles demanded.

"I can't. I promised," said Montague.
In that moment, Mallory admired him. It was easier, now, because she didn't consider him her problem anymore. She was leaving, and his previous behavior was rendered irrelevant by that decision.

Montague was a rotten bully, sure. But he was loyal. He was terrified of Cokebottles, *Mistress Slicer of Flesh*, from the Slytherin Initiation. But in spite of his fear, he held his own out of loyalty to his fallen allies. If he were as cold-hearted as some of his classmates, he'd have dropped them, by now. After all, Harper was a wreck, and Rowle was dead. And Montague was, sitting alone at his own bench, with no other friends or allies in Slytherin. Now was the time to try to gain some advantage, get new allies so he wasn't left out in the cold as friendships solidified.

Yet he was keeping his promise to Harper, even though he could gain social capital by telling his yearmates what happened.

*Loyalty.*

Someone started snickering, and Mallory's eyes flicked from Cokebottles and Montague to the source.

Dead-eyes Selwyn.

He was leaning on his workbench, arms casually at his side, grinning like he just skinned a cat.

"You're a disgrace, Montague. Cowering before a half-blood?" Selwyn's lips were quirked up, eyes glinting with enjoyment.

Montague stood up, wood scraping the stone floor. "What did you say?" His face was beet red, fists clenched and brow furrowed with fury.

"That's not even the worst part. I saw you groveling at Rowle's feet," Selwyn took a step forward into Montague's space, "'oh Rowle can I fetch your books for you? Do you need your arse wiped?' And then, with Harper? Merlin, I thought I was about to puke. A pureblood taking orders from a half-wizard. What a joke."


"Your friend? Don't make me laugh. He's got one foot in the door and the other out, like the rest of his kind."

"You—" Montague started, only to be interrupted.

"Shut it," said Cokebottles, wand pointed at Selwyn's nose, "you shut it or I'll make you shut it."

Mallory stood up, lightly tugging Colin's sleeve so he would, too. If it came down to a fight, the two of them needed to be able to move.

"Says the other half blood. Of course you speak up. I understand how hard it must be for you, faced with a harsh truth."

"I'll cut your bloody face open," Cokebottles hissed, wand almost *touching* Selwyn's face, but the boy only looked amused.

"Oh, will you?" Selwyn laughed, "I wouldn't. Don't forget how I made that mudblood scream the other night."
Hoop Boy, who had so far remained silent, spoke. His tone was dry and sardonic, "yes, Selwyn, why don't you tell the whole class how you make little witches scream."

"Want me to make you scream, too?" asked Selwyn, taking his mockery as a challenge. "I've gotten quite good at those spells. What do you say?"

Hoop Boy snorted, "me? I say somebody better call St. Mungo's before it's too late. The reception office in the Janus Thickey Ward closes early on Fridays."

Selwyn's eyes lit up like he was possessed, knuckles gone white with how tightly he squeezed his wand.

"Say that again," his voice was dangerous and low.

"Going to show me your crystal casket, Selwyn?" sniggered Hoop Boy, tone clearly mocking.

In that moment, a number of things happened. Selwyn flicked his wand, and Mallory dove forwards, grabbing Hoop Boy's collar to shove him down. The spell fluffed her hair as it whipped past, hitting a bookshelf with a crash.

Vaisey was mid-syllable through the cutting spell when Montague tugged her by the arm, disrupting her casting.

"STOP!" Montague's face was beet red. "This en't the time for fighting!" He looked between Cokebottles and Hoop Boy.

Selwyn was ignored because no one thought they could convince him to back down.

Mallory and Montague were the only two who knew Rowle was dead. Which reminded her of her game plan, to cause a combustion. This situation, here, was like ten barrels of petrol sitting next to a bomb.

*All she had to do was light the fuse.*

"You're a real sicko, Selwyn," Mallory said, pushing herself off of her workbench to stand up.

"Need I remind you what I'm capable of, mudblood?" asked Selwyn.

There wasn't time to think it through, no time to debate on the best way to do it. She had to go with the first idea to pop into her head.

"So it was you," Mallory lied. She widened her eyes a tad, faking a hitch in her throat. "You're the one that tried to kill us in the forest. You're the one who murdered Rowle."

A pin could've dropped.

Immediately after she said it, she wanted to take it back. Some part of Mallory's brain was still imagining what it must be like for Cokebottles, to spend a whole day wondering what happened to her friend. Aurors and professors were running around like madmen but *no one would tell Cokebottles what was going on.* They'd give her pitying looks every time she asked, and her anxiety would mount as each minute ticked past with no answers.

Now she finds out her worst fears are realized, and that her friend's murderer is standing right in front of her.

Mallory couldn't falter, though. The die were already cast.
She put her energy into pretending to be the little girl who believed Dead-Eyes Selwyn was the murderer. She backed up, wand in hand. Her face twisted in horror as she drew on the feeling of being terrified.

Selwyn stopped grinning and frowned, surprised, "Rowle's dead?" He almost dropped his wand.

Students around them gawked, crowding in closer to see the spectacle.

"Liar," said Montague, ruining Mallory's plot, "Harper en't said nothing about Selwyn."

"He did it," Mallory insisted, before she realized that she didn't need to convince everyone it was true. All she needed to do was start a fight.

"Incendio!" Mallory shouted, firing straight at Selwyn's head.

It missed, and Mallory didn't even have time to swear. Selwyn returned fire, spell flinging her into a shelf full of potion bottles. She was blown off her feet and landed in an undignified heap.

Mallory groaned from her spot on the ground. She must've flown back a full meter into those shelves. Her back ached and there were cuts along her arms, where broken glass pierced skin. Foul smelling fluid seeped into her robes and there were chunks of vitrified critters sticking to her clothes.

Colin dove to her side, grabbing her arm, and shoving her to the side as glass smashed into the ground where her head was a second ago.

She scrambled to her feet, attention fixed on Selwyn. Selwyn, who was now squaring off against Cokebottles. Mallory didn't even want to look at Colin's face. She didn't know what he was thinking and she didn't want to know.

"Did you kill Rowle?" Cokebottle's voice wavered.

"Are you stupid?" hissed Selwyn, "do not you dare—"

Cokebottles fired off one of her signature cutting charms, nicking Selwyn's arm and tearing a chunk out of his desk. He immediately retaliated with his lightning spell, but Cokebottles was too fast and twisted out of the way.

"Stop it, all of you!" Hoop boy was now standing, putting himself between Cokebottles and Selwyn. "We have to set this classroom back to rights now. Snape will be here any moment."

Mallory took that as her cue, "you're worried about house points? Selwyn killed Rowle and you're worried we're losing points?" she said it with just the right amount of disbelief, the exact sort of thing someone would say if their classmate murdered someone and everyone was fussing over points.

"Selwyn didn't kill Rowle," said Hoop Boy. "He can't have because he was cowering—"

"I'm no nithing—"

"—cowering" Hoop Boy raised his voice, practically shouting, "by the professors, looking like a right sorry little piece of—"

"Incendio!" Mallory replied, aiming for Selwyn. The more unreasonable she appeared, the more likely they were to expel her. It didn't hurt that her target was an irredeemable pile of shite.
The spell didn't do anything but billow smoke out the end of her wand, and Colin started coughing. A few students giggled.

Suddenly, everyone froze. The giggling, muttering, and twitchy movements of the students ceased, and all attention turned to the door.

Mallory turned, and saw the glowering form of Professor Snape, leering down at her. His beady eyes were narrowed into slits of rage.

*Right, she thought to herself, I wanted him angry.*

Chapter End Notes

Nithing is very old slang for a wimp/coward.
"Miss Vaisey, Mr. Selwyn, and anyone else with their wands out," spat Snape. "You have all earned yourselves detention, for a week."

Snape stood at the doorway to the classroom, fists balled bloodless. Mallory could imagine his yellow nails digging into his palms and drawing blood. The man's face was no better — bright puce and mottled, eyes bugging out of his skull in breathless fury.

The first years, collectively, recoiled in horror. Whether their gasps were to do with the points loss or Snape's ugly mug, Mallory left up for interpretation. The students, in their shrinking away, were starting to take in the extent of the damage to the classroom, and with it, the magnitude of their folly. Desks had been overturned, books and papers taken out in anticipation of a tense and arduous class were now scattered across the dungeon floor. Two shelves had been knocked over in their entirety, with the aforementioned vitrified critters alternately rolling on or shattered on the stone. The chunks of wood torn out of Selwyn's desk by Cokebottles didn't bear mentioning. Selwyn's bloody nose and sliced arm deserved even less mentioning. The scorch marks, one of which was less a scorch mark and more a rend, bisecting Snape's desk and entirely upending the previously-boiling cauldron, would hopefully receive no mention, at all.

"But Professor!" said Cokebottles, "the mud— she says Selwyn killed Rowle!"

With that statement, at least a quarter of the Gryffindors in attendance turned to glare at Cokebottles. Her slip, Mallory suspected, would go completely unforgiven. The rest of the Gryffindors still had their wands half-raised, pointed more-or-less at Selwyn. Though, a couple of the more canny Gryffindors had taken it upon themselves to point their wands at Mallory. Snape's proclamation might've scared them, but not enough for any Gryffindor to abandon their chance to participate in a good row.

"No he didn't. He couldn't've!" argued Hoop Boy, before Snape could get a word in. He looked rumpled and aggravated. His robes were all askew from being shoved to the ground, and a few wisps of his hair were still smoking.

Snape, realizing what had happened, whirled on her. If his glare could kill, she suspected she'd be dead nine times over.

"You disrespectf—"

"It wasn't her fault!" exclaimed Colin, "Selwyn told everyone he tortured Mallory."

"Enough!" Snape shouted, spittle flying from his lip, "you will be silent, and you will behave!"

The students visibly deflated, shrinking away from Snape's towering rage. Even a few of the Gryffindors decided to put away their wands, entirely. Mallory suspected they were now realizing the fight was over, and that no one would start slinging more jinxes across the room. She thought a few of them looked disappointed about that fact.

"Mr. Creevey, twenty points from Gryffindor, for encouraging this madness," Snape then vanished the contents of the broken jars, scattered across the floor. With another wave of his wand, the desks uprighted themselves, and the shelves tipped back up against the walls.

Mallory was too busy seething to be impressed by Snape's magic. Colin hadn't done anything wrong! He hadn't fired off any spells, nor had he encouraged the fight.
"But—" Mallory started.

"Silence!" Snape thundered, practically stamping his foot.

Mallory quailed under his glare. There wasn't any point in arguing further. Dumbledore wouldn't let Snape expel her for being disrespectful. Speaking out wouldn't convince Snape to change his mind. She needed to come up with a better plan, one that wouldn't get her friends into any trouble.

The students were ordered to sit down, and did so at the pace of a glacier. There were many shared glances and meaningful looks, as students attempted to sort out the mess left by Mallory and her scheme. 'Selwyn killed who?' she saw one Gryffindor mouth another, while a second Gryffindor shook her head, discreetly gesturing towards Snape's looming form.

Snape, of course, wouldn't allow his class to spend the hour furtively gossiping and utterly distracted. Instead, he decided to punish them all further, by choosing new seats to separate the troublemakers.

Of course, that meant Colin wasn't seated next to her.

"Since you're so determined to be a snake, Mr. Creevey, you may sit next to young Mr. Selwyn," hissed Snape. The Gryffindors reacted predictably, the ones who still believed that Selwyn killed Rowle gaped at Snape with bugged-out eyes. Mallory, for her part, ducked her head. She'd thought it'd be worth it if she got expelled from Hogwarts, but she could see now that wasn't about to happen. In other words, she'd tormented Cokebottles and created a scene for nothing.

She glanced over at Colin, hoping a familiar face would make her feel less guilty, but he wasn't even looking in her direction. After class, she'd have to speak with him to make sure he was okay. Colin's shoulders were drawn in together. Tense. If he believed Selwyn murdered Rowle, then his discomfort came as no surprise. *Another mistake.*

Snape sat her next to Hoop Boy, behind Selwyn and Colin. He said that since the two of them couldn't keep their mouths shut about subjects they had no business speaking of, they should sit together. That way, Snape said, he could keep an eye on them. Mallory glanced over at Hoop Boy, who was rolling his eyes in exasperation, the moment Snape turned his back. She found no sympathy in his eyes, either. Hoop Boy crinkled his nose when he saw her looking, and scooted his chair further away. Selwyn snickered, and Colin flinched.

Mallory wanted to reach over her desk and strangle him.

Frowning at her workbench, Mallory eyed the scorch marks and mottled texture while she thought.

She overplayed her hand, and the plan failed. Built-up anger fizzled into confusion with both Hoop Boy and Montague, muddying the waters. Her plan to get herself expelled by creating a sufficiently dramatic fight had failed, utterly. Worse, her plan was sloppy. She let Montague and Harper build momentum, throw doubt all over the flames she was trying to fan. She'd floundered. This, more than the freak-outs and constant anxiety, had her concerned for her health. She wasn't dealing, potion unable to mask the ball of emotion eating at her attention. The fear and memories stole mental real estate, slowing her down when she needed her mind most.

Her plans, too, were half-arsed. Usually, Mallory would never use someone's death as a means of starting a fight. She could already feel the sick guilt pooling in the pit of her stomach, even through the dulling effect of Madame Pomfrey's potions. She didn't know why she'd done that. She usually didn't do that. *She wasn't that sort of person.*
Mallory wished she had a few days to come back to herself, get in her right mind. She didn't know what was wrong with her, but she felt off balance, like she'd been taken apart and put back together wrong.

She couldn't let that stop her, though. The killer wouldn't leave her alone because she was having a rough day.

"Today we will begin lab by reviewing the most basic applications of potion-making. Something not even you dunderheads are capable of spoiling."

Snape spoke like a student hadn't just died two days ago.

He spoke like a piece of garbage.

This was a tense classroom, she noted, sliding back into planning-mode in an effort to avoid the guilt. Half of the students afraid and angry, the rest she knew were confused. If she wanted to draw parallels to The Slytherin Initiation, where that crowd was bloodthirsty, this crowd was terrified.

She just had to figure out how she could use that terror, she realized. And while a part of her demanded she slow down and think this through, the rest of her was too scared of the murderer to stop. She brushed aside her doubts, deciding she needed to get the measure of her classmates.

After all, the more she knew about her enemies, the better she could predict their actions.

"Miss Vaisey, could you tell the class the most important step in creating any potion?"

Cokebottles shifted in her seat, and spoke, "preparation of ingredients." Her voice came out clear and stead, but Mallory could see a gray tinge draining the vitality of her typically-chocolately complexion.

"Correct," said Snape, sounding almost pleased.

Cokebottles, who's real name was Vaisey, was a refined young lady, polished and self possessed. School was her element, if Mallory had to guess.

Vaisey and her friend had the front row to themselves; everyone else was too afraid of Snape to risk sitting that close.

The other girl looked familiar. Oh, Mallory remembered her. She was the one that kept casting the cleaning charm during the Slytherin Initiation. Cleaning-charm girl's head bowed down. Meek. She meant to avoid both Snape's gaze, and the gaze of her friend. When she turned her head, Mallory saw her cheeks were pink with embarrassment or shame. And the girl kept worrying her robes between her fingers, a nervous habit. During the brief fight before Snape entered the room, Cleaning-charm girl hid under an overturned workbench. She was also the only Slytherin who hadn't participated in the Battle on the Pitch. Mallory guessed the girl was afraid of conflict.

Cokebottles—Vaisey for contrast, had her books neatly laid out on her workbench, ink bottle uncorked. She sat straight up, hand poised over a sheaf of parchment, quill at the ready.

But she also kept glancing back at the door, waiting for Harper to walk on through.

Upset about her friend, distracted, but she still had the presence of mind to prepare for class, Mallory realized. Cared enough about school that Rowle's apparent murder wasn't enough to dim her vigor. Mallory allowed that thought to balm the guilt. If Cokebottles could answer the teacher's questions and show interest in class, she couldn't be that upset.
She did find it curious that Cokebottles Vaisey participated in the Battle on the Pitch, though. If she was vying for the position of teacher's pet, she was doing a terrible job of it. Mallory considered that Vaisey cared more about earning the respect of her peers than she did her teachers. But the more she looked around, the more she noticed that Hogwarts students seemed to take school seriously.

Back in South Brent, expressing mastery of a subject or acting like class mattered was a major faux pas. She hadn't expected it to be much different here, at Hogwarts, no matter that the students were learning magic. After all, they learned math and science in South Brent, subjects almost as useful as (if not more useful than) magic. But few students thought the subjects they learned were valuable. Most of them were far more concerned with getting medals and the approval of their classmates. Mallory didn't blame them, and found a lot of their classwork to be impractical busywork, too. She'd hoped an institute of magical learning would be different, both for herself and for her classmates. The thought of learning magic! should, she'd decided, act as a perfect motivator to keep her paying attention in class.

In reality, Mallory found the couple classes she'd attended so far dead boring. She felt alternately lost, frustrated, bored, and confused. And somehow, during all the upheaval in the last few days, she'd missed how her classmates didn't seem bored, at all. In fact, most of them came to class with their quills ready, and paid rapt attention while the teacher spoke. The atmosphere in Snape's classroom, she was beginning to find, was the exception rather than the rule.

All of this had Mallory feeling uncomfortable, since learning 'magic' instead of boring 'social studies' was supposed to cure her propensity for daydreaming and procrastination. Further, Cokebottles Vaisey's attentive attitude in class couldn't be used as an indicator of brown-nosing, since almost all the students paid attention in class.

Snape reached the front of the classroom, twirling to face the class with a dramatic flare of his long billowing cloak. The sallow man glared at them each in turn, spidery fingers clenched around his wand.

There was a long moment of silence, with the class collectively holding its breath. The tension was high enough that it drew her attention away from plotting her own expulsion.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" his voice was a mere whisper, though everyone heard him.

She wondered what would happen if she back-chatted him. She's say, 'I think you're as clever as a clogged toilet.' Except that would only get her a detention. He'd maintain control of the narrative, because everyone was too afraid of him to do anything else.

Mallory idly wondered whether Farley, that terrifying prefect from The Slytherin Initiation, learned how to control a crowd from Snape. Her deputy, the male hooded figure who'd been too nervous to properly run the ceremony, certainly hadn't, that was for sure. She suspected he lacked the mentality, that desire to be in command of others. Farley had it in spades, as did Snape.

She could tell, because Snape was clearly enjoying himself, the same way Farley enjoyed lording over the Slytherins during the Initiation.

It showed in the way the man was acting, the flair of his cloak and the sinister stroking of his wand. He wanted them scared, maybe to serve some purpose, but predominantly because he enjoyed their fear. He was taking in the students' wide eyes of confusion and terror, letting it simmer before...

"I advise you all not to delude yourselves into believing I will permit slackers in my classroom,"
Snape's eyes glinted with thinly-concealed glee.

"Blishwick, Urquart, Fetcher! Move to the front row." he pointed at the Gryffindors sitting in the back of the classroom. All the Gryffindors had crowded into the back few rows, as far from Snape as they could get.

**Control.**

The three Gryffindors gathered their things and slumped to the front of the class. Mallory felt a pang of sympathy for them.

Snape was a man that demanded control. The flair of robes and menacing tone? It was meant to scare them into compliance. She also remembered how he sounded so *resigned* around Dumbledore. *A man used to being kicked around, took his power wherever he could get it.*

That would be his weak point, the direction she should aim her scheme. It would have to be loud, messy, and completely break his control over the classroom. He'd *hate* that. Moreover, it would have to be something Dumbledore wouldn't want to offer her a third chance over.

But Dumbledore was a harder nut to crack.

Mallory needed a plan that would result in her own expulsion, without hurting anyone else, or getting her friends in trouble. Simply earning herself a detention wouldn't be enough. She needed to be sent home.

"First, we will begin discussing the difference between chopping, dicing, mincing, and grinding ingredients. I'm aware this is *remedial* for most of you, but I have no intention of allowing students to use ignorance as an excuse for ineptitude."

*Dear lord, he was such a prick.*

Mallory glanced at Colin out the corner of her eye, but he still wasn't looking her way. Had he guessed she was lying to Cokebottles about Rowle's murderer? Or maybe he was angry she lost him points from Gryffindor.

"It is vital that the diced portions are evenly cut..."

She took her eyes off Colin and glanced to the side of the room. The preserved animals in their jars leered out at her, lidless eyes dead and vacant of expression.

Tensed, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the workbench. The potions kept her from feeling the kind of intense fear she felt the other night. She suspected without them, she'd throw up. Her stomach was churning and her hands curled into involuntary fists. A breath and she released the tension, rolling her shoulders to shake it off.

The cuts on her arms stung and her back ached.

There might be shards of glass stuck in the meaty backs of her arms, where she fell into the glass jars. She was still picking off bits of vitrified critters from her clothing.

In spite of that, Mallory was grateful Snape hadn't suggested she go the Hospital Wing. It was the first nice thing he'd done for her, however unwittingly he'd done it. Going there now meant going alone, while the majority of the school sat through class.

It'd be the perfect time for Rowle's murderer to attack.
Fuck, plotting to misbehave was so much harder with Snape in the classroom. He was scary and she could see any plot of her's having the impact of a wet noodle in the face of his control.

She didn't have to interrupt his class to leave, though. Mallory could just get up after class, grab her trunk, and walk out the front door of Hogwarts. Sure, she had no muggle money and no idea where she was in Scotland. But that never stopped her, before.

In fact, she'd done it before.

Granted, being penniless in Dartmoor with Danny wasn't the same. They spent four hours in a strange city, after an adventure gone wrong. That was no where near as dangerous as wandering through the wilds of Scotland with a murderer on the loose.

Getting expelled was the quickest and surest way to get home.

At any time in any place, the murderer might come for her. She might not even see it coming, given how little she knew about magic. Even if the murderer wasn't a Hogwarts student, she was still in danger. Any of her classmates could be paid or tricked into dragging her off school grounds. Heck, most of the Slytherins would do it for free, no threats necessary. Her hesitation here was stupid. She was more afraid of ticking off her professor than she was of being horribly murdered.

A piece of paper slipped under her arm, dragging her out of her thoughts. It had been passed from Colin to Hoop Boy, who then passed it on to her.

Mallory unfolded the note, mindful of Snape's gaze.

'Are you okay?'

She flipped it over and wrote a message in reply.

'I'll tell you later.'

The note went back to Hoop Boy, who huffed and rolled his eyes.

She elbowed the boy, glaring at him until he grudgingly tapped Colin's bench with his foot. Colin glanced back, then made to stretch, coincidentally passing his hand across Hoop Boy's workbench, right where the note lay.

Colin met her eyes and nodded, tucking the note up his sleeve.

"We will first practice dicing flobberworms," said Snape.

She crinkled her nose. He looked like a flobberworm, she thought, uncharitably.

Two flicks of Snape's wand and small knives for cutting ingredients were deposited on each student's workbench.

Colin was already starting on his flobberworm, but Mallory kept thinking. And it was the sort of thought she'd usually shy away from, uncomfortable.

Because what better way to get expelled than to start waving a knife around? She could pretend to want to hurt a student.

But if she pretended like she was going to— well, Snape said she was a danger to her classmates.
This would only validate his claim. And Dumbledore would be hard pressed to defend the *knife-wielding* muggleborn.

Bloody hell, did she really want to do this?

No, she decided.

This was the sort of thing a hero definitely didn't do, she thought, even if they had a good reason for it. In fact, it seemed like the sort of thing a villain would do, and Mallory didn't want to become a villain. Villains ended up in jail or languishing in the Phantom Zone. Moreover, she'd already participated in one stupid plot that hurt someone, today. She didn't want to accidentally hurt someone else. Even if Cokebottles Vaisey didn't seem too bothered, *Mallory* felt bothered by it.

But, argued another part of her brain, if she didn't do something now, she might keep putting it off. There'd be another excuse to delay taking action, and then another. And then she'd be dead. Because choosing to *wait* gave her enemy more time to kill her.

*But what if her first few ideas were stupid ones?* she wondered. Taking, say, one class to think through all her options likely wouldn't doom her. Spending all day and night dithering would. Plus, Colin would *hate* her for this. Her Hufflepuff friends would hate her, too. Sure, she'd never see them again, but it mattered to her what they thought. That knowledge weighed on her more than she wanted to admit.

Mallory took a breath. *Time to think of a better option.*

A sidelong glance confirmed that Colin was focusing on his dicing. She picked up her own and began chopping half-heartedly at her flobberworm.

Snape, on the other hand, was prowling around the classroom, snapping at students for uneven cuts and sloppy dicing. One of the Gryffindor boys felt sorry for his flobberworm and didn't want to chop it up.

She stopped cutting the flobberworm. Her prop was unnecessary, now. Snape was too busy ripping the boy a new one to care about Mallory.

Pen in hand, she scribbled in her open notebook, next to the gutted flobberworm on the workbench.

She couldn't write her notes in the usual way, because Hoop Boy or Snape might look over her shoulder. No one could know what she planned to do. So she resorted to the code Danny and Mallory used when writing their letters. They both worried that someone might realize Mallory and Danny broke the Statute of Secrecy, and obliviate him for it. Luckily, Mallory liked word-puzzles and cyphers, and had long-ago created a secret cypher and matching key. They used to use it to pass along secret messages in class, and now they sent their letters through the owlpost encoded the same way. She'd boasted to Danny that she could read it almost as fast as plain english, these days.

*Leave School. How? When?*

Expulsion was obvious, but what stopped her from walking out the front door? Her brain reminded her that she was in the Scottish wilderness with no idea how to get back to civilization.

But that wasn't exactly true.

There was the Hogwarts Express to consider. If she followed the tracks, she would eventually find civilization. It'd be a hike, but at the end of that road would be a police station. She didn't have
muggle money, but a constable would call her parents to fetch her. If she left right after classes ended, no one would notice until Monday morning. Once she actually spoke to her parents, they'd agree that Mallory definitely ought to quit Hogwarts.

On the page she noted it down:

'I. Tracks to Constables'

The important bit was getting to her parents before anyone noticed she was missing. She wasn't sure how the school would take her impromptu escape. Would they send people after her on brooms?

Yet, Mallory liked this plan much better than her other ones. It didn't make her look like a raving lunatic, for starters. Also, it didn't cut her off from returning to Hogwarts if the Aurors caught the murderer in two days. She didn't think they'd expel her for running away. If she kept attacking students, they'd expel her. She couldn't undo that, but she could undo this.

"Mr. Avery," hissed Snape, "in which potion is flobberworm mucus primarily used?"

"They're used to make flobberworm fritters?" said Hoop Boy, who's real name was apparently Mr. Avery.

Mallory had trouble remembering names, and her brain stuttered for a moment as she reminded herself that Cokebottles was Vaisey, and Hoop Boy was Avery.

A couple students had the audacity to giggle, and Snape spun on them, yellow teeth bared in rage. The giggling stopped, immediately.

Snape gave Avery one last fearsome glare, before wheeling around to attack the Gryffindor side. "Miss Weasley, do you know the primary use of flobberworm mucus?"

"I— er—" a red haired girl with freckles turned as red as her hair, "thickening potions?"

"Correct. Miss Vaisey, can you name another potion?"

"Wiggenweld potion, sir," came the girl's crisp reply.

"Correct, five points to Slytherin," Snape folded his hands behind his back, "does anyone know what the function of the wiggenweld potion?"

Mallory didn't know the answers to any of these questions, but quite a few Slytherins did.

Selwyn, Vaisey, and Montague all raised their hands.

"Mr. Montague?"

"It wakes 'em from the draught of the living death."

"Another five points to Slytherin," said Snape. He smiled when the Gryffindors recoiled in outrage. A few of them were furious, Weasley looked like she wanted to strangle the professor with her bare hands. Mallory empathized with her. Snape had awarded Weasley no points when she answered him correctly, and added insult to injury by by heaping points on the Slytherins. Unlike Weasley, though, Mallory just felt tired. It was too early to be certain, but she hoped Snape's class wouldn't be an indication of her performance in future classes. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing. Cokebottles— Vaisey knew all about wiggenstuff potions and flobberworms. The girl even
knew how to cast the cutting charm.

She had to wonder whether she was cut out for this, if she ended up staying at Hogwarts.

The other muggleborns were in the same boat as Mallory, but that didn't do much to console her. Complaining about the unfairness of their situation didn't make it any better. None of her excuses leveled the playing field. When Selwyn or Harper came spoiling for a fight, they'd pummel her. They wouldn't go easy on Mallory, just because she was ignorant.

It made her wonder if she could ever compete against them.

She also wondered whether she was choosing to leave out of fear of looking stupid. Failing all her classes would be infinitely worse than choosing to leave. If Mallory was still in South Brent and the murder happened at her old primary school, would she demand her parents take out of school? Would she have trusted the adults, then, to protect her?

The thoughts swirled around her head as Potions Class dragged on.

Colin and Mallory hung back, falling to the rear of their class. They'd all packed up and were heading out the door, on their way from Potions class to Prep, their study period.

Unfortunately, Snape would be supervising them today. That meant they wouldn't be getting any help from said professor, only criticism.

Trailing after the main group of first years, Mallory briefly considered sneaking away while everyone walked to class, but reconsidered. Snape would notice if she went missing, and would likely send someone to look for her. A student had just been murdered, after all.

"Are you alright?" asked Colin, breaking the silence. He'd waited at the door to make sure they left together, but kept his peace. He'd seemed unsure of what to say.

"I'm okay," Mallory said, though it struck her as she said it, that if Colin believed that Mallory believed Selwyn murdered Rowle, then—

Then it would be strange for her not to be upset.

"I mean, I'm upset," corrected Mallory, hastily. *Not enough time to match requisite emotion and body language to her words, so it didn't sound very genuine.*

He studied her face, contemplative, "you're planning something."

"Sort of?" she squirmed, uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

"You're planning on doing something like what you did before, with that fight."

"I'm not—"

"No, no I know that look," Colin cut her off, "I'm starting to figure out how you work. This is your 'I'm about to do something bad' look."

"I'm not planning on doing anything bad," her tone was indignant, and she had to stop herself from crossing her arms across her chest. *Too defensive.*

Colin grabbed her shoulder and squeezed it. "If you *are*, though—"
At that moment came an unwelcome surprise, which was saying something. Mallory wanted almost any interruption. Except this one.

Cokebott—Vaisey stood in front of them, blocking their path. She was gripping Montague's upper arm, dragging him along.

"Is she really dead?" spoke Vaisey, voice shaking like she might start crying at any second. "He still won't say." The girl's cokebottle glasses glinting in the candlelight.

Mallory opened her mouth, at a loss for words. It didn't sit well, Vaisey finding out about her friend's death, like this. She could imagine Vaisey going to class this morning, friend missing with no explanation why, only to find out in the worst possible way that Rowle had been murdered. Mallory blamed herself.

Avery, who'd been trailing a ways behind them, slowed his pace, presumably to listen in.

"I saw it," said Mallory, voice lacking any inflection, unable to meet Vaisey's eyes.

"And Selwyn was the one who did it?" the girl whispered, face awash in grief and anger.

_Cokebottles just lost her friend_, Mallory thought, the part of her mind cringing in horror at the mess she'd made, continued on, vicious, _imagine how you'd feel, if Danny died and_ — she flinched away, unable to complete the thought, even in her own mind.

Mallory sucked in a deep breath, mentally fortifying herself, "no. I— I might've been confused about that part." She owed it to Vaisey to be a little honest.

"Confused? How can you be confused about it?"

"A lot happened. Everything's jumbled—" Mallory got cut off, mid-platitude.

"Jumbled?" hissed Vaisey, "how's it jumbled? I don't understand."

"I—" she stuttered, brain skipping and halting, "I was really scared, and he was saying all those things, and I thought—"

"So you didn't see him kill Rowle?" choked Vaisey, mouth opening in stunned disbelief, "what's wrong with you?"

Mallory shook her head, unable to answer, eyes on the floor.

Colin dropped his hand from her shoulder like it was on fire, and Vaisey recoiled as if she'd been slapped.

"What— how could you do that?"

"Because I— if he killed her, he might come after the rest of us, too," Mallory lied, feeling helpless and twisted up, "I thought if I called attention to it, if everyone knew, then he wouldn't be able to kill us."

She meant to suck it up and tell the truth, take her licks like she deserved. _But the look on Vaisey's face_ — Heck, the look on _Colin's face_. She couldn't do it. She didn't want Colin to keep looking at her like that.

"Wow," added Avery, looking between her and Vaisey, "you're in both Vaisey's and Selwyn's black book, now. Good job, mudblood." His tone was dry and sardonic.
"Why would you—" Colin started.

"Because he made all kinds of threats, Colin," her tone was pleading. "That's why—"

Avery interrupted her, "you know, Selwyn's not going to forgive you. He didn't kill Rowle, I saw him the whole time. But that doesn't mean he isn't dangerous. You lot don't know him, but I do. He's not right in the head."

"Thanks," said Colin, unappreciative of the sudden appearance of the peanut gallery, "but we've caught on, already. He doesn't hide his crazy well."

"He's a young Hannibal Lecter in training," Mallory said, shooting a sidelong glance at Colin. It should be an inside joke, a small laugh to lighten the mood.

He gave her a solemn look of disappointment, instead of a sly grin. Mallory's heart sank.

"Who's Hannibal Lecter?" asked Avery.

"I— er, it's a muggle thing," said Mallory.

Avery's interest waned the moment she said the word muggle.

Montague, who'd been silent up until now, spoke, "Rowle's dead 'cause of you, then. You three en't out there on accident. You was taken 'cause you're a mudblood. She en't done nothin' to deserve it."

Mallory's face crumpled. This whole situation, the guilt gnawed at her — and now this? She didn't know what to say to that. She didn't like Rowle. In fact, Mallory enjoyed punching the girl in the nose. But she knew Rowle didn't deserve to die. Mallory thought that if she'd just been smarter, better, she would've realized sooner that something was wrong. Maybe if she'd paid attention during the summer and read her textbooks closely, she could've recognized the spells used, she thought. There must've been something she could have done.

"I don't think—" Colin started only to be interrupted again.

"Did either of you read the paper this morning?" asked Avery. He wasn't talking to Mallory or Colin. He was addressing the two non-muggleborn students. And Mallory had enough brainpower free to feel irritated by that.

"No," said Montague, shaking his head.

Vaisey nodded, then her eyes widened in horror, "you don't think—"

Avery turned to Mallory, "there were three of you taken, right?"

"Harper, Rowle, and me, yeah."

"Then Rowle can't be dead because of her," he said to Montague. "Think about it. No one would go through all that effort to kill one mudblood and accidentally kill a pureblood, instead."

"You're—" Colin folded his arms, "that's not nice. You shouldn't call us that."

"Shut up," said Montague, without any heat.

"I'm telling you, I'm right," Avery spoke over them. "She might beray our house, but no one's going to kill her for it. This was about Rowle's family, I'd wager ten galleons on it."
"We're not betting on my friend's death!" hissed Vaisey.

"Merlin! It's just an expression. I'm not really going to make a bet."

"You shouldn't even joke—"

"There's a stick up your arse, Vaisey, and you should work on—"

"Shut it!" shouted Montague, over Avery's insult.

Mallory looked back and forth between them, eyes wide, confused.

"If it en't Hopkins, then why'd you start on the papers?" Montague asked Avery, taking advantage of the momentary silence, "there's nuffin' in the papers 'bout Rowle. She'd never shut up about it, if there was."

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Avery, sounding quite smug, "it's the Cracklewood Carver."

Vaisey's eyes widened in realization, face going white as milk, "the Cracklewood Carver? But, but —" she mumbled her words, like she didn't want to say them aloud.

"The Cracklewood..." Mallory trailed off, blood going cold.

A branch cracked behind them, and they all froze.

"It makes sense, right?" Avery asked, "you read the article, same as I did."

"No, no it can't be," Vaisey said, squeezing the straps on her book bag. Now that she'd started talking, she couldn't seem to stop, "they didn't say anything in — it would've been in the Prophet this morning, it would've — oh, Merlin, — the last article, they said that he strikes every seven years, and it's been seven— and he always takes three kids and — oh Merlin," her voice hitched, "all three of you went missing."

Montague grimaced, "I heard it does.. things to the bodies."

There was a wet sound, like stones on something slick and—

Vaisey glanced at Mallory, looking for confirmation. But Mallory didn't know what to do. Vaisey's worst nightmare is coming to life in front of my eyes, and I can't—

"It was the Carver," Vaisey whispered, taking Mallory's reaction as confirmation. "You saw what —"

Mallory nodded, trying to focus on breathing in and out, because thinking would make it worse.

Vaisey's knuckles went to her mouth, and Mallory could see tears in the corners of her eyes.

Fuck.

"We should've—" the crying girl swallowed. "My parents were even talking about the Carver a few days ago. But I didn't— He strikes every seven years and I didn't even think—"

Mallory saw in Vaisey, then, a mirror of herself. They both blamed themselves for Rowle's death, suspecting that they, with their own unique skills and experience, could've done more. Mallory wasn't interested in blaming Vaisey, though. She couldn't change Vaisey, only herself.
Avery rolled his eyes, "and what would you've done, exactly?"

"Anything! I would've looked for her, I would've—" Vaisey's eyes grew wide. "Wait."

"What?" asked Montague, who'd been watching the exchange with rapt attention and a slacked jaw.

"Wait," repeated Vaisey, an emotion like hope carrying over into her tone, "does everyone know the Carver strikes every seven years?"

Avery nodded.

"Then it can't be the Carver," said Vaisey, sighing in relief, "don't you see? It's the perfect way to hide a murder."

Avery snorted, "that's too obvious. It's the first thing anyone's going to think. A real murderer would never use the Carver as a scapegoat."

"No one will think of it. Not everyone's a Slytherin," said Vaisey.

Mallory glanced at Colin, who had his arms folded across his chest. He didn't even acknowledge her.

"But that's what a Slytherin would think!" argued Vaisey. "They'd think that because everyone will think no one would be that stupid, that it's the perfect plan."

Vaisey wanted any excuse to believe she wasn't living her worst nightmare. Mallory could understand why. If your best friend had to die, you'd want their death to be painless and quick. No one wanted the people they cared for to suffer.

Mallory spoke up, attempting to sound comforting, "It was over in a second. Quick," she swallowed, "I'm sorry." She didn't really believe that. She suspected the Carver took his time killing Rowle, and obliviated Harper and Mallory, for whatever reason.

Vaisey had a hitch in her breath, sucking in deep gulps of air. She'd start sobbing any second now. Being nice had only bolloxed it up, worse. Mallory didn't know what to do.

Avery shook his head and sighed, "blub all you like, Vaisey, but it won't make one whit of a difference. We won't be able to solve her murder."

Mallory wanted to kick him.

Colin spoke, then, redirecting the flow of the conversation, "the Carver— you said it has more than one victim?" He ignored Avery, who was being worse than useless.

"Yes," said Vaisey, sniffling and wiping her eyes, "three, each time."

"Then maybe we're all still in danger," Mallory said, building on of Colin's line of thought. The Carver, if that's who they were dealing with, murdered three kids every seven years. But this time, two got away.

"You, maybe," Vaisey narrowed her eyes, a hard anger in her tone, "and I hope it gets you." Her cheeks were pink and her fists were clenched at her sides.

Vaisey didn't forgive Mallory for what happened in the potions classroom, she could tell.

"No," said Avery, "that doesn't make sense. The Carver— murderer, whoever, they killed Rowle,
not the mudblood. If this is about blood, then the *purebloods* are the ones in danger."

Mallory blinked, confused. Had Avery changed his mind about the identity of Rowle's killer? "Er — then, why take me and Harper?"

"Because..." Avery frowned, "as a distraction? To draw everyone's attention from the real target."

"Harper's still in trouble, then," said Montague, nervous. "We has to solve it."

"You don't know that," said Avery, "you don't even know if it's the Carver."

"If it en't the Carver," said Montague, "then we only know that a pureblood Slytherin was murdered at Hogwarts, *and I reckon we should care about that.*"

Avery frowned, adjusting the strap on his backpack.

The rest of the group had gone on ahead to the library, and Mallory was starting to get antsy. Anyone who could disarm three first years could just as easily disable five of them.

"If someone is out to get us, are we safe walking around the hallways by ourselves?" Mallory asked. She said it like a question, but she meant it more as a statement of fact.

Montague and Avery looked around, alert. It occurred to Mallory that those two were both purebloods, and thought someone was targeting them.

She could feel a great deal of sympathy for that kind of fear, right now.

"I—" Avery frowned, trailing off, "I think I might know a way we can find out what's going on."

Vaisey's head whipped around, glaring at him, "you know how to find out who killed her?"

"No," Avery hesitated, "but I might be able to tell if more students will die."

Four confused faces stared at him.

"Meet me after lunch in the common room," said Avery, to Montague and Vaisey. "I need to send a letter, first."

Which meant Mallory would be postponing leaving until after lunch. A part of her mind reared up in alarm. *You're putting it off.* But another part said information was valuable, and that the murderer likely wouldn't kill her while she was in class.

The cautious part of her felt a spike of visceral terror. *She was deluding herself.*

During the Slytherin Initiation, she thought, Mallory had been surrounded by seventh years, second years, and the terrifying Gemma Farley.

None of them managed to save Rowle.

The murderer separated them, then killed her.

She couldn't forget that. Every second she delayed, she was putting herself at risk. Eventually, Mallory's luck would run out.

But, she thought, if Avery had some way of telling the future, then she could find out if another student will die.
Then she'd know if the killer was after her.

Colin kept ignoring her.

They trudged up a flight of stairs, toward the library and prep.

"Colin," Mallory started, but Colin only walked faster.

She picked up her pace, in turn. Torches flickered at regular intervals between the windows as she walked quickly behind him.

"Colin!" Mallory called out, gasping for air. He was moving too fast and Mallory was already hurting from her tangle with the shelves.

Colin ignored her.

"Please," Mallory said, emotion coloring her words. "Just tell me what's wrong!"

He didn't stop until they'd almost caught up with the group. Their classmates were standing in the doorway, enduring another one of Snape's lectures on appropriate library behavior. Wrapped up in his own performance, he didn't even notice the stragglers.

It was only then that Colin turned around, fixing her with a cold glare. She wilted a bit under that stare.

"That was really mean, Mallory," he said, lips downturned and weary. "You lied to her."

"I—" she stuttered. "I didn't—"

Something flickered in his gaze, tone going hard and angry, "if you even thought for a second that Selwyn was the murderer, you wouldn't have gone to class. And I know the Aurors spoke to you. If you suspected Selwyn, you would've told the Aurors, and then Selwyn wouldn't have been in class."

"Then I wouldn't have worried about going to class," she corrected, a sort of last-stand desperate lie.

"Stop lying," Colin looked sad, a bit disappointed, even, "I know you lied about it."

"No you don't!"

"You did the face thing. The—" he broke off, clapping his hands to his face and making an exaggerated expression of horror, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

"I did not." Mallory scowled at him, crossing her arms.

"You did," he said, "and you got me paying attention to faces, so I saw how long it took you to make the scared face. You did it after you told everyone he did it. You said words, and then you made the face! And I kept thinking that was odd until I finally figured it out, that you were acting."

"I— I'm sorry," Mallory said in a small voice, "I'm really sorry." The pressure of his gaze made her want to squirm and shrivel up into a ball.

"Why?" Colin asked, emotion injected into the word. "Why would you accuse that kid of murder?"
"I know," she spoke past the lump in her throat, "I wasn't thinking—"

"You weren't thinking," he echoed, incredulous.

"You can punch me in the nose, if that'll help," she meant it, too. A good sock in the nose could solve any number of issues, she'd found.

"No, Mallory, that's not going to help." Colin looked away, huffing out a breath of air.

"Then I—I don't know how to fix this," her voice was quieter now that they were closer to Snape and the group. She didn't know what to do.

Colin might not want to be her friend, anymore.

"I'm sorry, too," said Colin, letting out a huff of air, "I didn't push you to talk about this."

"What?" she frowned, confused. "No, you can't blame yourself." What the heck had he done? It wasn't his job to figure out what she was thinking.

"It's okay," said Colin. "I'll help. I want to help, but you can't do things like that, anymore."

She gaped at him, confused. She didn't know what he was trying to say, trying to express. She'd thought she had Colin pegged, that she knew what made him tick. But this wasn't what she expected.

"What— what do you want to help with?"

"The girl with the glasses— she said—" Colin broke off. "The Cracklewood Carver did something to Rowle's body, and it messed with your head. But— you're not sure it was the Carver? And you think someone's trying to kill you? I can't help if I don't know what's going on."

"I don't think you can do anything," Mallory said, fingers twitching at her sides.

"You've been attacked, and you're tired, hurt, distracted— I'm not." He took a step forward, "I know I said I wouldn't ask, but what happened the other night's messing with you, and if you can talk about it, it might help."

Mallory's model of Colin would react poorly to the truth of her so-called adventure. He'd be scared, and rightfully so. Colin admired Harry Potter, a child celebrity of sorts. She'd thought before that this was because he was famous, and Colin wanted to be famous, too. Her model of Colin wanted a girl best friend, because Potter had a girl best friend. He wanted a share of the glory, a moment in the spotlight. He wanted to ride to school in a flying car and crash into the Whomping Willow. Then everyone would be writing about him in the paper.

But after their conversation this morning, she wondered if she'd pegged him wrong.

They both talked about how eleven year olds could do heroic deeds, this morning. He wanted to help students avoid being picked on, help them with homework. That didn't fit with her model of Colin-the-Glory-Seeker, neither did this.

"Why do you like Harry Potter?" Mallory asked, blunt.

Colin startled, looking confused, "what? Mallory—"

"It's important," she drew up a wan smile, "humour me?"
"Okay," he frowned, "he defeated the Dark Lord when he was just a baby. And then—"

"You want to be a hero?" she interrupted.

"Of course," Colin said, taken aback, "what else would I do with magic?"

He said it like he'd scooped the words right out of her head.

She had a lump in her throat. Mallory blinked furiously for a moment, because she'd never been so wrong before in her life. She could have a team, just like she always wanted. And this was the worst possible moment to realize this, because she'd be leaving Hogwarts, soon. She didn't want to leave Hogwarts, not if it meant giving up friends like Colin.

"Okay," Mallory swallowed, "I'll tell you. Just give me a moment?"

Mallory dug into her pocket and pulled out a sticky vial. The calming potion. If she was going to talk about the forest, she'd need it.

Two familiar faces were breaking away from the group by Snape, heading their way. Mallory startled when she recognized them.

Felix and Kit walked towards them, Felix with a stack of books in his arms.

Kit skipped right over to Mallory and wrapped her arms around her. Mallory tensed, flinching back. Her arms stung where Kit's hands brushed over the cuts.

She drew back. "Are you alright?"

"Sure" Mallory nodded, "you brushed against a cut, it's fine."

Kit stared, mouth downturned at the edges, eyes full with some sort of emotion that Mallory couldn't put a name to—searching? Curiosity, maybe?

"You smell like something died," said Kit.

"There was an accident," Mallory said, "you don't want to know."

"Is that blood?" asked Felix. He put down his books and started prodding her arms with his wand.

"It's just the backs of my arms. Don't worry about it."

"Everyone's saying that someone died," said Felix, "and that another student tried to kill you?"

"I— er," wait, did no one tell the Gryffindors that she'd made it up about Selwyn?

"I— er," wait, did no one tell the Gryffindors that she'd made it up about Selwyn?

"Come on, leave her alone," said Kit.

"Come on, look up. It attacked when we weren't looking, look at me!"

Kit snapped her fingers in front of Mallory's nose.

For a moment, just a moment, Mallory forgot that she was in the hallway in Hogwarts, and not lost in the Forbidden Forest.

"Don't do that," said Felix. "You're not supposed to spook traumatized people. I read it in—"
"Lo Felix. Alright?" Colin spoke over whatever Felix was about to say.

She was desperately glad Colin changed the subject, and wasn't drawing attention to her little lapse.

Felix nodded slowly, apparently catching on, "I'm good. Have you started on the homework, yet?"

"No," Colin shook his head. "Why?"

Felix shrugged, "I thought we could do it in prep. We're supposed to practice wand movements."

Kit frowned, "we both got it, and so did Colin—"

"I know," Felix could've been made out of wood, for all that he was expressing.

Oh. Felix wanted to make sure Mallory got to practice the wand movements, if she was reading his intentions correctly. Hard to be sure. Felix confused her.

"Okay," Mallory said, "that sounds helpful."

Felix's face twitched in what might've been a shy smile.

She was right.

Mallory felt warm inside. It felt like when Colin tried to cheer her up in the Hospital Wing, when all he knew how to do was babble, and how Kit snapped her fingers in front of Mallory's face when she was sucked back there. They all cared about her. Before now, if someone asked how long it'd take for Mallory to make friends, she'd guess weeks, not days.

Kit tugged her hand, which still contained the vial of calming potion. "What's that?"

"I need to take it," Mallory said, before uncorking the vial and drinking it down.

"You did get that potion from the nurse," said Felix, as though he was daring her to say differently.

"Yeah, it's coz I—" Mallory trailed off, "I keep getting freaked out because everyone's talking about what happened, and then it reminds me what happened. It's calming potion."

"I don't want to make you talk about what happened, but I need to know why you did it," said Colin.

"Wait, there's some truth to the rumors? Did someone really die?" Kit's eyes went as wide as saucers.

"It's not that I—" Mallory swallowed, "I didn't think, back in potions. I never meant to hurt Vaisey, I just— someone's trying to kill me, Colin."

"What's going on?" asked Kit, worrying her lip. "Someone's really trying to kill you?"

"I—" Mallory broke off as Vaisey, Montague, and Avery came in sight.

The three Slytherins were just now catching up to the group. Cokebottles Vaisey gave Mallory a vicious glare as she passed the muggleborns.

Mallory lowered her voice, "a couple kids and me were kidnapped, and one of us died."

"What?" hissed Kit.
"Snape said I wasn't supposed to talk about it," Mallory glanced toward where Snape was still talking, "but I don't really care."

"Will talking about it disrupt the investigation?" asked Felix, adjusting his glasses.

"No," Mallory shook her head, "Snape just doesn't want us gossiping about it."

Kit reached out and squeezed Mallory's shoulder, "if you don't want to talk about it——"

"I did something bad," Mallory blinked, eyes feeling suspiciously moist, "and I'm not sure if you can make any of it better, but I do want you to know why I did it."

Snape finally whirled on them, "you will be silent! I won't have disrespect from snot-nosed children. If you continue to speak you'll serve more detentions!"

The four muggleborns went silent, glancing at one another in expressions of exasperation. In spite of Colin's disagreement with Mallory, they were still united in their dislike of Snape.

Snape, who still kept talking.

"I will determine whether you need more reference materials. You will not go into the library to avoid work. And I will be checking to be sure you're studying."

Mallory looked over at Colin, and he met her gaze. She rolled her eyes and made face. His lips twitched upwards, and she took that as a good sign.

With that final ominous pronouncement, the first years were lead into the library and then through a door into the study room.

All first years had prep together, which meant Mallory, Colin, Felix, and Kit were free to sit together.

The study room was a classroom with a stone floor and stone walls. A teacher's desk stood at the front, the right wall lined with tall windows that let in bright sunlight. A number of wooden tables were scattered around the room for students to sit, six to a table. The walls, of course, were lined in bookshelves, the overflow from the library.

Colin and Mallory guided the two Hufflepuffs to a table far from the Professor's desk.

Felix took out his books, and soon a disproportionate portion of their table was covered in notebooks and textbooks. Kit gave Mallory a long-suffered look of irritation, and Mallory shrugged. She didn't get Felix any more than the next person. Waiting for him to finish, she glanced around the rest of the study hall.

Their group garnered some attention, and not because they crossed the House divide. Already, word of Rowle's death and Mallory's involvement was spreading, heads turning, students trying and failing not to stare.

A Ravenclaw boy pulled Montague aside, gesturing sharply. Huh, well that dashed Mallory's theory that Montague didn't have any friends besides Harper. Vaisey, likewise, slumped next to a raggedy-looking Hufflepuff girl, who threw her arms around her and only spared her a moment to turn around and glare at Mallory.

"Snape's going to be really upset." Mallory muttered.
"Why?" asked Kit.

"Vaisey— the one with the Cokebottle glasses— she's telling everyone what happened and—" Mallory shook her head. Fuck, it didn't matter. She was leaving.

"Oh, you told her?"

"That Rowle was dead, nothing else." She didn't want her new friends to think that she told a stranger her life-shattering news before them.

"Right," said Felix, "what did happen?"

Snape chose that moment to interrupt.

"All of you will sit down. Now," Snape said, gliding to the front of the classroom to plant himself behind his desk.

At Snape's words, silence reigned.

The rest of the first years slowly slumped towards their desks, splitting into groups.

A blonde-haired Ravenclaw and the Weasley girl were sitting alone in the front, and everyone was giving them a wide berth. Mallory's table earned the same treatment. Whether it was because no one wanted to sit near the muggleborns, or because of the events in potions, Mallory didn't know.

Felix opened a textbook and started reading, adjusting the glasses up on his nose every time they started sliding down. He had two notebooks open in front of him. One already had pages of notes.

His pencil scratched across his notebook.

It took Mallory a moment to realize he was re-writing the notes from the old notebook into the new one, using a ruler to underline words. The boy had his pencil sharpened to a near surgical point, with a neat little eraser kept next to it.

She considered that Felix might be a tad obsessive. No one ought to care that much about notes.

Kit tapped lightly on the desk and Mallory looked up. A note was passed under her nose.

What happened? What did you do?

Mallory flipped it over and wrote—

Someone wants to kill me because I'm at Hogwarts, so I tried to get myself expelled in Potions.

Kit raised her eyebrows, and Colin snatched the note out of her hand to read it. He helpfully added an addendum to her note.

...by accusing this kid of murdering Rowle, when she knew he didn't.

And then passed that back to Kit. But before she could read it, Mallory snatched it back and crossed out this kid and replaced it with—

Evil Dead-eyed looking kid who hit Felix during the Battle on the Pitch

Kit read the note before Mallory could editorialize it more. Their actions even caught Felix's attention, and Kit handed over the note for him to read.
Where it was promptly snatched out of his hand by the vile and most loathsome Snape. He glanced over it for a moment before curling his lip in derision.

"I remember I explicitly stated that you weren't to speak of it, Miss Hopkins."

"Professor Snape," said Kit, "Felix asked Mallory for a piece of parchme—"

"Do you think I don't see what's going on in my own classroom, under my very nose?" Snape interrupted her.

Mallory had to credit Kit with an excellent poker face. Felix, on the other hand, turned redder than a hot tomato.

"No, sir." said Kit.

"This paper is written on." he hissed. "You're passing notes in my class."

"The back side isn't written on, yet." said Kit, helpfully. She was repressing a grin, struggling to keep her face straight, but Mallory could tell she wasn't fooling anyone.

"15 points from Hufflepuff, each!" Snape said, before crumpling the note in his hand and swirling off to torment some other poor students.

Colin, who'd been watching Kit in shock, widened his eyes comically, as if to ask why did you do that?

Kit replied by sticking her tongue out and grinning. Colin dropped his head onto the desk and let out a little groan in response.

They looked over at Felix, who was still frozen in his seat, ears red and face splotchy.

Mallory pointed at him and made a thumbs up, tilting her head a little. Are you ok?

Felix rolled his eyes, picking his pencil back up to—

"Mr. Underwood." Oh, bollocks. He was back. The miserable bastard came back, because he hadn't made them miserable enough.

"Need I remind you that you're a wizard? Wizards write with quills." Snape vanished all the pencils, pens, and erasers scattered across the muggleborn table. "10 points from Gryffindor, and another 20 from Hufflepuff, for being unprepared for class."

Kit, Felix, and Colin all looked at Mallory.

"Miss Hopkins," said Snape, "I believe I already informed you to bring a quill to class. At this point, you're flagrantly flouting the rules. You'll be serving another detention."

Mallory had enough. She was about to scream at him, mouth opening as insults fought themselves in her mind, all of them itching to be spewed at once.

But then—

"Severus!" yelled an adult voice from the door.

Mallory and her friends turned to look, and saw the librarian standing in the doorway, covered head to toe in bright green slime.
"It's Peeves," said the librarian, breathless and frazzled, "he's taken all the portraits from the Great Hall, and he's dropping them down the Grand Staircase!"

Snape moved with a whirl of his robes, stalking to the door. He only paused to spin around as an afterthought.

"You will all be silent and **study** while I'm gone."

Naturally, the moment he left earshot, the entire classroom erupted into noise.

Felix was livid, "I can't believe the gall of that— that teacher!"

"He's worse than a leaky arsehole." stated Mallory, nodding in solidarity.

"He's going to get everyone in Hufflepuff to hate us," said Kit, shaking her head. "It's already bad enough as it is without him sticking his nose in it."

Mallory blinked, surprised. "The other Hufflepuffs aren't being friendly?" Odd, because she heard around that Hufflepuffs were above all else, **nice**.

"Oh, no." Kit lowered her voice. "Macy Gibbon won't even lower herself to speak to me, and the rest follow her lead."

Mallory crinkled her nose. "Which one's she?"

"No, no." Kit shook her head firmly, "don't look. Then she'll know I was talking about her and she'll feel all kinds of pleased."

"I'm rubbish with a quill." Colin said. "It gets ink everywhere."

"I wanted to rewrite my notes. They're too messy," Felix slumped in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. "Now what'll I do with the time?"

Kit groaned and rolled her eyes, "think he'll be gone for a while?"

"Peeves is a poltergeist," said Felix, "he's trouble, so I suspect so."

A grin flitted across Kit's face, and she rummaged through her backpack. A moment later, Kit pulled her hand out, clutching a bundle wrapped in napkins. Grease seeped through the fabric, darkening it. Strips of bacon and sausages were revealed, much to the delight of the four muggleborns. The meat was a bit squashed from the trip to the library, but no one cared.

Picking up the meaty bits with one hand, Kit eyed Mallory while she nibbled her food. "I want to know what happened to you."

Felix perked up at that, scooting his chair forward. "So do I."

"We don't have to talk about it now," said Colin, glancing over at Kit. "I mean, if she's really—"

Kit shrugged, chewing on a bite of pilfered breakfast while keeping her eyes on her friends.

"I took the calming potion," Mallory said. "It should be working by now. I won't freak out again." Felix spoke, "what happened?"

Mallory hesitated, shifting in her seat. Her robes were stuck to her body from those jars of fluid.
The sensation reminded her uncomfortably of the forest.

Distraction. Physical discomfort didn't cause her hesitation. They did.

These were her friends, but they weren't her— she frowned.

What was closer than a friend but not quite family? Someone she could rely on when things broke down. Teammate fit, in the sense that she and Danny worked together to accomplish goals. But the word team didn't imply the easy trust she and Danny shared. Partners worked, but didn't allow for growth beyond two people.

It had been an idea floating around in the back of Mallory's mind for quite some time, now. Mallory knew she worked better with Danny. She took that to mean she worked better in a group, in general. But she didn't know these three well enough to anticipate how they'd react. Kit dove into battle to save Felix, but Mallory didn't know why she did it.

"Did you two know each other before Hogwarts?" Mallory asked Kit and Felix.

"I'm not following," said Colin.

"Humour me."

"You keep saying that," Colin groaned, "what are you up to, now?"

"No, we met on the train," Kit glanced between them, and then said, "are you up to something?"

Her tone held idle curiosity and not much more.

_I want to invite you to join my secret club to become powerful (Danny) and do heroic deeds (Mallory.)_

Then again, if they proved to be untrustworthy—

"I— no." Mallory shook her head. "I'm thinking."

"You're doing an awful lot of that." said Colin. "You're thinking about heroes, tough choices, why I like Harry Potter, and whether or not Felix and Kit knew each other before Hogwarts. You're trying to figure out how to get expelled out of Hogwarts—"

"Why on earth do you want to get expelled?" Felix gaped.

"Please?" Mallory said, injecting a bit of emotion into her voice. "I need a moment."

Colin's expression shifted, a touch of softness changing the shape of his eyes.

"Okay, take your time," Kit said, shrugging. Felix gave Mallory a curt nod.

_Mental review_, she was leaving Hogwarts, but she wanted to stay in touch with the friends she made here. She especially wanted to keep in touch if they could become a superhero team.

_What better way to test them than this?_

She took a breath, shaking her head. "Sorry. Okay, I'll explain what happened."

"You sure?" asked Colin.
"Sure, but— er, I'm not sure if telling you is dangerous. I think someone's trying to kill me, because I'm the first muggleborn in Slytherin. I was threatened. If you help, you might be targeted, too. I don't want to drag you into it."

Kit cocked her head to one side, lips pursed.

"A student was murdered," said Felix. "If we have the means to help and we don't, that'd be unethical." His voice was low, as though he was thinking aloud.

"Of course we'll help," said Colin. As if that were the obvious thing to do. Quite suddenly there was a lump in her throat. Again.

Okay, yeah, Colin was definitely secret-superhero-team material. She'd just have to hope he and Danny got along.

Mallory turned to Kit, "just because those two agreed doesn't mean you have to."

"This is the most interesting thing to happen in my entire life," Kit blinked. "Dangerous, yeah, but interesting. I'm in."

"Okay." Well then, that was a start.
Chapter Notes

Previously: Mallory and the rest of the Slytherin first years were subject to a Slytherin Initiation Ceremony. Only, something went terribly wrong. Mallory Hopkins, Darla Rowle, and Leland Harper were kidnapped by an unknown adversary. Then their kidnapper, for unknown reasons, proceeded to kill Rowle.

Mallory, still believing herself to be in danger from the attacker, started a fight in potions class in an ill-advised attempt to get herself expelled. Now, she and her friends, Colin Creevey, Kit Jennings, and Felix Underwood, are sitting in study hall discussing what to do next.

Felix took out a another pen from his backpack, glancing up quickly to make sure Snape was still gone.

Mallory imagined that he was afraid of Snape vanishing more of his writing implements.

The slimy git left the classroom earlier at the behest of the librarian, who was being pestered by Peeves the Poltergeist. She felt a keen sense of fondness towards the creature, for providing such a timely distraction.

"Okay, tell me what you remember."

Mallory wondered to herself if she was telling them about this to take the decision to leave out of her hands. She didn't want to leave, and she very much wanted someone else to make this decision for her.

But like Colin said, Mallory was tired, injured, and traumatized. She wasn't in the best shape to be thinking through problems. They might have a better idea.

"Okay, then." said Mallory. "The other night I was grabbed out of my bed along with all the other Slytherin first years. The older kids do this every year—it's the Slytherin Initiation Ceremony. They took us to the woods to scare us, but a lookout ran by screaming how professors were coming."

"The professors don't know about the Initiation?" asked Colin.

"I can't imagine no one leaking it, not once in a thousand years." Mallory shrugged.

It didn't narrow down the suspect pool, in other words.

"Who was the lookout?" asked Felix.

"I don't know," Mallory said. "The thing that gets me was that we were supposed to follow a seventh year back to the castle when someone spotted the Professors. But the student didn't lead us to the castle, they vanished into thin air."

"You didn't catch their face." said Colin.
"No," Mallory affirmed, "they were wearing hooded cloaks."

"Then Rowle was killed?" asked Kit.

"No," Mallory shook her head, "then we were hunted."

"Avery said the target was Rowle," interrupted Colin, "and that you were a distraction?"

"Rowle and Harper followed me." Mallory said.

"Do you think a student was behind it?" asked Colin.

"I think a student, or students, helped." said Mallory. "Maybe they knew the killer was out there, and put us in his path to kill us. Maybe they were hired by someone to do it. I don't know."

"But Rowle was the daughter of Death Eaters, right?" asked Colin. "Maybe you were just dragged along. Harper isn't dead, either."

"But I was following the seventh year, and Rowle was following me."

The sun was shining on their table, light glinting off of Felix's watch as he shifted in his seat. Mallory looked down at the desk. "We think someone memory charmed us."

Her three friends looked at each other, mildly alarmed. "Magic can do that?"

Mallory nodded. "I think so. And Harper and Rowle, they take potions," there was an awkward pause. "Did, I mean. Rowle did. The potions allow them to remember everything in detail—"

"Is that allowed?" Felix asked, eyes wide behind his glasses. His spine was as straight as a wooden beam, with fingers twitching on the desk in half-aborted movements. It was like he wanted to curl them into fists but kept stopping himself.

"I don't know." Mallory said, then amended, "I don't think so."

"That's not right. I don't have potions to help me study!" His ears were red and lips were white with how tightly they were pressed together.

Mallory got the distinct impression of a coiled spring, or a bottle of carbonated water under pressure.

"Hush! They'll hear," hissed Kit.

"I want them to." said Felix. "It's not fair!"

"Yeah, I know." Mallory said, irritated. "But we're talking about Darla Rowle's killer, now."

"Okay," said Colin. He sounded exasperated. "We'll table the potions talk for later. Why are you mentioning the potions, Mallory?"

"Because Harper and Rowle have- had very good memories," said Mallory. "And they knew how to get out of the Forest, but ended up going in circles, instead. And then—" she felt like throwing up.

"The murderer killed her?" Colin's voice was low.
She swallowed. "It was—" she broke off. "I really can't. I'll throw up if I do."

"You don't have to—"

"Have you all seen *Silence of the Lambs*?" Mallory asked, instead.

Kit and Colin nodded.

"So, remember the scene with the—er, the security guard. Hannibal strings him up with the guts and the gore?"

"Oh my god." Kit said. "Oh my god, did— it was like that?"

"No," she looked up, "It was grosser. Worse. But I mean, in *tone*, *if that* can have a tone. It wasn't a beast attacking, or— someone just killing another person. Any kind of killing her would've scared us bad, if that was what they wanted. So—"

Kit pushed her plate of bacon away, crinkling her nose. The topic must've put her off her pilfered breakfast. "Does this mean I have to stop making jokes about Dead-Eyes being a young Hannibal Lecter?"

Mallory choked on a little laugh. "No."

She grinned, "great."

"But what was done to Rowle, it was done in the *split second* I took my eyes off of her." Mallory whispered, "I think he took a while to kill her. We *saw* it happen, and had our memories erased. It felt like a split second, but it couldn't have been."

There was silence for a moment, as they absorbed the information.

Mallory turned her eyes to the rest of the classroom. A group was huddled around Vaisey. The students occasionally glancing back towards Mallory's corner of the room.

They were talking about Rowle.

It struck her then, that she hadn't consciously decided to solve this mystery. She was planning on leaving, so she couldn't. But fuck, did she want to.

Mallory needed to be able to put the event in context, to have some explanation for what happened to them in that forest. The uncertainty of *not knowing* ate at her.

Further, it was her first real mystery. If she were a hero, *this* would be where it began, with a solemn vow to catch a murderer.

But she couldn't solve this mystery between now and the end of lunch. It was impossible.

Even with the help of her friends, there was little she could do. If grown wizards were confused, then what hope did four first years have?

"I'm curious," Felix said, "what does this have to do with starting a fight and blaming Selwyn for her murder?"

Mallory turned back to her friends. "The other night, a group of Slytherins said they'd get me expelled or worse if I didn't leave Hogwarts. I'm the first ever muggleborn in Slytherin, and that makes them unhappy. I *think* this might've been a botched attempt to kill me."
"So you think if you get yourself actually expelled, they'll leave you alone?" asked Kit.

Mallory shrugged. "Pretty much."

"But blaming Selwyn?" said Colin, arms crossed across his chest. He disapproved.

"It was all I could think of at the time." Mallory's voice was tight, defensive.

"I understand why you did it." Colin said, voice soft. "And what we talked about earlier, the thing about being a hero? That's what you were asking about, right?"

She hardly remembered their conversation earlier. Mallory strained, thinking back. She asked him about being a hero, and he said people find all sorts of reasons not to do the heroic thing.

Mallory nodded, "Yeah."

"I— okay, then I change my mind. Running away isn't a bad idea." said Colin.

This could be it, her moment to be a hero, the start of a fantastic story of adventure.

But Colin was right.

Mallory, more than anyone, knew how impossible it was to defeat the Cracklewood Carver, or whomever was trying to kill her. This wasn't a storybook, it was real life.

And Colin, he saw that. Confronted with a real-life adventure, Colin Creevey responded with responsible suggestions. He wasn't pretending that Mallory wasn't really in danger. Instead, he listened to what she had to say.

She was keeping him.

"I don't want you to die." said Colin, mistaking her silence for confusion. "If someone wants to kill you—"

"Have you spoken to the professors?" asked Felix, speaking over Colin.

"Yeah," Mallory sighed, "but they think I want to leave school to avoid doing work. They don't believe another student could want me dead."

"Maybe they're right?" asked Kit. "I don't think you're trying to avoid homework. But are you sure they want you dead?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure my memories of that night are real."

"Montague and Vaisey mentioned something about a serial killer?" asked Colin.

There was, according to Vaisey, a serial killer that murdered three children every seven years. The newspaper ran an article on him, speculating whether he'd be back this September. If Vaisey was to be believed, Rowle's death mirrored the deaths of the previous Carver victims.

Mallory nodded. "The Cracklewood Carver. It sounds right, but they had a point. If everyone knows this guy strikes every seven years, and you want to hide a murder—"

"Then it might not be the real Cracklewood Carver." finished Felix. "If it isn't the Carver, would school be safe?"
Thank you, Felix. He was catching on, getting a handle on the situation faster than Mallory expected.

That was happening a lot lately, and she was wondering if her experience in the village wasn't typical. Maybe there were a lot of eleven year olds like Danny, Colin, Kit, and Felix.

"I don't know." Mallory shook her head. "I don't even know anything about the Carver."

Well, she didn't know anything about the serial killer in the papers. But with the calming potion running through her veins, she could think about that night without wanting to shrivel up.

"What?"

"I don't know anything about the Carver, but I do know a bit about Rowle's killer."

She'd never dared do this outside Danny. But then, Colin hadn't recoiled when Mallory explained about the body.

He didn't think she was gross or icky because she saw a dead person, didn't think it was reason to abandon her. His interest in Potter had nothing to do with fame and glory. He wanted to be a hero, just like Mallory.

"Whoever it was," Mallory spoke slowly, "they were a hunter." She looked up. Felix looked dubious and Kit was concerned.

Colin's face was intense, frowning in concentration.

"Why do you think that?" he asked.

It was because of a game.

Danny and she played this game back at South Brent. It was like people-watching, only better. They tried guessing what other people were feeling, based on how they were acting.

The way a person held themselves, the nervous twitches and split-second expressions crossing their faces, those were Danny's domain. He wanted to learn how to read them. Further, he wanted to learn what people wanted, and how to convince them to want what he wanted.

So Danny made people-watching into a game, a game which Mallory was grudgingly dragged into time and time again.

Mallory wasn't very good at this game, and found it terribly boring. She'd get an impression from the person sometimes, like it was the easiest thing in the world. But the rest of the time, she was left struggling to remember Danny's instructions. Worse, she had trouble paying attention to someone's face for that long.

But that was the skill she employed the other night when they were attacked in the Forest. Mallory tried to imagine the sort of person that would kill Darla Rowle. Why would they choose to hunt children?

The game wasn't something Mallory or Danny talked about with anyone, for obvious reasons.

"Mallory?" asked Colin, "why do you think it was a hunter?"

Right.
If Colin and the rest rejected her, she was leaving anyway. A rejection would box herself further into running away— it'd give her one more reason to leave.

"The killer stayed out of sight the entire night. He let us run away, but we always ended up back in the clearing where Rowle was murdered. He could do magic, and enjoyed the hunt. Killing us wasn't enough, he needed us scared."

"Holy crap," Kit's eyes were wide as saucers. "that's like— Steven King level—" "He let us know we were being hunted—" continued Mallory, "branches cracking and the whole running in circles bit."

"That might've been an accident," Colin said, uncertain. "It's hard to be quiet in the woods."

"Sure, but..." she trailed off. But it didn't fit "oh, silencing spells."

If someone didn't want to be heard, they'd just use a spell.

"You're right." Felix said, "they'd cast a silencing spell to muffle sound. I read about them."

"Maybe they didn't think of the spell?" Kit asked.

"Maybe," said Colin, "but wizards know spells for everything, you know?"

"So it was on purpose." Mallory confirmed, nodding to herself. "And the whole thing followed like the plot to a horror movie."

Felix frowned. "What?"

"Real life doesn't act like movies, I don't think. I mean, it can," she wanted to be a superhero, after all. "but there are all sorts of ways how it doesn't."

"It was too much like a scary movie to feel real?" asked Kit.

"Yeah," Mallory nodded. "it was scary in just the same way a horror movie is scary. Like someone who's watched too many and wanted us to feel like we were in one, on purpose."

"Suspense and jump-scares?"

"Yeah." Mallory said.

"We're not living in a horror movie." said Colin, deadpan.

"I'll bet that's what everyone in a horror movie thinks, right before the bog monster gets them." Kit said.

Mallory's lips twitched upwards, in spite of herself.

"You think the killer wanted you to forget Rowle's death for some other reason than not getting caught." Felix changed the subject.

"For fun," Mallory said. "Because they wanted the experience to be fresh and new. Because something went wrong while they were doing that to Rowle, and they didn't want us to see their mistake. Because—"

It could be for any number of reasons.
"Alright," said Kit, "they're creepy. What I'm still confused on— why do you want to leave Hogwarts? The aurors are here, and all our professors know what happened."

"Yeah," said Colin. "Won't the killer be more cautious, now that people are looking for him?"

"Maybe," said Mallory, "but think about the sort of person who waits in the woods to… say, jump out and scare you."

Danny was one of those people, and it bothered her that her model of the murderer wasn't far from her model of Danny, minus the evil murdering.

Danny, too, was obsessive and focused. When Danny and she plotted something, he tended towards schemes that allowed people to think *everything was just fine* until suddenly it wasn't. And by the time they realized something was *off*, Danny had already won.

"I tried," said Kit, "but I don't get how imagining that is going to help?"

Right. She got back on track.

"Imagine you're the killer, and part of the thrill of killing is *scaring* the victim. And— now they're alert, but because they are, they think they're safe."

Kit's eyes widened, the moment she understood.

"He's going to attack again, because it'll be unexpected and scare people worse."

"Yeah, exactly."

"I see," Felix said, "but Hogwarts has all kinds of protections on it."

Colin glanced over at Felix, "also, the killer might be expecting you to run away."

That gave Mallory pause.

By leaving the safety of Hogwarts, she might be exposing herself to more danger. The killer might guess Mallory would run, and be waiting for her.

"You could hide in an empty classroom or something, until he's caught." Colin said, eager. "Or you could *tell* everyone you're leaving Hogwarts and then hide!"

"There are tracking charms," said Felix. "Technically, if the killer is determined, he could find her wherever she goes."

Mallory nodded. "And staying here isn't safe. Half the kids want me gone. I'll bet the killer could bribe a student into kidnapping me."

"You can't be the first muggleborn in Slytherin," said Felix. "Hogwarts has been around for a thousand years."

"The seventh years said I was." Mallory said, mulishly.

How was that even related to anything, Mallory wondered.

"How many students are there in Slytherin, every year?" asked Kit. She was looking expectantly at Mallory.
"Er— there's Rowle, Harper, Hoop-boy Avery, Cokebottles Vaisey, Cleaning-charm girl, Montague, Dead-Eyes, and me."

"Eight," said Kit, "and there are about..." she counted on her fingers, "thirteen Hufflepuffs this year? It's not split evenly."

"The hat picks based on quality traits, not to fill a quota." said Felix.

"Eight times a thousand is eight thousand Slytherins, but some years may have more or fewer kids." Kit pursed her lips, "so, maybe ten thousand Slytherins ever? Except, there more people in Great Britain now than there were a hundred years ago."

"Less than eight thousand Slytherins, ever." said Colin, "okay, so one of them might've been a muggleborn."

"Maybe," said Mallory, "it's not a big deal. I mean, I'm not that excited about being the first."

"That's not his point, I think." said Colin, frowning. "If Selwyn knew of other muggleborns in Slytherin who met sticky ends, don't you think he'd taunt you with it?"

That was a good point. "Maybe he never heard of them?"

"Maybe," said Kit, "but you know Dead-Eyes would find any excuse to scare someone."

If Selwyn knew about other Slytherin muggleborns, he'd say they all met sticky ends to scare her. Though, if Slytherins were that obsessed with blood purity, they might deny muggleborn Slytherins ever existed.

Mallory shrugged. "Maybe." In truth, she was a little disappointed that she might not be the first muggleborn in Slytherin. For all her life she'd been special. Now she was at a school where she was one of many. Being the first muggleborn in Slytherin wasn't much of a consolation prize, but it was something.

"This isn't about you," said Felix, exasperated. "It's about Darla Rowle. She was the one who was murdered, not you."

"But her killer might be the Carver, and might want to tie up loose ends! And we don't know if students in the castle aren't working for him."

"Then just avoid suspicious people." Felix said, like Mallory was being supremely stupid.

Mallory gaped, trying to wrap her head around that. Only a sneaky bad person would kidnap her. He was joking, right?

"You get a letter in the mail." said Mallory, tone flat and tight with irritation. "It contains a picture of your parents at gunpoint. It says that if you don't deliver some stranger to a location at a certain time, your family will die."

"There's only one right answer, there." said Felix, grim.

"I know that," said Mallory, "but— how many people d'you think would really let their family die for a stranger?"

"But it's the right thing to do." Felix said, as if that explained everything. "If you allow yourself to be coerced this time, you open yourself to being coerced again and again."
"She's right, though." said Colin, "I don't think many people could. I couldn't."

"If Mallory stays, we're betting it all on the killer not caring about killing Mallory." said Kit.

"Yeah," said Colin, looking rather glum, "and we're guessing that Selwyn and his friends won't drag Mallory out into the woods for revenge."

And that was something Mallory hadn't even considered.

There was a minute of silence, where the four muggleborns at their table in study hall sat, contemplating their situation.

Mallory knew that the killer, whether or not he or she was the Carver, had some reason to go after her. The hunter wouldn't like how his prey escaped him. If someone lured Mallory, Harper, and Rowle to that clearing, there was no guarantee they'd be satisfied with Rowle's death, alone. The real target might've been Mallory or Harper.

They could guess Mallory would run away. If they guessed she'd run, they'd be waiting for her once she left the castle.

If they guessed that she'd guess this, then they'd blackmail or bribe students into luring her outside the castle.

If Mallory was really unlucky, the killer did both. They'd set up a win-win scenario, where they'd be waiting outside the castle and have students hunting her down from within.

Depending on how much leverage and money the killer had, they could have multiple students hunting Mallory down inside the school. Potentially, they could blackmail a professor. Adults had super dirty secrets that they never wanted getting out.

All it took was the right leverage.

"Running away makes sense." Colin said, hesitating. "At least until the aurors catch the killer."

"Yeah," said Kit. "But you're bonkers if you think getting yourself expelled is a good idea."

"I'm thinking of following the tracks." Mallory lowered her voice. She didn't know who could be listening. And now that she was thinking about it, anyone in her class could be blackmailed. Dead-Eyes Selwyn hated her, and if he overheard this conversation...

"The train tracks?" asked Felix.

"Yeah," Mallory said, and then immediately regretted it. Truth potions existed, and if Harper and Rowle could get their hands on the magical equivalent of steroids, then there was likely a way to get a hold of veritaserum.

Her enemy's minions could use the truth potion on her friends and then obliviate them. They wouldn't even know they'd betrayed her secrets.

And if they didn't know, then they couldn't warn Mallory.

"You want to get back to London?" asked Colin.

"I—" Mallory's brain stuttered, "er—, okay, I'm not sure I should tell you. Because there are students in the castle who might be working for the Carver, and every first year is seeing us sitting together right now."
"They don't know what we're talking about." said Felix, glancing around the room. No one was sitting near them, avoiding the muggleborns like the plague.

Instead, groups of students surrounded Vaisey and Montague. They were still huddled around and whispering to one another.

The only students not gossiping were Weasley and her blonde-haired friend.

"What else is everyone talking about?" asked Kit. "A student died. That's all anyone's going to be talking about for weeks."

"You can't keep secrets like that." said Colin. "Someone could torture you, or use truth potion on you, and you might not even remember it, because memory charms exist in the wizarding world. I don't want to put you in more danger."

"What if we all stick together until you're safe and gone?" asked Kit.

"That could work," said Colin.

"Not if—" Mallory started.

"If a student tries to take us down, then there's a good chance one of us will get away and tell a professor. Sticking together is safer."

"It's not safer for you." Mallory said. But he was right. If her friends stayed with her in the castle, the killer and his minions might have a harder time capturing her. And her friends would already be targeted, if anyone gossiped about Mallory and her friends talking. The damage was already done.

Colin rolled his eyes. "You're going to London."

"To my parents house. It's south of London, way south. South Brent, in Dartmoor."

"On foot?" asked Kit, skeptical.

"No, I'm going to stop in the first police station I find."

"Oh," said Kit. "That might work."

"I'm coming with you." said Colin.

"Me too," said Kit, before Mallory could get a word in, edgewise.

"No you're not," said Mallory. "It's like you said, the Carver might be out there waiting for me."

"Right," said Colin, "and you need us with you if you're going to stand a chance."

"Colin—" Mallory gaped, "all of you, no. No way, you can't." This was exactly why she wanted to leave them out of it. They were putting themselves in danger, and they wouldn't be able to do a thing against the Carver. They'd die, and it'd be all her fault.

"Of course I can," said Colin. And Kit and Felix nodded emphatically along with him. Like idiots who were about to get themselves killed.

"No," said Mallory, voice firm. "Do you— did you know that the whole time I was out there in
those woods, I kept thinking how bloody glad I was that you weren't there. I was so, so glad, because it'd kill me to lose someone I like."

"I know a shortcut." argued Colin, "I know how to get to Dufftown— that's the nearest town to Hogwarts, and I have money to call a payphone with."

And damn if that didn't mitigate most of her fears about running away.

"But—" Mallory worried her lip, "you could tell me where Dufftown is, and then you won't have to come along. You'll be safe."

"I don't have anything to bring to the table," said Kit, "and I'm still coming. Do you think I'm going to miss out on a real adventure? This is what I came to magic school for."

"Actually," said Felix, "I think we should tell all this to an auror and let them—"

"No!" shouted the other three muggleborns, drawing the attention of half of the study hall for a moment.

When everyone went back to their own conversations, Mallory spoke again.

"You promise you won't tell anyone." ordered Mallory.

"Alright, I won't." said Felix, "but I am coming with you. I can't make a promise not to tell in good conscience, if I don't."

"That's blackmail!" hissed Mallory.

Felix looked especially affronted, "it is not!"

"Is too!"

"I'd never blackmail someo—"

"It's the very definition of blackmail!"

Colin clapped a hand over Mallory's mouth before they could continue arguing. She attempted to shake him off and one of his fingers went up her nostril. She squawked behind his hand and licked it.

"Ew!" squeaked Colin, "did you lick me?"

"It's not blackm—" Felix still wasn't shutting up, and Kit kicked Felix hard on the shins.

"Ow!" hissed Felix, "don't do that!"

"You're not narking," Kit threatened. "Not ever."

"Alright, okay, I won't!" said Felix, alarmed, "I wasn't going to, anyway."

Colin took his hand away from Mallory's mouth, wiping it on the side of his robes.

"You said—" Mallory broke off when Colin raised his hand again. Apparently, he was undeterred by saliva and snot.

"I said I'm coming with you." said Felix.
"We're all coming with you." echoed Kit.

"But I'm not leaving Hogwarts— I mean, we're all coming back after we take her to Dufftown, right?" asked Colin.

"Amazing school of magic," said Kit, nodding.

"And we should do it soon. How long does it take to get there and back? I don't want to be out too late. I need to start studying."

"Maybe two hours," said Colin, "it's only a few kilometres away."

"I'm not okay with this," said Mallory. Because it was eating her up, the thought of that happening to Kit or Colin. She could imagine Kit's face in place of Darla Rowle's, mouth open in perpetual shock and turned into a fucking meat sculpture.

"I don't get how you think it's okay for me to run away, but you won't," her voice shook. "You're running straight towards danger." It really ticked her off, if she was being honest with herself.

"Yeah, because—" he broke off, "because you're my friend."

"And you're my friends." she said. "I don't want you in danger."

"Well, we're going." said Kit, "end of story." Her arms folded across her chest.

"What she said." said Colin.

"Fuck it." Mallory said, raising up her hands in defeat "fine."

She wasn't going to change their minds, and trying to stop them would be near impossible.

"If we're helping you run away, we need weapons." said Felix.

Mallory blinked. "Okay." On a list of things she expected to hear out of Felix's mouth, that wasn't even on it.

Colin shrugged, "I have a slingshot and a couple flashlights in my trunk."

"A slingshot?" said Mallory, disbelief coloring her tone. "I don't think we can—"

"Mallory wants to light the Carver on fire, I'll bet." said Kit.

Mallory balked at the idea, "I'm really hoping we don't run into him, for what it's worth."

This right here was why she hadn't wanted to bring them along. A slingshot? They were seriously underestimating the danger they were in, if they thought a slingshot was enough firepower.

"If we did though, don't tell me you're not lighting it on fire."

Mallory sighed and rolled her eyes, "it's the only spell I know that works." she paused for a moment, "Well, besides lumos. And I know the repairing spell, but every time I use it, it goes wrong."

"Exactly what I mean. What is it with you and fire?" Kit asked.

"Nothing. Back on topic, though," Mallory changed the subject, "I don't think a slingshot's gonna
"I know four spells," said Felix, "but I still think we should bring the slingshot. It'd serve as backup if our wands were taken away."

Kit stared at him with wide eyes. "you know four spells already? Can you show them to me? I don't know a single one!"

"Didn't you read your books over the summer?" asked Felix. "I couldn't put them down."

"Sure," said Kit, "but they're dead boring if you can't practice with a wand."

"Same," said Mallory, "and my parents even took my wand."

"Gee, I can't imagine why." quipped Colin.

"It's to keep everything fair." said Felix. "The professors don't want anyone to have an advantage."

Which meant Felix learned to successfully cast four spells in three days? That was impressive, even if he read all about them over the summer. Mallory read over her books, and promptly forgot almost all of it by the time she got to Hogwarts.

"Wow," said Colin, "that's good. Which ones did you learn?"

"I'm going in order from chapter one. Lumos, the levitation spell, the cleaning charm, and the cutting charm."

"The cutting charm might come in handy," said Colin. "Did you see the way that girl— the one with the glasses—" he was looking at Mallory.

It took her a moment to realize he was asking her.

"Cokebottles? Er— Vaisey." Mallory nodded, "Yeah. She tore a chunk out of Dead-Eyes' desk."

"She tore a chunk out of Dead-Eyes." replied Colin.

"They've already started studying, so you should work on that too, Kit." said Felix.

Mallory snorted, "tell that to Harper and—" Rowle, she cleared her throat, "Harper. He had a private tutor before Hogwarts."

"What?" hissed Felix.

"So did Macy Gibbon," said Kit, "she was telling everybody about all the magic she's done in the common room."

"Isn't that illegal?" asked Felix.

"I think so," said Colin, "but a lot of the Gryffindors knew spells, too. I think everyone ignores that rule."

Felix frowned, "we're going to have to work extra hard to catch up. I'm going to bring some books with me."

"Are you going to read while you walk?" asked Kit, mildly amused.
"Yes." said Felix. He wasn't joking.

Mallory and Kit exchanged a look.

"So we're all bringing bags?" asked Colin, presumably to change the subject before they could start nettling Felix.

"Yes." said Felix, Kit, and Mallory.

"Okay, we need to settle on the details." said Colin, "this period is almost up."

"We're not going hunting for the Carver." said Mallory.

"No, but we need to be prepared in case we run into it."

"Colin has a slingshot." said Kit, "and I have a bunch of snacks, and—"

"It'll get dark, so we'll need flashlights to see—" said Felix.

"And because you need light to read your books."

"That, too."

"We can use lumos." said Colin.

"Not near Dufftown," said Felix, "we can't do magic around muggles."

"Darn, right, I forgot."

"Flashlights, snacks," Kit was ticking it off on her fingers, "a slingshot, books to read—"

"We're looking out for an evil murderer, I really don't know where we'll get time to read."

"I'm bringing my walkman," said Kit. "It'll get boring if the Carver doesn't show."

Mallory felt her heart sink. They were doomed.

"Okay!" said Colin, almost shouting. "after lunch we grab everything we need and—"

The background noise that was their classmates gossiping and muttering about Rowle's death suddenly ceased.

Two guesses who was back.

Snape loomed in the doorway, arms folded with spidery hands resting atop stained robes. His lips were curled into a sneer, yellowed teeth flashing in the sunlight.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

Felix surreptitiously slipped his pen up his sleeve.

"Hunting Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, Professor." said the blonde haired girl that was sitting next to Weasley.

At that, at least half of the class started giggling. Mallory glanced over at Felix, brows furrowed. He wasn't looking at her, so she caught Kit's eye.
What? she mouthed.

Kit shrugged.

"There is no such thing as a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, Miss Lovegood. Twenty points from Ravenclaw! Now return to your seat at once!"

Oh, so Miss Lovegood was telling Snape to fuck off. Hah. Mallory grinned at her friends, who were looking bemused and slightly confused.

"Miss Hopkins," said Snape. Oh fuck, what had she done now?

"Yes, professor." There might've been an excess of sarcasm there, which was only acceptable because she was leaving tonight, and would never have to see his greasy mug again.

"You're required by the Hospital Wing. Follow me." He turned around, robes flaring around him with the movement.

Mallory sent a wide-eyed look at her friends. They were undoubtedly thinking the same thing she was thinking, judging by their expressions.

Who else wanted Mallory gone more than the Head of Slytherin House?

He held a deep disdain for anything muggle, hadn't cared one whit when Mallory reported the bullies, and now he was calling her away from the safety of the crowd.

Kit, Colin, and Felix glanced between each other, deciding in a moment what to do.

"Professor, I'd like to come with—" started Kit, only to be interrupted.

"You'll do no such thing, Miss Jennings." said Snape.

Colin raised his hand, "Professor? Before you go, I have to use the toilet."

"I need to go, as well." said Felix, barely able to get his voice above a mutter. He was turning red about the ears.

Mallory had a strong suspicion that their route to the toilets would coincidentally take them straight to the Hospital Wing.

"Absolutely not," hissed Snape. "I'll have none of this. You will sit still, all of you, until I return."

Mallory sat there, frozen. Fuck, what should she do?

Yet, if Snape wanted her dead, if he wanted her dead—

He would've killed her already. He wouldn't pull her out of class, with all first year as witness, just to murder her.

Which meant he wasn't trying to murder her, unless—

"Miss Hopkins! I will not repeat myself again."

Mallory stood up, collecting her bag and books. She risked a glance at Colin.

He nodded.
Fat chance that they'd be sitting quietly while Snape was gone. If he wanted to kidnap her, he'd have her friends to contend with, as well.

She wasn't dead nor was she kidnapped.

Throughout the entire trip to the Hospital Wing, Mallory kept an eye on Snape. She expected him to snatch her and drag her outside, maybe even kill her. But he never did.

Instead, Snape escorted her to a makeshift office by the Hospital Wing. It was here the Aurors were set up. Only this time, two strangers were standing next to trainee Tonks, instead of Moody.

"...as a personal favor to Lord Rowle." said the woman with the girlish, high-pitched voice. Her tone would be unremarkable, except for that she looked like an overgrown toad.

The woman was decked out in pink, from her squat witch's hat down to her pointy shoes, garish and frilly.

"Of course, undersecretary." said the dry voice of the new Auror. He was a tall man, black, with a deep voice and kind eyes.

"Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic." sniffed the Toad, her jowls wiggling.

Tonks, the trainee Auror who accompanied Moody yesterday, was sitting at the table—

Mallory did a double-take

—at the table which was covered in Mallory's things.

Why were the Aurors looking through the contents of her trunk?

Her things were spread across the stone floor, with a couple choice items— her walkman and some comic books— on the rickety table.

It was a small room, stone and windowless, with a single desk in the middle. An interrogation room.

Snape stood behind her, scowling down at Mallory like she'd done something to personally offend him.

"Professor Snape," the Toad smiled with her mouth. "you're here a tad early. No matter! We'll get this sorted in a jiffy."

She smiled with her mouth, but her eyes didn't crinkle. It was a fake smile, and not even a very good one.

The Toad took off her cloak— she had just arrived, —placing it down across a chair.

This was odd. The Aurors questioned Mallory yesterday. They had no reason to do so again. More alarming was her trunk spread out across their table. Tonks was looking through her things.

What did they expect to find?

"Hem hem," the Toad cleared her throat.

Senior Toady for the Minister for Magic was looking straight towards trainee Tonks. This was an
unfortunate turn of events for the trainee, who wasn't paying her any mind at all.

Tonks was scribbling notes on a piece of parchment, with a large feathery quill. A long streak of ink was smeared across her face.

"Hem hem," said the Toad again, and Mallory would've been amused.

She would've been laughing, were it not for the situation.

The twins. They'd given the Aurors her trunk? Why? Were they looking for evidence that Mallory's trunk was set on fire? Did they know about the conflicts between Rowle and Mallory? Surely they didn't think—

"What?" Tonks looked up, eyes flicking between the Auror and the Toad.

"You must be the new trainee," said Toad, words syrupy-sweet. "It's nice to meet Moody's new...protégé."

Poor Tonks was treated with another of the Toad's fake smiles.

She looked bemused. "Nice to meet you, too. I'm Tonks." The girl held out her hand to shake the Toad's.

"Tonks?" said the Toad, taking a step back. She made no move to take Tonk's hand. "not a wizarding name, Tonks, is it?"

Tonks' bright bubblegum pink hair turned a violent shade of maroon, as the girl clenched her fists at her sides.

Mallory's eyes flicked over to the Auror, who was subtly reaching into his robes for his wand.

"No," Tonks gave Toad a sharp grin, "my dad's a muggleborn."

And Mallory instantly approved of Tonks, in spite of how obviously stupid it was to back-chat the Prime Minister's secretary. Undersecretary. Did that mean she was secretary to the Prime Minister's secretary? Mallory cared little for politics.

The Toad's upper lip curled in disgust, eyes bulging in their sockets. She quickly turned away to face Snape and Mallory.

"Professor Snape!" her face split into that wide hollow grin. "Lucius Malfoy says such good things about you."

Snape gave the Toad a thin smile, and inclined his head.

"My mum's sister," interrupted Tonks, "she was Bellatrix Black."

Mallory had taken her eyes off Tonks, distracted by the great pale Toad leering down at them. But Tonks was quietly furious in her seat, glaring up at Umbridge.

Her tone and body language was combative. The words fuck you were implied, though Mallory didn't know why Tonk's aunt was significant.

"Oh Miss Tonks," spoke the Toad, "surely you did not intend to bring up your dead criminal of an aunt?"
"I thought since you didn't like how my dad's a mug—"

"Enough!" said the Auror. "Trainee Tonks, one more outburst and you'll have to wait outside. Madame Umbridge, I do apologize."

The Toad smiled, "I'll speak with the Head of the Department. The standards at the Auror Academy must be slipping, and the Minister can't have that."

A pin could've dropped.

"I wouldn't want to waste your time." the Auror was backpedaling, "I know you're an important witch—"

"It's really no bother, Kingsley." Umbridge's smile spread, eyes crinkling. Oh, she was enjoying this. She was enjoying the Auror's discomfort.

A sadist.

The situation, with Mallory's trunk and Senior Toady's presence were looking increasingly dismal.

"The Auror department can handle it, Senior Undersecretary." said Auror Kingsley, firm. "And I'd like to move this interview along."

The Toad's bulging cheeks deflated, twisting into a vicious scowl.

Umbridge took a short breath, before turning to face Snape and Mallory.

"Now," she smiled at Mallory, bright and cheerful, "Miss Hopkins, I need you—" she cleared her throat, "the Ministry of Magic needs your help."

"Okay." Mallory said, tone flat.

"We need to know— and this is of vital importance, so listen closely— why your trunk was with Miss Farley's things. Could you tell us that?"

And that was not what she was expecting, not at all.

"What?" Mallory gaped, "no it wasn't."

Her brain skipped tracks and did a double take. What was this? A trap? A frame-up?

"Your trunk was found in an unauthorized laboratory that Miss Farley had ...appropriated. Now, if you've been involved in something," she breathed, "naughty, you most definitely should tell us. The Ministry of Magic will uncover the truth, and it will only be more unpleasant, if you're found to be lying." said Umbridge, shaking her head slowly as though to emphasize how bad it would be to lie.

For once, Mallory wasn't lying, not even a little bit.

"I'm not." said Mallory, and she could feel the blood draining out of her face. "I don't know a thing about it, I swear."

Umbridge tsked, and turned away to face Auror Kingsley, "If we could, perhaps, expedite this—"

"She was given one drop of veritaserum yesterday." said Snape, "I cannot advise the use of it, again, so soon."
"Ah," said Umbridge, and that sinister smile spread to her eyes. "Well, perhaps we should put her in a holding—"

"I didn't give my trunk to Farley." Mallory said, speaking over her. Her mind was racing. "I dunno why she has it. I—"

The twins would be furious, but a holding cell? Fucking sadist.

"I gave it to Fred and George Weasley." Mallory said. "They were going to put protection charms on it for m—"

"Silencio." Umbridge whipped out her wand. "I was going to say, before I was rudely interrupted —"

Mallory gave the Toad a baleful glare.

"The muggleborn has been in two or more violent altercations with the young Miss Darla Rowle. It's only prudent to consider her a suspect."

Mallory stomped her foot, waving towards her face. This was bullshit! She had nothing to do with it!

"Senior Undersecretary," Auror Kingsley spoke with an irritated sigh, "Miss Hopkins isn't a suspect in this case. She's a victim here, too." He said it like he'd had to repeat this argument more than twice today, already.

Mallory's bad feeling about this was getting worse.

"That filthy little beast hit the girl with her bare fists!" hissed Umbridge, "like some kind of—of wild animal!" the woman's voice rose in pitch, shrill and grating. Her jowls wobbled, frog-eyes bulging out their sockets.

After that, Kingsley shot a spell at Mallory. She tried twisting away, this time on guard for magic cast at her, but she wasn't anywhere near fast enough.

And now Mallory was deaf and mute.

She couldn't hear a word of what the adults were saying. There was a small but growing part of her that was panicking.

Mallory was rubbish at lip-reading.

Toady Umbridge looked enraged. Her arms folded across her chest, shoulders raised. Defensive. Cheeks red, so she was embarrassed or her blood pressure was up.

Red cheeks can also mean angry, and the rest of Umbridge looked furious. Her nostrils flared, eyes bulging, and her lips twisted with displeasure.

Given the woman's position on Mallory, angry was good news. Angry meant Mallory wasn't tossed in jail.

Auror Kingsley, unfortunately, didn't look happy, either. His lips were downturned, brows furrowed in an expression that best translated to "I think you're a giant idiot." It was a fair assessment, in Mallory's opinion.

But his arms were folded, too. And Mallory wondered if Umbridge was threatening to go the head
of his department, again.

Snape, beside Mallory, was impossible to read.

His eyes were blank, there was no motion in the lip area, not even a sneer. He could've been made from stone.

Tonks, however, was looking at Mallory.

The trainee Auror glanced over at Umbridge, and then back to Mallory. Then she winked.

What.

Did that mean it was going well? Or did Tonks not want to distress her?

Mallory widened her eyes a bit glancing back and forth between Tonks and the arguing adults, a plea if there ever was one. Pay attention to what's going on, and react accordingly so I know what's happening!

Instead, the girl transformed her nose into that of a duck's, which had Mallory blinking in shock. Granted, it wasn't the most shocking thing she'd seen, but—

And now Tonk's nose was a pig's!

Oh, the girl was trying to distract her, because things were going that badly.

Mallory felt stricken, and it must've showed on her face because Tonks drew back, vaguely guilty.

Umbridge was saying something, gesturing at Mallory. Her upper lip was raised, and she kept making a face — disgust — every time she glanced over at Mallory. Disgust or contempt, she couldn't really tell. It wasn't a friendly face.

Auror Kingsley looked exasperated. He kept rolling his eyes and shaking his head. As the conversation went on, his brow furrowed and he frowned.

At one point, Snape joined in, but the only emotion she got off of him was disdain.

"...too advanced..." said Kingsley's lips, "...eleven year old ... do..."

And Umbridge responded with something about money?

Someone was paying her?

Her heart started pounding in her chest. Fuck. She shouldn't have come here. She'd been careless, thinking her friends would have her back, but what could they do?

Umbridge's face went an ugly shade of puce, from the tips of her ears down her neck.

And now Kingsley was looking rather smug, if not dismissive.

Had he won?

He pointed his wand at Mallory. She took a step back, preparing to jump out of the way—

A moment later, the silencio and muffling spells vanished. Mallory could hear and speak again.

"I didn't do it!" Mallory said, before they could say another word. "I don't know how my trunk got
there and I don't know why Farley had it and—"

"Silence!" hissed Snape.

"We just have a couple questions, and then you can go." said Auror Kingsley.

What? Oh. He had won the argument. She wasn't a suspect? Or were they luring her into a false sense of security?

"Okay." Mallory said.

Snape sneered, "speak out of turn again and you'll have earned yourself another detention."

How the fuck was that speaking out of turn?

"I'll tell you, Professor Snape," said Umbridge, breathless, "these children need a firm hand. If they were properly punished for their indiscretions, we wouldn't be facing this situation."

"Yes, thank you, Madame Senior Undersecretary," said Auror Kingsley, with no small amount of irritation.

"Well," said Umbridge, "you said you gave your trunk to a Weasley?"

"Fred and George." Mallory said, "the twins. They took it to a room behind a mirror. They said it was their secret lair."

"I see." she tsk-tsk'd, shaking her head. "And what would the young Weasley boys need with a lair?"

Umbridge put special emphasis on the word lair. Was there some sinister significance to that word? Mallory wasn't about to get the Twins in more trouble, not before she could sit down and figure out what all this meant.

"I— er, I misspoke. It was..." Mallory searched for a good word, "a clubhouse. I don't know."

"Well, it appears it wasn't only their ...lair. What can you tell me about Gemma Farley?"

"She's a seventh year prefect." Mallory chewed on her lip. "She isn't very nice."

"Have you seen her interact with Darla Rowle at all?"

Mallory's eyes widened, "you think Farley did it?"

"Detention!" hissed Snape.

"Now really," said Auror Kingsley, "that isn't necessary."

"I assure you, Mr. Shacklebolt, it is."

Mallory rolled her eyes. "Farley was there at the Initiation, and she and this other Hooded Figure said a bunch of mean things to Rowle. They did that to me, too. And Harper."

"All three students kidnapped were scolded by Miss Farley and a— a ...Hooded Figure?"

Umbridge's bulbous eyes grew bigger, if that were possible.

"Yeah." said Mallory. Snape didn't speak up, so she guessed that didn't count as speaking out of
Umbridge looked like someone just handed her the keys to her very own frog palace.

"Oh no, the Minister won't like this." she said, voice trembling with some suppressed emotion, "he won't like it one bit."

Mallory didn't say anything. She had no idea what was going on.

Kingsley Shacklebolt cleared his throat, "Miss Hopkins, did they speak about any Dark Lords, blood purity, or the dark mark?"

"Oh no you don't!" hissed Umbridge, "the Minister has heard enough of this nonsense. I should've known Dumbledore would've— the nerve of that wizard!"

"I don't know what a dark mark is," said Mallory, "but they weren't talking about dark lords. Farley wanted me to kiss her boots, and said some shit about me knowing my place."

"Did anyone use dark magic?" asked Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"What counts as dark magic?"

"Spells that do great harm."

"I don't—" then she thought for a moment, "Farley used a supersenory charm on me. And a bunch of people cast cutting charms—"

"You will cease this line of questioning at once!" said Umbridge. "I know what this is, and I won't have any part in it."

"I don't know what you mean, Senior Undersecretary." said Auror Shacklebolt, voice dry.

"This Dark Lord of his, oh no, he is not risen! All this nonsense with the stone and that teacher! No, I will not have it!"

Mallory blinked. Oh-kay, Senior Undertoad Umbridge was insane. That explained a lot.

"No one is saying anything about Death Eaters, Dolores." said Snape.

Umbridge whirled on Mallory, grabbing her by the shoulders. Her nails dug into Mallory's injured arms.

"Get off me!" Mallory shrieked, squirming as the Toad's sharp nails dug into the cuts on her shoulder.

"Who told you to lie about the Death Eaters!" she hissed, foul breath in Mallory's face, "was it Dumbledore?"

"No one's said anything!" Mallory screamed, mind blank and panicking.

"Release her at once!" Snape thundered, while Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks both yelled in the background.

Within a moment, Mallory was released and standing behind Snape's billowing robes.

"I think," hissed Snape, "this interview has ended."
Umbridge looked between them, nostrils flared, and spat, "the Minister will hear about this! Mark my words!" Spittle flew from her lips.

Her hair was coming loose out of it's strict up-do, strands sticking to her face. She was breathing through her mouth, great gasping heaves between clenched teeth, pink lipstick smeared across the white.

The Great Undertoad then snatched up her cloak and stormed out the room, heels clicking sharply on stone. She slammed the door behind her so hard it rattled in its frame.

Mallory shuddered, "she's bonkers."

"Detention, Miss Hopkins." hissed Snape.

Fuck, she hadn't realized she said that out-loud.

"Completely bonkers," said Tonks, sneaking a conspiratorial grin at Mallory.

Auror Shacklebolt rolled his eyes, then shook his head.

Mallory was fighting down a grin, the come-down after a serious jolt of adrenaline. Holy fuck. Tonks glanced back at Mallory, saw her suppressed grin, and started giggling. That got Mallory giggling, starting off a chain reaction.

For Mallory, it was sheer relief. She wasn't going to jail, the Great Undertoad hadn't won. Relief, coupled with incredulity. That was the most ridiculous adult Mallory ever had the displeasure to meet.

Shortly after, it went from chortling to full-out laughing. Auror Shacklebolt was looking away, but Mallory could see the crinkles around his eyes. His shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter.

The only one unamused was Snape.

"I believe we're done here." Snape spoke, dour as ever.

"Ah, not quite yet," said Auror Shacklebolt. "There are rumors that you accused young Master Selwyn of Miss Rowle's murder. Is this true?"

Shit. Mallory took a moment to get her thoughts back in order, "I thought he might've done it. He said a bunch of stuff in class about how he wanted to hurt me. But Hooper-Avery said he couldn't have, so-"

"I see." the Auror frowned, "what did he say?"

"That I ought to shut up or he'll curse me."

Auror Shacklebolt snorted. "Right. Nevermind. Miss Hopkins, in the future don't accuse people of crimes you know they didn't commit, especially as they get older and can seek legal recourse against you," the Auror glanced over at Snape, "I think that'll be all. Professor Snape, you may escort your young charge back to class. No need for the young witch to miss more of her classes on our account."

"Of course," said Snape.
"Auror Shacklebolt?" asked Mallory, hesitating. "can I have my trunk back, now?"

"Your— oh." The Auror rubbed the back of his neck. "Trainee Tonks, are you done with it?"

Tonks shrugged, "sure, I mean, yeah."

Two flicks of her wand and the trunk packed itself back up. Mallory was relieved, because this cut one step out of her plan to leave. She had been dreading chasing down Fred and George.

"If you like Black Sabbath," said Tonks, "check out Nirvana."

Snape sneered, "keep your muggle influences out of Hogwarts, Miss Tonks."

"It's trainee Tonks," sniffed Tonks, morphing her skin frog-green. Her eyes grew bulbous and yellow.

Mallory let out a bark of laughter, and Auror Shacklebolt looked up at the ceiling, shaking his head.

"How droll," said Snape.

Mallory gave herself points for not bursting into laughter, again. She grinned crookedly at Tonks, "it was nice meeting you."

"Nice meeting you too, Black Sabbath."

"And thanks Auror Shacklebolt, for not letting her er— arrest me." She almost said toadify me, but changed her mind last second.

"Your welcome, Miss Hopkins."

"Get moving." said Snape.

And Mallory took that as her cue to exit the interrogation room. Her trunk clattered on the stone floor, as she followed Snape back to the study hall.

Except outside the interrogation room, a Gryffindor and two Hufflepuffs were tangled in a heap on the floor.

They would've remained hidden in a convenient alcove, except Kit shifted and accidentally bumped Felix.

Felix, thrown off balance, tripped over his own two feet straight into Colin. And with that, the whole team tumbled onto the floor.

"Jennings, Creevey and Underwood," hissed Snape, "just what are you doing here?"
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"Jennings, Creevey and Underwood," hissed Snape, "just what are you doing here?"

"Well, er—" stuttered Colin, from his place on the floor.

Felix sprawled onto his back, ears red. It was Kit who stood up, brushing the dust off her knees. They were all looking winded and slightly ruffled, like they'd been in a tussle.

"We got lost, Professor." said Kit, "we were trying to find the toilet."

Kit, brave Kit, looked Snape right in the eye with the sweetest most innocent expression on her face. Mallory wanted to applaud her, or do a little gleeful dance. She was never letting Kit and Danny meet. A lit match and petrol was an understatement.

"Likely story," Snape scoffed, ignoring the skillful performance by Mallory's new favorite friend.

"It's true!" said Colin, unsurprisingly unconvincing. "We were looking for the toilets."

"Were you all going to the boy's or girl's toilet?" asked Snape, thin lips curling into a scornful smile.

Kit, Felix, and Colin looked at one another.

"Er—"

"Cease your pathetic excuses." snapped Snape.

Mallory, barely a meter behind Snape, took it upon herself to get them out of trouble.

She made a series of gestures, pointing at herself and crossing her hands across her neck. Blame me!

Colin and Kit both looked confused, and Felix frowned. They weren't getting the message.

Snape stared at the three blankly for a moment, then spun around.

His eyes narrowed.

"I'm not a fool, Miss Hopkins." he said. "Twenty points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, each. You're ungroomed and out of bounds. And Miss Hopkins? You've earned yourself another week of
detentions. Be grateful it isn't more. In my time they caned students for less."

It was as if his mind worked out the most wicked thing to do at any given moment, then decided to do exactly that. She boiled with frustration.

Her clever plan to distract his rage away from her friends hadn't worked. Thank goodness she wasn't staying. Then she'd actually have to attend all his fucking detentions.

She gave her friends an apologetic look, but none of them seemed to understand. She'd have to explain later.

Snape cast a spell, frowned, and then looked over at the four first years. "Get on to lunch, no dallying. Study hall is over."

With that, he stalked off to torment more first years.

Kit immediately tackled her, ponytail whipping Mallory across the cheek. "What happened?"

"Hullo Mallory," squeaked Mallory, a tad breathless, "how are you? Oh no, I noticed you're bleeding."

Kit squished her again, narrowing her eyes.

"Hullo Mallory," Kit mimicked her, "how are you?"

"Bleeding." Mallory snarked, rubbing her arm. She glanced behind them, looking for the Undertoad. "A giant toad clawed my arm."

When the Grand Undertoad clutched Mallory and shook her, she re-opened the cuts on her arms. The sting made her eyes water. It didn't help that Mallory smelled worse than a ripe sewer on a hot day, thanks to her run-in with that shelf of vitrified critters.

She suspected Kit had no sense of smell, because Colin and Felix were staying far back.

"A toad?" asked Colin, "You mean the woman?"

It said a great deal about Mallory's assessment of her, that Colin knew exactly who she referred to when she said toad.

"She went nuts," said Mallory, "completely bonkers!"

"We heard," said Felix, "we were listening at the door."

"When she stormed, out, she almost hit us with the door." Kit grinned, eyes glittering.

"Did you hear what they said?" Mallory asked, burning with curiosity. The aurors made Mallory temporarily deaf— no doubt to spare her from whatever vile things spewed out of that toad's mouth — but that left Mallory to imagine what the toad woman said.

Mallory had quite the imagination.

"Yes," said Felix, "they were awful."

"No, no," Mallory shook her head, "you have to tell me. They muffled my hearing and made me mute!"
"Oh, so that's what happened." said Kit, a sly grin across her face.

Mallory glared, crossing her arms. "what are you saying?"

"Mallory has how many detentions for giving the professors lip, now?" asked Kit.

Felix frowned, "at least a dozen, likely more."

"Only because Snape won't listen and—"

"Weren't we going to lunch?" interrupted Colin. He showed no signs of amusement. His eyes were downcast, shoulders a tad slumped.

Mallory furrowed her brow, "yeah, sure."

Was it the house points lost?

Maybe he was still mad about Selwyn and the Incident in the Potions Classroom. She wasn't sure, and kept an eye on him as she puzzled it out.

They started towards the Great Hall, walking at a snail's pace. The corridors were bright and cheerful, sunlight warming the stone floor. There were distant clouds on the horizon, skimming the tops of the trees. Mallory stared out the windows, enjoying the view.

She might not get to see it, again.

Colin folded his arms, walking three steps ahead of her. "That lady, you know, I can't believe what she was saying."

"What'd she say?" Mallory asked, eyes sharpening.

"She kept talking about filth and animals every time she said your name," said Colin, his voice grew quiet, "and you know those purebloods?" his voice cracked, "they always say 'filthy mudbloods,' or 'beastly mudbloods,' so we all knew what she really meant."

Colin, in Gryffindor, was insulated from slimy underbelly of the school. She rather expected all this business with Umbridge and Snape was a shock to him. Maybe even more shocking than a student dying. Everyone knows about serial killers and murder from the telly. But she doubted Colin ever experienced someone hating muggleborns like that.

It was disconcerting.

"Yeah," Mallory nodded. She'd laughed, but it was due to the shock of it. Never before had an adult laid a hand on her like that. None of the teachers and school, not her parents, not anyone.

There was a moment there, when her brain went blank and she hadn't known what to do.

"She was saying it without saying it," said Kit, looking uncharacteristically glum.

"She's the Grand Undertoad," said Mallory, with some finality. It was a poor attempt to add humor to a miserable situation.

The Toad would be back, that was for certain. The Grand Undertoad was prickly and full of pride. A person like that would never stand for such a humiliation.

"And she's working for the Rowle family," said Felix, "they want her to find answers, fast answers.
Umbridge doesn't seem to care if they're the right ones."

Which was fairly in line with what Mallory expected.

"The guy," said Colin, "he said something about whomever killed Rowle had to know necromancy, so it couldn't have been you or Harper."

"What's necromancy?" asked Mallory.

"In Dungeons and Dragons," said Felix, "it means death magic, the revival of the dead and spreading of disease."

"In The Evil Dead," quipped Kit, giving Felix a look of supreme disgust, "it means reviving zombies with the necro-whatsit book."

Mallory crinkled her nose, "but they killed Rowle, they didn't bring her back to life."

"Maybe he killed her to bring her back to life as a zombie, bound to his will." said Kit.

Mallory's stomach lurched, her mind's eye immediately illustrating what that might look like.

Rowle's corpse lit by the fire, blood sluggishly dribbling out the gaps between twigs.

"Okay, stop talking," said Mallory, "I'm going to throw up."

She stared at the stone floor, breathing through her nose. She was not thinking about the forest. She was thinking about the stone floor, with it's pits and grooves and sun-bleached —

— individual pools were merging together, sharing the same fluids. Mallory was standing in Rowle's diluted blood —

The blood rushing in her skull sounded like static in her ears, and Mallory's skin felt clammy and crawling with horror.

"Oh, god," Mallory croaked, "distract me. Please."

"I brought my set of walkie-talkie's from home, so have them in case we get separated." spoke Colin, in a rush.


Kit tugged her, looping her arm around Mallory's and squeezing her hand.

"I'm grabbing all the food at lunch." said Kit. "As much food as we can carry, just in case."

"And we're grabbing some steak knives, if they have any." said Colin.

"Are we bringing your trunk?" asked Felix. "Because we can ask a prefect to cast a featherlight charm on it. That way, if we need to run, it won't slow us down."

"She could just let go of it." said Kit, squeezing her hand again.

"The featherlight charm's a good idea," replied Mallory. "Thanks."

Kit at her side and the bright sunlight warm on the bridge of her nose did much to dispel the memories. As Mallory's calming potion wore off, she had to devote more energy to keeping
thoughts of the Forest away.

"Who's Farley?" asked Felix.

That question finally got Mallory thinking on what happened in the Interrogation Room. She'd been distracted before, unsure of the danger she was in and what The Grand Undertoad might do to her.

"She's a seventh year Slytherin Prefect. At the Initiation, she lead the ceremonies, said a whole load of waffle about Slytherin being the best. Then she made us — all the first years — hit each other with spells on pain of horrible torture."

"Holy smokes!" gasped Colin.

"I know!" said Mallory, "it was awful, and I had no idea what to do—" Mallory blinked, a thought coming to her mind.

"Oh fuck, Fred and George are working with Farley!" she groaned, "that's why the Grand Undertoad was saying my trunk was in her lair, because it was in her lair— they share it."

"And the Aurors think Farley's responsible." said Felix.

"She's a suspect, that's for sure." agreed Mallory.

"Oh-kay," said Kit, drawing out her vowels, "but why would she want to kill Rowle?"

"I don't know." said Mallory, "but— I didn't think of it before, but all three of us, Harper, me, and Rowle— we were called out by Farley for being un-Slytherin."

"You think Rowle was killed for not being Slytherin enough?" Colin gaped.

"I don't know," Mallory shrugged, "but it is weird."

This was another situation where she needed her parents. They'd know what to do about Farley and how to avoid getting into trouble with the law.

Snape, her supposed guardian in the wizarding world, didn't give two shits about her. Dumbledore might care, but according to The Grand Undertoad, he was losing favor with the public.

That loss of favor could translate to a loss in power. There was a good chance he wouldn't want to expend his dwindling capital on a single muggleborn.

Which left her in a lurch.

A lurch that the combined powers of mum, dad, and Danny could beat, if only they were here.

Mum was all kinds of clever, and dad was good at sounding firm and commanding. Mallory and Danny would do the strategy, and in no time at all everything would be well again. That foul toad would crawl back under the rock from when-st she spawned.

"Kingsley said that someone named Moody said that the killer used necromancy." said Kit, "and that they're bringing in a special person to look into it."

"This was when I couldn't hear anything?" asked Mallory.

"Yeah," said Colin, "and the Auror said that a first year can't cast death magic, so I don't think you're in any trouble."
"He said that a muggleborn first year couldn't." corrected Kit, sounding sour.
Mallory almost laughed. Oh, so that's why the Toad's face twisted into such a nasty shape. Kingsley turned her own argument around on her.

"You play dungeons and dragons?" asked Colin, looking at Felix.

"No," said Felix, "no one at home knew how to play." his tone was more challenging than necessary. Mallory wondered if what he meant was that no one wanted to play with him.

"Wait," said Felix, stopping dead in the middle of the corridor, "we're forgetting something."

"What?" asked Mallory.

"We need to warn Harper before we leave." said Felix. "He might be in danger."

She hadn't even thought of that.

But Felix was right, Harper was in danger.

If someone was picking off Mallory, Rowle, and Harper in particular, for any reason, then Harper might be next. She'd brushed off Montague before, when he babbled on about Harper. But now that she had time to think about it—

"He's still in the Hospital Wing, I think." Mallory said. She felt embarrassed. She hadn't even considered telling him.

---

It took ten minutes, but eventually they decided to split up. Felix and Kit would get food in the Great Hall and pack their bags with supplies. While they did that, Mallory and Colin would warn Harper.

They'd all meet in a half hour at the bottom of the Grand Staircase, ready to go.

The walkie-talkies would be left behind, as would the slingshot. Colin's dorm was all the way on the other side of the castle and up seven flights of stairs. It'd take far too long to retrieve it, and time was of the essence.

---

Harper was still in the hospital wing, and he wasn't alone.

Seven students crowded around Harper's bed. The nurse was going to have a conniption, when she saw.

Of the seven, Mallory recognized most of them. Hoop-boy Avery was sitting on a wicker chair by Harper's bed. Harper's legs were being employed as a makeshift desk for a game of cards.

Not a game, Mallory realized as they walked closer. Avery was dealing out cards from a collection of inexplicably stained and warped cards.

Tarot cards.

Was that what he meant by his secret way of telling if more students would die?

Vaisey was leaning over Avery's shoulder, cokebottle glasses glinting in the light. He didn't look too happy about her presence, and kept inching away from her in his seat.
"The ten of swords," Avery put down the card, "you'll be betrayed, followed by—"

"Rubbish." huffed the boy leaning against one of the other beds.

Avery ignored him, flipping the next card, "followed by the Tower, the betrayal will result in a fall."

"From a high tower," scoffed the boy, "you know what this means?"

"You're going to tell me," said Avery, with no small amount of scorn. They had yet to notice Mallory and Colin's slow approach.

"It means Harper's getting pushed off the Astronomy tower!" the boy crowed.

"Yeah, yeah, huck it up," snorted Montague, "you wouldn't be laughing if those were your cards."

"Yes," said Vaisey, "but what does it mean?"

"It means something bad is coming, and there isn't much we can do about it." said Avery.

"The Cracklewood Carver?" Vaisey asked, eyes narrowed.

"I've no idea." said Avery, with his usual nonchalance.

Vaisey picked that moment to glance up, and stiffened upon seeing Mallory and Colin.

"Go away." she hissed, "you're not wanted here."

The other kids looked up, faces twisted in various expressions of dislike. Cleaning-charm girl was sitting on the floor, eyes averted. Her legs were tucked under her bum, hands folded in her lap.

Montague was outright glaring, and Vaisey looked like she wanted to slice someone with one of her cutting charms.

More specifically, she looked like she wanted to slice up Mallory.

"Harper," said Mallory, craning her neck to look around Vaisey. "We need to talk. It's important."

"Bugger off, mudblood." said the boy who scoffed at the tarot cards. He wasn't a Slytherin, Mallory didn't recognize him.

"We don't want you here," said another kid, "if you don't go, we'll tell a teacher."

"It's really important, Harper." Mallory said, ignoring the other kids.

"Then say it." said Harper, who was sitting up in bed with dark circles under his eyes. He looked like how she felt.

"Er—" Mallory glanced at the small crowd of students glaring at her, "I'm not sure I should say it in front of your friends."

"Selwyn hasn't killed anyone," said Avery, "yet. Though he might make you his first if you keep mouthing off about it."

This already wasn't going as planned.

She hadn't expected for there being a crowd around Harper's bed. In fact, Mallory would've bet
money that all his classmates besides for Montague would abandon him entirely. Except, it seemed that wasn't the case.

Seven students crowded around his bed, seven new variables.

Any one of them might be bewitched by her Enemy. And that wasn't even accounting for the opportunists who would find the revelation of Mallory or Harper's vulnerability tempting. The wrong words spoken in the right place could mean her end.

The Enemy might not know Mallory knew she was in danger. They might not know she'd guessed they have agents in the school. Right now, her knowledge was her only weapon.

"I'm not talking about that." Mallory huffed. "I haven't told my friends, either. Not because I don't want them to know, but because it's dangerous."

She wished Colin was a better actor, because instead of showing solidarity or a firm nod to show he agreed with what Mallory was saying, he looked confused.

Harper sat up slowly in his bed, brow furrowed.

"You're lying," said Montague.

"Maybe," said Mallory, "but I'm telling you I know something, and your life might depend on you knowing it, too."

She couldn't say I saved your life in front of his friends. He'd be honor-bound to tell her to fuck off if she did. She knew how these things went. He'd be humiliated.

Saved by a mudblood was worse in the wizarding world, than saved by a girl was in the normal world. Embarrassing wouldn't begin to cover it.

"My life." said Harper, as though the words were something foul on his tongue.

"Yeah," Mallory flicked her eyes over to Avery and his tarot cards, "I know more than those cards, at least."

Harper looked away.

"How about this," said Mallory, "I'll tell you what I know, and afterwards, you can decide whether to tell your friends."

"But you don't want me to." said Harper.

"I think you won't want you to, to keep them safe."

"Let me guess," said Vaisey, "you're going to accuse one of us of killing Rowle."

"The more people that know, the more people in danger." Mallory stayed calm. If that's what they thought, then all the better. A good mouthful of misinformation fed right into her Enemy's maw.

"What kind of danger?" asked Montague.

"I really can't say." Mallory said.

There was a pause.
Harper looked between Mallory's steady gaze, and the suspicious glances of his twitchy friends. Then he glanced back between them again, scowling.

"Just—" Harper broke off, "it's fine." He waved his friends off.

Vaisey's hands curled into fists, "she's going to lie."

Harper scoffed, "I saw what happened, so she can't trick me like that."

Yes, and Mallory knew he knew that, which meant he knew that she couldn't lie about anything they saw. She would've pointed it out, but there was no need to oversell her case.

Besides, she wasn't about to correct his friends' faulty assumptions. Telling Harper was the right thing to do, just like splitting up into teams to save time was the sensible thing to do.

It didn't make it any less risky.

Kit and Felix could tell the professors her plan while Mallory spoke to Harper. And Harper might choose to tell his friends what she was planning. If he did, she'd lose her advantage.

Harper's friend's cleared off to the other side of the Hospital Wing. Colin went with them when Mallory nudged him. Twice.

She fought very hard to keep the irritation off her face as she sat in the seat Avery vacated, pushing aside his cards.

Harper didn't meet her eye, "what's..." he breathed out, "why are you here?"

He looked way worse than she did.

Mallory picked up one of Avery's discarded tarot cards, fiddling the edge.

"The aurors called me in to interrogate me, and I overheard some things, besides." Mallory started, thinking how she was going to proceed. The whole trip down to the Hospital Wing she had to puzzle out how she'd handle this.

Now that she was here, she was less certain. The addition of the seven friends was a wrench in her plans. She hadn't accounted for those variables.

"So was I." his eyes were on the card, seemingly unable to look her in the eye.

"We don't really know what happened in the woods that night," said Mallory.

Harper glanced up at her face, "we don't."

Mallory nodded, "memory charms, false-memory charms, you said it before when we were all talking— before— you know."

"You think it's one of the seventh years," he said it almost dismissively, and turned away.

"I don't know." Mallory shook her head, "I have a few ideas, but it boils down to how I'm not sure the aurors are looking in the right direction. They're talking about the Carver and necromancy, but what if this was about us?"

"You, you mean." said Harper, "we followed you."
"If an adult wanted to teleport only me, they could've done it. They chose to move all of us to the forest."

She didn't know if that was true, but it was better for him to believe that lie. If he thought Rowle's death was Mallory's fault, he might try to screw her over.

She didn't know how close Rowle and Harper were, before Rowle died.

"What?"

"Apparate, teleport, whatever—" Mallory rolled her eyes, "all three of us were there on purpose, and we have no clue why. But we can guess."

Harper sat up, and gave her a flat look, "and why won't I want to tell my friends this? You're not telling me anything I don't already know."

Mallory flipped over the card. The tower. A betrayal followed by a fall.

She drew another card from the messy pile, and placed them both in front of Harper as she thought out loud.

"The enemy falls into two major categories, someone within Hogwarts and someone from the outside."

"So, it could be anyone." He was starting to look peeved.

"Yeah, but then we narrow it down a bit," Mallory tapped the Tower, "it can't have been another first year, because the magic was powerful. The aurors are puzzled, so it must've been been someone older, someone who knew we'd all be out there that night, someone who knew we'd all run like rats from a sinking ship. They used the chaos to take us."

Harper scowled most condescendingly, "someone might've told the murderer we were out there. Just because they knew all that doesn't mean anything. The mind arts or plain bribery could get anyone that information."

"Exactly," Mallory's face split into a grin.

Harper blinked. "I don't follow."

"Anyone in the school," at this, Mallory lowered her voice to a mere whisper, "anyone, even your friends, might be working for the Enemy. They might not even know they're doing it. If this killer meant for all of us to die, it wouldn't take much for them to have someone kidnap us and finish the job."

Harper blanched, eyes flicking over to where his friends were awkwardly milling in the corner. They were frowning curiously at Mallory and Harper.

"The betrayal," he whispered.

"Maybe," Mallory thought of Kit and Felix, who currently knew Mallory's plan and were wandering the halls of Hogwarts. Risk. There was no way to know.

"The aurors are looking for the Carver," said Harper, "but they're also going through Slytherin House, questioning anyone who might be connected with it. They might catch whoever is working for the—"
"If I were secretly the agent of an Evil Killer, who was bribing or blackmailing me into torturing and memory charming kids, do you think I'd leave any trace in anyone's mind that I was connected to it?"

She'd pay someone to make her forget, and have them pay someone to erase their mind. It'd create a daisy-chain of memory erasing. With some finagling, it'd be impossible to tell who was an agent of the killer, after the fact.

"Only if they're very good at memory charms."

Mallory nodded, "so we can't catch them ourselves, and the aurors likely won't, either. And if it really is the Carver, well, the aurors haven't had any luck there at all."

The Carver operated for over twenty years without getting caught. She didn't expect them to catch the Carver this time.

"Yeah, but why still come after us?"

"Uhh..." Mallory blinked, "if it's the Carver, then he killed three kids every time, I think. We'd be the only ones who got away. Maybe it'd rankle him. Serial killers are bent in the head, you know. It's why they go killing. And if it was someone who meant to kill one of us on purpose and make it look like a Carver attack, then they'd kill all three of us to hide the real target."

Harper shook his head, "that can't—"

"I know what to do, though." Mallory looked him straight in the eye, "and it's why I'm telling you. We both need to run away from Hogwarts."

"What?" Harper drew back, "with you? No way."

"Not with me, no." Mallory crinkled her nose, "no way, but I'm getting out using a McGonagall's floo. You should, too."

"The professor's floo?" Harper narrowed his eyes in suspicion, "they've shut them all down."

"Not the Deputy Headmistress' floo." Mallory flashed him a grin, flipping another card over. "Tomorrow night I'm leaving, and you should, too."

This was, of course, a lie. The timing of her escape and the method were entirely different. It was the best she could come up with, on the spot. She hadn't expected him to have more friends, more people to tell her plan.

Risk, misdirections, lies.

If Harper told his friends, Mallory had a bit of room through which she could wriggle out of the noose she made for herself, here.

Her Enemy and their pawns might waste resources patrolling outside McGonagall's office.

Hogwarts was a teleportation-free zone. Which meant hiding within Hogwarts until one was ready to escape was a worthy design. Except, of course, that witches and wizards had the most incredibly vexing ability to track a young hero's whereabouts.

Now, she knew they couldn't actually take her from her parents, once she reached them. That would be all kinds of illegal, given how parents have authority over their children, unless they're
being terribly abused or somewhich.

Once she reached her parents, said parents could politely tell the wizards to *fuck off*, and they'd be obliged to do exactly that.

The whole problem lay in the *reaching* them.

This was complicated by a wizard's general ability to teleport wherever they please, rendering *distance* a decidedly surmountable challenge, once she left Hogwarts. She had to reach her parents *before* the aurors realized she was missing. The second they noticed, they'd do a tracking spell and then teleport to her location. If she wasn't at her parents' house by then, she was screwed.

How she accomplished this didn't matter very much to her, except to avoid doing anything that would have her friends forever hating her.

It was *really* too bad that the floos were locked down. The second she said it outloud to Harper, she started thinking how the floo was a great idea. Floo to Diagon Alley and take a bus home from there.

"Don't tell your friends," said Mallory. "Really, don't."

Harper shifted his gaze to the now-impatient group of first years. "They're set on finding whoever killed Rowle."

Which meant he was going to tell them? Mallory cocked her head, confused. "Yeah, but they're not going to. None of us could. The Carver or whatever, they're older and powerful and even have the aurors confused. We don't know any fancy magic or anything."

He shook his head, "just go away. You've made your point."

Mallory put the cards down and stood up, "*don't* tell them, like— I— *I didn't leave you behind in the woods to die,* "just don't, okay?"

"I get it," he said dully.

Mallory's eyes flicked over to the now-approaching group of ornery first years. "I could've left you to die, you know." she hissed, though it likely would only make him more stubborn, "this is the same sort of thing."

She didn't wait for him to reply, and instead spun on her heel and stomped past the group of first years.

Colin almost tripped over himself, catching up to her as she stormed out the hospital wing in a huff. She *knew* Harper wouldn't listen to her, but it rankled, regardless.

"What did he *say*?" Colin asked, eyes wide and worried.

Mallory stopped in place, adrenaline and fear coiling in her gut. She shouldn't have told him. It was a risk, a coin flip, but—

If Harper tells those seven first years all about Mallory's plan, even the fake plan, it was putting her and her friends at risk. She'd gone into it thinking Harper might tell *just* Montague, who was a loyal friend and wouldn't purposefully betray him.

The risk there was in Montague being snatched, tortured for information, and mindwiped. The
killer might want to know if Mallory or Harper saw anything of value. But instead of that, they'd learn how Mallory deduced that the killer had agents in Hogwarts. If she was right about that, it put her and Harper in more danger.

With only her friends, Harper, and Montague in the know, there wasn't much danger. Harper was in the Hospital Wing, with auror guards right outside. Montague was a risk, but Harper might not tell his loyal friend for fear of endangering him. Mallory and her friends were muggleborns, and everyone thought they were ignorant and stupid. Chances are no one would bother with them.

The risk there was in Montague being snatched, tortured for information, and mindwiped. The killer might want to know if Mallory or Harper saw anything of value. Now she had to worry about seven people, people she didn't know and didn't trust one whit.

Too much risk, with almost no chance of Harper actually choosing to run away.

"Harper's an idiot." Mallory said. "He and his friends, they think they're going to solve the mystery like they're bloody Sherlock Holmes."

"You don't know," said Colin, who was shifting from foot to foot with discomfort, "they might figure it out."

"They won't," Mallory insisted, "and he's going to tell them everything and they'll tell all their friends everything—"

And she hated it when doing the right thing bit her in the arse. She had to tell Harper and she hated that she regretted it on some level.

"They're not his friends at all." said Colin, with some hesitation, "they were talking the whole time, and— almost all of them were there to get information from him, and they were annoyed because he wasn't too keen on them being there."

Mallory blinked, surprised. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

"Who was there for him?" Mallory asked, trying to sort out who'd learn her secret by the end of the evening.

If, say, four of the seven were there for the mystique of solving a murder mystery, and those four kids each told (in total confidence, of course) two of their friends— and then their friends whispered to their friends (in total confidence) how Mallory suspected spies in the school—

Well, it'd be all over the school by nightfall.

Her lie wasn't clever enough to act as a proper safety net. It relied on her Enemy and their minions making a mistake and the aurors catching them and that her Enemy didn't know how to cast a tracking charm.

Mallory wasn't fond of any scheme that forced her to rely on multiple things going right.

"The kid from earlier in the hallway, not the one with the tarot cards." Colin shrugged, "and this Ravenclaw kid, I don't know his name, either."

The one in the hallway who wasn't Avery? Then the kids were Montague and some kid she didn't know.
Mallory nodded, "alright then, let's go catch up with Felix and Kit."

Two wasn't as bad as seven, but the risk was still there.

A sinking feeling of despair was welling in her gut. This wouldn't end well. And unlike her previous adventures with Danny, the consequences for failure here were far more severe.

Chapter End Notes

This work is now part of a series. "Part 2" contains all the illustrations from the fic I've created so far. There are pieces not included in the chapters, so if you're interested, check them out.
The Cracklewood Carver Part 5

Chapter Notes

As a general note to avoid confusion: while Mallory may believe that any and all over her memories are suspect, that's not necessarily true. Assume that if it happens "on-screen," it really happened.

The hallway leading to the Greenhouses was narrow, with a high vaulted ceiling. Sunlight weakly filtered through paned windows on the right wall, vines and creepers grasping for purchase on the grimy glass. Countless students walked in and out every day, tracking mud onto the stone floor. But not today, it seemed.

Two aurors were posted at the door, and they weren't letting any students in or out.

At the corner of the hallway leading out the Greenhouses, Mallory and her friends waited. She poked her head around the corner again, quickly, and saw a flash of red robes still lurking by the door. Damn.

"They're not moving," Mallory muttered from her crouched position by the corner. Felix and Kit were lurking behind her, likewise doing their best to be stealthy.

The wall they were pressed against met the greenhouse corridor, forming an L shape. Outside the windows it opened up into a yard, before the grass met the glass of the Greenhouse Two. Overgrown creepers crawled along the glass, wedged into cracks. They spread outward like long, gnarled fingers.

The vines spread from the Greenhouse proper to the corridor leading outside. She could see them from her hiding spot. Fortunate, because the vines blocked the aurors from spying the four students lying in wait.

"Don't you think it's more obvious that we shouldn't be here, if we're crouching by the corner?" asked Felix, whispering from right behind her.

Mallory looked back at him. The afternoon sunlight was glinting off his glasses, which he needed as badly as Velma in *Scooby Doo*. His black wizard school robes were slightly wrinkled, and she could see the bottoms of his trousers and white trainers where the robe rode up.

He'd dropped his bag on the ground next to him. It wasn't a good idea to leave it there. If they needed to move fast, he'd waste precious seconds picking it up. Mallory would've said something about it, but they'd been waiting at that corner for almost ten minutes. Their bags were heavy.

"No one's around," Mallory whispered with a shrug. *And this is more fun.*

At that, Kit abandoned all pretense of sneaking, walking back toward Colin at the other end of the corridor, away from the corner.

Beads of sweat had gathered on Kit's forehead. The girl let out an irritated huff and started fussing with her hair, tying the light brown curls back before shucking off her black witch's robes.
"Woah!" said Colin, from where he was meant to be keeping a lookout.

"Shh!" Mallory and Felix shushed him.

"It's not like there's a bathroom," hissed Kit, "just don't look."

Not that there was anything to look at. Kit, like the other three muggleborn students, wore real clothes under her robes. Her shirt was hidden under an ugly woolen jumper two times too big for her, buttoned all the way to the top. The sleeves were rolled up and the heavy jumper was long enough that it hung over her plaid skirt. Mallory could see skinned knees through her stockings, and Kit had picked bright red wellies to complete her ensemble.

Kit stretched, back cracking in a way that made Felix flinch, and flopped down next to Colin.

One more glance around the corner to be sure the aurors hadn't moved, and Mallory inched away from the greenhouse corridor. She tapped Felix's shoulder and gesturing for him to follow.

Once all four of them were two corridors away from the aurors, Mallory felt safe enough to speak without whispering.

"We need a new plan." she spoke, dropping her bag in the middle of the corridor with a thud.

There were two alcoves in this hallway they could hide in, if someone came by. She'd picked it for this reason. The alcoves were deep, dark, and suits of armor stood sentinal inside them. Two first years could cram behind it in a hurry, and would be almost completely hidden. The lack of windows meant it was cooler, too. A relief after crouching in the sun for a while.

"They might leave soon." said Colin, hope tinging his voice. He shifted the bag on his shoulder in discomfort.

They all had bags. Turns out no upper years were willing to cast a featherlight charm on Mallory's trunk, so she grabbed what she wanted most and shoved it all in her bag. That, her money, a butter knife and two forks, plus a pilfered sandwich made up the contents of her arsenal. The rest had similar scores.

Mallory wasn't feeling too hopeful about that. Two forks and a butter knife were hardly weapons they could use against the bloody Cracklewood Carver or some unnamed killer.

"They're not going to leave," said Felix, "they're wizard policemen. Protecting that door right now is their job."

He said the word job as though it was a synonym for sacred duty.

"It's warm," Kit kicked aimlessly at the air, "I thought they'd get bored or fall asleep."

Mallory took a deep breath. It smelled of the damp, leaving a sharp taste of minerals on the back of her tongue.

"I was thinking about it while we were waiting." Mallory said, starting to pace in the corridor, "the windows are all locked, and the rest of the doors we know of, they're guarded or locked, too. Do you think they missed one?"

It was saying something that she was now relying on people making mistakes. So far, their Grand Escape met all dead ends.
Kit shrugged, "I don't know."

"I don't know where all the doors are located, either," said Felix. He spoke like this was a personal failing of his.

Mallory hesitated. She could say something, pry or poke at him to figure out what he was thinking, but there really wasn't the time. The afternoon sun was getting lower in the sky, and it'd be a hike to Dufftown.

"Okay," Mallory nodded. They'd tried smashing a window in, but it hadn't worked. The windows were either made of something other than glass, or were magically reinforced. Whole corridors and floors were off-limits, for no apparent reason at all. Aurors guarded them, just like they guarded the door leading out to the Greenhouses.

Some doors were sealed and didn't have aurors guarding them. At first they thought this was lucky, but neither Mallory's attempt at lockpicking (bent bobbypins melted in her fingers) nor Felix's clever unlocking spell worked. Doors that couldn't be sealed were guarded by aurors instead of sealed. They'd hoped the aurors would get bored and leave, but—

Mallory blinked. Oh.

"If the aurors have to go, d'you think they leave the door unlocked behind them?" she asked, feeling rather foolish.

The four first years looked at one another. Felix's ears were turning red, Kit looked like she'd been struck in the face, and Colin practically deflated.

"We need another way out." said Colin, glancing around the corridor as though he were looking for inspiration.

Mallory thought, "okay, what about windows on the seventh floor?"

They'd tried the first floor windows, butw would anyone expect someone to try to leave through the seventh?

"The seventh floor?" asked Colin, perking up, "we'd need a way to get down."

"Brooms," nodded Mallory, "we'll grab some brooms, swing to the seventh floor, and fly away from Hogwarts."

Kit looked like Mallory just hung the moon. She wanted adventure.

"The brooms are stored outside in the broom shed," said Felix.

And they couldn't get outside, because all the doors were locked and guarded. And the windows were locked. They were back at square one. Mallory scowled with irritation.

Kit and Colin looked like someone just killed their puppy.

"But—" Colin perked again, "second years and up keep their brooms in their rooms. Someone will have brooms we can use."

"Right," Mallory picked up her bag, "let's go, then."
The four of them made their way down the corridor, this time heading toward the Grand Staircase. Felix took the lead.

After an hour of wandering through the castle, Mallory had realized Felix was good at directions. Better than Colin, Kit, and herself, at least. After the third time they got lost and Felix was the one who figured out how to get them back to the Grand Staircase, he was designated the group navigator.

Mallory and Colin took up the middle, walking side by side. Trailing behind, Kit was taking in the portraits and suits of armor that lined the corridors.

"You lied earlier," Colin said, voice low.

"About what?" Mallory asked, largely because she wasn't sure which lie he was referring to—she lied a lot.

"You said you didn't see her body, at first. You said you didn't see her die." Colin glanced at her, face unusually solemn.

Ah, that.

Before, when Mallory was in the Hospital Wing, she'd told him she hadn't seen anything gory. This was before she realized just how alike they were. He wanted to be a hero, too. She'd forgotten the lie between the Potion's Incident and their conversation in Study Hall.

"Oh." Mallory swallowed. It didn't feel good to lie to her friends, or to be caught in a lie. Her stomach felt twisty and her legs leaden.

Colin poked her in the arm. "Do it again." he said, "and I'll drop one of Snape's preserved animals down the back of your shirt."

"What?" she blinked, "no." The switch from grim disapproval to teasing caught her off guard. Her brain struggled to switch gears.

He poked her in the arm, again. It wasn't the injured one, which was crusty with dried blood under her robes. She'd forgotten to get it fixed in the Hospital Wing. Too distracted, preoccupied with schemes.

"Yes," he said, "friends don't lie about stuff like that."

Mallory crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes. "You wouldn't."

She could feel the scab on the back of her arm crack and re-open. It was a fight to keep the wince off her face. Colin might interpret it to mean she was actually upset, just when they were healing the rift in their friendship.

Worse, he might tell her to go to the Hospital Wing, again.

Time was of the essence, and Madame Pomfrey might decide Mallory ought to spend the night in the Hospital Wing. That could be fatal.

"Oh, I sure would!" Colin said, a smile bursting across his face, "how about it? An eyeball in your soup, flobberworms diced and grinded into your pumpkin juice..."

"No. If you do that I'll—" she was cut off.
"I thought you said you'd do anything." Colin's face was twisted in an expression of mock woe. "Anything to earn my forgiveness. Were you lying?"

"Colin Creevey, that's evil!"

He started giggling, so she punched him, hard, in the arm.

"Ow!" he clutched his shoulder, "that hurt!"

"I want to see Mallory drinking ground flobberworms," said Kit, from behind them.

"I'll pass, thanks." quipped Mallory.

Kit slung her arms around Mallory's shoulders from behind. It was awkward and uncomfortable, not only because Mallory was taller than Kit so she had to reach up, but because of Mallory's backpack wedged between them.

"Get the flobberworms while I have her trapped," said Kit, "she can't escape." Her tone was placid, calm, which didn't match her actions or words. An affected calm.

Kit's hands bumped Mallory's chin were they were clasped. She definitely could escape, but the backpack was a buffer between Mallory's injured arm and Kit's exuberance. She was fine like this.

It was nice. The rifts she'd created with her stunt during the Potion's Incident were healing.

Felix stopped walking and turned to stare at them. He shook his head, but was smiling.

"I don't have any on me." Colin's brow furrowed with confusion, "we can't—"

"Wait!" Felix turned to look down the corridor. He was standing a few paces ahead, at the four-way junction.

It took her not even a second to realize that he was seeing something that they weren't, and the joke was over.

The temperature in the corridor dropped by a dozen degrees in an instant, and their breaths were fogging out in little puffs in front of their mouths.

Something was wrong.

Mallory's heart thudded double-time in her chest, palms cold and sweaty.

"Don't ruin my—" Kit started, but Mallory reached back with her good arm in a flash, shoving her hand where she guessed Kit's mouth was still talking, oblivious to the danger.

One finger ended up a nostril, two between some sharp teeth, and the rest were slimed by Kit's still-moving tongue. Mallory wrinkled her nose.

A voice from the next corridor over spoke, "—him something like this could happen."

Colin jumped, and Felix froze where he stood.

"He no longer heeds our advice." spoke a different voice. Both voices carried with a strange quality, like they were speaking from a great distance. Quiet, like echoes.

Mallory rolled her shoulders until Kit released her with a huff. Still-slimed fingers snatched Felix
by the collar of his robe and dragged him backwards toward an alcove. Colin and Kit followed, the latter wiping her mouth with a grimace.

Two ghosts glided into sight. One was covered in silvery blood, and the other's head was hanging by a thin flap of skin.

Well, that explained it.

"If the protections keep rotting—"

"He believes it's dark magic, that the sacrifice is no longer necessary."

"Preposterous!"

Mallory and her friends stood frozen behind an ugly statue of a gargoyle, a statue which decided to move with a cringe-inducing grinding noise.

Fuck.

"Indeed, yet it is what Albus believes."

Except neither ghost looked over. The stone gargoyle finished scratching its arse, and went still.

"Foolish. Darker things, beasts from—"

The two ghosts stepped straight through a wall and out of sight. Almost immediately, the temperature rose from freezing to normal-Hogwarts-chilly.

"Darker things," Colin spoke, eyes on the wall where the ghosts disappeared through. "What darker things?"

The four stepped out from the alcove. Felix brushed himself off and straightened his rumpled clothes.

"I don't know, but—" Mallory half-turned so she could see her friends' faces. "Did that seem really weird to you?"

"No?" Colin asked, "the stone gargoyle scratched its butt, which was odd, but—"

"No," she shook her head. "That's not what I meant. Uh— the whole thing. Who has a talk like that in public where anyone can overhear?"

"Albus refers to Dumbledore, the Headmaster." Felix said, "the protections on something are rotting but the Headmaster thinks the— the protections, I guess— are bad."

He was thinking out loud.

"That's what would make sense," Mallory agreed.

"Protections for something are rotting, which means they aren't working anymore, or are working poorly," Felix was frowning.

"Dark things can get in." Colin cocked his head, considering, "do you want to bet they're talking about what happened to Rowle?"

If it wasn't, Mallory would cheerfully drink her flobberworm juice.
"That's what I meant, though." Mallory said, eyes still on the wall the ghosts vanished into, "it's mighty convenient, them appearing in front of us and having *that* talk."

"Maybe we got lucky." said Colin.

Mallory gave him a withering look, "I don't think so."

Felix's fingers were fiddling with the straps of his bag. "They warned the Headmaster about beasts from the Forbidden Forest. The beast attacked you, Rowle, and Harper because some sort of protections failed. A sacrifice— I'd guess and animal, or, I can't imagine a Headmaster ever sacrificing *people."

"*Felix.*" Mallory spoke sharply, before modifying her tone to something more gentle. "Thanks, you're right, I think. But… didn't— didn't that talk seem staged to you?"

"The ghosts don't want to secretly kill you, Mal." Colin rolled his eyes.

She shook her head, "no, I don't think they do. But it's just— it's *off.*"

Felix raised a brow, "why?"

"I—" Mallory blinked the cobwebs from her brain, "People don't talk like that. The one ghost repeated conversations they both had with the Headmaster. They both know *why* the Headmaster thinks it's bad. *We're the audience* and he was answering *our* unasked question why the Headmaster wouldn't update the protections."

The ghosts knew what would happen if the protections failed. If they were warning the Headmaster, by that logic they already knew what would happen if the protections failed. There was no need to mention it *again.*

"If they wanted to warn us, why not just walk up to us and *say* they're warning us?" asked Felix.

"Maybe they're not allowed?" asked Colin, shrugging. "I don't know."

Kit bounced on her heels, "everyone, don't you know what this means?"

Mallory gave Kit an annoyed look. "What?"

"It means we're *supposed* to solve this mystery! It's a *sign!*"

An hour and fifteen minutes had them no closer to escaping Hogwarts than before. It seems the aurors *thought of everything* and had confiscated everyone's broomsticks, in advance. Worse, the bloody windows on the seventh floor were sealed.

"If it's all sealed up," said Colin, sitting cross-legged on the teacher's desk, "then do you have to leave at all?"

They'd comandeered an empty classroom on the seventh floor. Mallory suspected it'd been abandoned for a while, given the amount of dust and cobwebs covering the desks. The windows were deep set into the stone, providing enough room for Kit to lounge there. She was looking out the window, overlooking a courtyard.

The musty smell of old smoke and resin tickled her nose.

Felix planted himself in one of the desks, and Mallory took to pacing back and forth in the aisle.
"If no one can leave, then you're not in any danger of being kidnapped," continued Colin.

"That won't stop them," Mallory shook her head, "we don't know all the ways out, sure. But there are secret passageways everywhere. The aurors 'nd professors don't know all of 'em. And— and a professor could be behind this, or blackmailed into helping the Enemy."

"The Enemy?" asked Felix, with a raised brow. His fingers were tracing lines in the desk where previous students scarred their initials.

"Rowle's killer," Mallory rolled her eyes in response, "the mastermind behind this."

Felix sat up straight, "you don't know that. You're not sure what happened. Earlier, you noted that your memories of Rowle's death are possibly fake, that memory charms were involved. I'd suppose your memories of the attack itself are also fake, a red herring for the investigators."

Kit hopped down from her perch on the windowsill, "we were talking at lunch. It makes sense. It's one of those— what's it. Er—"

"Think it through," said Felix, "Rowle's the only one dead. You said it yourself that her parents are criminals of some sort."

"Revenge!" Kit hopped up onto the teacher's desk, next to Colin. "They were doing revenge!"

Mallory stopped mid-step, contemplative. "They had me 'nd Harper think I went first so I'd think— so the aurors would think—" She was missing something. It didn't fit.

"Right!" said Colin, scooting forward, "so they need you alive so you can tell everyone that Rowle followed you, so they all think it was you who was the..."

Colin kept talking, but Mallory tuned him out. She was missing something. Why bother to alter her memories if they were about to kill her? It didn't make sense. She couldn't think with all the noise.

"Colin?" Mallory asked, "Can you stop talking? I need to think."

"You should ask the nurse for more calming potion," said Kit. "You're getting grumpy."

Mallory shook her head, "I'm fine, just—" give me a moment to think.

"You're overthinking it," said Colin, giving Kit a warning look. "Rowle was the target, not you. The doors are all locked and so are the windows. The aurors are here. I'll help— I said I would and I meant it— but—"

"—that's not—"

"I really don't want you to leave." said Colin.

There was a beat of silence. The surprise got her off-track, distracted her. Colin's legs were dangling lazily off the teacher's desk, and one of his shoelaces had come untied. Kit stood behind him, head cocked in curiosity.

Mallory's throat ached, in a distinct way that had nothing to do with the scent of old tobacco or dust.

"You're fun," said Kit, into the silence. "I vote you stay."

"We're not voting," Mallory muttered, blinking rapidly, "but thanks."
Felix said nothing at all.

She thought about South Brent, about eleven years where she’d only ever made one friend. It wasn't fair that she had to leave them behind. She didn't want to— it wasn't fair.

Mallory's eyes shut, chest tight and fists clenched. She needed to put this aside right now, she needed to solve the problem. After, then she could feel things.

The only memories Mallory felt certain of were that Rowle was dead, and that she and Harper were involved somehow. The three of them went missing sometime during that night, with a bunch of people to verify it.

"I've figured it out," Mallory said, snapping her head up, "if my memories are false, then Harper and I were meant to live. The Carver didn't do it, and it wasn't blood-motivated. Someone wanted Rowle dead, but wanted the aurors and everyone else to think I was the target." she nodded towards Colin, acknowledging his point.

"Okay," said Colin.

"But what if my memories aren't fake?" Mallory asked, "Because if they aren't, then all three of us were taken there to die. Harper and Rowle followed me, and all three of us were targetted by the Carver or someone else. Everything happened like I think it did, and the killer never expected me or Harper to get away."

"That's..." Kit trailed off, "that's not a good thing."

"No," Mallory confirmed, "no, it's not."

"We could sneak around the Castle." offered Colin, "if the ...Enemy has people in the school looking for you, it'd be hard track you if we kept moving around. Hogwarts is odd, so it'd be difficult to find you, what with secret passageways and hallways that mysteriously move between floors."

The tracking charm was called *point me*. Felix read about it, and explained to them what he knew about the spell, earlier. It acted like a magic compass, pointing the caster to the person or thing they wished to find.

Colin's plan wasn't terrible, except for all the holes in it.

"We don't know the castle well, and our Enemy or their minions do." Mallory said, "plus we don't have enough food for that. All they have to do is wait for us at the entrance to the Great Hall. Once we get hungry enough, they'll catch us."

They couldn't stay moving all day and night. And the aurors wouldn't be here forever. The castle was on lockdown now, but it wouldn't always be— if the killer couldn't get to her now, he would once the castle lowered its defenses.

"What about the secret passageways the murderer might use?" asked Felix.

"What about them?" Mallory asked.

"You think the murderer's using secret passageways the professors or aurors don't know about." said Felix, "I could try to find them."

"The castle's got a lot of rooms," said Kit, cocking her head to the side, "more than 100, at least."
Searching through all the rooms would take a long time. Passageways the aurors haven't found would be *extra* hidden, too. We might not find them at all, if the aurors and professors can't, and only a few students *ever* managed to discover them."

"The professors may have a master list. They'd know their own school." Felix protested.

"The castle's a *thousand years old.*" said Kit, crossing her arms condescendingly, "there must be *some* secrets." She looked positively delighted at the thought.

Fred and George might know. Granted, they were working with Farley and therefore a terrible choice. Asking them would be like asking the Enemy. Questioning older students could work, but if they had a secret passageway leading out of the castle all to themselves, they wouldn't tell any firsties.

The older years wouldn't help Mallory cast a featherlight charm on her trunk. Fat chance they'd tell her where the secret passageways were located.

It was really a shame the floos were locked down, because flooing to Diagon Alley and then asking the nearest adult for the next floo closest to Dartmoor was an excellent solution to her problem.

Mallory slumped onto the floor beside a desk, dropping the back of her head into one of the wooden seats.

"We're not giving up." said Colin.

"I'm not," Mallory stared at the ceiling. It was arched, with thick wooden rafters suspended across the room. Cobwebs connected them, and she could see dust motes floating down hazily when they passed through the light from the windows.

In the forest, she asked herself what Danny would do. But thinking around obstacles was usually Mallory's job. He'd define the problem, the variables, what the people were thinking and what they'd do. *She* was the one who made the plan.

This was her domain, but she was out of her depth. Mallory wasn't sure if this was because she was putting so much effort towards keeping her mind away from—she swallowed— or if it was because the aurors thought of everything *and she was only eleven, why did she have to deal with—*

"The rules aren't set in stone," spoke Kit.

"I'm not following," the words felt funny in Mallory's throat, with her neck stretched back like it was, to reach the chair. She blinked to get rid of the tears that had gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Grit and flecks of paper stuck to the tips of her fingers, as she shifted her hand along the cool stone underneath her. The rough surface and sensory input acted as a distraction from the growing pit of despair clawing at her stomach.

"The aurors or the professors control the gates, who gets in and who doesn't." said Kit, "Maybe we can try going through them, instead of around them."

They'd seen someone else try that, earlier. An older fifth year girl pulled an auror away from a door, with bloody knees and mussed hair, crying that she'd been attacked.

The aurors didn't leave their post, even when she said her friends were lying in a corridor bleeding
and needed help.

Instead, the two aurors called for backup over some sort of hand-held magic mirror, and cast a spell that shot ropes to bind the girl. The replacement auror arrived in a few minutes. And the girl was assigned detentions, once the aurors finished questioning her under veritaserum.

"They clearly anticipated that." sniffed Felix, a bit vexed.

"The extra aurors came from somewhere," said Kit, "maybe the ones that came left their own door unguarded."

"And unlocked?" asked Colin, "we did this. We're going in circles."

"What if we flooded a few bathrooms, or Mallory lit some tapestries on fire. She's said more than once she wants to, and I'll bet the aurors would investigate that!" offered Kit.

Mallory tuned them out a moment, thinking. How did she usually solve problems? Aggression meant attacking the aurors, which was likely to fail. Truth serum meant they'd know what she was planning in minutes and would fail to improve the situation in any measurable way. Running away? Didn't apply.

Intimidating an adult was really hard. She was eleven. Other kids could be intimidated, but not adults, they held all the power.

Mallory blinked.

They held all the power. They made the decisions.

"What?" asked Colin, "you're making that face, again."

"What face?" asked Kit.

"The face where she does something really stupid and starts a fight in potion's class by accusing Selwyn of Rowle's murder."

A grin worked its way across Mallory's face, and she sat up with a start. "We can't get out."

"Right," Colin echoed her, "we can't." He was looking at her like she might turn into a crocodile and eat him.

She stood up, stretched, and dusted off her robes, enjoying the anticipation.

"If we can't get out..." Mallory said, pausing to look each of them in the eye, "it's because the aurors are deciding the safest place for all of us to be is inside the castle."

"Oh, Lord." said Colin.

"If we can't get out, then let's make it so they believe the safest place to be is outside."

There was silence, for a moment, as her friends absorbed what she said.

"That's mad," said Felix, "we'll be breaking all kinds of rules."

"I love it," said Kit, grinning in a way that Mallory immediately categorized as manic, "but how are we gonna do it?"
"We're going to be in detention for the next two years." Colin said, resigned.

"First, we're already breaking rules. Second, some ketchup and a bit of dirt with panicked screaming should do the trick, and third, helping me escape in the first place would already get us in all kinds of trouble."

"I saw that fifth year—" Felix was fidgeting, anxious, "it's not— and what if the real Cracklewood Carver is out there and then all the students are out there and—"

"No, no—" Mallory waved her hands, "it's not like that, we're going to start— uh, are lots of people gathered anywhere?"

"I dunno," Kit shrugged.

"I'm not participating in this." Felix said, getting up. "You might actually get someone killed."

"You don't understand what I'm trying—"

"I think I do." Felix spun around, fists clenched. "You'll start a ruckus, have a lot of students believe the Cracklewood Carver is inside Hogwarts. In the chaos, you'll escape. Except that same ruckus can be used by Rowle's murderer as well. This is beyond reckless and shifts straight into deranged."

Mallory shifted her stance, eyeing Felix speculatively. His wand wasn't in his hand, and he was shorter than her, a twig like Danny. Danny, who she could get in a headlock in half a second.

Without magic to serve as an equalizer, Mallory was tall and rather strong for an eleven year old. Not freakishly so, not in a way that was magic, but she could definitely overpower Felix, if it came down to it.

"Are you going to tell a professor?" Mallory asked the only question that really mattered.

Felix froze, mid-motion about to pick up his bag. His eyes flicked between Mallory and the rest of them.

"Of course he won't." said Kit, "he'd never nark on us."

"You're going to beat me up." said Felix, tone flat.

"No," said Mallory, tone level, "but I'm going to tie you up."

She took one step forward and Felix bolted for the door, Mallory hot in pursuit.

What's worse was he made it.

Felix was fast for a bespectacled nerd-boy. He sped down the corridor, and Mallory wasn't catching up. It was all she could do to keep him in sight.

"Hey, stop that!" shouted a portrait.

"No running in the halls!" screeched another.

Neither Mallory nor Felix paid them any mind.

Her trainers thudded against stone with every step, robes billowing out behind her. Down a corridor and she recognized where they were, at the top of the Grand Staircase.
The Grand Staircase, which was a moving death trap straight out of Indiana Jones. He wasn't stopping. He actually intended to run down those stairs.

Fuck.

Mallory was already panting. A small part of her mind considered that maybe the events of the last couple days were taking their toll on her, and that was influencing her stamina.

He glanced back over his shoulder a split second before racing down the steps at break-neck speed, jumping over some steps to avoid them entirely.

Mallory followed his pattern of jumping, using the railing to avoid tripping on her way down.

"Slow down! No running on the staircases!" hollered a portrait.

Felix would remember where the trick stairs were, and she wasn't about to get stuck.

Then the staircase jolted, almost sending Mallory tumbling to her death. She grabbed the banister, steadying herself, as she realized what had happened.

She could've crowed with glee. The staircase they were both on detached from its landings and was moving up, twisting in midair, leaving Felix no where to run.

Mallory was at the top of the staircase, and Felix was at the bottom. Her heart pounding, she let out a breath of relief.

"Felix, I'll come up with another plan." Mallory lied, as she advanced down the staircase toward her target.

Felix ignored her.

Instead, he pulled out his wand, tossed his book-bag off his shoulders and into the air.

"Wingardium leviosa!"

The book-bag stopped its downward descend and floated up and out over the gap.

It took her barely a second to realize he was going to use it to bludgeon her, but there wouldn't be enough time because she could—

And Felix hopped up onto the banister. Mallory's brain went blank with confusion because what the fuck, "don't—!"

Felix Underwood jumped off the banister into thin air, hand stretched out to catch the strap of his levitating backpack.

He caught it, swinging wildly back and forth. The momentum carried him and the bag forward across the gap, out of her reach.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she shrieked, slamming her fist down on the banister. Her hands and legs were shaking from adrenaline and she thought her heart might leap it's way out her throat. It was a fucking six story drop holy fuck he could've died.

Worse, she couldn't do anything.

And what the fuck was that? She watched him float down to the fourth floor landing. Various
portraits on the walls whooped and cheered, tossing hats and painted bouquets of flowers in their paintings.

Did he spend all his time thinking of clever, unusual ways to use spells? If she weren't so annoyed at him and desperate for her plan to work, she'd be impressed.

"Fuck," she swore again, as he vanished out of sight.

Professor Pomona Sprout's office was a reflection of her greenhouse. Every available surface of the round room was covered in plants. With the late-afternoon sunlight filtering through the windows, it gave an overall impression of green.

Vines crawled their way up shelves and stones, while other plants actively moved. One had a sack-like protrusion that breathed, expanding and contracting like a lung. Another by the window was swaying back and forth, like one of those snakes hypnotized by a snake-charmer.

The professor sat behind her desk, wearing a concerned frown on her face. There was a smudge of dirt on her nose, and her curly hair was speckled with grey. Her professor's robes were covered by a muddy smock, which she forgot to take off before she sat down. As a consequence, the dried mud was cracking off and falling on the stone floor.

By the state of the floor, Mallory concluded this was a frequent occurrence.

Felix, the deranged rat, sat in the chair beside her, looking uncomfortable, but that was a poor consolation prize given that he actually had the gall to tell a professor what she was planning.

"Miss Hopkins," spoke Professor Sprout. "I'm very concerned about what I've been hearing."

"He didn't tell you that, too?" she forced the words out, past the frustration she felt. At this point, the frustration felt like a solid wall in her head, drowning out everything besides the fear.

"Mr. Underwood told me you fear for your life, and that you're determined to leave Hogwarts at any cost." She tilted her head a little, trying to make eye contact with Mallory, "I want to understand."

"I won't talk to you."

"Then others are going to speak for you, and you might not be represented accurately. I want to hear what you're thinking, Miss Hopkins."

Generally, adults didn't. Children's problems were petty interruptions in their busy lives. A child bullying another child was bothersome, and they didn't care how it was solved so long as the children were quiet and did as they were told. Granted, most weren't as bad as Snape, who took active pleasure in making their lives miserable.

"Miss Hopkins, Mallory, I need your help to understand what's happening, here." spoke Sprout.
There was the possibility, though, that Sprout was like her parents. Mallory's parents were the sort willing to go above and beyond what needed to be done. They cared. When they found out Mallory was a witch, they threw themselves into learning everything they could about the magical world. Before, when they learned Mallory was special and had powers, they guided her in keeping them a secret.

A kernel of hope grew in her, as she curled her fingers along the wood of the chair. This adult might want to help her.

"Professor Sprout," said Felix, "I can explain."

Mallory sat up, "I'll do it."

"Alright, Miss Hopkins, why do you think you're the target of this murderer?"

"I'm muggleborn," said Mallory, "possibly the first muggleborn in Slytherin. I don't know, but they all seem to think so. The seventh years, a bunch of others, they told me that if I didn't leave, they'd get me expelled or worse. Then, the very next day, I'm kidnapped along with two other students, and one of them dies."

Sprout frowned, "you're being bullied? By seventh years?" Instead of being incredulous, her tone and face read horror.

"I can list it out, if you like." Mallory fought hard to make her tone less combative, but she didn't think it worked.

"Yes," Sprout nodded, "please do. Though, if you'd like Mr. Underwood to leave, I'd under—"

"It's fine." Mallory shrugged.

"Alright, then. Go on."

"Er— night one, Harper and his friends dangled me upside down in the common room, and they all took turns hitting me with spells," Mallory counted it out on her fingers, "stinging spells, one that made me paralyzed, another that blinded me, made boils break out on my skin, that sort of thing. Then they dropped me on my head— er, they only stopped when they thought Snape was coming."

Mallory glanced up to meet Sprout's eyes. The woman's mouth was open.

"They did all this while saying it was because I'm a mudblood, and don't deserve to be in their house. That I'm lowering the standards of the house, and have dirty blood."

"The other boy— that's Harper, the one who was also kidnapped?" asked Sprout, voice soft.

"Yeah, and the next day Rowle, Harper, and Montague cornered me in a hallway. They'd burnt my trunk, and smacked me into a wall really hard. The nurse said I had a fractured skull— er, and other stuff. Burns. The bullies went to Snape and said I started a fight, said I burnt my own trunk for attention. Snape bought it, and gave me detention."

"On top of that, Felix flew into a group of Slytherins playing quidditch during flying practice, and they all started firing on him. My friend and I, we went to help, and they knocked us all off our brooms. Everyone believes we attacked them, but that's not what happened."

"That night, we're all taken out into the woods, all the first year Slytherins, second years, and
seventh years. Farley— she's a Slytherin prefect— she has us all cast spells on each other, right? Harper had to stand there and let us all hit him with jinxes, else something worse would happen to us. And you know, when I stood up to her, she cast a— a supersense spell, and it made everything feel way worse, and then she had everyone line up and—"

"They jinxed you." Sprout spoke, more of a whisper or like she'd said it without meaning to— her face was white as chalk.

"Yeah, until I passed out. They were going to do the same thing to Rowle when someone said a professor was coming, and everyone bolted. Then—" Mallory swallowed, "Rowle was killed." "I told the aurors about the mudblood thing, that they wanted to kill me, but they all think Rowle was the target because her parents were Death Eaters. And maybe that's true. Someone might've put false memories in my head to make the aurors think I was the target. But if my memories are real, then I'm in danger. It wouldn't take much to blackmail someone into kidnapping me or Harper."

Eyes on Sprout, Mallory was struck with a burst of inspiration, "and today, I overheard some ghosts talking. One had blood all over him and the other's head was nearly chopped off. They said Dumbledore wasn't renewing some protections on the school, and that dark things were getting into Hogwarts. I don't think the school is safe."

Sprout was looking down at her desk, lips pursed.

"Right," Sprout said, standing up. "We're going to see the aurors."

Sprout glanced over at Felix, "Mr. Underwood, thank you for bringing this to my attention, and for trying to help your friend. Ten points to Hufflepuff!"

Felix's eyes grew round behind his glasses.

"We're going to get this handled, so don't you worry. Run along to your common room, now."

Felix looked between them, and Mallory was getting that tickling in her brain when something was too good to be true.

This was too good to be true.

So far no professor at Hogwarts acted kindly towards Mallory. She didn't know if this was normal for wizards, but a professor acting this helpful? It was weird. And with thoughts of minions and speculation that the Enemy might be a professor swirling around in the back of her mind, it wasn't hard to come to the obvious conclusion.

She mouthed to Felix, hoping against hope that he'd follow through.

Minion she mouthed, using her eyes to point to Sprout, who was standing next to her, now.

Felix, who so far looked uncomfortable and guilty, froze.

Right, she wasn't dealing with Danny or Kit, people who could act on command. Felix was painfully sincere, hated lying, hated breaking the rules.

She switched gears, pulling her memories on faces and body language to the forefront. She relaxed her shoulders, unclenched her fists, and loosened up her posture.
I don't know Sprout is secretly a minion of the Enemy. I believe I'm going to talk to the aurors with adult back-up. I believe I'm finally saved.

"That was wicked," Mallory said, a half-grin on her face. "The backpack, floating away like you did."

Felix blinked, confused. "Thanks?"

Sprout walked past Mallory, and Mallory mouthed minion and pointed to Sprout. Send help!

"It was cool. You'll have to teach me that spell." Mallory said, then mouthed, go now! and pointed at the door.

Sprout slowly turned around, and Mallory shifted her posture to appear sullen-but-relieved.

"Alright, young man." said Sprout, "off you go!"

At that, Felix turned left the room.

Leaving Mallory alone with her enemy's minion. After all, who would suspect the Herbology professor? It was a perfect ruse.

Sprout pulled something out of her pocket, and Mallory flinched. The woman looked up, confused.

It was a magic mirror, the sort the aurors used.

"What's that?" Mallory asked. She knew it was, but keeping her talking meant stalling her.

"The aurors gave them out for us to use, in case of emergency. I daresay this warrants use."

Mallory widened her eyes, "really? How do they work?"

She was looking around the room, keeping Sprout in her peripheral vision. There was a metal watering can on the desk that could, in emergency, be used as a weapon. It was a poor one, but better than nothing.

The plants were useless, since Mallory knew nothing about magic plants. Worse, Sprout knew a lot about them. It wasn't like Mallory could trick her into walking into a poisonous plant monster.

"You know, I've no idea. I think it's a sort of charm." She tapped the mirror with her wand, and spoke into it. "Yes, this is Pomona Sprout, I've with me a student who's raised some serious concerns, and I was wondering if you could set some time aside today to talk to her."

"This isn't protocol," said a tinny voice from inside the mirror, "these are only supposed to be used if there's an emergency."

"This is an emergency," said Sprout, brows furrowed and lips twisted downwards in irritation, "I'm going to need a meeting with Auror Moody and Auror Kingsley, and I'd like you to collect Professor Snape as well as Madame Hooch and Nurse Pomfrey."

Mallory blinked. Was this woman fucking with her? Either that or—

She hadn't been paying attention to faces, not while Sprout was talking earlier, too wrapped up in her own head.

Sprout didn't look like she was lying.
Mallory knew from experience that it was really hard if not impossible to make her face go bloodless on command. It could be shock that Mallory figured out as much as she did, but all Sprout-the-minion had to do was wipe her mind and Felix's.

Unless she needed to erase Madame Hooch's memory, as well as the nurse's?

But no, the Enemy would already know about them if the plot was to rid the school of Mallory without anyone realizing Mallory was the target because she was muggleborn.

This wouldn't be the prompt that put them in the line of fire.

Mallory blinked again. Huh.

Was this an actual real-life adult in this school, that didn't immediately assume Mallory was at fault or lying? Granted, adults had motives that were beyond Mallory, and it was always harder to tell if an adult was lying.

They had a lot more practice at making their lies believable.

Yet, Sprout wasn't acting like how Mallory imagined a blackmailed professor would act. There'd be nervousness, sweat, twitching, anxiety. Perhaps a stony face as she tried to square herself with what she was about to do.

Sprout wasn't displaying any marks of stress, beyond appearing upset when Mallory told her about what happened.

It shouldn't be a shock, or weird, but it was— she was left waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Yes, all of them." snapped Sprout, "I don't care who he's in a meeting with."

"Contact one of the aurors on this investigation through owl or make an appointment at the office. Now, I'm ending this call, in case you're blocking a real emergency." said the auror, before ending the mirror-

Sprout looked like she wished for that little mirror to combust.

"Right," she nodded to herself, "well, come along. We're not giving up now. We'll do exactly as he said to do, and march on down to that office."

With that, Sprout stormed out of the office, and Mallory almost had to run to keep up. As she followed Sprout, Mallory considered she was either the greatest sucker in history, or she'd finally found her champion.
The Cracklewood Carver Part 6

The door to the Temporary Auror Office was wedged between a paneled wood cabinet and a tapestry depicting a weeping mermaid. Light flooded in through the tall paned window at the end of the hall. The heat touched the tips of Mallory's fingers, warming them. Leafy branches and trees from outside in the courtyard cast odd shadows on the stone floor.

Two aurors, who'd been leaning against the cabinet, tensed as Mallory and Sprout approached.

"We need to speak to Kingsley Shacklebolt or Alastor Moody, now. This is an emergency." said Professor Sprout.

It appeared Mallory had a champion, after all.

The entire walk down to the Auror's Office was agony. Mallory spent it silently wrestling with herself. She'd considered making a run for it, of lighting Professor Sprout's robes on fire and screaming bloody murder.

In the end, time ran out before she could make her decision.

Now, as she was being checked over by aurors with whizzing devices and spells, she could admit to herself that she was wrong about Professor Sprout. Worse, she'd told Felix that Professor Sprout was a minion of the Enemy.

It wasn't like there was much he could do, but Mallory didn't want to be the kid who cried wolf. She was in real danger. If she kept pointing fingers and crying minion! at every turn, eventually she'd stumble upon a real minion of the Enemy, and no one would believe her.

This situation, right here, was where she missed Danny most. Sorting out people was his department. He was the one who was good at it, and he wouldn't make this sort of mistake.

"Professor Sprout?" asked the auror to the left.

"Yes?" she said, "please hurry, this is an emergency."

"Of course, we're almost through. You'll have to excuse me," he said, taking out what looked like a plain spray bottle, before spritzing both Mallory and Professor Sprout in the face.

"Portable Thief's Downfall. We need to make sure you're not polyjuiced impersonators." The auror cracked a grin, but neither Professor Sprout nor Mallory were smiling.

The auror cleared his throat. "Right." He removed from his robes a pen—an honest to god muggle pen—and clicked it. Then he spoke into his hand-held magic mirror, "passcode is humdinger. Do you have a Pomona Sprout and—" he glanced up.


"—and Mallory Hopkins on your side?"

The Auror's Office was packed with people all speaking at once, and it was making her head ache something fierce.

Mallory tucked herself next to Professor Sprout's side, glancing up at her face.
Professor Sprout's face was chalky-white.

Mallory followed Professor Sprout's line of sight, and found herself staring at two people across from Kingsley's desk.

The couple in question could be carbon copies of Draco Malfoy.

It was actually *uncanny*. Normal people didn't look *that much* like their parents. You'd see traits from each: Mallory had her dad's eyes, and mum's natural hair was dark, like Mallory's.

*Oh*, she realized, she was being thick. *Obviously* Malfoy's parents colored their hair. The shocking platinum blonde they *both* shared with their son was too similar to be anything but a dye job.

"...yet the investigation moves at a crawl," sneered Mr. Malfoy, fondling his silver snake-head cane in a way that made Mallory feel vaguely uncomfortable.

Mr. Malfoy loomed over Kingsley's desk, leering down at the man in a decidedly condescending manner. Mrs. Malfoy placed a hand on her husband's arm. *Restrain yourself.*

"We understand you're quite busy, and we have no intention of tearing you away from this case. However, you must understand why we'd be concerned." Mrs. Malfoy spoke, tone steady and calm.

Mallory looked back up at Professor Sprout, again. The professor was wiping her hands on her robes and fidgeting. *Sweaty palms?*

Her eyes flicked back to the couple and Kingsley. Kingsley kept swallowing, like he had a dry mouth, and looked about as nervous as he did when Umbridge was threatening his job.

Trainee Tonks, leaning against the wall, didn't look afraid. Then, Tonks hadn't acted afraid when Umbridge threatened her, either. Instead, Tonks' hair was switching between a violent shade of pink to green, cycling through the rainbow.

Dumbledore, a silent presence at Kingsley's shoulder, stood somber and still.

Mallory's head pounded. She didn't understand what was going on.

At her side, Professor Sprout fidgeted, wiping her hands again on her robes.

Mallory reached up and took her hand, squeezing it. The professor squeezed back, and stilled.

Taking Professor Sprout's arm made the fabric of her robe tug against a small shard of glass still wedged in the cut. They'd scabbed over a bit before, gluing the fabric to her skin. Part of it must've ripped away while she was running, agitating the glass.

It wasn't *terrible*, but combined with the foul smell that seeped into her clothing from those potions, it worsened her headache.

She swallowed back bile; the smell made her nauseous.

Professor Sprout gave Mallory a sweet, comforting smile, and Mallory smiled back.

In the Forest, taking care of Harper kept her focused. She'd happily pretend to need comfort if it made Professor Sprout feel more in control. It wouldn't do to have her protector fall apart.

Mallory closed her eyes for a moment, switching her focus to the people in the room.
Mr. Malfoy was interesting. It wasn't the snake cane, which was way cool, or even the way everyone besides Dumbledore sought to pacify him.

No, that wasn't nearly as interesting as his reaction to Tonks.

Whenever the conversation lulled, his eyes would drift over to Tonks, and each time they did his upper lip would curl involuntarily. Disgust.

Tonks changed her nose to that of a pig's, and Mr. Malfoy almost flinched.

"Lord Malfoy, I assure you we're doing everything we can." said Kingsley, shoulders tensed and lips pressed into a thin line.

Lord? Just who was Malfoy, exactly?

"I've been informed by my son that this crime was motivated by young Miss Rowle's blood." spoke Mrs. Malfoy.

"We don't know that yet, Lady Malfoy."

The Lord and Lady both wore robes, like the professors and the aurors, but theirs shimmered in the candlelight and had patterns embroidered into them.

She hadn't noted it as important before, but if people were calling them Lord and Lady, then they must be what expensive clothes passed for in the Wizarding world.

Mallory wasn't certain, but people in Britain usually weren't afraid of Lords and Ladies, like Professor Sprout and Kingsley were trembling. She'd never met a Lord or Lady, before, so she couldn't tell if this was normal. Her little village back home didn't get visits from fancy Lords.

Moreover, she wasn't quite sure what Lords and Ladies did, only that a long time ago some of them were incredibly rich and ruled over lands under the King. Now, they sometimes helped write laws, along with a bunch of other politicians.

Mallory really wished her mum was here. Mum spent part of the summer reading up on the structure of wizarding government. Mallory tuned most of it out, since it was adult stuff and boring, but now she wished she'd paid attention.

"We want our son placed under auror protection, or he's coming home with us, today." said Lord Malfoy, slamming his cane against the ground for emphasis.

Professor Sprout, waiting at Mallory's side, must've seen the same opening Mallory did, because she chose that moment to interrupt.

"Lord Malfoy," spoke Professor Sprout, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have some information on the safety of the school that you may be interested in."

The professor's voice only shook a little, and Mallory squeezed Professor Sprout's hand tightly in response.

"Pomona, this isn't necessary," said Dumbledore, from his position by Kingsley. His tone was admonishing, like Professor Sprout was a child who'd spoken out of turn.

"I think it is!" snapped Professor Sprout.

Context: Mallory was missing it.
Lord Malfoy's eyes narrowed, flicking between Professor Sprout and Dumbledore. "What sort of trickery is this?"

"This child was one of the students attacked. I spoke to her earlier, and some of the things she's mentioned raise serious concerns about the safety of students, here." Professor Sprout's voice gained volume and confidence as she spoke.

"This is… the muggleborn." Lord Malfoy looked over Mallory like he was measuring her for her coffin.

"I'm concerned," said Professor Sprout, "that an agent of young Miss Rowle's murderer might wish to kidnap more students from Hogwarts."

"I assure you," said Kingsley, "nothing's getting in or out. All secret passageways are guarded by two aurors at all times. Windows and doors are locked— with real locking spells, not some flimsycolloportus. We have everything in hand, as I've told Lady Malfoy."

"And portkeys?" asked Sprout, "not to mention the concern of a student or professor under the imperius curse."

Lord Malfoy fingered his cane, "given the identity of the student murdered, it may be worth shutting down the school until the perpetrator is discovered."

"The students need to learn," spoke Dumbledore, "and I won't have any student denied the chance for further education, no matter their family."

"I've said nothing of the sort," sniffed Lord Malfoy, giving Dumbledore the stink eye.

Mallory tilted her head. Dumbledore believed Lord Malfoy wanted to shut down Hogwarts to deny muggleborns a magical education.

Wait, wasn't Lord Malfoy on the school Board? He wanted Dumbledore fired.

Which meant he was raising up a fuss to make Dumbledore look bad. Maybe that's what the Grand Undertoad meant, when she was screeching about Dumbledore and lies, earlier.

"Yes, Lord Malfoy, you didn't," Kingsley said, "and we have an anti-portkey jinx up. The floo network is locked down, except for one connection between here and the Ministry. A taboo has been set up on the unforgiveables, as well. We'll know if anyone uses them on premises."

Professor Sprout, next to Mallory, twitched like she'd been stung. What? And Tonks, from her position on leaning against the wall, stumbled and almost fell over. Lord Malfoy gave her another one of his disgusted glances.

"Your aurors have been likewise vetted?" asked Lord Malfoy.

"If someone tries to imperiuS them before they get to Hogwarts, there isn't much we can do, as you know, Lord Malfoy."

The strange emphasis on that sentence, coupled with how Lord Malfoy's fingers clenched his cane so tight they went bloodless, made Mallory very very curious.

Too many variables. Mallory was losing track of what was happening, trying to remember what exactly Umbridge said before about Dumbledore, while paying attention to the current conversation. And that wasn't even mentioning the part of her mind that was trying to suss out why
both Tonks and Professor Sprout just flinched.

"What about owls?" asked Professor Sprout, before Lord Malfoy could explode at Kingsley.

"What about them?" asked Kingsley.

"Someone may send blackmail threats or bribes to students and teachers. They might demand a student or teacher to kidnap students."

Lord Malfoy took that moment to shift from imminent explosion to surprised.

"Yes, we've considered that. This isn't our first time solving a murder case," ground out Kingsley, "all incoming owls are screened."

"And how many secret passageways are being monitored?" asked Professor Sprout.

"Four."

"Four?" Sprout frowned, "I recall—now this is a rumor, and only a rumor, you mind, but I've heard students mention in the past of there being six secret passageways leading out of Hogwarts."

"I must admit," stated Dumbledore, "we've never quite determined the number of secret passageways, here. The castle's mysteries are numerous."

"Which student?" asked Kingsley, ignoring Dumbledore.

"They've long since graduated." Sprout shook her head.

"No, give us their name so we can have someone drop by their house and ask them where the passageways are." Kingsley sounded a tad exasperated.

"Ah, yes." Professor Sprout's cheeks went pink, "Rufus Scrimgeour."

"Thank you. We'll have someone send him an owl."

"Thank you, Pomona," said Dumbldore, "you've been of great help. Now I believe that solves the matter neatly."

"No it doesn't," Mallory spoke up, "what do I do until he owls us back?"

Dumbledore frowned, "Miss Hopkins—"

"I'm not safe here, just like how Malfoy isn't safe. In fact, I'd be a lot safer at home with my family."

"Even the muggleborns don't wish to be here," snarked Lord Malfoy.

And Mallory knew that was supposed to be a jab at Dumbledore, for bigoted shitty reasons, but she nodded anyway.

Lady Malfoy was looking at Mallory, lips pursed. "Perhaps you should speak to Severus and have her sent home."

"Yes, actually," Mallory "that'd be great—er—Lady Malfoy."

She hadn't missed how everyone but Dumbledore used their title everytime they spoke to the Lord
"Professor Snape agrees it's in her best interests to stay." said Dumbledore, with finality.

Lord Malfoy glanced away, visually dismissing the issue. "Regardless, I believe it's high time my son came home. I won't have him in this farce of a school one moment longer."

Dumbledore bowed his head, "if you insist."

"I do insist." he spat.

Lady Malfoy, however, was still spying on Mallory. It was a bit weird, because Lady Malfoy wasn't doing it intentionally. Much like how Lord Malfoy's eyes kept travelling over to Tonks, Lady Malfoy's eyes kept wandering over to Mallory.

She'd catch herself looking, and glance away. Mallory asked herself briefly if Lady Malfoy was staring at her because she was staring at Lady Malfoy, but that wasn't it. Lady Malfoy kept staring. She did it even when Mallory looked at the wall for a half a minute while Lord Malfoy and Dumbledore were fussing over paperwork.

Too many things to pay attention to— Mallory had taken her shot, but without understanding what was going on in the room, it was hard to gauge the effect in advance. There was subtext, a lot of it.

Lady Malfoy kept staring at Mallory, Lord Malfoy kept staring at Tonks, and everyone besides Dumbledore and Tonks were scared shitless of the Malfoys. There was something going on between Umbridge and Dumbledore, and Malfoy and Dumbledore, but Mallory couldn't work it out while still trying to pay attention to everything going on around her.

And that wasn't even mentioning the bizarre flinch from Tonks and Professor Sprout.

Lord Malfoy took that moment to snipe at Dumbledore, "...clearly not. If I recall, one of your professors stole a priceless magical artifact from you last year, before absconding to places unknown."

"You know very well who's behind that theft." The look Dumbledore gave Lord Malfoy could've melted steel.

"You mean the nonsense you've been feeding Cornelius?" Lord Malfoy scoffed, "I know exactly what you're doing, and no one's fooled, I assure you."

"Lord Voldemort—" at that, everyone in the room besides Mallory flinched, "—is no ally of yours, or your family. He'll use you and kill you."

"I was under the imperius," hissed Lord Malfoy, "as you well know."

"More Death Eaters died at the hands of Lord Voldemort—" another room-wide flinch, "—than at the hands of the aurors and Order, combined. Investigate it, if not for your sake, then for the sake of your son."

"Headmaster Dumbledore," spoke Lady Malfoy, for the first time in a while, "Lucius, this isn't the time. I'll thank you for your advice, but we have nothing to do with the Dark Lord, as you well know."

Dumbledore lightly bowed his head, "of course." He sounded resigned.
Professor Sprout's hand was a block of ice in Mallory's, cold and sweating. She glanced around the room, noting the faces. Kingsley was stiff as a board, grim-faced and staring at the wall without meeting anyone's eyes. Tonks looked between Dumbledore and the Malfoys, anxious.

It was the first time Mallory had seen Tonks look anything but amused or defiant.

Her head spun, trying to fit together all the pieces of the puzzle. Too many people, too much information. She didn't know what to do with it all.

"Albus," spoke Professor Sprout, breaking the awkward silence, "we need to do something to make sure Miss Hopkins and Mr. Harper are safe."

"This is all unnecessary." said Dumbledore, who sounded awfully tired, "the children are safe."

"Albus," said Professor Sprout, drawing herself up, "after this, I'd like to speak with you in private. I've overheard a fascinating conversation between Nearly Headless Nick and the Baron."

Mallory almost jumped in shock, and Professor Sprout placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

Holy fuck, was Professor Sprout trying to blackmail the headmaster? Because in the rush of information she'd completely forgotten about the weird warning from the ghosts.

Dumbledore looked confused for a moment, but she saw the second he realized exactly what Sprout meant.

If she understood the situation right, here...

Then Lord Malfoy wanted Dumbledore ousted from the school. Lord Malfoy might be some sort of politician, given his title. Whatever the case, he almost had enough clout before to get Dumbledore fired, but not enough. Until now.

The ghosts said that **Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts** refused to protect the school.

That might be the leverage Lord Malfoy needed to get rid of Dumbledore, and now Professor Sprout was threatening to spill the beans unless Dumbledore agreed with him.

Mallory could've bounced with glee.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts fiddled with his beard, frowning for a moment, "Yes, they're incredibly concerned about the welfare of the students, as am I. It's unnecessary, but I do believe Kingsley might spare an auror to keep an eye on Miss Hopkins and Mr Harper?"

"We could," said Kingsley, who was looking between Professor Sprout and Dumbledore with suspicion. "But we still don't know if there are more than four passageways."

"I suppose it can't hurt to err on the side of caution, just this once." spoke Dumbledore.

At that, Kingsley shrugged, "sure. Tonks, how about it? Are you up to playing bodyguard?"

Tonks perked up from her spot against the wall. "Sir, yes sir!"

"Alright, bring Mr Harper here and you'll keep an eye on the kids while you read the map. Can you handle both tasks at once?"

"Of course," beamed Tonks. And with that, she practically bounced out the room, hair bubblegum pink with delight.
Lord Malfoy was still eyeing them all with disgust. Lady Malfoy, on the other hand, was looking between Mallory, Professor Sprout, and Dumbledore with a speculative gleam in her eyes.

In that moment, Mallory decided that out of the two of them, Lady Malfoy was scarier. Not just because of her odd interest in Mallory, but because she kept her head cool and noticed things.

When she got back to Sourth Brent, she was so telling Danny. She just witnessed a real live blackmailing event, and she even had a part to play in it!

Granted, it was all incredibly contrived how she knew Dumbledore neglected the protections. But it was the principle of the thing.

This was all working out well.

Protection by an auror might be enough to make her a less tempting target for the Enemy and their minions. If anything, it bought her time. So long as she stuck near Tonks and the aurors, Mallory was safe. Once they left the danger was back, though. It was only a short-term solution.

In the meantime, Mallory could send letters to her parents, look for opportunities to get out of Hogwarts. Maybe she could even convince Professor Sprout to use her leverage to send Mallory home.

She had options, now.

Mallory could feel the stress sliding off of her as though it were a physical thing. Her chest felt as light as a bird.

And without the stress bogging down her brain, she was free to think.

Umbridge screamed a bunch of things, earlier. Her memories of the event were scrambled by fear and the shock of Umbridge grabbing her by the arms and shaking her. But Mallory remembered—

The mirror on Kingsley's desk started flashing, and he picked it up.

"Is that Draco Malfoy on your side of the map?" asked the tinny voice of the auror who guarded the door.

Kingsley looked down at the sheets of paper on his desk. "Yes."

"Alright, he's coming in." And with that, ended the connection.

The door opened, and Malfoy the younger walked in, pointy-chinned with his nose stuck in the air.

With them side-by-side, Mallory withdrew her previous assumption that he and his parents were clones. The hair was the same, but Lady Malfoy had dark almost black eyes, where Malfoy's eyes were a light blue. The shapes of their faces weren't copies, either. Lord Malfoy's chin was different that his son's, which was of the extra-pointy variety.

"Come along, Draco." said Lord Malfoy.

Draco looked at the gathered adults, and hesitated. "What's going on?"

"We're leaving. Now, come along," hissed the Lord.

"I don't want to." said Malfoy, tone petulant and confused, "all my friends are—"
Malfoy's father grabbed him by the collar of his robe and dragged him to the fireplace, muttering a word before they vanished into the green flames.

Right. The only working floo connection in Hogwarts existed inside this room.

The room Mallory would be spending a great deal of time in, thanks to the two meddling ghosts.

Lady Malfoy gave Mallory one last lingering look, before turning to Dumbledore. "Good day. If the murderer is caught, he'll likely return. Otherwise, we'll be finding permanent alternatives for his education."

With that, she vanished into the flames after her husband.

Huh. Interesting.

Baby Malfoy's parents reminded her of Danny's parents. They were the sort who considered their children painful embarrassments.

Lord Malfoy had a temper, and a hard time controlling his temper. Lady Malfoy, however, either didn't get angry easily or was skilled at hiding anger.

The adults went back to talking, and Mallory tuned them out to think.

Something something Snape knows Lucius Malfoy. Why was that important?

Right. Umbridge said that Lord Malfoy mentioned knowing Snape, but— and Mallory barely remembered the context— but she'd bet anything that Umbridge had name-dropped the Malfoy's in order to show off her connection to the Lord.

And Umbridge really didn't like Dumbledore. She said a lot about Death Eaters, which sort of rang a bell but Mallory couldn't remember where she heard the term, before.

Umbridge made a fuss about not liking Dumbledore, and name-dropped Malfoy. Oh.

The Grand Undertoad was an ally of Lord Malfoy, and of Darla Rowle's family. Dumbledore's enemies were using Rowle's death as a means to weaken his position. Since Dumbledore was a known-supporter of muggleborns, it'd be bad in the long-run for Mallory if he lost too much ground. In the short term, he was standing in her way of getting out of Hogwarts.

And… Umbridge didn't like Tonks because Lord Malfoy didn't like Tonks? Or perhaps it was the other way around. Something to do with her dad being a muggle and her aunt a criminal.

Maybe it was that simple. Umbridge and Lord Malfoy were lawmakers, and disapproved of the niece of a criminal becoming a law-enforcement officer.

Mallory saw Professor Sprout preparing to leave the room with Dumbledore and almost jolted.

"Professor Sprout!" Mallory spoke.

"Yes, dear?"

"I— thank you." Mallory said, throwing all her sincerity behind the words, "thank you so much."

After several days of completely insane adults, a kind authority figure wasn't to be taken for granted.
Professor Sprout smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling, "you're very welcome. Now, be safe, and don't start any trouble."

"I won't," Mallory cracked a grin.

Dumbledore frowned, "Pomona, we must speak." His tone was grave and disappointed.

Professor Sprout snorted, "oh yes, we're going to have a talk, alright."

Professor Sprout wasn't at all scared of Dumbledore. In fact, Mallory suspected that Dumbledore would be getting the dressing-down, instead of Sprout.

Dumbledore let out a long-suffered sigh of irritation, and turned to leave. Professor Sprout stalked behind him.

It was nice having an adult stick up for her like that, when there were powerful people in the room who could make her life miserable.

Lord Malfoy was on the Board. He must have some sort of authority over professors and the school. He had power enough to take on Dumbledore and almost win.

And if Mallory remembered right, Dumbledore was one of the most powerful wizards ever, even if he was a judgmental prick.

Power.

That's what it was, why everyone was so afraid of the Malfoy's. They were powerful in some way that let them stand up to Dumbledore without fear of rebuke. Worse, they weren't nice about it. Lord Malfoy looked like the sort of person who'd happily curse Mallory within an inch of her life, if given the excuse.

Though, now that Mallory was thinking about it—

Umbridge accused Dumbledore about lying about something to do with Death Eaters— bla bla the Minister will hear about this! Then Lord Malfoy said the same thing, basically.

Lord Voldemort.

That had to be that ridiculous Dark Lord Fred and George mentioned. There was some sort of war. Did her mum mention that one to her?

There was this German guy that Dumbledore defeated, but no, his name began with a G. G for German. Grundlewick?

A professor left Hogwarts halfway through the year under mysterious circumstances. Now she was hearing from Lord Malfoy that a professor at Hogwarts stole a Powerful Magical Artifact, and vanished off into the ether with it.

She'd bet every X-men comic she owned that they were talking about the same person.

This Lord Voldemort character ordered a professor at Hogwarts to steal the artifact, and once the professor completed his job, he left.

And Lord Malfoy worked for him, before. But something went bad with it and now they were trying to distance themselves.
Which only left one remaining mystery: why the _fuck_ was Lady Malfoy interested in Mallory?

Kingsley, it seemed, spent very little time in the Temporary Auror's Office. Most of the time he was in his _real_ office, which was through the fireplace and into the Ministry of Magic's Auror Department.

Tonks took over his seat the moment he left, lazily eyeing the papers on the desk. In the corner of the room, Harper sat with his own specially-conjured table and chair. The little prick refused to sit with Mallory or Tonks.

Instead, he was curled in his seat, pretending to read a book. She knew he was pretending, because he hadn't flipped a page in ten minutes. Either he was the slowest reader in the world, or he wasn't really reading.

Mallory tried reading her comic books, but quickly found _Watchmen_ boring while she was waiting for the _opportune moment_ to sneak through the fireplace and into the Auror's Department.

She _knew_ she'd promised Professor Sprout to keep out of trouble, but she wasn't about to miss out on an opportunity to get home.

Tonks confirmed earlier that the floo was a one-to-one connection between the Auror Department and Hogwarts.

Mallory couldn't use it to get to Diagon Alley or anywhere else. And it was fact that _sneaking into the heart of the Ministry of Magic's police department_ was likely a horrible idea.

She needed a valid excuse to be over there. That, or she needed to wait until later in the evening when all the aurors went home for the night.

Regardless, the end result was that Mallory was bored, and itching for something to do.

Her gaze travelled around the room. Harper was boring, and picking a fight with him now would be a bad idea. Tonks was cool, though, and her side of the desk was covered in interesting magical artifacts.

One was a long scroll with an enchanted quill, poised to write over the parchment.

"What's that do?" asked Mallory, pointing at the quill.

Tonks glanced up from her work, "What?" she looked between Mallory and the quill, "Oh, that's a — well, it's a special paper that writes down words you aren't supposed to say."

"What?" Mallory frowned, confused.

"There are dangerous curses that might hurt students, and if they're said in Hogwarts, it'll write down here where it was said, and when."

Mallory thought about this for a moment. It was like wizarding forenzics, or cameras on street corners, only with quills, parchment, and magic.

"Why don't they have that all the time, or—"

Tonks beamed, "they do! There's a great— er— there's a great spell over all of Great Britain, and it marks down where and when things are said that witches and wizards aren't allowed to say."
Mallory noted the word choice, there, "not just spells?"

Tonks, who was no master of deception, shifted her gaze, "er— no. Not just spells. Though, it's rather impolite to talk about it, you see?"

"Why?" asked Mallory.

"Because it's—" she looked around the room, as though she were wishing for someone to give her an out. "There are some things you just don't talk about, for special, complicated reasons. And if you bring it up, everyone around you will feel very uncomfortable."

"It's a taboo." said Mallory.

Tonks almost flinched straight out of her seat. "Don't say it!"

A quick glance in Harper's direction told Mallory he'd abandoned his attempt to pretend to read his book, and was now staring at Mallory as if she'd done something terribly forbidden.

The word taboo was a taboo?

Was that why Tonks and Professor Sprout flinched every time Dumbledore said Lord Voldemort?

"What?" asked Mallory, fighting off a grin, "taboo?"

"Yes!" Tonks raised her hands, like she was about to clasp them over Mallory's mouth. "It's really not done."

"Why?" asked Mallory, giving Tonks her most innocent smile. Trust me, the smile said, I'm sweet and innocent.

She was a little high off witnessing Professor Sprout's victory over Dumbledore.

"It's—" Tonks bit her lip, "it's here for all our protection, and the sort of witches and wizards who talk about it are trying to get around it. And if you're trying to get around it, you must have a bad reason, you see?"

"The people monitoring—" Mallory saw Tonks flinch, almost imperceptibly, "—looking at it, they think anyone who doesn't want to be looked at is bad?"

"It's here to protect us," said Tonks, completely serious.

Mallory blinked, feeling uncomfortable. She was very curious, and she knew being curious didn't make her bad. Mum said so, and being curious about the taboo didn't make her a bad person.

"How does it make me bad, if I want to know about it?"

Tonks shifted in her seat again, "it just does. It's complicated, okay kid?"

"Er— so," Mallory continued, ignoring Tonks, "there was this newspaper the other day, and it had this article. I don't remember the word. But there was this… thing people were supposed to report, otherwise they'd be sent to someplace that began with an A."

Tonks nodded, "do you know anything about you-know-what? Because if you have, you need to report it to Auror Kingsley right away."

"No," Mallory shook her head. "I was just wondering what the place they send people to is."
"Oh!" Tonks let out a breath of relief, "that's the wizarding prison, Azkaban."

"And they send people there, for knowing about uh, the— the you-know-what?" Mallory asked.

Occlumency. She hadn't forgotten the word, but in this case, it was best to pretend to be ignorant. If she ever learned about Occlumency, she'd be sent to wizard prison. That was a really good thing to know.

And it struck her then, that mum would be upset about that, too. Then, if mum thought it was so terrible, she would've told Mallory all about it over the summer. Maybe the topic never came up in her research?

"Not just for knowing the word," scoffed Tonks, "don't worry. But if you know what it means and you're not authorized? Oh, yes."

"Does the thing-we-can't-talk-about look for people saying you-know-what?" Mallory was quite proud of herself for that doublespeak. Already she was learning how to get around the taboo.

Tonks shifted in her seat, squirming a bit. "It's really not on to talk about that, okay? I'm not a bad witch, and neither are you. Getting around the thing we aren't talking about, that's something bad witches do. Do you want to be a bad witch?"

In other words, yes.

"No," said Mallory, giving the stock answer she was supposed to give. "Did anyone actually report people saying you-know-what?"

Mallory glanced at Harper out of the corner of her eye. He was looking at her as though she just did something incredibly horrible. Harper knew about the taboo, and that meant the taboo was some sort of common knowledge. It was something everyone knew and no one acknowledged?

Why? It seemed so silly.

It also made her wonder what the heck Occlumency was, in the first place. It had to be something extraordinarily evil or powerful, if witches and wizards were going through this much effort to keep people from knowing about it.

Now her curiosity was piqued. She hadn't expected to have this sort of conversation about a bloody parchment and enchanted quill. Her mum would have a field day with this.

Tonks rolled her eyes, "Oh, Merlin, it's been a nightmare. And since I'm a trainee, they've left me and the other trainees to deal with it all."

"What happened?"

"It said any paper that even mentioned you-know-what had to be turned in, and of course, to tell the witches and wizards what they're supposed to look for, they have to use the word in the paper. Except then everyone started mailing the Ministry copies of the Daily Prophet!"

"They sent us at least two hundred. And then the Prophet itself caught on and bulk-mailed us an entire shipment through the floo! You couldn't see a bit of floor under all those papers, I swear."

Okay, there were a lot of people who thought it was silly, then.

Mallory giggled. "But the paper must've sent out other warnings before, yeah?"
"I know!" Tonks leaned in conspiratorially, "the aurors think witches and wizards did it because they're upset. We've been sending the Prophet like, two of these notices every week. At this point, witches and wizards are getting tired of being reminded of what they aren't supposed to know. It makes it even harder not to know about it, if it's always on your mind. You know?"

"Sure," Mallory nodded. Now she understood. The wizarding world was completely bonkers.

Mallory almost held her breath as she asked the next question, "will… will all the protestors get into any sort of trouble?"

Another flinch.

"For what?"

"For… sending all those papers back to the Ministry?"

"Oh," Tonks snorted, "technically they were reporting usages of the word you-know-what, so it could be argued they were doing their duty. I don't think they meant it in a bad way."

The trainee didn't look very concerned.

"But wouldn't complaining like that get you in trouble?"

Tonks flinched when Mallory said the word protestors. It was a valid concern.

"No, why would you think that?"

"Because complaining means you don't agree with the Ministry?" Mallory phrased it like a question.

"Hah," Tonks barked out a laugh, "we get hundreds of howlers every day. Yesterday, a wizard sent in a letter that tried to bite one of my fingers off. And I have to deal with that rubbish because all the trainees are— right of passage or some nonsense like that."

"The people who send those letters don't get into trouble, then?" Mallory asked, just to confirm.

"No," Tonks looked confused, "why… I mean, it's just old Bathsheba. She thinks tiny faeries are living in her rosebushes, plotting to kill her. We've sent aurors to her house, but there's no one there. Everyone's convinced she's gone mad."

"They're all from one person?" Mallory was a bit confused.

"No, there's Pilliwickle, too. And a bunch of others. Though, Pilliwickle's quite funny. You see, he went into this resteraunt and we wanted to bring his pet occamy. He claims its his familiar," Tonks rolled her eyes, "and when they told him he couldn't eat with the thing there, he refused to leave! The resteraunt, of course, vomited him right out. Now he's claiming the building's saliva ate through his robes, and the occamy developed a rash."

Mallory goggled at her. Yes, okay, the wizarding world is insane.

Another question popped into her head.

"What happens if you learn about you-know-what?" Mallory asked, "will you be taken to Azkaban?"

"Only if they know what you-know-what means."
What? How the fuck would they know—

Veritaserum.

"They're going to give truth serum to every single person that anyone accuses of knowing about you-know-what?"

"Yes?"

"Do they usually ask about— well, let's say you don't know about you-know-what, but they have you under truth serum. Would they ask you about other bad things you've done?"

Tonks blinked. "Well, obviously, yes."

Wow. Okay, just— she wasn't sure what she ought to do with that. Off the top of her head, she'd be informing Danny about it using doublespeak, as soon as possible. And her parents. Given that witches and wizards still owned books on *Occlumency*, it seemed the spell didn't track the written word, so the taboo was a weak protection.

It'd likely only entrap the really stupid and ignorant.

This was also serving as a wakeup call. The Wizarding World was larger than Hogwarts and Diagon Alley. Her parents, with all their research, hadn't come across this in any book they'd read. And Mallory had no doubt they'd tell her immediately if saying certain words could get her locked up in a prison.

In fact, now that Mallory was thinking about it, the taboo was a *really* weak form of protection. All anyone had to do was use doublespeak and write down their illicit conversations. They could burn the paper afterwards.

This didn't match with the actions of an Auror Department that checked for ten kinds of obfuscation before letting her through the door.

"One last question," Mallory said, "and then I'll change the subject, I swear."

Tonks let out an irritated sigh, "*please don't.*"

"Does the thing we're not supposed to talk about, or a version of it, note what people write, too?"

Tonks made a face like she was constipated, "*yes, now please drop it. It's not nice.*"

Mallory gave Tonks her sweetest grin, "*thank you!*"

Books on *Occlumency* and papers mentioning *Occlumency* were likely old, then. Perhaps they were written before they put up the taboo. Doublespeak would work, but writing anything down wouldn't. That was potentially critical information.

Mallory couldn't risk being pulled in by aurors for speaking too many forbidden words, especially as she got older. She didn't have parents who knew which words were forbidden and which words weren't, and her friends were likewise ignorant.

She'd have to be *extra* careful.

Once the Aurors tested her under veritaserum, they'd *know* she was ignorant, but there would then ask if she broke any *other* laws.
And Mallory told Danny, a muggle, all about the wizarding world. That wasn't even getting started on what her parents were planning to do.

She had secrets, people she needed to protect.

"Okay," Mallory drew the word out, "how about that?"

This time she was pointing at the animated map next to the Taboo Quill. She was hoping this object wasn't going to open any sort of serious conversation.

"Oh," Tonks perked, "that's an enchanted map. It shows the location of where everyone is, inside Hogwarts."

Tonks pointed to a small drawing of the Auror's Temporary Office, with tiny dots depicting Mallory Hopkins and Nymphadora Tonks in the middle, and Leland Harper in the corner.

"Let me guess," said Mallory, deadpan, "there's one covering all of Great Britain and we're not supposed to talk about it."

She could hear Harper choking on his spit, in the corner.

"Er—" Tonks stuttered, "I'm really not supposed to talk about it."

You've got to be fucking kidding me. Forget leaving Hogwarts. She and her parents were going to have to leave fucking Britain, at this rate. Mum and dad were going to flip serious shit when they found all this out.

"Doesn't the map get confusing to read with all the norm— er— muggles?" Mallory asked. She was imagining a sea of overlapping black names.

In other words, camouflage.

"Oh, it doesn't pick up muggles."

"Great," said Mallory, sarcastic. "Why did you even tell me if you're not allowed to talk about it."

"We're allowed," Tonks looked confused, "but it's just not done."

It's taboo.

"But saying map isn't bad?" Mallory asked, confused.

"It's a map of the school, here. You were the one who brought up other maps." said Tonks, defensive.

"How about that one?" Mallory changed the subject, and she could see how Tonks was relieved, shoulders drooping.

"That's a tally. We're keeping track of the number of people in Hogwarts at any time, but it's—" she shook her head.

"What?" Mallory asked.

"Parts of the castle won't appear on any map. And they're resistant to the tally spell, as well. We've cordoned off a number of corridors that are resistant, but we haven't caught them all yet, so the numbers are off."
"Why's it resistant?"

"I don't know," Tonks shrugged, "parts of the castle are plain unmappable, and other parts of the castle didn't consent to being looked at."

Mallory tilted her head. It was interesting how Tonks said *looked at* easily, like it was the natural phrase to say. Except *watched* would be a better term for it.

She added *watched* to her list of words never to say, next to *occlumency*, *protestors*, *taboo*, *Voldemort* and *monitored*. She was considering adding other words like *spy* and *surveillance*, too.

The Powers That Be in the wizarding world didn't take kindly to people speaking about their dirty habit of spying on everyone.

Mallory let out a huff of air.

"Tonks?" Mallory asked. There'd been an awful lot of silence since Tonks last spoke, and she went back to her papers in the meantime.

"Yeah, what's wrong?"

"What's a trainee auror do?" she was very, very bored.

"Mostly, minding the enchantments and shadowing the real aurors. Why?"

"Do you know what a superhero is?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Is there a wizard job for superhero?"

"Not really, though Dark Wizard Catcher and Auror are close."

"Neat," Mallory leaned over and looked at what Tonks was writing. Tonks drew back, scowling at Mallory.

"What is it? It's rude to read what other people are writing."

"Is that for the mystery? The Cracklewood Carver?"

"The investigation? Yeah."

"I have a theory." Mallory said.

"You do, do you?" Tonks gave her an exasperated look.

"I think it's someone *pretending* to be the Carver, to hide the *real* intended victim."

That wasn't entirely true, but she was curious how Tonks would react. If she was going to sit here, less than a meter away from her own mystery, she was going to find out all they knew.

"Wow," said Tonks, "that's awful clever. I'll write it down and let Kingsley know when he's back."

"You're being sarcastic." Mallory crossed her arms, "I *know* that's sarcastic."

"Real auror work is complicated, far more complicated than a firstie could get."
She *could hear* that little constipated shitstain snickering in the background.

"I'll bet you don't even get to do any of the real auror work. You're just stuck on map duty."

Tonks narrowed her eyes, "are you *seriously* trying to trick me into telling you about the investigation?"

Mallory perked, "is it working?"

"No."

Mallory slumped in her seat for a moment, before remembering what else she wanted to talk about.

"Lord Malfoy kept staring at you like you took a dump in his rosebushes. What did you *do?""

Harper choked again, and Mallory admitted to herself that she may have phrased it that way just to see how he'd react.

Tonk's hair went red, "what?"

"He kept looking at you, and he'd curl up his lip like he'd smelt something awful, like you took a big smelly—"

"Yes, okay, thanks for the imagery." Tonks spoke in a rush, "*Merlin, kid.*"

"Okay, what did you do?" She barely refrained from swinging her legs back and forth under the table.

She doubted Tonks would have any idea why *Lady* Malfoy kept staring at Mallory, but she suspected she'd know why *Lord* Malfoy was giving Tonks the stink-eye. Any context on that family might prove useful, in the future.

Tonks blinked in surprise, "you're a muggleborn."

"Yes." Mallory said, deadpan.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like *that*, it's just—" Tonk was backpedaling, "everyone *knows* about my family, so it's sort of weird to meet someone who has no idea."

"Okay," said Mallory, prompting her to continue.

"He's my uncle." said Tonks, "his wife's my aunt, but my mum was disinherited because she married my dad. He's a muggleborn, you see. And my mum's family, they're The Blacks."

"Okay?" Mallory was confused.

"Right, you wouldn't know. Well, there are some families that are really old— The Malfoys, the Selwyns, The Blacks, and a bunch of others. You're in Slytherin, so you likely had class with a few of them. Anyway, so these families, they're all pureblood. Now, anyone who's with the times knows blood doesn't matter one whit, but these families put stock in it."

Mallory nodded, "are they all Lords and Ladies, too?"

"Only a few," Tonks shrugged, "My mum's one of the notorious Black Sisters. There were three, but my mum was disowned for marrying my dad. *My other* Aunt joined up with Death Eaters and died in Azkaban. She was disowned, too, for all the scandal. That leaves my Aun— Lady Malfoy,
as the only unsullied Black sister." Tonks rolled her eyes, using air-quotes around the word unsullied.

"Oh," Mallory nodded, "so Lord Malfoy doesn't like you, because you remind everyone that his wife is the only one that didn't go— well, not bad, but in his mind—"

"I wouldn't presume anything about what Lord Malfoy is thinking, if you take my drift. Your guess is as good as mine." Tonks shrugged.

"He kept flinching everytime you turned your nose into a funny shape." stated Mallory, "How did you do that? I want to do that."

She figured Tonks already knew her uncle was uncomfortable with her... shapeshifting. But it could only be seen as a helpful gesture by Tonks. Building some repertoire with Tonks couldn't hurt. She hadn't missed how Tonks almost called Lady Malfoy Aunt.

And Tonk's shapeshifting spell was awesome.

Not only because turning her hair whatever color she wanted would be fun, but because if Tonks could shift her features however she liked, then the trainee was seriously misusing that spell.

If Mallory could shift her features however she liked, she'd impersonate an auror and already be out of the castle. She could look like anyone and get inside any building she wanted. She could pretend to be Danny. Better yet, she could pretend to be Selwyn and backchat teachers, and then they'd give Selwyn detention for things she'd done.

It would be the best joke, ever.

"That's because I'm a metamorphmagus. It's really rare. Only the oldest and purest magical lines are supposed to be able to produce metamorphmagi." Tonks said this with a little smirk, and winked at Mallory.

"But your dad's a muggleborn." Mallory said.

Tonks gave her a shit-eating grin. "I know."

Ah, so that's why Lord Malfoy hated her so much. She wanted to bet his perfect little pureblood son hadn't inherited that special talent, and he was all kinds of furious that his half-blood niece did.

Harper, from his corner, was pretending very hard to read his book.

"I can't learn to be a metamorphmagi, can I?" Mallory asked, just in case.

Harper snorted from his corner, "only a muggle would think that."

Mallory turned around in her chair to glare at him. "You're picking a fight with me now?"

"Because you're stupid. Any good wizard knows you're only ever the sum of your parents. A great family makes a great wizard."

"That's a load of rubbish," scolded Tonks, "and you'll do well to mind your tongue around me."

"You're not a professor."

"No, but I'm a trainee auror under Alastor Moody. I can hex you seven ways to sunday and there's not a thing you can do about it."
"My parents would sue you," he scoffed.

"Actually," said Mallory, "I think I like this sum of the parents thing. See, my parents are awesome, and yours raised you to be a stupid bigoted little pimple on my arse, so they must be the worst."

Tonks dropped her face into her hand, "stop fighting," she groaned.

"And aren't you a half blood anyway?" Mallory asked, "just like Tonks."

Harper spluttered in outrage, "my grandmother — but the rest of my family is pure! And you're not allowed to say anything about my blood status. You're a mudblood!"

"Hey!" shouted Tonks, "say that one more time and I'm cleaning out your mouth with a good scourgify!"

"Take it back!" shouted Harper.

"Take what back?" scoffed Mallory, "the part where I said you're a pimple on my arse, or the part where I called you stupid?"

If she got him to say No, don't take back the part where you called me bad names, instead take back the part where you said my blood wasn't pure, she was awarding herself double the points.

"You're stupid and a squib!" hissed Harper.

"Hey!" said Tonks, "that's an awful thing to say, stop it!"

"Do you want me to light your arse on fire, again?" Mallory asked.

"Enough!" Tonks shrieked, sparks shooting out her wand. Her hair was sticking straight out like she'd been shocked by electricity.

"He started it." Mallory pointed at Harper.

"I don't care who started it!" Tonks hissed, "now both of you, be quiet!"

Mallory wasn't sure exactly how long she spent being quiet. It felt like an eternity, but it was likely less than a minute.

"Tonks?"

The trainee let out a long sigh, "yes?"

"You look like you're having problems. You should work it out out loud, and then that'd help."

"You just don't give up, do you?"

"Nope," Mallory chirped, "mum says I'm incorri — incorrigish?"

"Incorrigible. Tell her I agree with her."

Mallory smiled widely, "I will!" And sooner than she'd think.

Tonks looked down, then glanced back up to see Mallory still smiling widely at her. As psychological warfare went, it worked well. Tonks looked rather unnerved.
"What is it?"

"I've got some dead clever advice."

"Not on the investigation, you don't."

"No, on your power! The metawhatsit-thingy!"

"Metamorphmagus."

Mallory thought she heard that pathetic snivelling arsewipe let out a groan behind her.

"Yep, I have advice on that."

Tonks put down her quill. "Really?"

"You've been pretending to make pig and duck faces, and change your hair, but— I mean, what if you changed between people faces? You could pretend to be anyone. And you could make your hands into swords, or into claws like Wolverine, or be like Mystique and spy on people or—"

At that, Tonks' face rippled and suddenly Mallory was staring at an exact duplicate of herself.

Tonks-as-Mallory sat in too-large auror robes, black hair frizzing about her ears and staring at the real Mallory with one eyebrow raised.

"Wicked!" Mallory grinned, "pretend to be Selwyn and get him in detention. Or better yet, have him go up to Snape and call him a— uh, oh! Call Snape a dickmuncher while pretending to be Selwyn! It'll be great!"

Tonks, still disguised as Mallory, threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, you're too much. But that's not even —hah— You don't even want to know the sort of mischief I got up to, when I was at Hogwarts."

"Now I definitely want to know."

"Well, I can't tell you. Ask again when you're seventeen."

Mallory tilted her head, "why then?"

"Oh dear Merlin. Because then you'll be an adult."

"It's adult stuff, then? Adult stuff is boring. Except for mysteries, mysteries are good. Do you want to solve the mystery with me now? If we solve it together, you'll look extra clever to your boss."

Tonks shifted back to her normal face, with violent blue hair. "Why did I volunteer for this?"

"Please?" Mallory begged.

Tonks glared, then her face twisted into snotty amusement, "alright, see if you can tell me this: why is it that half of Slytherin is under memory charms?"

"Really?" Mallory raised her brow, suddenly nervous. That was a much greater conspiracy than she figured.

"Yes, really. Now you see why—"
"Is it all the seventh and all the second years?" Mallory asked.

"What?" Tonks frowned, "no. It's most of the upper years and a few of the younger."

Huh. "Okay, everyone at secret hazing ritual thing was in seventh year, second year, or first year. I don't think it'd take that many people, just to kill off Rowle, me, and shitface, so—"

"You're such a freak, Hopkins."

Mallory ignored him, "so, that means… wait, is that whole truth-serum questioning people about everything still in effect?"

"Mostly, yeah?" Tonks frowned. "The mass memory erasure wasn't related to Rowle's death, then?"

"Or it was used to hide the real accomp— the real murder-helpers."

"Uh huh, well, you're doing just about as well as I am. Good work! If that's somehow helpful, I'll transfigure you a badge, alright?"

"She thinks you're an idiot, Hopkins, in case you can't tell." Harper, the dipshit, responded from the back.

"If I have to spend five more minutes in this room with you, I'll—"

"No!" hissed Tonks, "No fighting!"

"He started it!"

"I don't give a damn who—" Tonks glanced down, breaking off mid-sentence.

The magic-mirror on her desk was blinking. "One sec, I need to get this, then you're both getting yelled at."

Tonks raised the mirror to her face, "yes?"

"There's… something odd going on here. Are you by the map?" spoke the tinny voice of an auror.

"Sure, yeah. What's going on?"

"Some portraits are slashed, and there's bloodstains all over the third floor northern corridor." His tinny voice sounded strained, "a bunch of students said they saw bodies, bodies like the Carver victims, and we're thinking—"

"No kidding, okay, I'll check." said Tonks, suddenly grim.

And Mallory? Mallory was doing her very best to keep a straight face, because holy fuck Colin and Kit came through. Felix must've told them Sprout was a minion of the Enemy, and they were trying to rescue her by creating a giant distraction.

Of course, the second Tonks checked those maps she'd realize—

"Tonks," Mallory said, eyes wide and tone panicked, "we need to get out of here."

"What?" Tonks looked up from the map.

"You know who the Carver is here for. We're the only victims that got away, ever. We need to get
out of Hogwarts, now."

Harper jumped to his feet. "I…” he stumbled, "yeah. I want to leave, too. I can't do that again."

"He said there's bodies." Mallory emphasized.

"Is something wrong?" spoke the auror on the other end. "Hello?"

Tonks looked between the map and the two first years.

"Please, please," Mallory widened her eyes, "just let us wait in the Auror Department until you figure out what's going on. If it's nothing, we can just come back. Don't make us go through that again."

"Can you hold on a second?" asked Tonks, to the person on the mirror.

Mallory held her breath.

"Quickly, take my hand." Tonks said, holding out her hands to Harper and Mallory.

It took everything, *everything* Mallory had not to break out grinning or let out a whoop of victory. This was it. This was finally it.

A whole new set of problems lay in wait on the other side of the fireplace, but *this was her chance!*

Tonks tugged the two of them closer to her sides, dropped some floo powder into the empty fireplace, and said "Auror Department!"
The world under Mallory lurched out from under her bellybutton, spinning her dizzily fast. She clutched Tonks hard as they whirled through green flames before it spat them out onto stone.

Mallory took two steps and fell right over.

The Ministry of Magic's Auror Department was a fishbowl. The room was arranged in steps, like a university classroom, except the steps extended all around the border of the room. The fireplace opened on the floor level, opposite the main doors.

It was lit only by candlelight, dim with the edges of the room fading into indistinguishable darkness. There were no windows, only tall marble columns.

Mallory pulled herself to her feet. Her legs were wobbly, and her palms were sweating. Standing at the bottom of a fishbowl, with everyone's eyes on her and Harper, made it only worse. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Tactically, it was a sound strategy. Assuming that apparition was impossible inside the Department, then the only way in or out was through the fireplace or the door.

If anyone wanted to get in, they'd be forced through the bottleneck and dropped into what basically amounted to a kill-zone. All the Auror desks were looking down on the entrance and exit, at different levels. They were free to fire on whomever broke in, without risking accidentally hitting each other.

It also meant that everyone had a perfect view of Mallory's arrival.

Kingsley stood up from his desk immediately, "what's happened?"

The couple Aurors that stood up when Mallory, Harper, and Tonks entered through the fire, sat down as Kingsley assumed authority over the situation.

"I don't—" Tonks broke off, "there's blood in one of the hallways, portraits slashed, and students are saying they saw dead bodies. I thought I'd take the children here, first, just in case."

Kingsley nodded, "good work, let's go."

Kingsley pointed to another Auror, a man with a rusty red beard and thick glasses, "check these two over for polyjuice, the whole lot. I don't want any oversights."

And with that, Auror Kingsley and Trainee Tonks rushed back into the fire.

It'd take them, what, maybe a minute to realize they'd been duped? This wasn't ideal, not by a long shot.

Rusty the Auror muttered a few spells, spritzed them with the portable thief's downfall, and finally declared them to be two ordinary first years.

With that, the entire Auror department collectively lost interested in them.

Mallory edged her way up the side of the room, Harper following close behind. She needed to find an Auror stupid enough to let her leave the fishbowl without a guard. That was her goal. From there, she could get out of the building.
But she'd have to do that fast. There wouldn't be any time for dallying. At any moment Kingsley and Tonks could pop back through the fire, declaring that it was all a hoax. If Tonks and Kingsley got back before Mallory escaped, then Felix and her friends would've gotten in trouble for nothing.

From her vantage point, Mallory took in the room. What was she looking for? Someone stupid? No. It'd be hard to tell, just by looking. What other characteristics would she need in a properly gullible adult. Arrogance, maybe. Pity, laziness, perhaps a very busy adult, who couldn't be bothered to take her to the loo.

Except Auror Moody ran this place. He was methodical and hardcore, as far as defense and protection went.

No, that wasn't helpful.

Desks.

If Auror Moody forced everyone in line, then she had to look for the desks that weren't like the others. The sore thumb, the person who didn't mesh well with the rest of the group. That was the person most likely to break the rules for Mallory.

Almost all the desks were fairly neat, which meant her dissenter would be messy. If not a messy desk, then an Auror who was furiously scribbling over a report, and didn't want to be bothered.

She glanced around the room, and then identified her mark.

"Wait here," she whispered to Harper, "I'm going to ask an Auror to use the loo."

Harper dealt with, she winded her way up the stairs and around to the Auror who's desk was overflowing with paper. The Auror behind the desk was wearing red robes, and was as bald as a newborn chick. Better still, he was scribbling on a piece of parchment, looking far too busy to deal with the needs of any irksome child.

"Hello," Mallory said.

The Auror looked up, and sighed with irritation the moment he saw who was bothering him. "You're the children that trainee brought in." He frowned, "go sit in the back and keep quiet."

Mallory glanced behind her, realizing Harper followed her there like a particularly irritating fly.

"I need to use the loo." Mallory said, not moving an inch.

The Auror looked back up from his paperwork, adjusting his glasses to glare at her properly. "I don't—"

"I really need to go." Mallory's voice turned tight, like she was straining to hold it in.

"I'll go with her," said Harper.

The Auror looked down at his paper, and then looked back up at the two children.

"Can you just tell us where it is?" Mallory asked, "we'll be right back."

Please, please, please, she stared him straight in the eye, giving him her most piteous and innocent expression.

The Auror rolled his eyes, and huffed, "You'd better. I don't want to go and have to look for you."
"Thank you!" Mallory said, and she meant it.

"Go out the main door and make a left, it's right there, you can't miss it."

"Thanks again!" Mallory said, and jogged toward the door, Harper hot in pursuit.

It truly amazed her, sometimes, how thick adults could be. Even she hadn't expected that to work.

How many minutes had already passed, she wondered. Three? Four? Mallory almost ran, keeping her stride at a fast walk. If she outright ran, someone might stop her. And if Mr. Busy Auror wasn't well liked, another Auror would override his command.

The second the door shut behind them Harper grabbed her arm.

"You're behind all this, I know it!" Harper accused, "This is like before, in the potions classroom."

His eyes were narrowed in anger, lips pressed in a thin line.

She didn't have time for this. She didn't have time to muddle through whatever Harper was thinking, and chase him off. There were too many variables in this equation, already. Outside the Auror's office was a long marble corridor, not a waiting room like she'd thought.

Mallory had no idea where she was, or where to go. In fact, she wasn't even sure where in Britain the Auror office was, in the first place.

She didn't have time to deal with whiny, vexing boys like Leland Harper.

"I'm not!" hissed Mallory, "I'm taking advantage of the situation, just like you."

"This whole time you've wanted to leave Hogwarts, and you even said you were going to use a floo!"

"We got lucky." Mallory insisted. They had to get moving.

"No, you planned all this from the start. You had us both moved to the Auror's office, and now with the attack—"

He wasn't going to let up, was he?

And wow, was he giving her way too much credit.

"Yes," Mallory lied, tone sardonic and cutting, "I admit it. I'm the mastermind behind it all, and I won't have you mucking up my plans, so let's go, already. There's no time."

If he went back to the Aurors, there was a good chance he'd nark on her. Then she'd be caught for sure.

It was almost better that he thought she was some sort of diabolical mastermind. He wouldn't feel the need to constantly second-guess her. He might even be useful, if he'd just shut up and follow her orders for once, instead of whining and arguing with her.

Harper looked back, uncertain. "I don't—"

Okay, she took that back. He was still hesitating.
"That attack wasn't fake." Mallory hissed, "the Carver's at Hogwarts and we have to run, now!"

"But we're at the Auror—"

She practically growled, tone biting and eyes tight, "The Auror Department, which has a direct floo to Hogwarts, where the Carver is now actively rampaging. No one's caught him in two decades and he can kill people in an instant. Do you want to be here when he gets here?"

"No, but—"

"Do you want to die? Because we'll die if we stay here."

Harper looked between Mallory's most solemn face, and the closed door to the Auror Department.

"Okay," he nodded, swallowing, "how are we getting out of here?"

Mallory grabbed his wrist with her good arm, hoping he was instinctively rehashing how she'd grabbed his wrist in the Forest—

Stop.

She was hoping he'd associate it blindly with someone saving his worthless arse.

"Through the front door," Mallory said, "come on."

They walked fast, but Mallory forced herself not to run. Running was generally suspicious. A brisk but confident pace was best for not being noticed in places you weren't supposed to be.

In a word, the Ministry of Magic could be described as ostentatious. The floors were black-and-white marble, with marble columns and a marble ceiling. The detail work, bezels, railings, and motifs, were all done in solid gold.

Garish, ugly, like someone found a list of expensive materials somewhere, and tossed all those things together in a blender, until it vomited out an extremely expensive eyesore.

If she were an adult, she'd gouge her eyes out before she'd work here.

Two adults passed them in the hallway, but neither stopped Mallory or Harper.

"Where are we going?" hissed Harper.

"Have you ever been here before?" Mallory asked, evading his question.

"No, not really."

"Not really how?"

"My dad took me here a couple times, but we didn't come to this floor."

Okay, so there were multiple floors. Good to know. Now, if only he knew where the exit was, so they could go there instead of wandering the hallways like two ninnies.

"Do you know where the staircases are?"

"I didn't go to this floor."

"Usually the layout's similar on every floor of a building."
"No it isn't. And why are we looking for a staircase?"

"We need to get to the ground floor, the lobby, wherever people enter and exit from. The area that's open to the public, you know?"

"We took the elevator."

"Okay." Mallory nodded, "then we're going to the elevator."

A third adult was spotted on the far end of the corridor. She was a woman in her mid thirties, witches robes neat and black. Her hair was pulled back in a bun like Professor McGonagall's.

"Okay." Mallory repeated, voice low so only Harper could hear, "you're my brother, and we're ten years old. We're dressed up as Hogwarts students because we're so excited to be going next year. Our parents are downstairs in the lobby, and we got separated from them."

"What?" hissed Harper.

And there wasn't time to explain again, because any moment now the witch would be in earshot. Fuck, where was Danny when she needed him?

"Just follow my lead." Mallory said, tugging Harper forwards and toward the witch.

She must've had her eye on them, because she slowed down a bit as she saw the two approach.

"Is something the matter?" the witch asked, brows raised in curiosity.

"Actually," Mallory said, pitching her voice a bit higher than usual, affecting the voice of a young and eager child, "can you help us? We're lost." She dropped her eyes, looking mournful, and a bit abashed.

"Are you Hogwarts students? What are you doing here?"

"Oh!" Mallory lit up, bouncing on her heels "I'm going next year, and I'm ever so excited. We had mum and dad make our robes look like proper Hogwarts robes and everything."

The woman's eyes crinkled as she laughed, "that's sweet, but—" the woman's brows drew together, "you said you're lost?"

"Mum and dad told us not to wander off but—"

"It's your fault," said Harper, finally joining in, "you're the one who had to use the loo."

"Shut up, stupid." Mallory hissed, before spinning to address the woman, "mum and dad told us to meet them in the lobby, but we can't find the elevator. Can you show us where it is?"

"Yes, sure, of course." The woman shook her head, and added as an afterthought, "you ought to be nicer to your brother."

At that she looked between the two of them, likely noticing how Mallory was tall, had dark eyes and dark hair, while Harper was short with dishwasher blonde hair and blue eyes.

"He's only my half—"

"Our mum and dad will be looking for us," said Harper, stomping on Mallory's foot in warning.
What? Oh. Wizards. Weird byzantine rules. Divorce and remarrying was probably another one of those things that just wasn't done or talked about. Good catch on Harper's part. She'd have to thank him, once they were alone, again.

"Right, of course." the woman said, "this way."

The woman didn't follow them into the elevator. She had a job on that floor, and was rather busy. It was fortunate, because Mallory and Harper had no parents waiting for them in the lobby.

The elevator didn't look safe. It was old, metal, and had far to many leavers and nozzles for any proper elevator Mallory had ever seen.

*Luckily*, Harper said the shower handle that had a printer "L" on the tap meant "lobby," so Mallory pulled the handle.

She immediately regretted it.

Mallory and Harper clung to the railings as the elevator went horizontal then vertical, faster than any safe elevator ought to go. Several flying paper airplanes joined them, along with four office workers from another floor.

What was it about wizarding travel that made it so bloody uncomfortable?

When the elevator dinged L for lobby, the two scurried off, taking in the sight.

"You're a liar," said Harper, now that their conversation could be drowned out by the loud cacophony that was the lobby of the Ministry of Magic.

There were floo-fireplaces lining the length of one wall, and dozens of people were entering and leaving in one great hurry, filling the large chamber with echoing voices of the crowd.

"No I'm not," Mallory responded absently, distracted.

"You're a good liar." said Harper, again. "You tricked me, didn't you?"

Mallory turned to Harper, giving him a look of great condescension, "if I tricked you, d'you think I'd actually tell you that?"

"We're going to be in so much trouble!" hissed Harper.

"I didn't trick you, I said it in the first place I didn't have anything to do with anything, you were the one who wouldn't believe—"

There was a change in the crowd, a shift in tone or something.

The groups and clusters of people were *moving out of the way of someone*, and fast. Even the noise level in the room was changing, raised voices and shouts of alarm.

*Bollocks."

"Come on, we have to go, now."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

Great! Which meant this festering pile of sphincter drippings was going to get caught by the
Aurors, and subsequently give away her position! *Fuck.*

"Fine!" Mallory snapped, "I hope the Carver gets you and *eats out your eyeballs!*"

She didn't mean it, not a word of it. But boy, did the look of shock on Harper's face make it worth it. He deserved a good whack across the nose, acting like he did.

With that, she ducked into the mass of witches and wizards, weaving between them in the general direction of the fireplaces. Being eleven worked out in her favor, since she was shorter than almost all the adults.

If the Aurors tried looking for her in this crowd, even with their pointing charms and magic maps, they'd have trouble finding her.

A wall of fireplaces stretched out before her. Witches and wizards took a scoop of floo-powder, dashed it in the fireplace, shouting where they meant to go.

Mallory scurried in line, and luckily it was a short line, and waited her turn. The itching in the back of her skull reminded her that time was short. She physically had to stop herself from fidgeting and twitching. Acting anxious around adults would only draw their attention.

Finally, *finally* it was her turn, and she scooped a handful of the powder, dashed it into the fire, and shouted, "Diagon Alley!"

She'd actually done it.

Mallory Hopkins was standing in the Leaky Cauldron, gobsmacked.

All those Aurors, all their planning and worrying, and it amounted to nothing. She, a first year Slytherin student, had slipped past their security and was now two steps from muggle London.

She wanted to laugh, to bounce around or giggle madly. The rest of her brain reminded her that she wasn't out of the woods quite yet, and she still needed to call her parents. Worse, she forgot her bag in Hogwarts.

Mallory Hopkins didn't have any money to make the call.

A little note of despair rose in her, because there were only so many problems she could handle. This was too much.

*One problem at a time,* she reminded herself, and walked confidently to the door of the Leaky Cauldron, and out into muggle London.

It was 5 PM in muggle London, the streets were crowded with cars, cabbies, and pedestrians. The smell of petrol stung her nose, almost as repulsive as the rank smell drifting up from the sewers.

Charing Cross Road was boxed in on either side by tall narrow buildings, with shops under the apartments. A bus stop sat squat on the corner of Charing Cross and Tottenham Court, and next to that was a red telephone box.

First thing's first, she thought. Mallory peeled off her robe, leaving her in normal muggle clothes, a t-shirt and jeans. She rolled the robe up and tied it around her waist, like a lumpy jumper. It wouldn't do to attract awkward attention from adults.

Next, she needed to get in a crowd.
If she was right, people were searching for her. The existence of those maps meant the best place to hide was in a crowd in Wizarding Britain. Except, she needed to contact her parents, first.

Once she'd done that, she'd hide in Diagon Alley, in a crowded area, until they could come and pick her up. She'd already realized that her parents would have to come to her, not the other way around.

There was simply no way she could get all the way to Dartmoor without Aurors picking her up. The crowds would make her hard to find in Wizarding Britain, and lurking in crowded places in muggle London might also work.

Just because they could locate her on a map didn't mean they could apparate into the middle of a crowd of muggles and snatch her. The wizards would have to hunt her down on foot. And from what Mallory had seen of wizards, they were hopelessly stupid when it came to blending in with muggles.

She'd spot them miles away, and would vanish into the crowd before they knew what even happened.

Encouraged, she stalked forward into the crowd of pedestrians, making her way toward the bus stop.

There were five people waiting, three women and two men. One man was an older gentleman, maybe seventy or so. The girls were together, teenagers around Gemma Farley's age. It was incredibly rude, she knew, to go up to random adults and ask for money. In the first place, random strangers didn't appreciate people walking up to them and speaking to them, at all.

But Mallory was a child. Children were often awarded more leeway, when it came to such things.

Mallory targeted the teenage girls, first.

"Sorry," Mallory said, sounding uncertain, "but— er— my mum was supposed to come pick me up, but she hasn't yet."

The girls didn't look over at first. The one Mallory was talking to hadn't realized Mallory was speaking to her. Then her friend nudged her, and she looked over.

"What's wrong?" the girls brows were furrowed, more in confusion than sympathy.

"My mum," Mallory said, louder, "she hasn't picked me up. It's been an hour, and I'm really worried. I want to call her, but I don't have any money on me. Can you lend me it? Mum'd pay you back when she gets here."

The girl gave Mallory a look of derision, "piss off."

Right. Okay, then. Moving on.

Mallory bypassed the rest of the girl's friends entirely. They seemed like the sort to do what their friends did, and she suspected she'd get no further with them.

"Sorry—" Mallory said at one of the men.

"I don't have any money on me, beg somewhere else." said a man. He was a slimy sort, in a business suit with a fancy umbrella tucked under his arm.
"I'm not begging," Mallory's tone was indignant, "I need to call my mum."

"Leave us alone." He gave her a mean look, like he was quite cross with her.

"Over here," said the older gentleman, sitting on the bench. He was holding up a handful of change.

"Oh my god," Mallory gaped, "thank you," and rushed right over to him.

"Now," the man's tone was stern, "I'm going to watch you make that call. And if you run off with this to spend it on sweets, I'm reporting you to an officer, do you understand? What's your name?"

"Patricia Wayne, and I understand."

Mallory gave her mum's maiden name. It was the obvious thing to do, when you knew your enemy could track words said out loud in Great Britain, and you knew they were looking for you. She wasn't sure how the maps and taboo worked, and without that certainty, she couldn't know if her name could easily be added to a list, or if the maps were search-able. She wasn't going to do anything that'd make their jobs easier for them, it was simply out of the question.

He held out his hand, and she took the coins, sighing in relief.

"Thank you, I mean it. You're saving my life." She couldn't say more, she really couldn't, because the man might start asking awkward questions. She didn't want him calling an officer. But she needed him to know how grateful she was— because she was a rotten pickpocket and would've never gotten home without his help.

"You're welcome."

"What's your name?" Mallory asked, "I'll have my mum do something nice. I mean it, we'll pay you back."

She'd have dad bake him a cake, or something.

"William Barnes, I'm in the phone-book."

"William Barnes," Mallory nodded, "okay, I'll remember."

Mallory ran straight into the red telephone box, which was next to the bus stop, and locked herself in.

The old man was generous, she had enough for maybe four calls.

Four calls.

Fuck it, she was calling him. She had to call him. There was nothing for it, she needed to hear her friend's voice.

Mallory inserted the coins, dialed a number she'd known by heart since she was six years old, and held the receiver to her ear. Even the dial tone sounded nostalgic and welcome.

"Pearce residence, who's this?" said Mrs. Pearce, Danny's mum. Danny's mum didn't like Mallory, and had deluded herself into believing Mallory was a bad influence on her son.
It was needless to say that Danny's mum lived in a fantasy land. Out of the two of them, **Danny** was the bad influence. **He** was the one who wanted to become a Secret Mastermind, with all the big plans about secret super-powered conspiracies. **She** wanted to be a superhero.

Take *that*, Mrs. Pearce.

"Hi Mrs. Pearce, is Danny there? This is Lena from class." Mallory said, affected a higher tone.

Lena was a girl in their year who was well-known to be studious and hard-working. She was sweet, and had overbearing parents quite like Mrs. Pearce. They weren't only obsessed with their daughter's image, but her grades, as well. Once, Lena had burst into tears when she got a 95% on a spelling test. Mallory and Danny thought the girl was *bonkers*.

"Lena?" asked Mrs. Pearce, sounding curious and a bit surprised. Before she could get another word in, Mallory interrupted.

"We have a group project due, and I wanted to sort out when we'll meet." Mallory said, mimicking Lena's precise clipped tone. The girl spoke like she was putting on airs.

Mrs. Pearce let out an irritated huff into the receiver. "Of course. I'll get him."

"Hello?" Danny's voice crackled over the receiver, and Mallory almost let out a sob of relief.

"Don't say my name. Yes, it's me. *Don't say my name.*"

There was a pause. "Okaaay, may I ask why? How are you on a phone, anyway. I thought your parents grounded you."

Great, Mrs. Pearce was still lurking around Danny. In this case, Danny was using *grounded* to mean that Mallory was supposed to be in Scotland, with no access to a telephone.

"I, uh," Mallory swallowed, "I ran away from school."

There was a short pause, he was surprised. "What happened?"

"I got your letter," Mallory's voice cracked, "but—" she sniffed.

"Is someone looking for you?" he hissed into the receiver, "mum's gone, finally."

"The girl I talked about, the bully? She's dead," Mallory wiped her cheek, "she was murdered, um—"

"Holy fuck."

"Yeah," a laugh, "I know— oh god, don't say her name, either. No names. I— we were kidnapped."

"Wait, are you still—?" *Are you near the kidnappers?*

"No, fuck no. I got away. The school— the headmaster found us, but her killer's still out there and I think he's looking for me, too. I think I was the target all along, because my parents aren't *special*."

"You ran away."

"Yeah, but— I meant— I meant to go to Dufftown, walk there over the weekend, take a bus to London and then home. But then I found— they can *track* people. They can track what anyone
"They? Who's they? Where are you now?"

"London, on the corner of Charing Cross and Tottenham Court. And they are the special-people-policel. They were called in when bully-girl was murdered. They track everyone all across Great Britain. It's fucking creepy. They can tell if you say certain words on a list, they can find you on their map, anywhere in Britain. And they can teleport, so basically I'm fucked."

"That's… that's a lot of constraints on the problem, yeah. Okay, so, off the top of my head, you'll want to stick to crowded areas."

"I thought of that, yeah."

"Okay, are you safe where you are, now?"

"God, I don't know."

"Will you be safe if you come home, with the teleportation and all?"

"I don't know, I think so. My parents don't know— I'm going to call them next. I just— I needed to —"

"Yeah, I missed you, too."

A little sound that might've been a sob strangled it's way out her throat. "I won't be safe at home."

Outside her little red telephone box, the bus was arriving. The older gentleman gave her a wave, and Mallory waved back. She forced a happy and grateful smile onto her face. The snooty teenagers rolled their eyes at her, and the slimy business man didn't even glance back. Prick.

"Alright, where will you be safe? Short term for now, we'll sort out long term in a bit."

"Any special adult can teleport. They have a map that can pick out special people anywhere in Great Britain. I got— I only got here because I helped blackmail the headmaster into getting me a bodyguard—"

"Holy shit, how?"

"I overheard a suspicious and faked conversation by two people who definitely were talking about this confidential thing on purpose near me and my friends," she breathed, voice wobbly and high pitched, "and I think it was a warning, but it was a puzzle piece and it fit—"

"Slow down, take a breath."

"Two people said protections on the school were failing." Mallory took a breath, "and that the headmaster refused to renew them, because of his morals. Some of the protections were sketchy, apparently. The two thought Row— bully-girl was murdered by something that got through the protections, because they're failing."

"They said this in front of you?" his tone was incredulous, "that sounds sort of… staged."

"Yeah, that's exactly what I thought!" she breathed, excited. She knew he'd get it. "Anyway, the headmaster didn't want to assign me any protectors— we were in the room with the special police, and this rich dad, Lord Arseface, who's on the Board, whatever that means. His son said something about his dad trying to get the headmaster sacked, and that he didn't have enough sway."
"A student killed under his watch due to his failings would definitely give him enough sway."

"Yeah, and I told all this to the professor who was helping me, and she might've said something hinting that she overheard the conversation, and the headmaster reversed his decision right after. Thing is, I don't think—"

She took a deep breath, "I don't think the killer will give up, just because I've gone home."

"If they wanted to send a message, if it's political, then no, they wouldn't."

"Home isn't safe."

"No," Danny sighed, and it came across as crackling through the receiver. "Arseface is a lord on our side, too? An Earl or Duke?"

"I've no idea. Does it matter?"

"Maybe. I dunno. Just thinking." there was a short pause, "did you see the kidnapper?"

"No, I— it happened in the woods. My house had this hazing ritual, and it was interrupted. We were snatched. Wi— uh— special people can wipe memories, and implant false memories, so—"

"Holy fuck, what?" he screeched.

Mallory had to hold the phone away from her ear for a moment. Jesus.

"Yeah," Mallory spoke over his exclamations, "so I don't know if what I remember is even real."

"Holy fuck! Okay, so— wait, go on. Let me just absorb this for a sec— what, mom? No, no it's fine. Yeah, no. Okay. Yeah. Lena, talk."

Great. His mum was hovering around again.

"I don't know if I saw anything real, but we were— me, the kid who flipped me upside down the first night— don't use his name either, and bully-girl—"

"Her name, yeah. I got it."

"We were suddenly in the bad part of the forest, and it was freezing and dark, and all the sudden she just went all like Silence of the Lambs had a fucking love child with the Evil Dead. She was alive one second, and the next this—"

"Really gross?"

"Yeah. Remember that scene in Silence of the Lambs where he strings up the security guards outside his cell?"

"Yep."

"It was like that, but way worse."

"Wow. In a split second?"

"Yeah, which is why I think my memory was messed with."

"Call your parents and call me back after." Danny sounded irritated, likely at his mother, "I'll work
things out on my end."

"Okay, you're—" her voice wobbled, "I really missed you."

"I'm the best, I know. Me too."

"Talk to you in a bit."

"Yeah, later."

Click. She hung up, swallowing hard.

But it helped. It had helped to talk about it with Danny, to hear his voice. She'd fucking missed it, missed his advice. And it was good, knowing she was doing what he would do in this situation. She had been scared she was missing something obvious, and she let out a breath of relief knowing he came to the same conclusions she did.

At that, Mallory glanced outside of her phone booth. Staying still in one location was stupid. But she didn't know where the next phone booth was located. Luckily, she didn't see anyone in suspicious robes heading her way. For that matter, no one was heading in her direction, or making a bee-line toward the phone booth, or otherwise acting suspiciously.

For now, she was safe.

The next phone call would be harder.

She was going to have to tell her parents everything, and she was dreading it.

Mum and dad taught her how to be a hero, even if they didn't mean for her to take it so literally.

Mum chose to do what's right, even when it hurt her. When a teenager in the neighborhood got pregnant, everyone snubbed the girl. Mum came over with a basket of baby-things and offered to babysit for her.

Half of the neighborhood thought mum approved of the girl after that. Like the girl's one action was all they needed to know everything about her. And mum choosing to help her was all they needed to judge mum. They didn't want their kids playing with Mallory, and excluded mum from social events.

And you know what mum said? That she'd do it again. Fuck them, she was no coward. And it wouldn't have mattered, but mum kept doing things like that. She wrote angrily-worded letters to companies she felt cheated her. She defended her unpopular political opinions at family gatherings, even when it meant Uncle Simon stopped inviting them over.

It wasn't heroic like pulling people out from a moving train, but it mattered. It mattered that mum didn't give up, even when it cost her something she loved.

Mum was the reason Mallory and Danny didn't pick on that kid that wet himself in class. They went after the bullies, the kids that were mean and took pleasure in hurting others. It was a prelude to taking down super-villains with her awesome superpowers.

But being good was never difficult. It wasn't hard for her to avoid picking on weak people. She didn't want to pick on them. Sure, they sometimes peed themselves in class or spent two hours examining their bogies. But she could take out that irritation on someone who deserved it more.
She thought that meant she was good, because being mean wasn't a huge temptation. She didn't feel tempted to use her powers in class, didn't want to pummel losers.

For all her life, it confused the heck out of her when her parents claimed that being good was hard. She said she understood, but she'd lied.

Privately, she thought it meant being good was hard for her parents.

She was wrong. She never imagined it would be this hard.

Not even a week at Hogwarts and she participated in torturing Harper during the Slytherin Initiation. She should've said no, she knew she should've said no.

Given the opportunity to act like the hero she so wanted to be, Mallory took the coward's way out. She only acted when she thought there was no other option, that it was better to go out in a blaze of glory and defiance.

Harper might be the pimple on her arse, and she knew it'd be a superhuman task to ask herself to feel sympathy for him. It'd take superhuman empathy to feel badly for the person who took pleasure in beating the shite out of you, and then take a beating for their sake.

Except that was the whole point of being a superhero.

Mum and dad would love her, she knew. They'd love her even though she told everyone Selwyn murdered Rowle, even though she took the coward's way out during the Initiation.

But after this, they'd know she—

Mallory blinked back tears, fighting the lump in her throat.

They'd know their daughter, their daughter with superpowers who they'd always taught to stand up and do the right thing, acted like a coward when it counted.

It hurt. It hurt a lot.

Mallory picked up the phone anyway, and dialed the number.

"Hello?" mum's voice, slightly distracted.

"Don't say my name, this is really important."

"What? Mal—"

"Don't say my name!" Mallory shouted, interrupting her. "Someone's listening for my name! This isn't a game or a joke. There are scary bad people who are looking for me and they can tell where I am if they hear my name."

There was a moment of silence on mum's end of the line. Granted, Mallory wasn't sure that her name was taboo'd, but there was always a chance. And it didn't cost her much to take that extra precaution.

"What? What do you mean? Sweetie, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me, your daughter. The— er, the special people, they have a net over Great Britain that catches words on a list and my name might be on that list right now. It'll note your location and maybe mine, and that'd be really really bad."
Mallory trusted her parents to understand her doublespeak, just like she trusted Danny. Mum was very clever, the sort of clever that got her a doctorate in philosophy. And it was mum and dad who told Mallory that *bad people* might want her for her powers, and had encouraged her to be careful with them.

They'd understand.

"What's going on?" there was some shuffling, and indistinct muttering in the background, "I'm putting you on speaker. Dad's here."

"Hi dad."

"Hi sweetie. Mum says we're not allowed to use your name?"

"Yeah, don't. Special people have a list of words they track, and they note down the time and location of who said the word. I'm sort of on the run, so that'd be really bad."

"On the *run*?" squawked dad, "what did you do?"

The whole story came out, almost exactly like she told Danny. She told them about the bullying, about the Slytherin Initiation, and about what came after.

"You're coming home, right now." said Dad.

"What about the murderer?"

"It'll be fine. We'll take care of it. Stay in a crowded area until we come get you."

"Okay, and mum? Dad?"

"What, sweetie?"

"I'm sorry about the plan."

"Oh no, sweetie, it's okay. We want you alive. More than anything, we want you safe and happy."

"It's just—"

"You infernal child." hissed the most unwelcome voice on the planet.

The door to the red telephone box snapped open, and Mallory's heart dropped to her stomach. *No*, no, it wasn't supposed to— *No*. It wasn't supposed to end like this. Because a part of her hadn't believed this was allowed to happen. She'd gotten so far, all the way muggle London. This *wasn't allowed to happen*. The back of her throat burned, eyes prickling.

"Mum—" Mallory started, and Snape grabbed her by the arm, ripping her away from the phone and safety. She gripped the handle on the door with her other hand, and *screamed*.

"Stop! *No!*"

"Silence, you pathetic child."

She distantly heard mum screaming from the phone, "Mallory! What—"

"No!" Mallory shrieked. "I won't go back!"
"Silence! You'll do as your told."

"Help!" Mallory screamed, "I'm being kidnapped! Fire! Child Molester! Unsafe touches!"

A number of people on the street were now staring at the odd scene. A child screaming and crying, clinging to the door of a red telephone box, was being yanked by the arm. Except the man doing the dragging was dressed in funny robes with greasy black hair.

Two people started rushing over.

"Help!" Mallory screamed toward them.

With two flicks of Snape's wand, the people on the street suddenly became disinterested, and Mallory was silenced.

That didn't stop her.

She kicked at him hard, twisting, mindless of how badly it was hurting her arm. She hit him twice before he managed to petrify her, and then—

And then, he apparated her.

She screamed, sucked through a straw wasn't a worthy description. It was by far the most unpleasant form of wizarding travel.

Only a moment later, Mallory was staggering, retching up bile on the green grass. Severus Snape and Mallory Hopkins were standing outside the gates of Hogwarts, right back where she began.

Fuck didn't even begin to cover it.
A reminder: This fic features unreliable narrators, and a limited POV. Every character is speaking through their own lenses, which color how they see the world.

Albus Dumbledore: December, 1991

The Mirror of Erised stood at the center of a secret room below Hogwarts, exactly where it ought to be. In front of that mirror, however, was a wizard who definitely wasn’t supposed to be there.

Quirinus Quirrell admired the stone in his hand with a look of mild amusement.

It shouldn't be possible, thought Albus. Tom needed the stone to rise from the dead. And Quirrell, his likely servant, needed to give it to him. The only way anyone could take the stone from the mirror was if they didn't intend to use it. But how—

And then the Defense Professor looked up and saw Albus Dumbledore, "ah, it seems I've sprung a trap."

Quirinus's voice had changed. No longer did he hear the wheedling, stuttering Professor Quirrell. This wizard spoke in sharp, precise tones.

He couldn't be Voldemort. Voldemort spat insults, hurled killing curses and spoke with a sibilant hiss coloring his every word.

The wizard, who was definitely not Quirinus, sighed. "A pity. I'd hoped for my theft to go unmarked."

"You cannot escape." spoke Albus, "your master has led you to your doom."

A brief flicker of emotion crossed the Defense Professor's face. Surprise, perhaps, or amusement.

"It is a pretty trinket, isn't it?" the defense professor glanced up from his examination of the stone, "if you don't mind, I think I'll skip this battle."

Albus Dumbledore had raised his wand to strike, just as the defense professor vanished into thin air.

Impossible.

There were protections against apparition, portkeys, all kinds of— and then he realized.

The defense professor's other hand hadn't been on his wand, it'd been in his pocket. No doubt, the wizard had been spinning the glass of a time-turner. He hadn't vanished, he'd gone back in time.

Present Day:
Albus Dumbledore cast a firm *quietus*, to avoid anyone overhearing them.

Pomona was still scolding him.

She started on him the moment they left the Auror's office, face almost purple with fury. Her hands were clenched into tight fists.

The hallway was cooling under the dim light of the late afternoon. A tapestry depicting a seventh century mermaid greeting wizard adventurers was vacant. Their inhabitants fled at the commotion.

Albus felt weary.

"I don't *understand* it, Albus," Pomona said, voice low and tight.

"What you did was *reckless,*" Albus Dumbledore's hand tightened on his wand. He couldn't have this, not now, not when everything was so close to falling apart.

*Damn* those meddling ghosts!

"If half of what that child says is true, you *should* be sacked. I mean it. I don't understand how you can—"

"You have no sense of *scale,* Pomona!" He struggled to keep his voice lowered.

"That child—"

"Pomona, you must *listen,*" he took a breath, "Voldemort has risen. He's using the Philosopher's Stone. I made a *grave mistake,* and once again we're on the brink of war. You must understand, if he gains a foothold in Hogwarts, the Dark Forces will win. Our students will die."

"I've heard," her tone was dry, "yet, that doesn't excuse neglecting the protections on the castle. It doesn't excuse allowing Snape to ignore bullies, either. If you won't do it, assign someone else the responsibility, but don't plain ignore it."

Dumbledore sighed. He needed to get this through to her, explain before she did something regrettable. Pomona Sprout wasn't a *powerful* witch, but every professor at Hogwarts knew his skill in the mind magics. She was smart, and she cared a great deal about her students. If she cared that much, the ever-prepared and practical Professor Sprout would've taken precautions.

She'd have a contingency to handle obliviation, depending on how long ago she'd heard from the ghosts. If he chose to obliviate her and tripped her contingency, she'd no doubt go directly to the Head of the Auror Department.

The Malfoys, Gamps, Selwyns, and a number of other families were just *waiting* for a misstep like that. He wouldn't give them the rope with which to hang himself.

This meant he needed to get through to her. And if all else failed, he'd use *legilimency* and *persuade* her to give up this cause. There weren't many possible contingencies she could raise against that kind of attack. It was regrettable, but with the safety of the Wizarding World at stake, Albus would do what he must.

"The protections the ghosts spoke of are ancient, and haven't been renewed since Black was Headmaster of Hogwarts," said Albus, pausing for effect. "They require, regrettably, the sacrifice of human life."
Sprout blinked, taken aback.

Good, he needed her off-balance.

"It's possible that the loss of those protections had a role in young Miss Rowle's death," Albus continued, "but we cannot be sure."

Unless the Cracklewood Carver was some sort of entity from Beyond the Veil. Which it probably was, given the evidence.

The first clue was the fire.

Each time the Carver struck, one child would be found mangled and posed, while two other children at the corpse's feet were burnt to cinders.

Miss Hopkins lit the fire.

Miss Hopkins lit the fire that ostensibly would've taken her own life. It was unlikely that each time the Carver struck, the children independently thought to light fires.

Until now, the Aurors and Dumbledore had always assumed the Carver lit the fires. That may still be the case, but Albus was now forced to consider another possibility.

They'd been manipulated. Some foul force swayed their minds, bade those children to light the fires that killed them.

It was mere speculation, but Albus doubted this was a targeted attack against the students. He believed this was the work of something summoned from Beyond the Veil, and that those three students were merely convenient targets.

That two of those three students were tactically important cast doubt on that theory, yet—

Yet, there was the ritual nature, to consider. Young Miss Rowle's heart had been replaced by an effigy of twigs and mud. It might symbolize a stolen heart, a stolen soul.

Transformation.

A witch turned to wood, flesh turned to cinder.

It pointed to old and forbidden magics. Necromancy.

The forest had been blanketed in frost. Trees hundreds of years old were rotting from the inside out. Not one living thing had returned.

Whatever was summoned there that night was powerful. Rocks had been eroded to fine grit. The water had been absorbed into organic matter, bloating it and starting a chain reaction. The air was rank with putrefaction.

Harper and Hopkins were likewise touched by the corruption, the rot. The young wizard's mind carried more damage than Miss Hopkins'. He suspected some combination of potions and family magics accounted for the difference.

The signs and portents were clear. Yet the question remained, who summoned it? A creature such as that couldn't cross over unless invited.

Rowle's enemies weren't that foolish. Killing their daughter would only invoke ruin upon the
murderer. Harper's family didn't have the sort of enemies that'd attack using necromancy. And Hopkins wasn't even on the game board.

Only four people knew the truth about Miss Hopkins, and none of them were likely to speak on the matter.

In other words, this was no assassination. The students were merely targets of convenience.

Moreover, there was another portent of Necromancy, one more subtle than the last. The three children were the first to be punished by the Mistress of Ceremonies, that night.

Such things carried weight. To sacrifice the young was to sacrifice potential. The children suffered through pain, in a quasi-ritualistic bonding ceremony. To break it, sacrifice the reconciliation which would have no doubt followed the punishment, meant that the students went through their trial for nothing.

Suffering, decay, rot, transformation, frost and fire.

Yes, the signs and portents were clear. This was the act of the Cracklewood Carver, the original demon. The one who summoned it twice before summoned it a third time, only for the ritual to be broken.

It was troubling, not only because of the necromancy, but because of Tom Riddle's potential involvement. The Death Eater attack that constrained his use of the time-turner that night was no coincidence.

It was possible the murderer knew word of Death Eaters would draw him like a moth to the flame. Yet, there was little evidence to support that theory. Beyond the sporadic kidnappings, there'd been no Death Eater activity in the months since Tom's resurrection.

Could it be that Lord Voldemort was delving into darker magic, still?

Albus Dumbledore thought he might solve this mystery, given time. But the Rowles, Malfoys, and Alastor Moody wanted to bring a necromancer to the school.

Professor Corvinus Blackthorn.

In Albus Dumbledore's opinion, this was a mistake.

He knew this wizard, encountered him before in the early 1960s, at an ICW conference. Blackthorn earned the ire of Solomonari Order, with a radical plan to recruit more muggleborns into Koldovstoretz. Two wizarding countries dragged Blackthorn before the ICW, threatening hostilities if the necromancer didn't cease his operations in the region.

War, again, only years after Gellert and his generals slaughtered their way through Wizarding Europe. He tried reasoning with them, poured time and energy into finding some kind of compromise, but they would not be swayed. The ICW had been left with no other option than to declare Blackthorn's actions in violation of multiple treaties. Blackthorn, enraged, declared them murderers in front of the whole assembly.

Corvinus Blackthorn was another wizard with no sense of scale, no understanding of how fragile peace was to maintain.

Worse, Blackthorn studied the Dark Forces, Necromancy, making pacts with entities that wished for the destruction of all life. It was a testament to how much power Albus Dumbledore had lost,
that the wizard was even allowed to step foot in Hogwarts.

He'd read some of Blackthorn's papers, after Alastor suggested bringing the man to Hogwarts.

Great Britain was incredibly lucky Blackthorn turned down Tom Riddle's offer. Tom, ever the fool, had coveted Blackthorn's power. The Dark Lord made offers of battle and glory through Blackthorn's former apprentice, intending to lure him to Britain. Instead, Blackthorn fell out with Bellatrix over the matter, banning her from his school. To Albus' knowledge, Blackthorn never contacted her, again.

He imagined the war would've gone quite differently, if Blackthorn had taken Bellatrix's hand and joined Riddle. Bellatrix alone was bad enough, but Blackthorn? He shuddered to think of it. Instead of facing armies of inferi, they would've been crushed under the foot of a summoned demon-god.

He still remembered stories of a necromancer in Siber, who bade a demon to collapse a landmass the size of London into the White Sea. Towns were still cordoned off, forever mutated into hellscapes where the Beyond bled into the living world. No, that sort of Wizardry could not come to Hogwarts.

The Ancient Families were tame compared to him.

Which brought him back to Pomona Sprout. He didn't have time to deal with her threats. He just didn't.

Corvinus Blackthorn was coming to Hogwarts, a summoned entity from Beyond the Veil was loose in the Forbidden Forest, and Voldemort was risen.

Albus looked Pomona in the eye. "Against Voldemort, we almost lost. If it weren't for Harry Potter, Wizarding Britain would've fallen. This time, we face him weakened. I cannot fight a war on two fronts, Pomona. You must understand the seriousness of what you've done. Today, you would've sacrificed the war to save one child. If the Malfoys obtain that leverage, they'll use it to destroy us."

"I wouldn't have—" Pomona gaped, "I meant to get your attention. I wouldn't have—"

She was lying. He read her mind and felt a great deal of guilt and terror. In the moment, she would have told Narcissa Malfoy that Albus Dumbledore neglected the protections on the school, all to save one child.

And if she had, Albus Dumbledore would've lost his position as Headmaster of Hogwarts. The news would've spread that he was at least partly responsible for young Miss Rowle's death, and Malfoy would've capitalized on it.

His allies would've deserted him, and with them went the money needed to fund the Order of the Phoenix.

Tom would've won, all because Pomona Sprout couldn't stand the suffering of one child. It was almost ironic.

"Yet you thought to endanger the lives of every student in this school, to earn a temporary reprieve for one child."

"I didn't know, Albus. I'm certainly not going to say anything, now. And don't— don't distract me from my point, here. You need to reign in those bullies, keep—"
"It matters not," the old wizard stared down at Pomona, exhausted, "it is far worse than you realize. Now Narcissa Malfoy knows you have leverage over me, and she'll attempt to discover what you're hiding, and why."

"The Malfoys can't do a thing while I'm here," scoffed Pomona, "the castle would alert you if Lucius Malfoy came anywhere near my office."

"Indeed," Albus nodded, "but taking the path of caution is often wiser than the riskier slope."

"Albus," She looked rather cross, now. "You need to handle this. I don't want to hear about wiser paths and whatever else. I want to hear what you're going to do to protect our students."

And again, Pomona was proving that she couldn't see the big picture.

"All I can say, Pomona, is that we're in control of the situation. So long as the students remain inside the castle, there's no danger."

Pomona let out an annoyed huff, "then tell the child that, for Merlin's sake. And the young— Harper— they're worried sick. Half of the school is braced for another attack."

He wished to tell Pomona, and even the students, the protections in place around the school. It would assuage their fears. Yet, no one outside of Moody, the Board of Governors, and a handful of Aurors knew the extent of the protections. Already, too many people knew. It could spell danger, if their summoner were to learn of the clever traps and charms now protecting the castle.

Pomona had already proved herself to have poor judgment. And the children were just that, children.

"No," Albus shook his head, "I regret to say that the children might not recognize the need to keep these protections secret."

Pomona Sprout chewed on her lip, thinking, "and what will you do about those bullies? The ones heckling poor Miss Hopkins."

The unfortunate truth was, there was little Albus could do. If Voldemort had not chosen this year to rise, he'd have the capital to pressure those families into reigning in their children. As of now, if he punished those young Slytherins, they'd complain to their parents.

Their parents likely already knew a vile mudblood had somehow managed to enter Slytherin. The fanatics among them might threaten to try something, but few would follow through. Anyone with a modicum of sense knew the damage to Slytherin House would be negligible. And the rest had more pressing concerns than the existence of a muggleborn in Slytherin.

Yet, if their precious children were forced to attend detention due to that muggleborn, they'd be enraged. The parents would claim that Hopkins was lying to the professors. Then they'd say that Albus was only taking her side because of politics.

The more Albus fought them, the further they'd escalate. In the end, they'd be before the Wizengamot.

And everyone knew the Wizengamot was made up of purebloods, and the wizards who served them. The Ancient and Noble Houses would claim slander. Business deals fell through due to false accusations of bigotry. A line of witnesses out the door, all paid off, would claim how Roderick Selwyn was the sweetest child they'd ever known. No Selwyn had ever espoused blood purist views, they'd say.
It would be a farce, and the Hopkins family would be ruined.

Without Voldemort, he'd be able to fight on the child's behalf, or find the child a Patron to fight for her. But now? Now, he could not. He was already asking too much of the Bones. All his favors were cashed in.

The young witch and her hapless muggles would face the combined wrath of the Ancient and Noble Houses, and lose everything. She'd end up impoverished, expelled from Hogwarts, and once Voldemort's influence grew—

Well, his followers would kill her and her muggle parents.

At most, he could touch a few of her classmates' minds and will them to lose interest in her. But he'd have to be careful. Children's minds were delicate, and there were lasting effects to mind magic. Changing their minds might do more harm than good.

That also didn't solve the issue of Selwyn, Avery, and a number of upper-year Slytherins who knew Occlumency. He'd be unable to touch their minds without their parents learning of it.

The main instigators wouldn't be hindered, at all.

Telling the Aurors about their parents' lawbreaking was pointless, as their parents would simply bribe them. That was what it meant, to be an Ancient and Noble House in Magical Britain.

But Pomona didn't care about any of that. She saw a child in need, and failed to see the long-term consequences of her actions. She couldn't see the size of the game-board, and thus was blind.

"I'll speak to Severus," lied Albus, "he has more sway over them than I."

At that, he touched her mind. It wouldn't do to obliviate her. He couldn't trust that she'd cleverly hidden her countermeasures. Hufflepuffs were much like Hopkins in that they asked for help when they needed it.

In other words, he had to be subtle.

She'd already developed some caution about who she might speak to about the protection spells. But she wasn't truly swayed from her path. Should Albus fail to fix the situation between the first years, she still intended to use her leverage.

Regrettably. Then, there was only one thing he could do. Her fear he strengthened to paranoia. Pomona would fear telling anyone, as it would put her students in grave danger.

The concern over Miss Hopkins he dulled, weaving in the thought that Severus would handle it. When that wasn't enough, he added a second thought to the refrain: Severus was a half blood, himself. He wouldn't let this go on.

Those thoughts he dug into her brain, like wearing grooves in a dirt road. Pomona would feel concern for Mallory, and that would trigger her to feel Snape would handle it, he's a half blood and wouldn't let this go on, coupled by a feeling of reassurance.

Of course, this wasn't foolproof. Hopkins would no doubt come to Pomona again, now that she knew she'd found an ally amongst the faculty. When she did, Pomona would overcome the compulsion.

There was only so much he could change before it became rather obvious something was wrong.
He could imagine Pomona, sitting at her desk unable to say or think anything besides "Severus will handle it, he was a half blood."

The mind arts had their limits, and Albus was mindful of them.

This meant he needed to give Pomona a reason to doubt Underwood, Hopkins, and her other friends, the next time they demanded she take action against the Slytherins.

Albus called up the memories of Underwood in Pomona's office, and of her observations.

Underwood, it seemed, was a stout and noble young lad. The details were blurred — Pomona's memory wasn't augmented by potions, — so the words and minutiae were ever-shifting, inconsistent.

It was fortunate, though. If Pomona used Wit-Sharpening potion, his compulsions and triggers wouldn't stick. She'd revert back to normal in no time at all.

As it stood, Pomona's mind would accept his alterations semi-permanently. It'd take a strong outside force to break it.

Underwood, in her mind, shared his story with her.

Hopkins had planned to start a riot to distract the Aurors and escape Hogwarts.

That plot was, unfortunately, unable to break the top ten most insane things he'd discovered students attempting. On that list was committing murder with the fabled monster of Slytherin and attempted murder by luring a student into a werewolf's path, so this was no surprise.

It was troubling, though. Personal considerations aside, Hopkins was only a first year. Students usually didn't begin to plot potentially fatal catastrophes until their third year. Had he missed something vital? In ten years of sporadic check-ups, Hopkins never displayed such extreme behavior.

Pomona Sprout stood in front of Albus Dumbledore, mouth agape, mind under his sway.

In her mind, Hopkins was a precocious little Slytherin, with an audacious plan the child would've never followed through on. She believed Underwood believed Hopkins would start a riot. But she didn't believe Hopkins would do it.

Surely, the child would lose her nerve, Pomona thought. Pomona Sprout was naive and optimistic. A decade of teaching did nothing to dent her belief in her students. It was heartening to see, but inconvenient.

Her feelings with regards to Hopkins' actions were mild amusement, fondness, and exasperation.

That wasn't much to work with, really. What she found amusing in Hopkins, she found amusing in other students, as well. He'd have to alter her overall sense of humor if he wanted her to find Hopkins tiresome.

Instead, Albus came up with a different idea. It'd be finicky and delicate work, but he could do it. He drew up her memories of Farley, and several other students Albus knew to be troublesome.

Pomona didn't see Farley's deceptions. Instead, he saw a dedicated if slightly domineering seventh year.
That wouldn't work.

She found the Weasley Twins funny, though she pretended to be stern and disapproving around them.

No luck there, either.

Peregrine Derrick and his gang of troublemakers were also regarded with fondness.

Really?

Roderick Selwyn, however, disturbed her. This was not his first choice. Selwyn was living up to his family name. They, like other Ancient Families, sacrificed to Dark Forces. What they sacrificed was up for debate—they closely guarded their secrets. However, judging by the cruelty members of the Selwyn family engaged in, he suspected they sacrificed pieces of their souls.

He wanted Pomona to see Hopkins as troublesome, not psychopathic.

He hesitated.

Albus Dumbledore hesitated, and then undid the connection. No, this was too much. For the same reason he couldn't leave a cursed child to die, for the same reason he didn't kill Harry Potter the moment he recognized the piece of Tom Riddle's soul latched onto him—he wouldn't have Pomona fear Hopkins.

Later tonight, he'd compel the young witch to go to Severus for help, instead of Pomona. It would be dangerous, but less damaging than having Sprout believe Hopkins to be evil. And Hopkins could keep her Professor Sprout, who'd dote on her in class and give her an extra biscuit during study hall.

But Hopkins would never ask Pomona for help with bullies again, averting disaster.

With that, he released Pomona with the lightest touch of a confundus, and sent her on her way.

There was a problem.

Albus Dumbledore, in the privacy of his office, was interrupted by a fuming Severus Snape.

In the hour it took to read through a particularly vile piece of legislation proposed by the Selwyn family, a panic started in the Ravenclaw common room. Said panic spread throughout the school, with frantic students screaming bloody murder.

Apparently, the Cracklewood Carver was loose in Hogwarts.

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was behind this fiasco, and Albus was, indeed, a genius.

Nymphadora Tonks, for her part, looked thoroughly embarrassed.

A Black by blood, but Ted Tonks' contribution must've mellowed out the madness that dogged their line.

"And where are the young Mr Harper and Miss Hopkins, now?" asked Albus, raising one bushy brow.

Tonks pointed to the fire, "I took them through the floo. They were concerned—well, they acted
— are you sure they're behind it?"

Hopkins somehow contrived to communicate with her friends, who started the panic on her behalf. Then they used the confusion to convince Miss Tonks to take them through the floo, out of Hogwarts.

Albus nodded, "if you please, find Messrs Underwood, Creevey, and Miss Jennings on that map of yours? And Severus, fetch Miss Hopkins and Mr Harper."

Snape nodded, and went through the fire.

Mallory Hopkins was not behind the panic, at least not intentionally. It seemed that Hopkins was rather mistrusting, and thought Pomona was a spy for the Carver.

Seated in the Auror's office across from three recalcitrant eleven year olds, Albus Dumbledore was trying hard not to laugh.

"We have to save her!" insisted Colin Creevey, "we're all in danger."

"I assure you, Mr Creevey, you're safe within Hogwart's walls."

The young Mr Underwood looked abashed, likely feeling foolish for his mistake. His friend, Miss Jennings, however, was not at all repentant.

"That's not true at all," Kit Jennings said, stubborn. "someone could be tricked or blackmailed, and there was a whole bunch of other stuff, too!"

"Professor Sprout is under the bad guy's mind-control!" interjected Creevey.

"Professor Sprout might be secretly begging for help in her mind," whispered Jennings, "wishing for all her heart that someone would stop her from hurting Mallory, and we're fulfilling that wish!"

Albus Dumbledore looked into the minds of the three muggleborns, who wouldn't know occlumency and didn't have parents who'd teach them how to detect the use of mind magics.

In Mr Creevey's eyes he saw only grim determination and fear for his friend.

Underwood felt humiliated, torn between feeling deceived and guilty for breaking the rules.

Jennings was noting—fractal patterns on his robes. Counting them. Albus paused for a moment—was the young witch practicing some form of proto-occlumency? No. She just enjoyed arithmency, and was bored of the conversation. It seemed her mind defaulted to counting interesting things.

Well, then.

"Miss Hopkins is safe here, however she's gone missing—"

"Yes!" Jennings jumped out of her seat, whooping. "We did it!"

Creevey slumped in his seat, letting out a sigh of relief. Underwood perked up from his self-flagellation.

Albus felt some amount of pity for his professors. For the next seven years they'd be dealing with this lot.
"Can you tell me where she's gone?" Albus asked.

The stubborn silence he received as a response didn't surprise him. However, they didn't know he knew the mind arts.

It was— how did muggles say it? Like trying not to think about pink elephants.

Colin Creevey's thoughts were on Dufftown, phone-calls to parents, and an eventual bus home.

Felix Underwood's were of home and parents.

Kit Jennings was imagining Hopkins— sneaking down an alley in some sort of costume? He examined the thought. Hopkins wanted to go home, but she never could because she ran out of money. Somehow, this led to her becoming a muggle named James Bond.

Quite the imaginative young witch, that one. All three shared a similar theme: Hopkins was running away, going home to her muggle parents.

"We aren't going to tell you anything," Creevey elaborated. The silence must've got to him.

Jennings piped in, "you can tack my toes to the floor and I still wouldn't talk!"

Underwood said nothing, preferring to remain silent in solidarity with his friends.

"You can pressure us all you like!" said Creevey.

Albus was amused, and doing his best not to show it. Pressure? Awkward silences were hardly pressure, though he was curious how long it would take them to crack.

Jennings made a face like she was constipated, and blurted, "okay, I give up."

"Don't!" yelled Creevey, eyes wide and frantic.

"She ran away to Antarctica to live with the Eskimos." Jennings slumped in her seat, a couple fat crocodile tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

"What?" Creevey looked befuddled.

At that, Underwood dropped his head into his hands and started giggling. So much for repentance.

Jennings smacked his shoulder, "you aren't helpful at all!"

"Ooh," said Creevey, eyes widening as he caught on, "you lied to protect her." Then he realized his mistake in pointing that out, and doubled down to correct it, "Mallory actually went to— er— to India. So, er— she's safe." Creevey smiled as though he were trying his best to appear genuine, but failed miserably.

"Eskimos live in Alaska, not Antarctica." Underwood said, muffled through his hands.

"How is that helpful?" Jennings glared at Underwood, imperious and dismissive.

"Because that means she went to Alaska!" said Creevey.

At that, a ruckus outside the door distracted them.

It seemed Severus was back, with one of their missing students.
"Ow ow ow!" screeched a familiar voice, "get your paws off me you stupid shitstained dickmuncher!"

Underwood's jaw dropped, while Creevey looked as though someone sucker-punched him.

Severus blasted through the door, dragging an irate Miss Hopkins by the collar of her muggle shirt. The young witch had discarded her witch's robes for muggle wear, robes wrapped around her waist in a messy knot.

Face red, tear tracks and snot smeared across her face, Miss Hopkins made for a ridiculous sight.

Kingsley followed them in, Tonks bringing in the rear. Her hair was a mousy brown instead of her usual exuberant bubblegum-pink, no doubt embarrassed. She'd been outwitted by five first years, after all.

They piled into the small office room, shuffling around awkwardly, avoiding the struggling first year.

"Twatface, get off me." Hopkins shrugged off Severus' hand, adjusting her muggle shirt.

He was putting the look on Severus' face right now into a penseive and bottling it.

"Albus," said Kingsley, attempting to regain his equilibrium after the first year's outbursts, "we might have a problem. Severus says Miss Hopkins was talking to muggles over a fellyton—"

"Her parents," Severus cut in, "it's a two-way connection, not a radio. It communicates information between two individuals, much like your mirrors."

"I see." Albus nodded, "then it's of no concern."

Albus looked into Severus' eyes, and projected a general question.

Snape responded in kind, Hopkins told her muggles about the Carver. From what I heard, she told them everything.

That was troubling. He supposed they were going to have to obliviate them. At the least, a couple cheering charms and some legilimency should have them out of his beard. Merlin knew he didn't need muggles raising a fuss. They could hardly understand wizarding matters, and would only get in the way.

Modify their memories, or have the Obliviators do it, he told Severus.

"Might other muggles listen in?" asked Kingsley. He looked disquieted, and kept glancing at Miss Hopkins as though the young witch were a live snake.

"I doubt it," Severus rolled his eyes.

"No," Albus said, "there's no danger to the Statute, here."

He turned to Miss Hopkins, who's gaze was flicking around the room like she might bolt at any moment.

"Miss Hopkins," Albus spoke, his voice grave and low, "I hear you've had quite an adventure. According to your young compatriots, here, you've been to Alaska, Antarctica, and— ah, India."

Hopkins glared at him, and he supposed she meant to be threatening. Amusing on its own, but
Albus felt a twinge of worry. She looked remarkably like them, when she glowered like that.

 Granted, he reminded himself, many muggleborns were the descendants of squibs. Some came from even more dubious origins — love potions and obliviations, administered to an unsuspecting muggle. No one had any reason to suspect Miss Hopkins was anything different.

The young witch glanced between Albus and her friends, then rolled her eyes.

"You lot are awful liars," Hopkins shook her head.

"Listen here, young lady," broke in Kingsley, "this isn't a game. You interfered with an active investigation, wasted time and resour—"

"Yes, Kingsley, thank you. I believe you have other matters to attend to?"

There as a beat of silence, where Kingsley Shacklebolt gave Albus Dumbledore a flat stare, but then the man turned tail and left the office.

"Miss Tonks," Albus said, as the trainee Auror made to leave after him, "if you might stay? Thank you."

Tonks met Kingsley's gaze, halfway out the door. He nodded, and she backed through the door again, standing against the wall.

Good. He'd need her, after this. Someone had to keep an eye on the children, and he didn't think she'd fall for the same trick twice.

Albus Dumbledore turned to the child, "did you know, Miss Hopkins, that Professor Sprout was not under the employ of any murderers, when you told Mr Underwood here that she intended to kill you?"

He made eye contact with her, touching her mind.

"I want to go home." Hopkins ignored his question.

She had thought Pomona planned to kill her. Once she realized her mistake, she hadn't considered that Felix might be able to start the panic without her help.

"Did you consider the implications of causing a panic?" Albus asked.

"I want to go home." Hopkins insisted.

She hadn't, and assumed everyone would be escorted out to the field.

Mistrusting and reckless, but not malicious.

And while her outbursts alarmed the Aurors, Albus was not so surprised. Muggles were far more indulgent with their children, and it showed. For a witch or wizard child to scream and engage in fisticuffs was almost unheard of, outside the mad or demon-touched.

Whatever plagued Miss Hopkins, the Carver's influence and her muggle lack of discipline were doing her no favors. He would have to speak to Poppy.

Albus turned to Severus, who was scowling by the door. He nudged at his mind, an open question.

Severus sent back an image of Hopkins howling in the street, kicking out and accusing Severus of
being a pedophile.

Yes, Poppy would have to be consulted as soon as the meeting was over. This could not go on.

"Have you found Mr Harper?" he asked, instead.

"No," Severus scowled, "Kingsley sent a team of Aurors out to find the young wizard. It wouldn't surprise me if Miss Hopkins killed him through sheer stupidity."

"Hah," Hopkins barked, "well, at least when the murderer comes around there'll be one less student for him to kill. That's more'n you've done."

"We didn't give you up, I swear. Not even Felix said anything." Creevey was looking at Hopkins, sorrowful and defeated.

Underwood's protest was drowned out by the exuberant Miss Jennings, "I even said I'd stand thumbtacks through my toes and not say a word!"

"Thumbtacks go through your thumbs not your toes," groaned Underwood, "and you said tacks, not thumb—"

Jennings took that moment to cover Underwood's mouth with her hand.

"Why are you lot here, anyway?" asked Hopkins. She made an effort to look confused. It was belated, especially since he'd seen that she knew exactly why her friends were here.

"I believe you know that already, Miss Hopkins." Albus fixed her with piercing stare.

Dumbledore read her mind. She was currently debating whether a declaration of I don't know anything! would make her friends angry, or keep them out of trouble. It all depended on whether or not that old fart realized who was behind the riot.

The child settled on glaring at him silently, with that constipated-attempting-to-look-intimidating face.

"I know these three were behind the panic, Miss Hopkins." Albus made it easier for her.

Hopkins looked at her friends expectantly, and they all nodded glumly.

Her face was blank for a moment, and she turned away from his gaze. What was she—

Hopkins perked up, chirping, "that was wicked! I can't believe you started a riot for me! Felix, you're a horrid traitor but I forgive you because you threw a riot! For me!"


"You four are in more trouble than you can imagine," hissed Severus, livid from his corner.

Hopkins spun around, "four? No, they've nothing to do with it. You see, I tricked them. I told Felix I was planning a riot, and how to start a riot—that was all on purpose. I tricked him into believing Professor Sprout was trying to kill me so he'd convince them to start a riot. It was all part of my diab— er— diabic? No. Devilish super-secret clever plot. I would've gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling er— adults."

If Albus hadn't known she was lying from reading her mind a minute ago, Creevey bursting into giggles and Underwood groaning into his palm would've given it away.
Creevey was imagining a moving drawing—a cartoon—with a talking dog. A villain monologued, "I would've gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!" Her words sparked the recognition.

Some sort of muggle joke? Irrelevant.

Severus seethed, "this isn't amusing. You've disrupted the Aurors, ran away from government officials, and you three started a panic."

"No, that was me. That was all me, they were just the," Hopkins waved her hand in a vague circle, "the victims."

"We're all victims of your sheer stupidity."

"Clearly I'm too stupid to keep my wand." the young witch said, cheeky, "you should expel me."

And now this was escalating into a pointless argument. Severus was childish in the extreme, and had never learnt how to handle petty insults with levity. His presence would only make the situation worse.

Albus caught Severus' eye. Go. It was an order, not a suggestion.

"You will discuss that with the headmaster," hissed Severus, before spinning around and exiting the room in a huff.

Albus eyed Hopkins. This wasn't the first time she'd tried to take the blame for her friends. Two incidents were at the top of her memory—after the broom incident, then again in a hallway with Severus.

Multiple times, with different people, and not always where her friends could hear. Not affected, then. The emotions surrounding those actions were a sense of responsibility for them and protectiveness.

Right now, though, she was contemplating how she wanted her friends to like her. A few more detentions, in her mind, were worth the gesture.

Oh. Then it was calculated, but not for sinister reasons. She wanted her friends to stay out of trouble, wished to protect them. She feared they'd stop wanting her company, should they attract too many punishments due to her suggestions.

"Do you know where Mr Harper went, Miss Hopkins?"

"If I did, I'd never tell you."

The two split up. He unwittingly gave her the idea of pretending to be the mastermind behind it all.

"Mr Harper could be in danger."

"He was in danger at Hogwarts," scoffed Hopkins, "at least now he's out of this death trap. Really, the staircases alone belong in an Indiana Jones movie."

Harper intended to go home, and she was glad he was safe.

Reckless, childish, but again, not malicious.

It was possible, it was just possible—
Hopkins crossed her arms across her chest, "are you going to expel me now? I ought to be expelled, after I masterminded this whole thing and all that."

"Mallory the Mastermind!" chirped Jennings, "it has a ring to it."

"You're not the mastermind behind any great plot, Miss Hopkins," Albus sighed, "in fact, I know you had no intention of starting a panic after you spoke to Professor Sprout. At some point, you recognized that she was, indeed, planning to help you. Yet, you only realized this after you warned Mr Underwood."

Hopkins blinked, shocked. Her thoughts were mostly composed of expletives.

"No, I'm plotting to cause a mass panic and create all kinds of trouble, especially for the Aurors."

In her head, she chanted expel me! expel me! expel me!

"In fact, when believing yourself to be in mortal peril, you chose to warn the young Mr Underwood before considering yourself."

That was a stretch, but if Hopkins were to remain at Hogwarts— Well, it wouldn't do to sabotage her choice to be Good.

Friends in Hufflepuff and Gryffindor would be good for the Slytherin witch.

Hopkins narrowed her eyes, "that's a load of rubbish and you know it." Expel me, you old sack of arse.

"One point to Slytherin, for showing outstanding loyalty." Albus said, with some cheer.

Positive reinforcement, wasn't that what the muggle psychology books called it?

"What?" shrieked Hopkins, mouth agape. Is he daft?

"One point to Hufflepuff, for taking action in the defense of your classmates, even when you do not agree with all that they do." He looked Underwood in the eyes.

"And another point to Hufflepuff for the creative use of flour, various preserves, and …acting." Albus said, while viewing Jenning's memory of pretending to die from fake lacerations.

The room was now completely silent as the four friends were giving each other wide and sort of panicked looks.

What's he doing? and Is this for real?

"And Mr Creevey, One point to Gryffindor for bravery and chivalry."

The young Creevey puffed like a balloon.

There was a moment of silence, and Albus let the anticipation build.

"Of course, there will be punishments." said Albus, "all four of you were out of bounds during an emergency. Furthermore, each of you lied to your professors, and to me."

Creevey's balloon popped, and he sagged in his seat.

"I hold that they're innocent." said Hopkins, sounding for the first time since Severus brought her
"You, Miss Hopkins, left school grounds without permission. And when a professor was charged to retrieve you, you fought him and used foul language."

"Expel me. It's all my fault."

"And you, Miss Jennings, Messrs Creevey and Underwood, misused school property." He stared them down, "and while the school has no specific policy against starting a panic, I should deem it common sense that you ought not do so. Did any of you think that your classmates might get hurt?"

Mr. Underwood, in fact, had. But when he believed that Hopkins was right, and that the professors really were bewitched, he decided that inaction was the same as killing Miss Hopkins, himself.

Now, Mr Underwood was kicking himself for believing her, though that the young witch had truly believed herself in danger did lessen the sting.

"Each of you have earned yourselves two weeks of detention for being out of bounds." It'd typically be a weekend or day of detention, but they'd chosen to carry out their venture while the school was occupied by Aurors.

"Furthermore, I expect a foot-long essay from each of you on why what you did was so dangerous. Miss Jennings, and Messrs Creevey and Underwood, you three have another week of detention for lying to your professors. Needless to say, such behavior isn't tolerated at Hogwarts. Your friend was in very real danger, and you refused to tell anyone where she had gone."

"Miss Hopkins, you have a month of detention for leaving school grounds without permission. I'm adding an additional weekend to that, in the hopes it'll curb your use of foul language. That is not the behavior befitting a young witch. You must realize you're lucky you aren't suspended or worse. You interfered with an active investigation, and I've no doubt that were Auror Moody here, he'd suggest you have your wand snapped immediately. There are serious consequences to your actions. You must realize this, before you end up hurting yourself or others."

His proclamations were met with stunned, horrified silence.

"After class, all four of you are to go straight to your dorms, indefinitely. Once there, I expect you'll stay there until you're escorted to dinner by a prefect. In Miss Hopkins case, trainee Auror Tonks will be following you. Miss Tonks?"

"Yes, sir." Tonks saluted.

"And Miss Hopkins? You are lucky, indeed. Auror Kingsley, the wizard you tricked, suggested that you endangered the Statute of Secrecy, with your actions here today. That is a serious offense."

Hopkins, who'd been making pleading faces at her friends, dropped her gaze to the floor, swallowing thickly.

"I'm also writing letters home to your parents, informing them of your behavior."

That finally got a reaction from them.

Jennings' head hit the desk with a solid thunk, and Underwood was wishing he could shrivel up and die. Creevey simply felt mortified.
That should keep them busy enough, until the Aurors and Corvinus Blackthorn solved the case. He couldn't have four nosy first years, all of whom weren't especially cautious or sensible, mucking up the investigation.

He amended himself, giving them one boon, "though, if you wish, your prefects are welcome to take you to the library to study together."

And they would have detention together. He didn't actually want to separate the youngsters. From what he could tell, Mr Underwood would benefit much from Mr Creevey's warmth. And Miss Hopkins could benefit from their kindness. More cold, calculating Slytherins was not what a young witch needed, if she were to be Good.

"Can I be expelled instead?" asked Hopkins, a strange note of hope in her tone.

"No, Miss Hopkins, you're not expelled."

There was a beat, where Hopkins considered something and wasn't looking him in the eye.

Then—

"Incendio!" shouted Hopkins, pointing her wand straight at him. The spell, of course, fizzled out on his jinx-repellent robes.

The child scowled, "incendio!"

Again, it didn't work. He was curious if she'd keep trying, or pick something else to set aflame.

"Incendio!" this time she aimed at his face. One of several amulets diverted and absorbed the spell.

Jennings, from behind them, cackled with glee.

Hopkins switched her target to Jennings, who yelped, "Whoa, no—" and grabbed Underwood, shoving him in front of her like a human shield.

"What are you doing?" squawked Underwood.

"Enough, Miss Hopkins." said Albus, wandlessly summoning away the young witch's wand before she managed to actually light someone on fire.

"I tried to light you on fire and I threatened a student. Will you expel me now?" she tried to control her tone, but her voice wobbled.

Albus poked at her mind, irritated. What was all this about?

She wanted to be expelled because she thought at home, she'd be safe from whomever wanted to kill her. She believed she was the real target of the murderer, and that it was someone pretending to be the Cracklewood Carver in order to trick the Aurors.

Godric save him from Slytherins.

"Miss Hopkins, as you have recently suffered from a severe trauma, you will not being expelled for your actions. However, if you continue to light people aflame, cause panics, and run away, you will, indeed, be expelled." Albus paused, lowering his tone conspiratorially, "Now, you must all four of you keep this a secret, but we believe the culprit will be captured soon. Until then, Trainee Tonks will accompany you and Mr Harper wherever you go."
Hopkins stared at him for a moment, before nodding, "okay, that's a relief."

She deduced that he was lying to pacify her, and was going to try to escape again.

Godric save him from Slytherins. He was going to have to speak with her privately, legitimise her, something. He'd never seen a student this young who disrespected her professors on such a scale.

Severus knocked on the door, walking in. "Mr Harper took the floo home to his parents," Severus met his eyes, they're irate, in your office. They want to speak with you.

"Excellent," said Albus, "is young Mr Harper here?"

"No, his parents elected to keep him home."

"Smart people," Hopkins quipped, "I like them."

"Ah, but young Mr Harper is going to miss out on all kinds of adventures with his friends," Albus admonished the would-be peanut gallery, "and friends bring strength in trying times."

Not to mention, Hogwarts was far safer than Harper's home. But Miss Hopkins could hardly be blamed for her ignorance, and it wouldn't do to put that kind of responsibility on a child.

"I'd prefer to be alive, thanks."

"Detention!" hissed Severus.

Albus caught Severus' eye, I gave her and her confederates one point each, —incoherent rage— and two months of detention. Severus' rage simmered.

Immature, petty man. Albus would think him demon-touched, if he didn't know better.

"Miss Hopkins, stay behind. The rest of you, you're dismissed." Albus said, "Miss Tonks, you may wait outside until we're done. Miss Hopkins' friends may wait outside as well, if they wish. They can accompany her afterwards to the Hospital Wing. I believe we've underestimated the effects of the last few days on Miss Hopkins."

Miss Hopkins sat across from him, sullen.

Here was a conundrum.

The problem with altering the way a child thought was complicated. He'd make a change, and new thoughts would grow out of that thought. In other words, it'd have a long-lasting, exponential impact.

Changing Miss Hopkins' mind about running away meant changing a fundamental part of her personality. She'd take her decision to not run away, and base new decisions on it. It also meant that from that one change, a number of other changes would spring.

Her impulse to run was governed by her will to succeed, her desire to protect herself. Already an impulsive child, she might become more reckless if he altered it.

Adults weren't so fragile.

Connections already existed in an adult's mind. In a child's, all those connections were just starting
to form. In other words, if he did this, he'd be making a large-scale, permanent alteration to her mind, with unknown consequences in the future.

There were only so many times he could modify someone's mind, before something went wrong. It wasn't something he'd do lightly, and he needed to be careful. He'd make it the smallest possible change with the least impact. He didn't want to take away a child's freedom of choice.

"Miss Hopkins, I'm aware that you've been through a terrible ordeal." he spoke, meeting her eyes.

Hopkins didn't respond. In the brief glimpse he caught of her mind, she had already dismissed him. Instead, she was rolling through plans on how to leave Hogwarts.

He grimaced, frustrated. Of course Miss Hopkins felt distressed. Anyone would, in her situation. This was precisely why he aimed to assuage her fears. Children shouldn't live in fear, and it was the grown wizard's responsibility to keep them safe. Miss Hopkins shouldn't feel the safest place for her was far away from the ones who wanted to protect her. This was his own failing, and he needed to correct it, before she got hurt.

"Miss Hopkins, I need you to pay attention," Albus lowered his tone, firm.

She looked up, "I am," a blink, "just— why am I here?"

"What I told your friends, that we are about to close the investigation, that was a lie."

Shock, quickly followed by alarm. Why's he telling me this? What—

"But you've already guessed this, young Slytherin. Though, you're unaware of the reasons for my deception, and lack the knowledge to understand why it was necessary."


"Headmaster," spoke the young witch, "why are you telling me all this?" her words were precise, careful like she'd thought them over before speaking them.

"Because there is a reason for the deception. I implore you to believe that the Aurors and myself are able to investigate this without your help. In fact, I'm quite curious why a first year believes herself to be more knowledgeable than several grown-up witches and wizards. It seems far wiser to me that you listen to your professors, when they all give you the same advice."

At this, her thoughts went something like this: Umbridge wants it solved quickly, and doesn't care who's caught so long as she can tell the Rowle family she's solved it. And then, Snape doesn't care about the muggleborn girl, and Professor McGonagall trusts other adults over me. If I managed to escape the school, then someone else much more clever than me might be able to get in, too. The adults just want me out of the way, except for Professor Sprout. But I don't think I can convince her to smuggle me out of the castle.

"Because it's dangerous," spoke the child, instead. "I don't get why you're so keen on keeping me at Hogwarts when I don't want to be here. You can't actually keep me here, anyway—that's up to my parents. And I know they don't want me here, with the murdering and the bullying."

Perhaps she could be reasoned with? It was difficult to tell, she was only a first year, after all. He already knew that threatening her with detentions didn't motivate her: she didn't expect to stay in Hogwarts long enough to experience the consequences of her actions. If he could reason with her, convince her to abandon this path, he'd avoid endangering her mind. He didn't want to have to alter
her mind again. There were too many risks.

"Your parents aren't likely to understand wizarding matters, but besides that—"

"Besides that..." Hopkins trailed off, eyes widening, "Headmaster, please—" her brain was panicking, "please tell me my parents can take me out of this school. Please don't tell me they can't."

The blind panic she was feeling was quite telling. If she kept thinking that, she'd be driven to only more extreme actions. And then he would have to expel her.

He couldn't have students at Hogwarts, so completely unable to accept authority, that they'd attack a teacher to prove a point.

He was granting her leeway now, because he suspected that this behavior was brought on by the corruption she'd faced in the forest. Harper was obviously effected, but the impact on her might be more subtle. Rash actions could be expected, and temporary insanity likely.

In light of that, he'd rather not expel her.

Once expelled, Hopkins and her family would be at great risk. Death Eaters and their ilk were emboldened by their leader's rise, and were targeting the homes of muggleborns. Already he'd expended resources. He placed protection charms on every muggleborn's home at Hogwarts, but it might not be enough.

There was only so much he could do. At least here, the children were safe.

"In June, once the school year is over, you may request a transfer to another school. This is most unusual, but it has been done."

"Right," said Hopkins, clearly disbelieving.

Albus wasn't humoring her. It might even be safer, long term.

If she stayed in Britain, eventually some entrepreneurial wizard would notice the irregularities in her records. Right now, the vigilant eyes of Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, could maintain the necessary deceptions. However, he couldn't count on that as a long-term strategy. Already there'd been too many close calls.

It was a miscalculation on his part. He'd expected the last ten years to unfold differently. So yes, he would gladly provide her the necessary recommendations she'd need to go abroad.

"Perhaps," spoke Albus, breaking the silence, "we can speak on this further, after the investigation is closed. There are several schools you and your parents may find preferable." He paused, "should you maintain your grades until the end of the term, I suspect you would have several professors willing to provide you with acceptable references."

"What if I want to leave now?" she asked.

That would be impossible.

"Miss Hopkins," he broke off, considering, "I wish to shelter young students like yourself. It is my dearest wish for you to spend your childhood happy, enjoying the many delights of wizardry. Alas, I fear I cannot. A dark force is rising in Britain, one who wishes nothing more than to strike at the very heart of all we hold dear."
At that, there was a spark of recognition in her eyes. "that's what The Grand Undertoa— Um— Umbridge? The Minister's secretary, she was saying how you were lying about something. And then Lord Malfoy said all that about the dark lord coming back, and a schoolteacher disappeared with a magical artifact— that's what you're talking about, isn't it?"

Albus Dumbledore's bushy brows rose.

And from her mind he saw that she put that together with only minimal knowledge. She'd only half-overheard a couple conversations. Moreover, she knew about truth potions and how they were used. She'd correctly deduced that citizens were often questioned under veritaserum, and that the Homonculus Charm minded the locations of witches and wizards across Britain. Unsurprising, given what he knew, but still.

She'd even come up with a plan to counter it, while trying to escape the Ministry. It was a short-sighted and made with inaccurate information, but a plan nonetheless.

All those thoughts were tangled up in her mind, factored into how she interpreted what he said. This was more than most muggleborns learned, in their first week.

Indeed, he might be able to do this without altering her mind at all. That'd be the best of all worlds. And if she came to the wrong conclusions, he could always obliviate her and start again.

"Yes," Albus Dumbledore nodded, "Lord Voldemort has risen. He and his followers wish nothing more for you and other young muggleborns to never attend Hogwarts." And their deaths, but he didn't wish to terrify her.

"Why haven't the Aurors arrested him?" asked the eleven year old child.

"I fear he is too powerful, Miss Hopkins."

Okay, thought the child, so he's a super-villain. And this followed a pattern of thought he didn't follow, because the words super-villain triggered an automatic response of resolve and excitement.

"Miss Hopkins," he felt slightly alarmed, "what would you do if you had the opportunity to meet such a wizard?"

The young witch blinked in surprise.

"Er— well, I'd run away?" she paused, "unless you meant when I grow up. Because then I'd fight him. Wait, are my parents safe? If this man's running around killing muggleborns and their families, then is it safe for them to even be in Britain?"

Albus Dumbledore's heart ached.

She'd guessed without him saying anything that Voldemort killed people. She was more afraid than ever, and for those she loved.

Yet, he could see in her mind that she wished to fight the Dark Lord.

This child wished to become a hero, to protect her friends and defend the weak. And while she didn't always behave kindly, like all children, her intent was to do Good.

This was not some ill-fated Dark Witch, like the many he'd seen before her. And that hurt him, for he felt responsible for failing so many Slytherins, in the past. But it also gave him hope.
"Miss Hopkins, not one witch or wizard knows where your parents live. And no map can display the location of a muggle. They're quite safe."

And they were even safer if he didn't mention the protection charms he'd placed on their home. They'd hardly work if the wizards who'd hunt Miss Hopkins' muggles knew of their existence.

"I see," Hopkins blinked, "and if I go home, then the maps will note where I live. Do they keep records? Like, a history? I was there before September first, and if anyone can look at it, then they can find my parents through me."

Albus Dumbledore smiled, eyes twinkling, "all such histories have been lost, I'm afraid. It's quite mysterious."

This was true, and one of the most basic protections he'd devised against Lord Voldemort's allies. They'd discover it the moment they went looking, so it was no great loss to tell Hopkins.

The child dropped back in her chair, tension escaping her in one great huff, then— "wait, what about Christmas break? And summer break?"

"I cannot speak to future disappearances, unfortunately. It would be quite odd, if I should know about the future vanishing records."

"That's good to hear." Hopkins said. Hopkins, who knew about truth serum and knew he couldn't admit to any kind of meddling, out of fear that someone would question her.

She was unaware of legilimency, though the same basic principle applied. How she interpreted what he said was one thing. If he actually said it, that was another.

And now the arrogant little child believed he was— and these were her thoughts— an actually competent adult.

Because, for some reason up until now, she'd believed he was insane and useless. It was striking, how little respect the muggle-raised held for their elders. No wizardborn child would ever dare speak to a grown wizard the way this child did, the way her friends did.

They might lie about rule-breaking and minor schoolyard duels, but never about serious matters of Wizardry. It was baffling.

Even Harry Potter tried to smuggle a dragon out of the school his first year, dragging the young Mr Weasley along with him. Twice he'd caught sixth year muggleborns attempting to brew outrageously complicated potions in abandoned classrooms. Once, a muggle-raised child murdered another student with the fabled monster of Slytherin.

There was a level seen there, that spoke of a profound disrespect toward elder, wiser wizards.

"Er— so— I've said this to my friends, but you ought to know, too, professor. I think my memories might be fake. I don't know, I can't tell. But if my memories are fake, then I reckon Harper and I were meant to live, for some reason. The murderer wouldn't give us fake memories in case were were caught and then kill us. Not unless—" the child blinked, "not unless they were really well prepared. Were they? I mean, then they wouldn't've gotten caught, I don't think."

She was reaching out, because she believed he might be able to solve the mystery if he had her insights. The audacity left him torn between laughing and groaning.

"Your memories of that night are not fake, Miss Hopkins." He'd seen the fire, the wooden effigy,
and the two students frozen in horror. It was real.

"Okay," She accepted what he said without question, a marked difference from a moment ago. "Then I am in danger. All three of us were taken there to die, and I think I was the target. Harper and Rowle followed me, you see?" and then, "why didn't you want the Aurors to do everything they could, when you knew all the passageways weren't covered?"

"Miss Hopkins, might you consider that telling the students of hidden traps meant for the murderer might not be wise? Students speak to one another, believing their conversations to be confidential. And there are many hidden powers which might reveal secrets one would rather be kept secret."

Hopkins blinked, "you mean, truth potions? You think if you tell me, some bad person will use truth potion on me to tell if I know anything important." A pause, "but if they've already got me as their prisoner, then won't I be in deep trouble, anyway?"

He wanted to groan. She missed the entire point. It was a trap, laid out for the murderer. Sprout and Hopkins, through their meddling, managed to disarm three traps he'd laid down to catch the murderer. They had to do such things, just in case it wasn't a summoned monster.

"Miss Hopkins, you were not the target of the attack. There was another motive, one which I'd be remiss in telling you. So long as you stay within the bounds of the castle, you are safe."

Young children didn't need to know that sometimes adult wizards sacrificed other wizards to demons for some arcane boon. The child was terrified enough.

The child blinked, and thought, now I'm just curious.

"Can you give me a clue like you did before with the maps?" her tone was hopeful.

Albus wished to sigh in disappointment. "I've given you no clues, and have meant exactly what I said, before. There's no hint to give."

Oh, right. He can't give hints that he gave a hint, Miss Hopkins rolled her eyes. "Okay, then say something vague and mysterious that I could mistake for a clue?"

"I'm afraid I cannot."

The child groaned, but he was heartened to see that she was doubting her decision to run away, if only a little.

Her other reasons were now limited to the bullies and the dawning realization that she was actually going to have to attend all the detentions she'd racked up.

Perhaps she wouldn't be setting robes on fire, any longer.

One could only hope.

Though, her ability to partly decipher doublespeak might allow him another path, instead of compelling her.

After all, teaching her brain not to ask for help might have unfortunate long-term consequences.

"If you wouldn't mind, Miss Hopkins. I'd like to discuss a matter of grave importance with you."

The child raised her brows, "okay?" Is he fucking with me?
"Do you know much about the governing of Wizarding Britain?" he asked.

She shrugged, "not really?" then, oh, he's about to give me a mysterious and vague clue, followed by giddy excitement.

"Few know of it, so young. I thought it might be prudent to give you a short lesson on the topic."

"Okay." And now for the clue...

"The Wizengamot is the judicial arm of the Ministry, presiding over matters of the law. Traditionally, the court was composed of Lords and Ladies who would make charters, and held special privileges."

"Sorry, I'm not following." Hopkins was confused. She was currently trying to figure out if there was a secret message in the wording, or some other, more abstract clue.

He explained it again, using different words, "there's a wizarding court where a number of witches and wizards act as judges. They decide if someone is guilty of a crime, and what sort of punishment they deserve. Do you understand?"

"Er, if you mean do I understand the words? Yes. If there's a secret message there, I'm not getting it."

"Indeed, well, the judges are decided upon by the Minister. Yet, if the Minister does something the judges do not like, they may remove him from office. That is to say, they may be rid of him if they do not approve of his additions to their number."

Hopkins frowned, "okay."

"Lord Malfoy is a member of that court. In fact, you already know the children of many members. Young Roderick Selwyn, for example."

The child gave him a blank stare, thinking, Lady Malfoy was staring at me. Does it have something to do with the court? Is that what he's trying to tell me, why she's staring at me? 

Ah, definitely not.

"I also wished to speak on bullying at Hogwarts, Miss Hopkins."

Now, the child was very confused, "sure. But—Professor, if there was a secret message there, I don't get it. And yeah, I know not to say what I think it might be, but I really don't get it."

He ignored her, "bullying at Hogwarts is taken very seriously. If one student is found to be bullying another student, the typical punishment is a deduction in points or a detention, depending on the severity. Should matters escalate, the Headmaster becomes involved. If matters escalate beyond the school, the Wizengamot is asked to preside over the case."

The realization came to her almost instantly. And then Lord Selwyn and Lord Malfoy will insist their pureblood twats of sons never did anything, and their friends in the court will agree.

"What happens if, say, the children of a Lord get a detention?" she asked.

"Of course, every child is treated exactly the same at Hogwarts, no matter their parents."

In other words, they won't get detention, thought Hopkins, who then said, "I get it."
"I'm afraid there was no secret message to impart, Miss Hopkins. I only wished to advise you of the court system, and give you advice on who to speak to, should you find yourself in an altercation with another student."

Hopkins smiled without any humor, "thank you, Headmaster. That explains a lot."

It was uncanny.

What's more, she desperately needed to learn not to reply to the secret message, and instead keep up the facade. Such a child would not last very long in the Wizarding world.

"I've also learned you've made a friend in Professor Sprout, and I'm glad to hear it. She's known to do anything in her power to help her students."

Is he saying I should go to her for help? she thought, while saying, "okay."

"Professor Sprout has primarily two concerns in life, her plants and her students. Outside that, I know she enjoys cooking biscuits for students during their study sessions."

"Er— um— that's nice?" Hopkins was baffled, "she's really nice."

"Indeed. Hufflepuff has always prided fairness and loyalty above all. The families with children in Hufflepuff, likewise, prize fairness above all, it seems."

Fairness. Then, she never had to deal with bullies like that before? But that seems really unlikely. I mean, if she's been a professor for a few years, she'd have to encounter some dickheads—

"She believes the very best in people. It is to my belief that she thought you'd've never truly acted. When you suggested to your friends that you start a riot, she believed that you'd not go through with it, that it would be too unkind."

Wow, really? Is he saying Sprout doesn't believe in me anymore? Wait, no, hold on. Oh. He's saying all she knows about is her plants and biscuits. And that she deals with parents who'd be upset if their kids were dickheads. And she thinks the best in people, so she wouldn't expect—

The young witch blinked her eyes, hard.

—and the other muggleborns aren't bullied like this so soon, because they're not Slytherins. There's time for the older muggleborns to let them know not to report it to the professors. And the bullies, they fucking know it. They know they can get away with bloody murder because all the muggleborns are too afraid to go to the teachers for help.

"Headmaster?" Hopkins voice was small, "what should I do, if going to the professors— I mean, I don't know how to fix this."

She was thinking that young Avery's advice on avoiding Selwyn now made sense.

"Of course, I must bid you speak to a professor, should you find yourself the target of bullies." He said this with no small amount of regret coloring his tone.

Hopkins squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed audibly, slumping down in her chair.

"I got advice from an older Slytherin," her voice wobbled mid sentence, "that I should blame my sorting on you, and say you wouldn't let me leave the school, or switch houses. In a pretend world where a muggleborn girl in Slytherin was being bullied by the children of Lords, would that make
"it stop?"

He considered it for a moment. It was likely what the students already thought.

"I believe it wouldn't do any harm. Though to that child, I'd suggest devoting her efforts to her friendships, especially to those who are loyal, kind, and brave."

"I sleep in the same— er— Professor, what if she sleeps in the same room with them?"

"Miss Hopkins, I'd have to suggest that the child speak to her professors. Though, in an unrelated note, you do not share a dorm with any children of Lords." Not anymore.

"I don't?"

"No, if I'm correct, your dorm-mates are a young Miss Vaisey and Miss Brody."

_Cokebottles, who hates my guts and is good with a cutting charm, and Brody— who the fuck is Brody? But, if neither of them are the kids of Lords, and aren't friends with any, then they won't do anything serious. It'll be South Brent style fighting, then, and I can handle that._

He considered, briefly, if telling her this damaged her belief in the goodness of others. Perhaps he was teaching her to be bitter and cold.

"Miss Hopkins, do you trust your friends to help you, should you encounter difficulties?"

*What?* then, "sure."

She did, but with caveats. Mallory Hopkins expected Colin Creevey and Kit Jennings to help her, regardless. She held less hope for Felix Underwood, believing him to resent her for getting him into trouble.

It seemed this venture hadn't damaged her belief in the goodness of others. And he'd avoided compelling her, again. Success.

There was a slim chance she'd ever be asked about this under veritaserum, and even if she ever were, this conversation wouldn't be ammunition for his enemies.

He couldn't help how a young child interpreted his words, after all.
Still September 4, Friday.

Mallory Hopkins' face paled, cheeks splotchy. Her hands were shaking at her sides. She wasn't supposed to be here. Less than an hour ago she'd been in London, free. Now she was stuck in the Hospital Wing, at Nurse Pomfrey's tender mercies.

The nurse insisted she was sick from her ordeal in the Forest, and bade her lie down the moment Mallory was dragged into her office.

Kit, Felix, Colin, and Mallory weren't the only students subjected to Nurse Pomfrey's fretting. It was for this reason that the nurse left their company alone for some minutes, to deal with a more pressing case.

Mallory sat on the edge of her hospital bed, contemplating what to say.

All the adults believed she was ill, and that's why she ran away. Except, Mallory didn't think she was reasoning from anything more than logic.

Leaving was plainly the sensible thing to do.

Now, she knew her parents would be in more danger if she went home.

But the information Headmaster Dumbledore had imparted to her wasn't sitting right. She couldn't put her finger on why she felt confused, which made it even worse.

Her chest felt tight.

"Was it us?" asked Colin before Mallory could collect her thoughts, "were we why you got caught? We tried to distract the professors, but it didn't work."

Felix sat in the chair across from her, while Colin had planted himself next to her on the creaky hospital bed. Kit was balancing herself on the bed's railing, one leg swinging free.

Colin reached out to her before aborting the motion half-way between them. His hand rested on the turned-up sheet, fingers flat against the linen. The fingernails were short and dirty. Small specks of red-brown spattered across his index finger like a line of freckles.

Blood? No. Fake-blood from their fake-Carver escapade around the castle.

But her mind was already sinking back down into the forest.

Plunk-splash of feet racing through muddy water, chest tight, cold air burning the back of her throat. Harper's wrist in her hand, wet grit smearing as she wrenched him after her.

"Mallory? Mallory." Colin touched her arm and she started.

Mallory let out a huff of air, rubbing the bridge of her nose.
"I'm fine," she said, grounding herself in sensation. The thin mattress under her was warm, her were feet wedged in sneakers, not bare. The air she breathed out through her nostrils was room-temperature, not biting-cold.

She was fine. It was fine, it was all fine.

A sickness roiled in her stomach, and she firmly ignored it. She was fine.

What had Colin said?

Right, he was blaming himself for Mallory's mistakes.

This had to be addressed, now. She didn't want her friends blaming themselves, if the Carver killed her tomorrow. She'd watched enough telly to know what happened to people torn up by guilt. Colin, Kit, and Felix weren't at fault.

It was her own failure. She hadn't realized how long she'd been on the phone.

"No," Mallory shook her head, "you three were amazing. I messed it up. I didn't—" her voice wobbled, eyes watering, "I didn't mean for any of you to get into trouble."

She swallowed, focusing again on her breathing. This wasn't the time. She needed to get on the ball, tell her friends what Dumbledore and Tonks told her.

"We knew we'd get into trouble," said Kit from her left, shrugging.

Mallory glanced over at Kit, and Kit flashed her a small grin. The corners around her eyes crinkled a little, warm.

"I'm still sorry." Mallory's return smile was strained, "and you helped, more than you know. I spoke to my parents, let them know what's happened. I don't know how much they can do, but it's something."

She'd wanted to make her words sound more heartfelt, let Kit hear her appreciation. Problem was, Mallory couldn't pull up the necessary emotion. Too much going on in her mind, effort funneled into preventing herself from backsliding into her memories of The Forest.

Kit's expression changed, from warm and conspiratorial to concerned.

Bollocks.

She was going to have to fix her friendships first, it seemed. It couldn't be put off.

Time to get her head in the game. Even as exhausted as she was, Mallory could tell her fledgling group of friends was faltering. There was an undercurrent of friction spoiling their dynamic.

She'd inadvertently driven wedges into the cracks formed when Felix told the professor about Mallory's plan. Now they'd only keep widening unless Mallory healed them.

Focus. She needed to be focused. Sharp, attention oriented towards faces and posture. Mallory couldn't figure out what they needed to hear if she couldn't get her head screwed on straight.

"I need a sec, okay?" she asked, "don't go anywhere."

Her friends looked at each other for a moment, confused, but made no moves to get up or otherwise distract her.
Mallory shut her eyes.

She imagined the last time she felt *sharp*, grasping for the memories associated with the mindset she wanted. At first, her brain drew a blank.

Changing tracks, she imagined the sensations she wanted as best she could. Elation, that satisfying feeling of pieces sliding into place. *That* sparked a memory.

She remembered observing Colin's face and noticing how he wasn't smiling with his eyes. Sitting in the Hospital Wing with Colin brought to mind how she taught him to fake a genuine smile. And from that, she could reach her memories of pulling pranks with Danny.

Their pranks almost *always* involved using people-skills to distract or read their targets. As such, her memories of those skills were tightly bound to those pranks.

Almost at once, the associated memories rushed in, like a dam broken.

The connections unfolded, snapping into place. *Establish a rapport. People often touch the back of their neck when they lie. Leave out the details so people can fill in the blanks with whatever they like. Reciprocation, commitment, consistency—*

Right. Mallory Hopkins was back.

She opened her eyes, and looked at each of her friends in turn, "okay, I'm good."

"Good," Colin's face flicked from momentary confusion to relief, "and now that your parents know, they'll be here in no time. Until then, the Aurors will protect you. It's okay, now."

"Yeah, er..." Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose, "I'm not sure— well, I mean, are we okay? As a group, I mean."

She didn't know, exactly, how to bring it up.

Felix spoke up from his spot on the chair, "I don't know what you mean. But, no. No, we're not okay. Next time, could you *listen* to me when I say something's a bad idea?"

He looked cross, eyes a bit droopy behind his glasses. The glasses were crooked, which was odd. Felix was *exact*ing. Fastidious, patient, the sort of boy who re-wrote his notes after class because the originals just weren't right.

And the glasses perched on the bridge of Felix Underwood's nose were crooked.

Tired, maybe. Distressed?

"Okay," Mallory said, "we did good, though."

"It might've gone a bit better," said Felix, voice constrained with emotion.

Mallory groaned. Two different tracks of conversation at the same time, they were talking past each other.

The boy shifted in his seat. Squirming, uncomfortable. Why?

"You're upset because we got detention?" Mallory guessed.

"I *deserve* detention. And when I said 'this is a bad idea,' you ignored me. We might've
accomplished the same goals without endangering other students."

Mallory frowned, brow creasing as she puzzled out what he was thinking.

He was defensive, like he was responding to an attack. He expected to be attacked. Why?
Because...

He'd betrayed her before, went to a teacher. Kids didn't narc on other kids, and he knew he broke
the cardinal rule. Felix was waiting for her to rag on him for tattling.

He was justifying his actions because he thought he needed to explain himself to her, and the rest
of the group, too.

That wouldn't do at all.

"When I was in a bad spot, you didn't back down," she measured her words carefully, "you were
doing the right thing, telling Professor Sprout. She's the one who got Dumbledore to assign an
Auror to watch me, and that makes me safer. You, all of you stepped up and helped me. I couldn't
ask for better friends."

She also thought it'd be stupid to alienate someone who was both a natural ally and obviously
brilliant. Felix grated on her nerves, but he'd already proven himself sharp and resourceful.

With few allies and many enemies, Mallory needed all the help she could get. And it struck her
that even afraid, he stuck his neck out for her when he thought she was in real danger.

Hard to have a beef with him, after that.

It bothered her that he felt the need to jump off a staircase to get away from her, though. What did he think she'd do to him? That much fear didn't come out of nowhere, and all she'd done was threaten to tie him up.

Bad experiences with kids from his old school? Maybe she'd tripped some bad associations,
something in her demeanor reminded him of old bullies and he'd acted on instinct.

Maybe. She wanted to push, dig into the heart of the issue. But something told Mallory his reaction
would be ugly. She'd shelve it, come back to it another day.

Felix fidgeted in his seat, ears pink, "thank you, but that's not why—"

"It's too bad it didn't work," grumbled Kit, "feels like a lot of effort and we're back where we
started."

Mallory almost growled with frustration. He still wasn't satisfied? What was wrong, then?

But now Kit was changing the subject, and she'd need to see if what was bothering Felix was also
bothering the rest of the group. Were they placated? Mallory wasn't used to handling group
conflicts, and wasn't sure what to do. Back in South Brent, it was just her and Danny.

She was still working out how to respond when Colin spoke up.

"Harper's out of Hogwarts," Colin said, nodding at Felix, "and Mallory's parents know what's
going on. Even the Aurors are on guard now. That's progress. I'm glad we've done that."

"Yes," Kit's expression switched from glum to beaming in an instant. "And we had an entire
adventure!"
Felix pursed his lips, exhaling, "yes, true." His posture wasn't nearly as closed-off or defensive.

Mallory nodded at Colin, silently thanking him. Colin managed to re-frame their actions so that Felix could think of himself as a knight in shining armor, a hero. Felix couldn't argue with saving another student from a terrible fate.

Everyone seemed content to move past their old arguments, which meant the cracks in their nascent group were mending.

Crisis averted, for the time being.

The sun was setting outside the windows of the Hospital Wing, disappearing below the tree line. Inside the castle, the dim light from the candles was now brighter than the growing shadows outdoors. It was enough that Mallory only saw her blurry reflection when she tried looking out the window.

Today's efforts weren't wasted. Harper was safe, and that was a weight off her shoulders. She didn't like the twit, but she didn't want him dead.

It did make Hogwarts riskier for her, though. The murderer would now go after Mallory, and Mallory alone. She was the only target left.

On the other hand, Harper's absence meant she didn't have to protect both herself and Harper. There'd be no fear of information leaking out because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

He was safe, leaving Mallory free to quit worrying about him and focus on her own problems.

Namely, getting the heck out of Hogwarts.

She knew it'd be harder to escape, were she to try again. The adults had some idea of how she thought, of the sort of plots Mallory and her friends could carry out. They'd on the lookout for another escape attempt.

Dumbledore said he had plans in play, but she escaped right out from under the adults' noses. If she was able to arrange an opening in their security, an adversary would likewise be able to get in or out of Hogwarts.

He never answered her questions.

She'd been too distracted to notice at the time, but what was that about her parents being unable to take her out of the school? She couldn't remember if he answered her straight about that. No, in fact, she was almost sure he hadn't. He'd distracted her by changing the subject.

In other words, her parents could march up to the Ministry of Magic demanding their daughter back, and the Ministry would tell them it's out of their hands.

Dumbledore wanted her here because that supervillain Voldemort wanted muggleborns dead, and —

...and frankly, this was all going way over her head. She couldn't keep all the pieces straight. She wasn't sure how they all fit together.

She needed help.

"I need to tell you something," Mallory's voice was low, mindful of Tonks, who was standing by
the doorway, frowning at them.

"What?" asked Kit, lying cross-ways atop the bed, behind Mallory and Colin, who were sitting along the edge.

"It's important," Mallory said, grim.

Felix sat up straight in his chair, leaning forward. Colin was likewise paying sharp attention. And Kit poked Mallory on the base of her spine with one lazy finger, impatient for her to begin.

In the dimly-lit hospital wing, three first-years listened intently as Mallory Hopkins told them all she learned from Professor Dumbledore and the Aurors.

She whispered to them the secret of the Taboo, of maps that charted a witch or wizard's every move across Great Britain, how certain words were forbidden. The Wizarding World wasn't safe, and her friends needed to know it.

"If they can find anyone on a map, why haven't they looked on the map to find the murderer?" Kit asked.

"I don't know," said Mallory, feeling slightly foolish for never wondering that before.

"Maybe the murderer hid from it, somehow." Colin shrugged.

"You know," interrupted Felix, "creating the t-word we can't say sounds an awful lot like what the bad people do in my books."

_The t-word we can't say_ in any ordinary group of eleven year olds would be a swear word they were too afraid to say out loud, for fear a teacher would overhear. However, in this group of decidedly un-ordinary children, it referred to The Taboo.

"Don't be silly," scoffed Kit, "this isn't a book."

Mallory loved how quickly her friends picked up on doublespeak. There was nothing more fun than sharing in a conspiracy. It felt Important and Special, like when she and Danny would practice magic down by the river.

"No," Felix shook his head, "but that's what the Communists did in Soviet Russia, before it fell. They secretly looked on everyone, to see if they could catch anyone who disagreed with them. Then they rounded those people up and sent them to labor camps in Siberia. Even the Nazis in Germany had a similar program."

_Secretly look_, in this case, meant _spy._

Mallory groaned, "how come you even know that?" This was getting off-track. She had a lot more to say, and wanted to tell them before Tonks came over and interrupted them.

"I read books. The Soviet Union only fell _last year._"

"It did?" Mallory scrunched her nose, "I don't remember that."

Likely because was more of that boring adult stuff. She probably had seen it on the news, and promptly forgot about it.

"Anyway," interrupted Colin, "does that mean we're in a _bad_ country of evil people, and need to
overthrow them?"

Kit reached up and clasped a hand over Colin's mouth, "hush. Even if that's true, we can't say it."

"We don't know they're actually bad," Mallory said, voicing her thoughts out loud, "all we know is that they secretly look on us. That'd be easy for bad people to use, but doesn't mean they are abusing it."

It didn't sit right with her, outright declaring the Aurors evil. Auror Moody and Trainee Tonks didn't seem evil. And while the Ministry of Magic was a gaudy eyesore, she didn't see anyone carrying out sinister plots or force-choking stormtroopers.

Some people might be using The Taboo and Maps for ill. But if most Aurors were like Auror Moody and Tonks, then she doubted there were many bad Aurors.

Colin's brows rose, "I don't think even you believe that. You wouldn't be whispering about it and using secret words if you did."

"I don't think—" Mallory sighed, "I know the people who can see the maps and lists aren't perfect. And yeah, it'd be bloody stupid to think no one would bribe the workers there into letting bad guys see them. I don't know. I think Auror Moody would catch most of them, though."

Auror Moody was frightening. She suspected if he'd been there and not Auror Kingsley, Mallory's plan would've failed.

"Maybe," said Felix, but he sounded doubtful.

"And the Ministry could be protecting us from something that's really evil. I don't know." Mallory shrugged, "it's a good idea to figure out how to get around it."

She expected most people secretly got around it, unless they were thick or overly righteous. And because most people did it, they'd be protected by the crowd.

In the muggle world, lots of people sold or traded bootleg VHS tapes. Likewise, she and Danny recorded songs off the radio into their mix-tapes. Adults always scolded them for doing it, but everyone did it anyway.

Wizards likely didn't go out of their way to find minor rule breakers, not unless they pissed off someone powerful. It was just like how muggle police didn't inspect peoples' homes for bootleg VHS tapes: people found it easier to just leave others be. Investigating minor crimes meant lots of paperwork, and boring adult stuff. She couldn't see subjecting herself to that unless someone was twisting her arm.

She was having trouble putting a finger on why that model wasn't sitting right, though.

"I don't think they're good," said Felix, face tight. "you said every time someone mentioned a bad word, people flinch. Fear doesn't appear out of thin air. And the words you've mentioned aren't bad. They're just ordinary words. I don't think people are afraid someone will blackmail an Auror. They're afraid of the Aurors, themselves."

Mallory blinked, surprised. Felix just nailed her wordless confusion. He was making sense, and the picture he was painting was rather grim. The words "spy" and "watch" didn't seem sinister.

Maybe there was some sort of threshold, where if you said enough suspicious words you ended up with the Aurors knocking on your door?
"I don't know," she chewed on her lip, "the words might have extra-meanings in the wizarding world that we don't know about. But yeah, the fear is a point in the scary column."

"Yeah," Colin said, "and it's really weird."

"You're making excuses for them," Felix said, blunt as ever. "You're over-complicating it, and I don't understand why."

Mallory was silent for a moment, collecting her thoughts, "I'm worried about jumping on-board the 'they're-the-villains' train too quick. I think I want them to be villains, because it fits this story I have in my head about being a hero."

Colin wrinkled his nose, "you're going too far in the other direction."

"I don't know," Mallory said, feeling uncomfortable.

And that reminded her.

"Oh bollocks. I forgot— but there's more," Mallory said, suddenly feeling very tired, "two more things, before Tonks gets tired and comes over."

"More than a secret looking list, spells covering Britain, and enchanted maps?" asked Kit, sounding strained.

Mallory could empathize. She remembered how she felt after Tonks said all that about the maps in the Auror Office. Overwhelmed.

"Do you three know anything about that Dark Lord who was around back when we were born?" Mallory asked, instead of indulging Kit. There'd be time for that, later.
"Harry Potter defeated him," said Colin, promptly.

Mallory blinked, surprised, "okay. That's— wait, what?"

"You-Know-Who tried to kill Harry Potter as a baby, but the spell rebounded and killed him, instead. Potter's supposed to be really powerful."

Mallory's eyes widened in surprise, "but how?"

Seated on a creaky hospital bed where the primary treatment for ailments was a magical potion, Mallory still couldn't imagine how a baby would kill a Super villain.

Babies couldn't do much at all. Mostly they cried, pooped, vomited, and ate. Sometimes, they'd attempt to do all of those things at once. But babies didn't slay powerful super villains, and they certainly didn't deflect powerful spells.

At this point Mallory imagined some children would feel despair at learning they were outmatched by a drooling toddler. But Mallory squared her shoulders in resolve. She was going to have to work very hard to be a superhero, if the bar was set at Harry Potter.

"The books said it's because he's very powerful, and the next coming of Merlin," said Colin.

"Right, okay, so—" Mallory cleared her throat, "turns out the Dark Wanker's not really dead. He got his minion to steal a Powerful Magical Artifact from Hogwarts, and now he's hunting down the families of muggleborns across Britain. Headmaster Dumbledore says he's doing a bunch of things to protect our parents, but it seems sort of daft to stay in Britain if there's someone out there looking to kill all of us."

"What? No he isn't," scoffed Colin, "he was killed by Harry Potter. There are whole books on it."

She bet he read every one, too.

Felix shook his head, "I'm confused on the part where anyone believes a baby could kill someone, no less a powerful wizard. It's absurd. Are you sure no one's playing a trick on you, Colin?"

"I agree with Felix," Mallory said, "but that's not the issue, here. Dumbledore says Voldeface is back."

"No, I've heard Potter killed him, too." said Kit.

"There's a book on it in the library. I checked one out." said Colin, "d'ya wanna read it? It's brill."

Mallory flopped back on the bed, head cushioned by Kit's stomach. "That isn't the point. He might've— faked his own death. I dunno. Whether Potter defeated him or not, he's back now."

"No, Potter obviously didn't kill You-Know-Who, not if Headmaster Dumbledore said he's still alive," said Felix.
Mallory raised her arm and pointed a finger lazily in Felix's direction, "yeah, exactly."

"So if this dirt ball's back, how much danger are we in?" asked Kit.

Kit's words sounded funny when Mallory could hear them vibrating in the girl's stomach.

"Hold on," said Colin, "why d'you think we're in danger?"

"Headmaster Dumbledore says the super villain and his minions want to kill all the muggleborns and their families. The Secret Maps that Record Where Everyone Goes would tell the villains exactly where to find us. All Voldewhatever has to do is look at the maps." Mallory said, "The Headmaster's gone and destroyed the records of where we live, but every time we go back home we'll be putting them in danger."

"His minions are Death Eaters." said Felix, like he was puzzling out a complicated riddle in his head.

"Yeah," said Mallory, just as Colin said, "I think so."

"I read in the paper how people are disappearing, and that Headmaster Dumbledore is blaming You-Know-Who. The paper says he's wrong, that it's old age catching up to him. But yesterday, I read an article—" Felix adjusted his glasses, "it was overshadowed by Rowle's murder, but there were reports of people dressed up as Death Eaters roaming town the night Rowle was killed."

"Then Voldemort could be behind Rowle's murder." said Mallory, feeling queasy, "Rowle's murder might've been a smokescreen to hide the raid, or the other way around."

"The paper said it was an— an ill conceived prank." said Felix, brows scrunched together.

"What does that mean?" asked Kit.

"That it was stupid, or maybe that it was in poor taste," Felix replied.

"It is in poor taste," said Colin, "I don't think Death Eaters are something people should joke about."

Mallory shook her head, "we're getting distracted."

She would've explained that some people find it funny to shock or alarm others, but they really didn't have the time. Tonks or Nurse Pomfrey might come by at any moment, and break up their conversation. Mallory wasn't sure when she'd get to talk to her friends again. If she'd ever get to talk to them again.

Her plan to escape the school failed, and there was no telling when the murderer would strike, again. She had to either solve the mystery of The Cracklewood Carver herself, escape the school while under the sharp eyes of suspicious Aurors, or trust the Aurors to protect her. She listed those options from most to least likely in her head, with trusting the Aurors at the very bottom.

If the entire Auror Department combined couldn't keep two eleven year olds inside Hogwarts, then she very much doubted they'd be able to keep the Carver out.

"Alright," said Felix, "you were talking about the maps?"

"Yeah," Mallory nodded. "The Headmaster can't keep erasing them. Someone will figure it out, and he'll get into trouble. And if the Death Eaters get to the maps before her erases the records this
"winter break, we'll all be dead."

"Ok," said Colin, "we need to warn the other muggleborns at Hogwarts, if they don't know already."

"He's told them already," said Kit, sighing. "we haven't heard 'cause we're new, and it wouldn't matter until winter break, anyway."

"I think we all need to leave wizarding Britain, and Muggle Britain too." said Mallory, as seriously as she could while lying halfway across Kit's stomach.

Kit, under her, snorted, "no we don't. We can just take a surprise trip to France for winter break, or a lot of other things."

Mallory blinked in surprise, "oh."

"Yeah," Kit said, "I think your problem is that you jump to the most far-out-there answer to everything. If I got a cut on my leg, you'd suggest chopping off the leg to fix it."

Mallory sat up, "I'm worried, that's all. And we need to be worried, especially if Evilmort is behind the murder."

At that, Kit sat up as well, "you're being annoying. Rowle died, and she was the daughter of what's-his-face's followers. If it were just about killing muggleborns, there was plenty of time that night for him to kill you. You said it, yourself. And do you even know how many muggleborn children are in wizarding Britain? I don't, but I'll bet there are a lot. We're needles in a haystack of needles. Even if Volde-whatever's back, he wouldn't care about you. And why's he coming back now, anyway?"

"I don't know," Mallory said, throat tight, "none of it makes sense. I just want to make sure we're safe, is all."

She didn't know if Harry Potter really defeated Voldemort, or why he chose this year to re-appear after being gone for so long. All she knew was that almost everything she learned about the Wizarding World so far was frightful. Blood prejudice, The Cracklewod Carver, The Taboo, Spying Maps, and now Voldemort's return felt like one massive weight crushing her shoulders.

Flying cars were great, but even those were illegal.

"Agreed," Colin said, ignoring the sudden silence that'd come over the group, "and if Kit's right, we can ask the upper-year muggleborns what they're planning to do with their families. We've got a few months before we need to worry about it. Even if things get bad enough that we have to leave, we'll be fine. Anyway, you said before that we didn't have much time to talk, and you had two more things to say. The first was the You-Know-Who. What's the second?"

He was effectively changing the subject, and looked rather irked.

Mallory felt conspicuously small and stupid, in that moment.

"Er—" Mallory switched gears, trying to think back to what else she needed to say, "oh, right. Dumbledore said— well, I asked him if parents of muggleborns could take their kids out of Hogwarts, and he changed the subject. Then he went on about how the kids in our class who're bullies have parents who're judges. Er— if we complain about bullies to the teachers, eventually it goes to the Wizen— Wise—"
"The Wizengamot?" asked Felix.

"Yes, that thing." Mallory nodded, "and they're like judges and juries and all that. Their kids are the bullies who're messing with us. And he said a bunch of stuff, but it sounded like we'd end up in more trouble than the bullies."

"I'm confused, what?" asked Colin.

Mallory took a breath, re-focusing.

"The parents of the kids who were firing on us while we were on broomsticks have powerful, scary parents who're in charge of making and enforcing laws. If we try to get their kids in trouble, they can punish us with the law."

Kit, behind Mallory, went stiff. Colin's eyes were flicking between all of them, brows drawn together in thought. Felix, on the other hand, was furious.

"A teacher said that?" Felix's tone was colored with angered disbelief, fists clenched at his side so tightly they'd gone bloodless.

"Well, I'm not lying about it," Mallory scowled, "I asked him what'd happen if a student went to a professor for help, and he strongly hinted that I shouldn't."

"That— that craven clot pole" swore Felix, "that—"

"We're going to have to be secret spies," said Kit, sounding resolute, interrupting Felix's sorry attempt at swearing.

"That's a bad word," Mallory reminded her. They needed to keep up the doublespeak.

"Okay, right," Kit nodded to herself, "but I meant it. We need to think like James Bond."

"I'm not following," said Colin, looking between her and Felix, worried.

"You were right before, they're the bad guys." Kit looked uncharacteristically grim, "the maps, the tab— tabad words, and now these judges add up to what? Does what's going on sound fair to you? Because it doesn't to me."

"No," said Colin, "but how does that get us to James Bond?"

"You said earlier that you and Mallory want to be heroes, that you were going to fight bullies and help people with their homework until you could do bigger heroic things." said Kit.

Mallory interrupted, "when was that?"

"You were with the Aurors, then." Colin answered.

"Right."

Kit swung her legs off the bed and stood up, looking all three of them in the eyes, "heroes need missions, and I think we just found ours."

Mallory blinked, doing a double-take, "you're all going to be heroes with me?"

"Didn't we already agree on that, earlier?" asked Colin.
"You said you'd help me escape Hogwarts and maybe try to catch the Carver."

"Same difference," Kit grinned, "and we talked about it more while you were escaping."

"Helping others is the responsible course of action for people with powers." said Felix, echoing something he'd said earlier.

Mallory's eyes lit up, a smile working its way across her face "and our first mission?" she asked, legs swinging off the side of the bed. Her earlier funk was all but forgotten.

"Missions, plural." Kit counted them off on her fingers, "Catch the Carver, first. But after that, we're going to have to opple-tay the overment-gay, free the people, and save Great Britain!"

Wow. And here she thought her own goals were overly ambitious. Well, she had no idea how they'd manage that, but Mallory thought they'd have a great deal of fun trying. In fact, it sounded a great deal like the adventures she'd daydreamed about back in South Brent.

Except, now that she'd been on a real-life 'adventure,' she was reconsidering how fun her comics made them out to be. Real adventures weren't fun at all.

That thought nearly took all the wind out of her sails, and Mallory slumped back on the bed.

Felix dropped his head into his palm, shaking his head. "And what, exactly, does that have to do with James Bond?"

"Well, we can't go after the really bad-guys now, said Kit. "So, while we're at Hogwarts we're going to py-say on the kids of the villains, so we can find their evil lairs and feed them to their own pet piranhas when we're grown ups!"

Mallory perked up, "that's doable." In fact, that was more than doable. That sounded outright fun.

Colin started giggling, "I think that'd break our no-hurting people rule."

"No hitting, and no jinxing people unless they really deserve it. Tripping them into their pit of piranhas isn't against the rules," Kit stated back, grinning, "it's only fair."

"Rules?" Mallory asked. That must've been another conversation they'd had before, while Mallory was out attempting to escape.

"Feeding people to piranhas isn't fair, just on principle. Also, I don't think wizarding criminals even have piranhas. They'd have dragons or venomous magical snakes." said Felix, both ignoring Mallory and missing the point.

"Piranhas are easier to keep than dragons, though." Colin interjected, "do you even know how much dragons eat?"

"A wizard would simply vanish the piranhas. Dragons are spell resistant." argued Felix.

"I said what are the rules?" Mallory asked, crossing her arms.

"Magical piranhas." said Colin.

"There aren't any magical piranhas."

"There could be. You don't know."
"I do know, and there aren't any."

"Really?" asked Mallory, folding her arms across her chest. They were outright ignoring her.

"The rules are that we don't hit or jinx people," said Felix, "but it's implied by the spirit of the rules that we ought not feed anyone to their pets, as well. But if we did, we'd be feeding them to dragons."

"That wasn't in the rules!" hissed Kit, "if I want to feed a villain to their own villainous pet, then it'd be — it'd be — goshdarnit! There's a word for that!"

"Hoisted by their own petard?" asked Felix.

"That's the one, but ohmygosh, guys!" Kit jumped in place, "there's something we have to do, before we even think about becoming superheroes."

Mallory just glowered.

"What?" asked Colin.

"We'll need secret identities, otherwise the bad guys will just threaten to kill our families or something. So, we need to come up with our superhero names."

Okay, never mind that about sulking. Superhero names? She loved talking about superhero names.

"I declare you Mallory the Mastermind, and me Double-O-Seven!" declared Kit.

"No," Mallory's jaw dropped, aghast. "It can't have our real names in it." She'd been putting off deciding on her superhero name since forever.

She and Danny wanted to wait until they'd figured out what Mallory's secret powers really were. Telekinesis? Pyrokinesis? Some combination of a bunch of things? They hadn't wanted to come up with a name only to learn she had more powers, and there was a better name out there, for her.

Danny, on the other hand, favored names revolving around hypnotism, brainpower, and card tricks. He couldn't settle because he kept thinking there might be a more magnificent name out there, and changed it weekly.

"What about Kitty-Kat for Kit, instead?" asked Felix, lips quirking upward in a small mischievous grin.

_Felix was making a joke? Wow. He really was feeling better._

"What?" squeaked Kit, "no way! No! No one's calling me that!"

"Wicked," Mallory grinned, "Kitty-Kat's an awesome name." Of course, it was a terrible superhero name, but the teasing potential here was too great to ignore. She also thought it'd be good to encourage Felix's more playful side, but that thought came in at a distant second after teasing Kit.

"I'm going to feed you to piranhas, Felix Underwood!"

"Dragons, not piranhas." piped in Felix, who was leaning back in his chair, clearly enjoying himself.

"Magic piranhas!" argued Colin.
Kit advanced on Felix, stepping closer to the chair and wriggling her fingers menacingly.

"I know what I'm going to do to you" said Kit, tone sweet, except that her face was twisted into a manic grin that was rather disturbing to see on an eleven-year-old girl's face.

"No you don't," said Felix, inching back.

"I'm going to tick—"

"Shenanigans!" called out the voice of Trainee Tonks from across the Hospital Wing.

At the door now stood two students next to Trainee Tonks. A red-haired boy who looked an awful lot like the Weasley twins, except dour and older, scowled at them. Next to him was a blonde-haired boy wearing a Hufflepuff scarf. By their badges, Mallory reckoned they were the prefects assigned to escort Colin, Kit, and Felix back to their dorms.

"Fuck," groaned Mallory.

"You're up to shenanigans." said Tonks, matter-of-fact, "I know what shenanigans look like, and whatever you're up to right now, they're shenanigans."

"Are not," said Mallory, because that was what you did when an adult accused you of mischief.

"Nope, no, I don't want to hear it. You three, your escorts to your dorms await. And you," she pointed at Mallory, "no shenanigans."

"There's no shenanigans here, pinky promise." said Mallory, with a decidedly cheeky grin. Tonks raised one brow, "right."

"I'm up to exactly no shenanigans. High jinks and mischief, though, I can't promise you anything." Mallory gave Tonks her most winning smile.

She likely knew every synonym that ever existed for the word 'shenanigans.' Mallory had been accused of every last one at least twice.

She enjoyed baiting Tonks, and it was only sweeter now, since Mallory and her friends had outsmarted her.

The Trainee Auror looked down on Mallory for being a little kid. It was patronizing, and served to make their conversations grating. Now, though, the dynamic had shifted. They were interacting with the knowledge that Mallory gotten one over on her.

Tonks' buttons were right out in the open, and Mallory doubted she'd have the restraint to resist pushing them.

"Don't even start." Tonks adopted the tone of a mum, "Has Pomfrey come by and given you your potions yet?"

Mallory shook her head, "she's been back there with this older kid, grew an extra arm or something? I dunno. Wasn't paying attention."

"Alright, I'm going to go speak to her and speed this up. No shenanigans, high jinks, or mischief while I'm gone." There was a pause, "No anything else, either. Just sit still."

"Am I allowed to breathe?" Mallory asked, with no small amount of sarcasm.
"How long can you hold your breath?" Tonks gave her a mean smile.

Mallory glanced to her side and caught Colin's eye. Her friends were dallying, taking their good old time getting up and moving toward the prefects.


"I'd said so," nodded Colin, eyes crinkling with mischief.

"It's the only way," said Kit from next to Felix, with false solemnity.

"Dragons breathe fire and they fly," said Felix, "just pointing it out."

Tonks looked suspiciously between the four first years, "what did I say about shenanigans?"

At that, the four first years burst into giggles.

A calming potion and something called the Drought of Peace left Mallory feeling comfortably calm and relaxed for the first time since Rowle's death.

Pomfrey then noticed Mallory's scabbed-over cuts in her arms, and scolded her for a good five minutes while she removed the glass with a quick spell, and healed over the cuts with another.

That and two cleaning charms for Mallory's robes and person left her feeling almost human as she and Tonks descended down into the dungeons.

Leaving her friends with the prefects wasn't ideal. She still considered it a possibility that Rowle's murderer might kidnap them as bait, if they couldn't get to Mallory. Her anxiety was only kept at bay by the calming potions.

That wasn't a good thing.

Even if she felt better, the situation wasn't resolved.

At least she'd managed to clear the air with her friends. They were on stable footing, now. Even Felix was starting to relax around her.

Flickering candlelight dimly lit the long hallways and steep stone staircases, casting strange shadows on the stone.

It wasn't too long a walk to the Slytherin Common Room, and Mallory spent it examining Trainee Tonks out the corner of her eye.

Tonks' red Auror robes billowed out behind her. Peeking out beneath her robes were lace-up leather boots, caked in dried mud. The robes were long enough that Mallory couldn't tell if she was wearing trousers underneath them, like a muggleborn would.

Mallory suspected the trainee spent some time hunting for Mallory and Harper outside.

Tonks' expression was uncharacteristically grim, which didn't suit the fresh-faced girl. Her features looked predisposed toward warm smiles.

"You're coming into the common room with me?" Mallory asked.

"No, I'm getting you there. You'll be fine once you're inside."
Mallory frowned, jamming her hands in the pockets of her trousers. It was chilly in the castle.

"S'not safe. What if I'm kidnapped by another Slytherin once I'm in the Common Room?" Mallory asked.

Tonks groaned, "why do you ask so many questions?"

"Because kidnapping doesn't sound fun. You think it would, because it has the word 'kid' in it, and kid sometimes means 'joke,' but—"

"Oh Merlin, stop. Please stop. You're not going anywhere, ok? There are guards posted outside both entrances to the Common Room. You'll be safe."

"What if they're invisible or in disguise? Or they could knock me out and put me in their trunk, and then kidnap me that way."

"Yes, we know. We're checking for that, and a hundred things you haven't even heard of."

"What if the Carver's already in the Common Room and kills me while everyone's sleeping?"

Tonks stopped in her tracks, and let out a long groan of frustration, before turning to face the eleven year old, "there are maps monitoring the school. Aurors are posted right outside the doors. And that's not even mentioning all the protections we've put up that you can't know about for security reasons. You're safe, okay?"

Mallory eyed her dubiously, "you'd tell me that just to shut me up, wouldn't you?"

"Merlin! I swear to fu—" Tonks almost swore, cutting herself off.

"Okay, okay! I was just checking!" Mallory said.

She suspected there really were a number of secret protections on the school, but she had to test Tonks' reaction, regardless. If Tonks had looked guilty, then Mallory would've known to be more afraid.

It wasn't that she thought all adults were incompetent. Quite the opposite, in fact. Her parents were brilliant, and her teachers in South Brent were likewise sensible.

If her parents told her the common room was safe, she'd believe them in a heartbeat. Hogwarts professors and Aurors, on the other hand, proved to be less helpful.

"Listen, Mallory? Can I call you that?" Tonks crouched down in front of her, meeting Mallory at eye-level.

"Sure," Mallory said, without enthusiasm.

"Mallory, you're safe here. Nothing's going to happen to you, I promise. Hogwarts is the safest place in the Wizarding World."

Tonks' face was genuine. At the very least, she believed what she was saying. Or, that's what Mallory would assume if she were dealing with another eleven year old.

Adults were better liars than Mallory, and their motives were largely inscrutable, compared to children her own age. The imbalance of power between them made it hard to have an honest conversation with any adult.
"Alright," Mallory gave Tonks what she hoped was a trusting smile, "but can I ask one more question?"

Tonks' expression fell, "beyond the one you asked right now?"

"You said all about the maps covering Bri—"

"No!" hissed Tonks, "no more questions about that!"

"But this is important!"

"No!"

"Why haven't they looked on the maps for Rowle's murderer?" Mallory asked anyway.

Tonks blinked in surprise, "oh." She looked rather relieved, in fact. What did she think Mallory was about to ask?

"Like I said, important," re-stated Mallory.

"The castle and grounds are unplottable. Only a map made inside the unplottable area will work, and even then it'll only work if used while inside the charmed region."

Mallory frowned, "so there isn't a Hogwarts map?"

"Headmaster Dumbledore believes a young witch or wizard's misdeeds should be forgotten, once they've left Hogwarts."

"Huh," Mallory said, her respect for the Headmaster rising a bit. It was mightily inconvenient, for the purposes of determining the killer. But she understood his logic. No one wanted reminders of every embarrassing thing they'd ever done, on record.

"Then The Taboo doesn't work here, either?" Mallory asked, after a moment of thought.

Tonks involuntarily flinched, then looked surprised, like she hadn't thought of that before. "I don't know?" then stern, "but that's not an excuse to break the rules. Those rules are there for a reason."

"I understand," said Mallory, smiling widely.

"Stop that!"

"I'm not doing anything," said Mallory, still smiling.

"Yes you are! You're being a— a Slytherin! Stop it!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

And so their bickering continued, all the way to the Slytherin Common Room.
The Masters of Misdirection, Part 3

The first time Mallory saw the Common Room, it immediately brought to mind the bottom of a deep, deep well.

The walls were dark stone, glimmering wetly in the dim light. Low green lamps flickered on lacquered tables, casting strange shadows on the black leather winged-back chairs. Desks were arranged along the walls, cabinets brimming with trinkets and other oddities.

From the entrance, the Common Room branched off in two directions, like a great capital T. The root of the T could be imagined as the hallway that lead to the student dorms, while the horizontal bar made up the common area.

Well, it wasn't a proper common area. Farley and the prefects informed them on their first night that only a select few Slytherins were allowed in certain parts.

One alcove, dubbed The Fishbowl, was for upperclassmen only. Firsties up to fifth years weren't allowed in under any circumstances.

The whole setup brought to mind conspiracies and intrigue, of whispered conversations in smoky back-rooms. Eerie. A haven of powerful magic and ancient tradition.

Mallory would be lying if she didn't find anything about that attractive.

Today, however, the atmosphere in the Common Room was closer to that of a circus.

By the entrance of the Common Room, Mallory took in the chaos.

A crowd of students pressed into the common area, hooting and cackling. More students, drawn in by the noise, made their way toward the mess. Mallory couldn't hear herself think. Loud, deeper voices of upper-years drowned out the higher-pitched jabbering of the younger kids.

At first glance, it looked like a solid mass of bodies. At second, Mallory noticed divisions. Not a unified crowd.

A few students were wolf-whistling and jeering at others. They pointed to— huh.

Yesterday, she'd noticed how every decoration hammered in the theme of the arcane and prestige. The creepy skull leering down at them from the mantelpiece spoke to power over life and death. Various brick-a-brac of gold, brass, and silver glittered in the gloom whispered of wealth and prosperity. Every shelf was packed with musty books of esoterica.

Until today.

Pasted on every wall and surface were a series of tacky posters. They were garish, bright, and seemed to be the main attraction, drawing people to the Common Room.

Flashing, animated posters which were depicting something. Too far away to see.

*Something about Rowle? The Cracklewood Carver? Voldemort?* It could be anything.
Mallory groaned. Fuck it. She'd have to push her way through the crowd if she wanted a good look.

Bracing herself, she weaved her way between them.

She squeezed past black-robed Slytherins, ignoring the withering glares and sneers they gave her as she inched by. The press of bodies and sharp tang of sweat and excitement had her crinkling her nose.

Closer to the fireplace, now, she could see why students were breaking out into high-pitched giggles.

Naked, adult pictures were plastered to every wall in the common room. Mallory was quite sure eleven year old girls weren't supposed to see those sorts of things.

Gross.

Speaking of, why were there naked, animated, adult pictures pasted all over the Common Room?

"You foul-mouthed knotty-pated wagtail!" shrieked a voice over the din. At once, a smattering of laughter broke out among the gathered Slytherins.

"I mean," said another voice, crowing loud over the noise, "I knew you were a freak, but I didn't realize you were a kinky bastard."

Ah. She saw what was going on, here. Bullying.

"I'll see you hexed for this, you odious little—"

"Odious is thinking of you wanking to this drek."

More hoots and howls muffled whatever was said next, and Mallory warred with herself over what to do. She wasn't sure what the fuss was over the pictures. The students around her were alternately turning red as a tomato, giggling, or sneering. But no matter what they emoted, they couldn't tear their eyes away from the bloody things.

In Mallory's opinion, naked adult-stuff was gross. She didn't get why anyone would want to look at it. Yuck.

Instead of staring at adult-things, she was wondering if she ought to do something about the older boy being teased. Either that, or she ought to leave and not add to his embarrassment.

Actually, no.

She should go get the Aurors stationed outside the door. They'd be able to stop the bullies far better than she—

"Comport yourselves!" barked a familiar tone.

Immediately, the din in the Common Room silenced.

Gemma Farley glided into the room, eyes cold as chips of ice. She crossed the cavernous room with a confident gait, certain that any student standing before her would scramble out of the way.

Finally stopping in place, she stared down the bully and his victim.

"Good evening, Warrington." said Gemma Farley, addressing the bully. Her lips curved upward in
a smile of faint amusement, but her eyes remained flat and cold. The heart-pounding moments before she spoke felt like a lifetime, even though Mallory suspected it'd only been a few seconds.

"Farley," spoke the bully, who's face had gone from gloating to panicked in about half a second. He looked like someone who'd been caught with their pants down in the middle of class.

"Well," she said, eyes settling on the posters, "this is unimpressive."

A few students giggled, but the noise faded quickly.

"Do you want to know why it's unimpressive?" she asked, tone sharp like a professor.

Mallory felt dread pooling in her stomach. Any time Farley was involved, something went horribly wrong. She tortured Mallory just for back-chatting her during the Initiation. She wasn't sure if the older girl would turn around and lambaste the victim, torment the bully, or both.

Farley's face twisted with contempt, "because no real Slytherin would ever think to do it."

Mallory started inching back, away from the looming catastrophe. She needed to find an Auror, put a stop to this.

Not even one step back and she bumped into Montague, who grabbed her arm.

"Let go," she hissed, glancing back nervously toward Farley, who was glaring down the crowd of Slytherins.

"No," whispered Montague, "we need to talk."

But he didn't get a chance, because Farley chose that moment to continue speaking.

"You should know by now that a real Slytherin achieves her ambitions by outsmarting her foes, through strategy and control over resources." Here she paused, before her tone turned as cold as iron, "turning on your friend for mere amusement isn't Slytherin."

Mallory gaped in disbelief, glancing back at Montague. He looked as surprised as Mallory felt.

What. But— But she bullied Mallory and the rest of the first years relentlessly during the Initiation.

Farley raised her voice, "Tell me, how are you supposed to achieve your ambitions without allies? No one rules alone, not even a wizard. Your House now knows you as rash fool who'll throw away leverage on a lark. Who will you go to now, if you cannot depend on your own House? I assure you, the rest of the school will be most disobliging. They all think us Slytherins cheats! Liars and cutthroats, the lot of us. Do you think they might put their faith in you?"

The gathered students looked at one another. Some wore expressions of confusion while others looked irritated.

"We must rely upon our housemates for help, if we ever want power. Yet, look what you've done," spoke Farley. "Imagine what your housemates must be thinking of you, Warrington. You obviously stole these pictures from an incompetent Auror while they were searching our dorms."

At that, a couple students giggled nervously. Mallory glanced behind her, and saw that Vaisey had joined Montague, glowering at Mallory behind her coke-bottle glasses.

"It was—" came the halting voice of Warrington.
"A clever plot?" interjected Farley, tone mocking, "what a ridiculous notion. And anyone here who thinks **blatantly breaking the rules** is clever doesn't deserve to sleep under this lake. I expect you supposed that everyone here would keep a still tongue about these posters, too." A short laugh. "Rumors will make their way to the Aurors, who will be quite vexed to learn how you stole contraband and interfered with an ongoing investigation."

Warrington paled, looking as though someone just dumped ice water down the back of his shirt.

"Breaking the rules and getting away with it is one thing, finding loopholes in the rules so you may do as you like with no penalty is better. But that isn't even your **worst sin**, Warrington."

Warrington gulped.

"In your hands you held enough blackmail to make him do whatever you wished for as long as you wanted, and instead of **leveraging** it, you wasted it on a **schoolboy prank**," her tone was as sharp as a razor's edge.

"Your friends won't stay by your side, Warrington. Now they laugh, but already some are wondering if you'll break with them next."

At that moment, Mallory felt a sharp tug on her arm. She turned, and this time it wasn't just Montague and Vaisey. Avery stood there too, and beckoned her back toward the dorms.

Fuck. What did they want? Farley's speech was **unusual** and—

"Come on," hissed Montague.

Mallory rolled her eyes, and followed the three first years back toward the dorms, weaving between the Slytherin mass that'd gathered to hear Farley speak.

Once out of Farley's hearing, Avery let out an irritable groan.

"Do you know I heard tell from my cousin that she's been giving lectures like that for the last two years?" said Avery, in a sort of detached tone, like he couldn't care less whether they wanted to hear what he had to say or not.

He wasn't speaking at her, but rather at Vaisey and Montague.

"Really?" asked Mallory, ignoring the subtext. She was curious what he'd do. He was an enemy of Dead-Eyes Selwyn, and getting a dialogue going between them might get her some information on where he stood. Like Farley said, it's hard to plot alone.

In the back of her mind, though, she was worried. Mallory didn't know why they pulled her aside, or if this was some sort of plot to kidnap her while everyone else was distracted by Farley. At the moment, though, she decided it was best to play along.

If they **were** spies or minions, it'd be best to find out sooner rather than later. Now that the professors and Aurors were on alert, it'd be even harder to get out of Hogwarts. While that made it next to impossible for her to escape, it also meant any would-be kidnapper would face a greater challenge, as well.

"Yes, and it hasn't made one whit of a difference." Avery said flatly.

"Everyone's scared of her." remarked Mallory.
Tonks did say that there were Aurors guarding the doors, after all.

"Sure," said Avery, lips quirked up in a wry grin. "Because unfortunate things happen to anyone who dares cross her, but that doesn't stop the more determined idiots from kicking up a fuss."

"Please stop," whispered Vaisey, and everyone went quiet.

It struck Mallory then, that Vaisey didn't look like herself.

Mallory only interacted with the Slytherin girl a few times, and each of those times she'd left a distinct impression upon Mallory.

Vaisey was the sort of person who moved with precision, a bit like Felix. But where Felix looked uncomfortable in his own skin, she was confident. The girl with the Coke-bottle glasses spoke, and people listened. She'd look you square in the eye, with her shoulders back and spine straight.

Like Rowle, Vaisey made declarations when she spoke. Rowle hadn't asked Mallory to leave Hogwarts, she'd ordered her to do it. Likewise, Vaisey ordered Montague to tell her what happened. The words formed a question, but their cadence suggested a demand.

Mallory wondered whether Vaisey picked that up from Rowle. Was it intentional, with Vaisey pretending to be her dead friend when she wanted to sound fierce and commanding, or did she unintentionally pick it up from her?

But now, the girl who'd threatened to slice Dead-Eyes Selwyn to ribbons could only manage to choke out a weak 'please stop.'

It was disconcerting.

Vaisey's eyes were ringed with red and puffy, like she'd been crying for a good long while. Her uniform was likewise rumpled, as though she'd spent time today in a bed.

The realization struck Mallory right away, and she felt very, very guilty.

After all, it was Mallory who broke the news of Rowle's death in the worst possible way to Vaisey.

There was a long drawn out minute of silence, like they were all waiting for someone to talk, but that someone couldn't work up the courage to do it.

Then Montague spoke, haltingly.

"Hopkins," said Montague, the levity in his voice draining into something bleak and empty, "we were wondering where we might find Harper."

Oh. Oh. That's why they called her aside.

"He's missing," whispered Vaisey, "and no one will tell us where he is or what happened to him. You both went missing again, and only you've come back." Her voice cracked on the last word.

Vaisey's shoulders were so stiff Mallory thought they'd snap like brittle wood. It hadn't escaped Mallory that Vaisey's hand never left her wand.

Mallory reached for her wand in her pocket. She didn't point it at Vaisey, didn't want to ratchet up the tension or start a fight. But this still could be a kidnapping attempt.

"I overheard you ran away from Hogwarts?" asked Avery.
"Harper's fine," Mallory said, "just to start off, he's fine. He's at— actually, I have no idea where he is, the Aurors have him somewhere in the castle, I think."

Halfway through her sentence she realized that misinforming them was a good idea, just in case they really were spies or unwitting minions. Harper was safer if no one knew where he was, and they were both safer if the Carver expended resources to find Harper at Hogwarts when he wasn't even there.

"What do you mean the Aurors have him somewhere in the castle?" Vaisey demanded.

"Er— that they do?" she was very confused. If the Aurors had taken Harper somewhere, she wouldn't feel nearly as concerned as Vaisey looked.

Montague shook his head, "we overheard the Aurors saying that you both ran away from Hogwarts together, but only you were found."

"Maybe I should start from the beginning," she sighed, voice weary, rubbing the bridge of her nose with the hand that wasn't holding the wand.

"You didn't really run away from Hogwarts," said Avery, looking at Mallory's wand. "Did you? Tell me honestly."

Actually... Harper had inadvertently given her a rather brilliant idea, back when he'd declared her a mastermind of epic proportions.

It crossed her mind that she wouldn't be able to escape Hogwarts anytime soon. And while bullies became a low second priority with a deranged killer on the loose, they were still a concern.

She suspected that if Harper came back to Hogwarts, he wouldn't bully her much. It'd just be too awkward, after everything they went through together in The Forest. They'd never be friends, but the events of the last few days spread some common ground between them.

Likewise, she suspected Montague wouldn't try to bully her, because he was friends with Harper.

Rowle, the main instigator, was dead.

That left the rest of the Slytherin first years to beat into submission.

She knew the only real way to gain the upper hand over the bullies was to gain power. But her enemies weren't going to give her the time she needed to catch up.

Mallory's parents spent weeks reading up on the Wizarding World, and didn't find one single reference to secret maps or The Taboo. That meant some of the vital knowledge Mallory needed to survive wouldn't be found in a textbook.

She needed allies, yet knowledgeable allies wouldn't join her unless she was already powerful. It was a catch-22. She needed power to gain allies but she wouldn't gain allies until she was powerful.

Mallory could see this continuing, going around in loops with no way out, pressure and resentment mounting. A few weeks and she'd be liable to blow her top.

Things would get ugly.
Right now, the pattern wasn't set in stone. Alliances were in limbo, and she still had a shot at disrupting their momentum. If she could trick them into believing she was already powerful, the bullies might leave her alone. Then she could get some power, make more allies, and get the resources she needed to be a real hero.

Reputation was important, and so long as her classmates thought she was weak, they'd continue to bully her.

"Actually," said Mallory, "we did run away. My friends and I plotted the whole thing. We staged the second Carver attack to distract the Aurors, and Harper and I slipped out while they were busy."

"You're lying," said Vaisey, tone tinged with disbelief. She scowled at Mallory like she was toe fungus.

"Ask Tonks, or one of the other Aurors. Or better yet, have Snape confirm it."

They wouldn't, but that wasn't the point. Enough gossip would filter through that Mallory's story would at least become plausible. And later, they'd think to themselves that the first year girl who could trick Aurors wasn't an easy target.

"Alright," said Avery, "tell us how to get out of the castle."

"Why?" asked Mallory, suddenly feeling a tad alarmed.

"I'll pay you two sickles. An older kid's asking around, paying four sickles to anyone who'll tell him how to get out of Hogwarts."

"Who's asking?" asked Mallory.

"And have you cut me out of a deal? I don't think so." scoffed Avery.

Mallory almost stomped her foot in frustration, "s'not why I'm asking! Keep the sickles, I want to know who because they might be a spy for the Carver!"

"What?" hissed Vaisey.

"Why else would anyone want out of the castle right now?" Mallory said, exasperated.

"Black market potions, ingredients, banned items, meeting up with friends, shopping trips—I don't know. There's a hundred other reasons."

"Yeah, but none of that is urgent."

"Not to you it isn't."

"This is a waste of time," said Vaisey, crossing her arms, "she didn't run away at all."

Mallory rolled her eyes, "there's a floo connection active between the room the Aurors are using in the castle, and the Auror Department. I convinced the Aurors to let me stay in the room, and once I was in, my friends staged my fake Carver attack. In the chaos, I slipped into the Ministry building and out into London. I almost got all the way home."

She didn't think they'd be able to replicate that, given that the Aurors now knew about that hole in their security. Moreover, that wasn't anywhere near the truth, on multiple points.

"Oh, really? Then why was Harper with you?" asked Vaisey.
Mallory blinked, pausing for a moment before her brain spat out an acceptable lie, "he was in on it. What do you think we were talking about, in the Hospital Wing?"

"So what you're saying is it was Harper's plan, and you're taking all the credit." Avery said with disdain, looking down his nose at Mallory.

"It isn't! It was my friends and my plan!"

This wasn't working out nearly as well as she thought.

They ignored her, "that does make more sense, it being Harper's idea."

"You think he was pretending to be really sick, then?" Montague looked hurt, "he was all upset, though."

Vaisey shook her head, "we don't know him very well."

"I do," said Avery, "and I don't think he was pretending to be sick. The nurse said he'd been cursed."

"It was my plot and Harper is really sick," insisted Mallory, "we were both cursed, but Harper's sicker— Hea— the Nurse said we'd been struck by a corr— er— corrupting?"

"corruption?" offered Avery, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, corrupting force. But that Harper was struck by it worse, and that's why he's still so sick."

"No, that's impossible." said Avery, "Harper must've been faking, then. Huh, that sly little bastard. I can't believe he fooled me."

Mallory almost blurted out that the Headmaster mentioned a corruption due to dark forces. But she didn't think it was a good idea, telling bigoted Slytherins with potential ties to the Wizengamot she was on good terms with the Headmaster. At least, she thought she was on good terms with him. He'd told her secrets, after all.

"The second I said about the corrupting thing, you changed your mind," Mallory said, challenging. "Why?"

"Because you're—" he waved his hands, "you don't have—" Avery broke off, looking frustrated, "you just can't."

"Because I'm a muggleborn?" Mallory crossed her arms, feeling more than a tad irritated.

"Yes, exactly."

It was interesting, seeing the usually disinterested Avery all excited.

"Well, that's what the nurse said. And it was my idea, all my idea."

Vaisey had walked away during their little spat, frowning at a cork-board hanging off the wall. She turned back toward the three first year Slytherins, looking quite perplexed.

"Avery," Vaisey asked, "do you remember how many detentions and points deducted Hopkins had this morning? And Harper?"

Avery sighed, "I wasn't really keeping track, but I'd guess... we all lost fifty points during flying
class. I don't recall Harper earning any detentions, but I know Hopkins had like, twenty?"

Mallory blinked in surprise, "how the fuck do you know that?"

"It's on the board. We keep score," said Avery.

Of course they did. But that didn't answer her question. She wanted to know how he remembered—Oh. Of course. He used memory potions, like Harper and Rowle. And Vaisey must know about it, because she asked Avery with the expectation he'd have no difficulty remembering.

Vaisey looked like she swallowed a lemon, "Harper still doesn't have any detentions, and Hopkins now has fifty."

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Well," Mallory spread her arms out, "there you have it."

The implications here were obvious. If Harper were behind the plot, he'd be in more trouble than Mallory. Of course, they didn't realize he wasn't at school to be given detention. It suited Mallory's narrative fine, though.

_But fifty fucking detentions? Dear lord._

"Seriously?" Avery's eyebrows rose, _"how?"

Mallory gave him a rather sharp grin.

Pulling off this hat trick wasn't quite as good as beating up Harper publicly, but it would force her year-mates to view her in a new light.

"Well, you see," Mallory boasted, "I floo'd into an entire room full of Aurors, all leering down at us like a pack of wolves. I knew I only had seconds to come up with a clever lie before they—"

"No, I mean how did you get out of the Auror Department?" Avery sounded tired, or perhaps irritated.

"Oh, that part was easy. I asked someone for directions."

"And someone just let two Hogwarts students who obviously weren't supposed to be wandering the Auror Department go by?"

"We said we were dressed up as Hogwarts students, because we were so excited to go next year. And that our parents were waiting for us in the lobby."

"Someone bought that?"

"I sold that." Mallory said, a tad smug.

Avery gave her a look of stark disbelief, "this doesn't sit right."

"Two little children lost is more common than children escaping Hogwarts using a floo that doesn't usually exist," Mallory said. It truly was amazing what people would take at face value.

Montague had remained silent since Avery said all that about Harper faking illness. He looked rather hurt, and probably thought Harper had left him out of his plans.
Her instincts warred. For years she and Danny were the walking personification of the apple of discord. Whenever one of their classmates got it in their head to start bullying another, Mallory and Danny made a game out of driving wedges between the bully and their friends. Divide and conquer.

Except, it hadn't escaped her notice that Danny didn't care if he was playing games with bullies or the bullied. She steered him toward the bullies because picking on the weak bothered her. He let himself be steered because Mallory was his best friend, and had awesome superpowers.

Before Hogwarts, she'd considered this dynamic acceptable. Danny was the only person she'd ever told about her powers, the only person besides her parents who didn't find the idea of magical powers terrifying.

He thought being a superhero would be brilliant. Not for the same reasons as Mallory, but it was enough.

Here at Hogwarts, however, she found herself on the opposite end of that dynamic with her new friends. They were often steering her away from behavior they thought crossed the line.

She wasn't stupid.

She knew those rules they'd talked about— no hitting and no jinxing and whatever else— were aimed at Mallory. They'd talked about her while she was gone, talked about managing her, even.

And they were planning to be heroes for the same reasons as her. It gave her pause, made her wonder if she'd gotten into the habit of being unheroic without even realizing it.

Back in The Forest, she'd thought about turning Harper and Rowle against each other. Create some chaos, sow discord in Slytherin.

But Mallory knew without a doubt that Felix and Colin would think using Rowle's murder to ratchet up tension was wrong. She knew it was wrong.

*She couldn't get Vaisey's expression during Potions Class out of her head.*

She'd crushed that girl.

Mallory opened her mouth, adopting a gentler tone, "Harper really *is* sick. I don't know if it's corruption or something else, but he was feeling badly."

Even during their escape he looked pale and sickly. He was shaky, unsure of himself. On their elevator ride down to the lobby, he'd looked positively haunted.

On second thought, that might've been because Mallory told him the Carver was about to come through the floo.

But even *before* she lied about that. He'd remained in the Hospital Wing while she was released. She'd written it off as grief, but Headmaster Dumbledore and the nurse said that it was corruption. A taint.

Mallory suspected she wouldn't be able to convince Avery of that, so she'd attack this from a different angle.

Montague looked up, "something else?"
She shrugged, "if it can't be corruption worse than mine, then— I mean, Rowle was—"

Thinking back to their conversation was like dipping her hand into ice water. She couldn't make herself do it without flinching back, but she tried anyway.

He'd spent all day shadowing Rowle, intending to befriend her.

Mallory shut her eyes for a moment, "they were friendly, is all I mean."

The potions were working, a little.

It was easier to tear herself away from those memories. The Forest wasn't such a heavy weight, dragging her deep down underwater.

Montague looked suspiciously misty-eyed, and Mallory looked away so he could keep his pride.

"You both saw her die." Vaisey said.

Mallory flinched.

"You need to tell us everything you know," said Vaisey, face turned serious and intense.

"You won't feel better." Mallory said, haltingly, "you won't— I don't— it'll just make you—"

"I'm catching my friend's murderer, and you're going to help me." Olive Vaisey stood before her, eyes red and puffy from crying, resolute.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

My friends and I are trying to catch the killer, too. But the more people that know about that, the more people that can be put under veritaserum.

"Er— I don't think that's a good idea." It made her feel ugly inside, saying those words.

"She was my friend," insisted Vaisey, eyes cold behind her glasses.

"You were her future vassal," scoffed Avery, "but never-mind me. Continue telling all of Wizarding Britain how close you were with the Rowles."

Vaisey spun on him and looked like she wanted to kill him, "who are you to talk? You aren't friends with anyone."

"Ouch," said Avery dryly, putting his hand over his chest, "I'm in agony."

"Stop being such a prick, Avery," Montague said, scowling at him.

"I think we all can agree that we'd rather Rowle be alive," said Mallory, attempting to get the conversation back on track.

"Coming from you?" Avery snorted.

"Yeah, coming from me. I mean, I wanted her punished, but not— now she'll never—" Mallory cut herself off.

Rowle would only ever amount to a nasty bully. It was a comic book canceled before it hit its stride. You'd never find out what happened. She'd never have a chance to become more than a bratty eleven year old.

Maybe it was just that the girl was dead, and the threat of having Nibbles the Panda shredded and lit on fire again was gone. It was easier to romanticize a fight when you didn't have to live through it, yourself. But Mallory thought now that it might've been fun to have the chance to beat her.

Of course, she couldn't really express that to the Slytherins. And she doubted Felix, Colin, or Kit would understand.

Well, maybe they would. It seemed all she did was underestimate how awesome her friends were, and there was a lesson to be learned from that.

"She'll never get punished for what she did?" asked Vaisey, tone biting.

"No," Mallory backtracked, shaking her head, "she'll never grow up, or see Hogwarts again."

At that Vaisey looked like she was going to burst into tears. Mallory cringed. Oops.

"Okay," said Montague, "I don't want to hear about this, right now."

"Sorry," Mallory faltered. She didn't know what to say.
Avery cleared his throat, "while you were in the Auror's office, did you see any papers that looked like maps?"

He was effectively changing the subject, and Vaisey looked as relieved as Mallory felt.

"You mean the maps that secretly-not-so-secretly look at everyone all the time?" Mallory asked, deadpan.

"Yes," Avery sounded surprised, as if to say how do you know about that?

"The Auror said that unplotting maps only work inside unplotting areas, and normal maps don't work on unplotted areas."

"Unplottable maps," corrected Avery.

"Yeah, before now there weren't any Hogwarts maps, and the Forbidden Forest is part of Hogwarts," Mallory said.

"Not of much use, then." said Avery, with a sigh.

"Alright, then we think of something else," said Vaisey.

"Vaisey?" Mallory tried thinking of how to say it, "I'm not sure... er— right now you're not at the center of this. No one's trying to kill you. But if you start looking into it, you might become a target, too. Harper's safe for now, so—"

"This is why I can't believe you pulled off the escape." Vaisey drew herself up. "You're not even a good liar. You just said you involved your friends in the escape. If you really thought investigating Rowle's death was dangerous, you wouldn't have involved them."

"Merlin, Vaisey," drawled Avery. "Maybe she doesn't very much care about them. You know how disturbed mudbloods are."

"What?" Mallory's cheeks went bright red, "that doesn't even make sense."

She did worry about them, and she had warned them.

But they told her they wanted to be heroes, that they were helping Mallory because it was the right thing to do. Mallory kept them along because she needed help, and because liked Colin, Kit, and even Felix.

She couldn't ask for better friends.

Heck, together they'd managed to fake an entire Carver attack. Felix jumped off the staircase and floated down like something out of a movie. Kit could act, better than Mallory could, even. And it hadn't escaped her notice how Colin soothed upsets in a way Mallory couldn't.

It was like Farley said, 'plotting alone means your bound to fail.'

Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose, "I just—"

"What?" asked Vaisey, deadpan.

"I haven't told them much, is all," Mallory lied. "I can't. I'd put them in danger. They know less than you do, I think. And I want to catch the murderer, but—"
Outright telling Vaisey that she was trying to misinform the killer meant the killer would start mistrusting Mallory's misinformation. Expressing knowledge of the game would mean the villain would know she was playing.

Except the murderer already knew Mallory felt threatened enough to run away. She'd made her move and failed. Would it really hurt, to set more complications in the murderer's path? Would it make her a bad person, if she told them what she knew and possibly put them in danger?

Truth is, she told her friends everything she knew. Mallory knew she wouldn't be able to solve the mystery or escape without help. They'd wanted to help her. But Mallory also didn't really expect the murderer to go after Colin, Kit, and Felix. Her instincts told her that a Slytherin was behind the murderer, and so far she'd seen Slytherins unilaterally dismiss muggleborn and the other Houses.

She didn't know if telling Vaisey would put her in danger. She didn't know what the murderer knew. But... she did know how she'd like to be treated, if she were in Vaisey's shoes.

"—but this isn't the Mystery of the Missing Trunk." Mallory said, "someone tried to murder three first years, and might've been murdering people for twenty-one years without getting caught. The fewer people in their cross hairs, the fewer at risk."

"I know that," said Vaisey, firm, "I'm investigating anyway."

"And once you know," Mallory ventured, "you could be kidnapped, truth serum'd, and memory charmed. And anyone you told could be hurt, too. You wouldn't even know you betrayed your friend, and they might die because of you."

Vaisey flinched, and Mallory's hands started sweating at her sides.

But she needed to know if Vaisey would still want to help in spite of the risk. She was putting a lot of her cards on the table, revealing more than she knew she ought to, but it was the right thing to do.

"In for a knut, in for a galleon," drawled Avery, sounding resigned. "You've already told us too much, best to tell us the rest."

"That's not true, and you know it," said Mallory.

"I don't care, tell us," said Montague.

Mallory looked between them. She knew she was jumping in with both feet, here. Worse, she didn't know these Slytherins like she knew her friends.

Kit, Felix, and Colin weren't expressing any regrets. She'd notice it if they did. Colin and Felix were awful liars.

She did fear, though, that they didn't realize how much danger they were in. Colin was optimistic to a fault, Kit didn't seem to have a concept of fear, and Felix was driven to do the right thing, no matter the cost.

She understood her friends. What she needed now was to understand Avery, Montague, and Vaisey.

Montague was the easiest. He was defined by his loyalty to his friends. Apparently he hadn't even known Harper that long, and still stood by him while Dead-Eyes Selwyn was mocking him during potions. It reminded her of her own friends' loyalty to her, and her's to them.
He was a rock, orbiting Harper. No harm would come to Mallory, so long as he thought that harm would spread to Harper, too.

Vaisey was another matter.

The more Mallory interacted with Vaisey, the more she seemed insecure. Mallory imagined her as someone trying her very best to appear fearsome and polished. A shell of metal encasing spun glass. Precise, exacting, a little like Felix in that she was conscientious.

More concerning, she was a little like Danny in that her instinct was to go for the throat. Her diffindo during The Slytherin Initiation sliced uncomfortably close to Mallory's neck. She suspected it was poor aim and not a lack of intent that spared her. Bloodthirsty.

The target of her ire was Rowle's murderer, for whatever reason. Mallory suspected Vaisey would gleefully throw Mallory in the line of fire in the process of catching The Carver. But if she thought sacrificing Mallory meant the Carver would get away, she'd restrain herself.

Avery wasn't motivated by revenge or loyalty. She wasn't even sure why he was here.

Avery reluctantly showed up to Harper's side, reluctantly tagged along on their interrogation of Mallory. He was an enemy of Dead-Eyes Selwyn, and halfheartedly tried warning Mallory off of him. He feared Snape. When Vaisey found out Rowle was murdered, his instinct was to mock her interest in solving the murder.

Yet he kept involving himself in the conversation. If he were completely apathetic, he wouldn't try at all.

She didn't get him.

"Avery," Mallory asked, "why did you warn me about Dead—er—Selwyn? And during the Initiation, you didn't—er—you weren't awful. Why?"

"What does this have to do with anything?" asked Vaisey.

"Answer the questions, or no deal." Mallory said.

He opened his mouth, and Mallory interrupted. "I'll know if you're lying. I'm good at telling if people are lying."

"It wasn't about you," said Avery, looking distinctly uncomfortable, "everyone was getting so caught up, so involved in the stupid thing. They were play-acting. There was nothing at stake, nothing worth—" and he cut himself off.

Mallory could guess what he was going to say. Nothing worth getting hurt over. None of it was for real. If Vaisey had cut Mallory's throat, it would've been healed within thirty seconds by the prefects.

"And Selwyn?" Mallory asked.

Montague answered, instead, "everyone's been warned about him, because he's dangerous."

Mallory's brow furrowed, "right."

But she did get Avery, now. Disaffected. He saw the games people played around him, and thought they were petty. Didn't want to lower himself to their level.
Then why the interest in Rowle's murder?

He didn't have a drive; he was driven by his search for a drive. If she tried putting it into his terms, he'd say he was *looking for something real*. Life and death are about as real as it gets.

Montague was wrong.

"You're not warning everyone about Selwyn because you're trying to protect them, you're warning them because it'll piss off Selwyn. You want to see what he'll do," Mallory guessed.

A flash of anger, "sure, Hopkins." Sarcasm. Avery had a good poker face, but not good enough.

It was no worse than Kit's need for action. There was a chance he'd screw them over just to see the fireworks, but she doubted it. Or rather, so long as she got it across to him that turning them over to the enemy was suicidal, he'd remain on their side.

"Okay, I'll tell all of you," Mallory said, "but not unless you tell me everything you've learned up til now on the Carver."

The second the words were out of her mouth, she was mentally outlining a rough strategy of what she wanted out of this. Right now, they couldn't work with Harper to solve the case.

They might've worn Harper down, with enough time, but he was out of their reach. No access. Now they were forced to work with Mallory, instead.

"This isn't a negotiation," said Vaisey, "Rowle's dead, and you're not turning this into some bargaining tool."

"I'm not," Mallory interrupted, "but I want to solve this case, too. I know you think I'm some kind of idiot, but—" here, she took a gamble, "you told Harper what you learned about the Carver, back in the Hospital Wing, yeah?"

"Yes," said Montague, "but what—"

"I shared some stuff with him, too." Mallory barreled on, "not all of it, because I was worried he wouldn't go along with the escape. But he was surprised. It was stuff he hadn't heard before, stuff you haven't heard before."

She didn't know what they knew. But she'd be willing to bet they hadn't overheard any conversations between The Grand Undertoad and Auror Kingsley.

"Really?" said Avery, one brow raised, "what sort of stuff?" He said the word stuff like how Professor McGonagall said 'secret agent spies.'

"Remember when I was called away in prep? Snape didn't take me to the Hospital Wing, he took me to a meeting in the Auror's office with some Ministry Official. I overheard a bit, but they made it so I couldn't hear what they were saying. What the Aurors didn't know, was that I'm bloody good at reading lips. I overheard other things too, before I slipped out to the Auror Department."

She wasn't going to say that Colin, Kit, and Felix were listening at the door. Then the Slytherins might go to them, instead. Moreover, so long as everyone believed her friends ignorant, they'd be left alone.

But Mallory needed them to agree to give her something valuable for this. If they knew something she didn't, then she needed them to give it to her. And the only way they'd do that was if they felt
grateful for her help.

"Be more specific," said Avery.

"I don't remember the Ministry Official's name. She looked like an overgrown toad, and she was the… secretary of the secretary of the Minister? Kept insisting everyone call her by her title. Senior Undersecretary? Umburger?" Mallory frowned. She should've taken note of it.

"Senior Undersecretary Umbridge?" Avery's eyebrows rose, surprised, "that witch is second in charge next to the Minister, not a clerk."

Okay. Wow. That whole conversation between her, the Grand Undertoad, and Auror Kingsley suddenly became way more alarming. The Prime Minister's second-in-command had wanted Mallory thrown in a fucking holding cell because she didn't like that a filthy muggleborn laid hands on Rowle.

Fucking Christ.

"Yes," Mallory swallowed, "her."

She was thinking of not mentioning Lord and Lady Malfoy at all, if she could help it. It'd be safer for Mallory if they were willing to make a deal over Umbridge, alone. Whatever power the Lord and Lady commanded, Mallory didn't want to accidentally run afoul of it by repeating their conversation.

It was becoming more and more apparent to her that she had absolutely no idea what was going on in the Wizarding World.

"Right," said Avery, taking out his wand. It was pointing to the ground, and might just be a reaction to noticing Mallory had her wand out. Regardless, it made her uncomfortable.

He continued speaking, "that's worth something. Fine. You want to know what we have on Rowle's killer? I think we can manage that, but there's going to be some caveats."

"What's a caveat?" Mallory asked, while simultaneously attempting to figure out why he was holding the wand. Was it about The Grand Undertoad? Was he working for her? Was this a trap, for real?

"It means you'll vow to tell me everything you know about Rowle's killer," said Avery.

They weren't calling the killer 'the Carver' like everyone else was, and that made her curious.

It also made her nervous. Unintentional slip of the tongue? They might actually know something she didn't, something important.

Mallory frowned. When Avery spoke, he sounded rather a lot like an adult. It wasn't the words he was using, but the twisty way of thinking that left her feeling off-footed.

"I feel like this is a trick," said Mallory, still holding her wand. She wanted to see how he reacted.

"It isn't. I'm going by tradition," spoke Avery.

Mallory noted that both Vaisey and Montague were leaving it up to Avery to hash out the details. They were more or less following his lead, which was surprising. Vaisey didn't strike Mallory as much of a follower.
Then again, Vaisey was pretty upset. And Montague wasn't nearly as sharp as Avery. It made more sense for him to pick up the slack.

"Alright," Mallory said, "But... if the your stuff— information— isn't much... I want this to be a fair deal. I tell you what I know, you all tell me something that's worth what I told you."

Vaisey spoke up, "what do you want, Hopkins?" She sounded irate.

"Do you three know anything about how the Aurors are protecting the castle? I'm not talking about the windows being shatterproof, or the patrols on every door, or the locks that can't be opened by a simple unlocking charm. I mean— do you three know any other ways out of the castle?"

"No," said Vaisey, looking at Montague and Avery, "do you?"

Montague shook his head, and Avery said, "no."

"Alright," Mallory said, "do you know anything about the laws about muggle parents and muggleborn children? Like, whether or not my parents can take me out of school without the Headmaster's permission, or where I can find that information?"

"You can read a textbook on it," said Vaisey.

"Is it a long and boring textbook meant for adults?" Mallory asked, deadpan. It might take her days to figure out what passages of the book she needed, and what they meant. Adult books used complicated words she didn't know, especially law books.

Even the table of contents and index weren't useful. Adults used complicated words there, too. It wouldn't be 'laws about muggleborn children,' it'd be something in Latin or legalese, which she was pretty sure was its own language.

"Yes," answered Avery for Vaisey, "and there aren't many books describing laws on one topic. They're collections written by the year. Laws passed in the Summer Session of 1977, for example. If you're looking for something specific, you're better off asking a professor to find out for you."

"Okay," Mallory frowned, "then..." She'd need to craft a sort of general request, one that'd get her in the range of the information she needed to move forward. She wasn't sure what that information was, though.

Oh. Well, once she thought about it like that, the answer became obvious.

"Then..." she swallowed, mouth dry, "I want to know what mistakes you and other people see muggleborns making. Er— stuff that can't be learned in the assigned textbooks. Like, you see muggleborns making this dumb mistake all the time, and it can't be 'oh, you think you're as good as a pureblood' or 'you think you belong here but you don't.' I mean—"

"I understand," interrupted Avery, "so to get this straight, you promise to tell us everything you've learned relating to Rowle's murder. In return, we promise to tell you everything we know about Rowle's murder. If the information exchange isn't even, then we further promise to tell you about the unwritten rules of magic, information you don't know, but that's so obvious no wizard would think to tell you."

Mallory frowned in irritation, shoving her wand back in her pocket. If they were minions, they would've kidnapped her by now.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose with her now-free hand and attempted to untangle what Avery
said. That was a lot of fancy speaking. Not even Felix spoke that eloquently, and she'd yet to see him without a textbook in hand.

"Yeah?" she said, unsure, "I think so. Er— are you... are your parents solicitors or something?" Changing the subject, to give her more time to think.

Just like she and Danny didn't decide to become superheroes on their own, Avery hadn't learned to speak like that from nowhere.

Mallory knew about being a good person because her mum talked about ethics a lot, not just because Mallory read comic books. Before Mallory was born, mum worked as a Philosophy Professor at a Big University.

Mallory suspected mum really wanted to go back to teaching, but felt she couldn't because of her daughter. That made Mallory feel guilty, so she would sit quietly through mum's lectures without complaint. And when mum went off on a rant about how she couldn't get behind the Ethics of Care, Mallory pretended to find it interesting.

At any rate, Mallory knew a little about ethics because mum talked about it a lot. Likewise, Danny knew a lot about manipulation because his father was in marketing and had an entire library on the topic at home. (Mr. Pearce kept a copy of *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by his bedside where some people kept the bible.)

It stood to reason that Avery's parents were solicitors, or that he had a tutor who focused heavily on fancy words and deal-making.

Avery looked affronted, "my parents are Lord and Lady Avery."

Oh. Well, that explained a lot. Actually wait, Harper had the same tutors as Lord and Lady Avery's son? Rowle told Harper in The Forest that she'd get him better tutors. Better tutors than ones supplied by Lord and Lady Avery?

Then, perhaps some Lords and Ladies held more wealth and sway than others. Tonks said not to presume, with those sorts.

"Er— I mean," Mallory stuttered out, trying to talk and think at the same time, "it's just you talk like an adult and it's sort of weird? Not weird, er—"

"Will you make a vow, Hopkins?" Avery asked, apparently looking past her word-vomit.

"Sure," Mallory said, "I promise."

"That's not a vow," said Avery, tone as dry as the Sahara.

"What do you mean?" Mallory asked, confused.

"You need to make the vow with your wand in your hand," replied Avery, as though Mallory just said something phenomenally stupid.

Mallory faltered, "why?" She'd put her wand in her pocket once they started negotiating in earnest. She realized now that Avery never put his away.

"You had your wand out earlier. Don't tell me you don't know," Avery looked baffled.

"Know what?" Mallory asked, puzzled.
"Promises made with wands are binding," Avery sounded exasperated. "If you make a vow and fail to keep your word, you sacrifice a portion of your sway over magic. It's the only way we can know you're not lying."

"I took out my wand because I thought you might be minions of Rowle's murderer, trying to kidnap me," Mallory drew back, "you were going to trick me into swearing a magical vow?"

"It's hardly tricking you if we're telling you about it," said Avery.

Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose, "I don't get it."

Vaisey spoke up, "magic can tell if you're keeping your oaths when you're holding a wand, because that's your connection to magic."

"No," Avery said, "that's not quite right. The wand acts as a focus. Think of it like a telescope's lenses: you adjust the dials until you can see clearly through it. Magic focused through a wand holds us to our word. At least, that's how my tutor put it."

That wasn't what she meant at all. Yet the more they spoke, the less their explanation made sense.

"Okay," said Mallory, "I'm still confused. How does that even work, the connection to magic or magic listening? I thought— doesn't magic come from us? And why doesn't everyone just use that to— to make everyone honest. And you can easily use that to blackmail someone!"

She knew she was babbling, but she couldn't help it. Mallory could imagine abusing that in a hundred different ways. Why wasn't everyone walking around with their wands in their hands constantly? Wouldn't it become a norm where if someone wasn't carrying their wand and offering to make a promise, everyone would think they're a liar?

"I don't think I believe you," continued Mallory, before they could get a word in. "I'm pretty sure people still take bribes in the Ministry, and if it's anything like the muggle offices, they swear oaths to obey laws. But they're still taking bribes."

Montague groaned into his hands, "this is why no one bothers with mudbloods. You're all so bloody stupid, I swear."

"I'm not stupid," Mallory hissed.

"You need to read your Magical Theory textbook," said Vaisey, "didn't you read anything over the summer?"

"Yeah, but not all of it." Mallory said, lying. "And I still think you're making this all up."

She'd only skimmed her textbooks, skipping to the sections that described spells and how to make potions. The rest of her days were spent daydreaming about how she'd look dressed up as a superhero, making fireballs appear and levitating trucks.

Magical Theory sounded dead boring, so she'd skipped it.

"Hopkins," Vaisey spoke, "Avery isn't lying. And I don't know how witches and wizards get away with bribes. But I do know I'd look plain silly if I demanded everyone make a promise any time they—"

"That's not right, either, Vaisey," said Avery, sounding mighty annoyed, "wizards don't take bribes, they fulfill oaths that hold more weight than their oath to office."
"What about if someone blackmails me into taking a vow?" Mallory asked.

"It's complicated," said Avery, "there are Magical Theorists who've studied this for centuries. I just know what my tutor told me, and the general rules are to only make a vow holding your wand if you intend to keep it, and to never force someone into a vow unless you want it backfiring on you."

Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose, "okay, say this is real. Why have truth serum if you can have someone swear to tell the truth? And oaths that are more important than other oaths? Who decides which is more important?"

Montague snorted, "you can either lose most or all of your magic, or go to Azkaban. Which would you choose? If you're lucky, you might even get away with it."

"Azkaban is… wizard prison, right?" Mallory asked. Her head was reeling, trying to sort this information into something she could use.

"It's guarded by Dementors," said Montague, looking a bit green at the thought.

Vaisey shuddered.

"I don't know what Dementors are," said Mallory. She felt like she'd heard about them before, but couldn't remember from where.

"They're monsters that force you to re-live your worst memories over and over, while simultaneously eating all of your happy memories. Few people survive a sentence in Azkaban, and those that do don't come out the same." said Avery.

Mallory made the connection, "if… say, if someone were to threaten to put someone else in a holding cell, would that holding cell be in Azkaban, or somewhere else?"

"Azkaban," said Avery, "why?"

Jesus Fucking Christ on a rocket ship. The Grand Undertoad wasn't just a sadist, she was an evil motherfucking pile of sphincter droppings. That fucker.

"Why?" said Avery, "what did you hear?"

Mallory shook her head, "if I'm going to make a vow, I'll tell you after I've made it."

They'd have to give her information of equal value. The more she withheld until after a vow, the more they'd have to tell her.

If she took a vow. If.

"We won't trust you're telling the truth unless you promise to the agreed terms with your wand in your hand," said Avery. "We'll promise, too."

Montague snorted, "I'm not sure we can trust her, even then. It's not like she's a real witch. It might hurt us if we can hardly cast magic for a time. But her?"

"This still sounds like a trap," Mallory said, feeling uncertain.

She could see why they wouldn't trust her without it. Assuming the vow was real. After the fiasco with Selwyn, it made sense that they'd want one.

It might be a load of bullhockey. Convince her she'd lose her magic if she lied and didn't keep her
 Pressure exerted so she'd feel compelled to play fair.

On the other hand, Mallory knew she was a stranger in this world. She didn't have the context to understand the events unfurling around her. They could give her some of that context, make it easier for Mallory to connect the dots.

Fuck. Like Umbridge. What the fuck.

Problem was, she couldn't fulfill her end of a vow. She couldn't tell them everything about the investigation, and asking to change it now would be like announcing that she had something to hide.

Mallory knew she couldn't say a word about the ghosts, no matter what.

The conversation with the ghosts was both important and vital to the investigation. It was also liable to result in Headmaster Dumbledore being sacked. She wasn't sure if anyone even knew she knew that, besides Professor Sprout.

Headmaster Dumbledore hadn't brought it up during their conversation, and it hadn't even been on her mind. She'd been too distracted by the riot her friends threw for her, by how ruddy awful Snape was, by everything else.

Headmaster Dumbledore wasn't the most helpful adult, but he wasn't actively throwing her to the bullies or sneering at her for being a muggleborn. He tried helping, even if it was in a sideways off-the-books sort of way. A different Headmaster might make Hogwarts much worse for Mallory.

She'd ask if they wouldn't mind her leaving out one piece of information, but even hinting that she knew something that serious was a bad idea. There was a limit to how many risks Mallory was willing to take.

Could she risk losing her magic for a time, though?

Granted, Montague was right. She could only cast the fire-making and wand-lighting charms with regularity. Her wandless magic wasn't any good in a fight, since she needed to be in the right headspace for it to work. Accidental magic was entirely unreliable. She'd hardly notice its absence.

Yet, she was loathe to give it up, even for a short time.

Fuck, she needed to think this through.

"Do any of you have your Magical Theory textbook on you, now?" Mallory asked, "I want to check."

She didn't expect any of them did. Stalling tactics. Plus, she really didn't trust that this stuff about vows wasn't one big head game.

"Are you serious?" asked Avery.

"Yeah," Mallory said, "Vaisey said it was in the book, and I don't trust you."

It was more than that, though. She wasn't happy with the idea of bringing these three on board.

Five minutes later, an irritable Avery came back with his textbook. And it did, indeed, confirm that magical vows were real and could be made by making a promise while holding your wand. It also required the people making the vow to know they were making a vow.
In other words, once Avery had realized Mallory didn't know what a vow was, he had to explain it to her. If he hadn't, the vow wouldn't have binded her quite so tightly.

She wished she'd kept her wand out. Would've saved her a whole lot of hassle, if she weren't bound by the rules. Now that she knew, she was likewise bound.

"This is pretty scary stuff," Mallory said, skimming over the words.

Avery shifted, uncomfortable, "I don't know what you mean."

"It says that to take an oath is to create a connection of trust," Mallory said, glancing up from the text, "and I don't get what that means, really."

"It means that because you're honest here, I'll trust you more in the future. You'll trust me more than you would've, too," Avery frowned, "it's distasteful, but it's the easiest way to tell you're not lying."

It was described as one of the oldest kinds of magics, creating connections, binding and fasting. The language it used reminded her of some old fairy tales about hand-fasting rituals from mum's library— weird fantasy novels her mum liked.

But the book specifically said it was nothing like that. It wasn't that sort of trap, and further she didn't see any reason for Avery to want to trap her that way. *Gross.*

"Is it—" Mallory tried to figure out how she wanted to word this, "is it *noticeable*? Will I noticeably trust you more?"

She really didn't like the idea of her judgment being altered by anything.

"A little," Avery said, "if we kept making vows it'd get worse. A spell like this wears off after a while."

"If I break the vow, how bad is the cost?" Mallory asked.

"You're trying to weasel your way out of it," hissed Vaisey, "aren't you?"

"I need to know what I'm getting into," said Mallory, evading Vaisey's question. She really did need to know.

"It depends on the promise, on intent and how thoroughly it's broken," said Avery.

Mallory rocked back on her heels, thinking, "would my suspicions be included? Like, guesses and ideas, not stuff I learned from other people?"

If she told them everything *but* her suspicions and about the ghosts, would that count as only a minor breach? She didn't know.

"No," said Avery.

Ok. Well, she was considering it.

"What're you offering me, then?" Mallory asked, "information-wise."

She was considering it, so long as they offered her something worth potentially losing her magic for a time.
Avery smiled, sharp and cocky, "I can tell you if the killer's going to attack again, and see if there's a path you can take that'd result in you living through it."

Chapter End Notes

Care Ethics was a theory hotly explored during the late '80s and early '90s. It was a contentious topic among feminists, and it struck me that Patricia Hopkins, being both a Philosopher and activist, would have an opinion on it. If you're curious about the study of ethics, a good intro is *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* by Rachels.

While *Influence: Science and Practice* by R.B. Cialdini came out in 2001, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by the same author came out in 1984, and was well-regarded as a manual on influencing people by 1992. Much of Danny's (and Mallory's) knowledge of persuasion comes from this text.

As always, the characters' opinions, whether they be villains, heroes, or the half-remembered ramblings of a child, do not necessarily reflect the author's.
Chapter Notes

I made changes to the last chapter. My previous update was sloppy. I completely forgot that Harper did a tarot reading publicly, not in secret. I further changed it so that the vows are better explained, and Avery gives Mallory a better idea what he's offering.

They were in the First Year Slytherin Boy's Dormitory, which looked almost exactly like the girl's First Year Slytherin Dormitory.

For some incomprehensible reason, boys weren't allowed in the girls' rooms.

In the corner of the room was a wooden table with four chairs. They each took a seat, Mallory across from Avery, Montague to her right. Without sunlight filtering through the lake, the room was dim, lit only by candles.

*Of course* she made a vow. After what Avery offered, what else could she do? Still, she feared the cost and further feared that Avery might be tricking her into something sinister.

They wanted to know everything Mallory knew about the murderer. And it seemed that Harper told them next to nothing. Not surprising. He hadn't recovered nearly as quickly as Mallory. Talking about The Forest would be beyond him, at this point.

Mallory took her time, deciding what she ought to say and how to say it.

She kept to the truth about the actual events in The Forest. She managed to choke out how Rowle was turned into a bone-stick-flayed corpse in what appeared to be a split second. She told them how everything went cold and dark. They'd run in what they thought was a straight line, and ended up right back where they'd started.

Vaisey's usual chocolate-brown complexion turned near gray when Mallory described Rowle's corpse.

That half-hour sucked for all of them: for Mallory who struggled to stay in the here-and-now, for Vaisey who learned the grim details of her friend's murder, and for Montague who learned *just how close* his own friend came to meeting the same fate.

Avery, on the other hand, looked excited. She was shelving her concern about that, because she thought she might have a solution to steer him in a useful direction.

"Everyone there was interrogated," said Vaisey, looking grim, "but no one remembers who shouted that the professors were coming."

Mallory nodded, "and… I'm piecing this together from a few things I heard adults say. But they think necromancy—"

At this, Montague flinched, and Vaisey frowned in confusion.
"—was involved. The Headmaster thinks Death Eaters or You-Know-Who might be behind it, but the Aurors aren't sure, and the Undersecretary got really upset when she heard about it." Mallory said, making a mental note that necromancy was another word she ought not say.

Also, it seemed that Vaisey and possibly Avery didn't know that necromancy was a taboo'd word. Interesting.

"You shouldn't say that," said Montague, "it's a…"

"Bad word?" asked Mallory, rolling her eyes, "that's stupid."

"Good wizards just don't, okay?" said Montague, sounding rather wound up.

Vaisey caught on, eyes widening, "Oh, Merlin, don't."

"I don't know what it is. I'm just repeating what the Aurors said." Mallory rolled her eyes again. These were kids her age, not stuck-up adults and trainee Aurors. They couldn't actually buy that nonsense about the so-called 'bad words' making you a bad person, could they?

Not that Mallory was about to risk spouting Taboo'd words any time soon. She didn't know if Tonks was right about The Taboo being inapplicable in Hogwarts. Mallory wasn't keen on taking chances with Danny's memories, nor her parents' plans.

Made her a bit of a hypocrite, but she couldn't help but take jabs at kids who were so eager to bend over to authority.

"I don't know what it is, either," Avery said, measuring his words, "but if I had to guess, I'd say we're safe from dark magic like that, so long as we stay inside the castle."

Because of those protections the ghosts mentioned were failing? Right. Now she was only more worried. But Mallory wasn't about to tell them about that, not if it was leverage enough to unseat the Headmaster.

It was also obvious that Avery did, in fact, know what necromancy did.

Interesting.

If she had to bet money on it, she'd guess that Avery didn't really fear The Taboo. So far, the only people she saw not flinching around Taboo'd words were Headmaster Dumbledore, Lord and Lady Malfoy, and Avery.

All this talk of the Wizengamot, vassals, and pureblood supremacy painted a certain kind of picture. It would fit if Lords and Ladies were exempted from The Taboo.

Necromancy, Occlumency, random other words she didn't know— why were they taboo?

Mallory could guess that Necromancy involved dark and terrible things from the ghosts, and that it involved dead things from Kit and Felix. That wasn't much to go on. It might end up being vital to her continued existence, knowing what it meant. It annoyed her that everyone was tip-toeing around the conversation as though it were a slumbering dragon.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose, repressing an irritated sigh.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean much if we're taken out of the castle." Mallory said, "half of Slytherin's under memory charms. The Aurors said it wasn't even all of us at the Initiation, but
someone must've had something to do with it."

"The Aurors interrogated Slytherin House," Avery echoed what Vaisey said before, "and we all have secrets we don't want anyone to find out."

Especially since the Aurors weren't being too careful with their records. Mallory could see that, but dismissing every mind-wiped Slytherin as unrelated secret-keeping would also be stupid.

"But I don't understand why you were afraid to tell us," said Avery, "none of this is overly dangerous, unless you mean mentioning certain arts."

Necromancy, she suspected he meant.

"The Undersecretary threatened—" Mallory cut herself off. She had to word this right, "It's about what I said earlier about Azkaban. The Undersecretary was really angry that they used truth serum before she got there. When she insisted on using more, Snape wouldn't let her. That only made her angrier, and she started threatening to throw people in Azkaban."

Avery didn't look surprised, "sure, but did you hear who she wanted to interrogate?"

Avery didn't look at all surprised. The implication there was more alarming than anything Mallory heard so far. In the Wizarding World, if the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic wanted you imprisoned, you'd be imprisoned.

Fuck Wizarding Britain. Seriously.

"Fred and George Weasley," Mallory said, "and Farley."

She already mentioned those names, but she wasn't about to mention herself.

Mallory was worried in a general sort of way that if people found out Umbridge suspected Mallory of killing Rowle, other people might start to believe it, too. It wouldn't matter that Mallory couldn't possibly have done it. It was the sort of juicy rumor that everyone couldn't help but repeat.

'Mad muggleborn kills pureblood Rowle in a fit of anger, tries to blame Lord Selwyn's son.'

She'd noticed the common thread connecting the insults directed at muggleborns, so far. Filthy, barbaric, mad, monsters, liars— it'd play into an existing narrative and it'd have more of her classmates attacking her, in revenge.

"I'm still not seeing it," said Avery.

Fuck. Alright, it was best to tell him anyway. Didn't want to break the vow more than she had to. Either that, or the vow was fucking with her judgement. Fuck. How could she tell?

Mallory bit her lip, "Lord and Lady Malfoy came and got Malfoy. They spoke to the Aurors a little while I was there. They sounded worried, but I don't want to— to guess wrongly about what they're thinking."

Tonks said it so much better, but Mallory couldn't remember how the older girl worded it.

She did need these three to understand that they were getting into something dangerous. Mallory couldn't tell them that the protections on the school were failing.

The Malfoys removing their son from Hogwarts would get their attention, though. If it was so dangerous that the so-called untouchable Lords and Ladies were afraid, then the rest of the school
was in danger, too.

"Malfoy's gone," Montague's eyes widened, "you met Lord and Lady Malfoy?"

"Sure," Mallory said, already regretting telling them, "and I don't remember exactly, but I think they said that Malfoy wouldn't be coming back to school unless the murderer is caught."

Avery scowled, "you tricked us."

"What?" Mallory drew back, surprised, "no I didn't. What d'you even mean?"

"We promised to give you information, equal to the value of your own. You knew all along you had something really valuable, and let us think you didn't." He sounded almost impressed.

"I didn't do it on purpose," said Mallory. She had been thinking in terms of her breaking the vow, not Avery. Granted, now that he spelled it out for her, she felt rather stupid. But maybe this worked in her favor? They'd both be breaking the vow. Avery might not be capable of providing something of equal value. Maybe it wouldn't count.

She hoped.

"You had to have known—" Avery cut himself off, then groaned into his palms. "You're such a little goblin, Hopkins."

"That's all I have," Mallory said, ignoring the barb, "besides guesses. Now how are we going to work out what's fair, trade-wise?"

Best to play stupid, here. She didn't want to accidentally talk herself into a corner.

"You idiot," Avery insulted her again. "I can't—  ugh, I guess I can—" Avery wiped his face, "fine. It's fine. I can think of something equal to that."

"Okay," Mallory eyed him like he was holding a live snake. She'd never really seen Avery lose his composure, and it was weird.

"Alright," Avery let out a sigh, "cast the wand-lighting charm so we can move forward."

After she'd made the vow, Avery had her cast a wand-lighting charm. If her spells were noticeably weaker now, they'd know she paid the cost for breaking her word.

Something told her if she tried the wand-lighting charm right now, it wouldn't work. It wasn't as though she had a choice in the matter, though.

"Lumos," Mallory intoned, jabbing her wand.

Nothing happened. Fuck.

"Lumos!" Mallory tried again, and again nothing happened.

Double fuck.

Finally, Mallory jabbed her wand and practically shouted lumos. At that, a weak light flickered dimly in the gloom.

Vaisey frowned, "that isn't nearly as bright as before." She sounded annoyed.
Mallory thought about pretending to cast the first wand-lighting charm and failing on purpose, earlier. Fake the test. But Avery pointed out that by some twisty-magic logic, faking the test would backfire badly.

He might be lying about that, but she had no way of telling. The textbook said nothing on the matter, one way or the other.

"You're right," Avery's looked pensive, "I suppose you must've left something out. But if you lied about the investigation, your spells wouldn't work at all, I think. In fact, I'd rather you not tell me more. If you have more secrets, I won't be able to fulfill my end of the vow without breaking other oaths."

"Okay," Mallory said, "how will we handle the fairness end?"

She could tell him and fuck him over. But no matter what Avery said, Mallory Hopkins wasn't stupid.

"By doing what I feel is fair," said Avery, "and if I know I'm cheating you, then I'll be breaking a vow, too."

He lit his wand, and it lit up in a bright, cheery lumos.

"Proof," he said.

"Okay," said Mallory, feeling thoroughly overwhelmed and off-footed, "tell me what you know."

Avery stood up, and walked to a cabinet on the other side of the room.

He withdrew from the top shelf a collection of warped and inexplicably stained tarot cards.

"I can tell you that Rowle's killer will strike again, but not much else. You knew more about the investigation than we did," Avery said, as he walked back to the table, "but I can do for you what I did for Harper, and let you know how to survive the attack."

Mallory froze. What.

"That's not real," said Mallory, eying the tarot cards in his hand, "it's cold reading and luck."

He said before he had proof that the Carver would attack again. She'd been thinking along the lines of an overheard conversation, an angle she could work.

Instead, he was presenting her with a fucking tarot card reading.

She'd spent some of her power to have him read her future in tarot cards? Bullshit. She'd thought he had something real, something worth weakening herself over.

Shuffling a deck and taking a few guesses was bullshit.

"Maybe for muggles," said Avery, "but for wizards," he slapped the cards down on the table, "they can tell the future."

Mallory shut her eyes for a second, swallowing down her disbelief.

Could she give him the benefit of the doubt? She had to wonder if she'd be considering this at all without the vow. He said it messed with her perceptions of him, made her trust him more.
Granted, that was a double-edged sword. She could trust him, to an extent, because he promised to give her information of equal value to her own. He had to be honest unless he wanted to lose his sway over magic.

And Avery even used spells to tie his shoelaces. Magic was his weapon of choice. Breaking the vow would hurt him far more than it hurt her.

Which meant he might not be trying to screw her over, here.

Alright. But there was another issue. She was pretty certain that predicting what people would do in the future was impossible. It was something her mum said.

"But mum said…" Mallory struggled to remember the term, "don't we have free will?" she asked.

"Muggles know about free will?" asked Avery, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, and loads of other stuff," Mallory responded, rolling her eyes. She was getting tired of everyone shitting on her muggle background.

"The results of a tarot card reading might change from reading to reading, depending on how likely the outcome is— imagine tree branches, where some are thicker than others," Avery said, "that's why I want to do more than one reading."

Oh. And that's how he'd be able to figure out which series of actions would lead to her living through this. They could keep going through the branches of probability until they found the one where Mallory survived.

Holy fuck. That was actually really useful.

"Okay," Mallory said, tempering her excitement, "two questions: first, why aren't the Aurors using this, if it's so amazing? And is this what you were doing for Harper?"

"You interrupted before I could finish with Harper. Once you left, an Auror stopped by and told us all to leave," Avery sounded very cross, "said he needed the time to heal."

The frustration on his face bled into his posture. Shoulders raised, fingers clenched, "and now he's in their office and we can't do anymore readings."

Oh. Huh. Rather lucky for her, then. If Harper got his readings done, she doubt he'd tell her how to survive. And then Avery wouldn't have had any incentive to seek out Mallory.

"But the Aurors think it isn't worth doing?" she pried. That didn't make any sense at all.

"The Aurors would employ a cartomancer if they could," Avery said this with some bite, "and I suspect the case would already be solved, if they did."

"Why don't they, then?" Mallory asked, still confused.

"They're expensive, extremely expensive. It's a useful gift, and families tend to keep their cartomancers to themselves. There are very few willing to lend their talents to the Ministry."

"Why not train their own?" Mallory asked.

If cartomancers were so good, you'd think the Auror Department would invest in it. For every situation, they'd always know the best course of action. There was no way Auror Moody and his ilk didn't see the potential, there.
"Because— Hopkins, you realize there are maybe a dozen people in Wizarding Britain trained to do this, right?" Avery rolled his eyes, "and it's difficult. I've been getting lessons since I was six, and I still don't always know how to translate what I'm seeing. The magic is symbolic, beyond difficult to master. Even if you can sense it, you need a good teacher."

"I still don't get it," Mallory said, "why haven't the Aurors asked you, then?"

"Before I came to Hogwarts, my family made me swear an Unbreakable Vow that I'd only use my skills to further the family interests," said Avery. He said this matter-of-factly, as though there was nothing strange or upsetting about swearing such a vow.

"And your family told everyone this," Mallory guessed, "so kidnapping you to force you to work for them wouldn't be possible."

"Yes," confirmed Avery.

Mallory nodded, anxiously rubbing her sweating palms against her trousers. She was already regretting bringing these three on board. She'd imagined their knowledge would be different. Overheard conversations, a lead on the Carver's identity.

"Alright," Mallory said, tapping her fingers on the desk. Nervous habit. "so, you can use cartomancy on Harper and me, but not the Aurors, because that benefits your family, somehow. You have to admit that sounds pretty sketchy."

She wanted her cards read, but she needed to know if there was a catch.

"Helping Rowle's killer wouldn't benefit my family," said Avery, addressing her main concern, "I swear on the oath I made to you."

Mallory spoke, "some oaths weigh more than others. You said that yourself."

"They do, but I'd still suffer a loss." He raised his wand, "lumos."

It was just as bright as before.

Mallory bit her lip, "how does helping me help your family?" If it were about catching Rowle's murderer, he'd offer his services to the Aurors.

"It's unrelated to Rowle's murderer, or you," Avery said.

"This is about Harper? Rowle?" Mallory asked.

"It's family business," Avery evaded.

Huh. So, his family needed to catch the Carver? No. What would reading the tarot cards give him? Mallory's future? No, not specifically. He said it was unrelated to her. The Carver, Rowle's killer, or perhaps—

"This is about Harper," Mallory realized, "Something to do with him, or his family. You asked Harper to do the tarot card reading first. But..."

"Hopkins," Avery scowled, tone warning, "it's none of your concern."

Mallory nodded, "yeah, sorry."

The Avery family had no business with Mallory. They didn't know her to care about her. But it was
interesting. Rowle's killer, Harper, and the Averys were somehow interconnected. There was something to be gained or a debt to be paid.

"Hopkins, can we move past this?" Avery asked.

The Avery family needed information, and they couldn't go through the Auror Department to do it. It might have to do with Harper, but they weren't trying to help Rowle's killer. She got the sense that going to the Aurors might hurt the Avery family. Maybe it was because she had a strong suspicion Avery knew what necromancy was, or maybe it was something else. Mallory didn't know.

The whole thing was pretty sketchy, but she didn't think Avery personally wanted to screw her over. And his family likely didn't know she existed.

Him revealing that this was all about his family had her more at ease.

"Yeah, I can do that," Mallory nodded.

"Thank you," he said.

Avery picked up the deck of tarot cards and began shuffling them. If she understood this right, he was going to read her cards a number of times to determine the course of action that'd let her walk out of another encounter with Rowle's killer.

"Hold your hands out, palms up." Avery said, holding out the deck. He was sitting across from her, leaning forward on the table.

Mallory wiped her hands one last time on her pants, and held them out over the table.

He placed the deck in her palms.

"Now what?" Mallory asked.

"You hold a question in your mind, as though you're casting a spell with it," said Avery.

"Okay," Mallory said, sitting awkwardly with the tarot deck balanced in the palms of her hands.

Holding the question in her head wasn't too difficult. She did something similar whenever she hovered a pencil in South Brent, or tried lighting wood on fire by the river. It was a force of will.

At that, Avery held the tips of his fingers to the deck on her palms.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then she felt it.

It started as pins and needles up her arms. She sucked in a breath, surprised, and smelled clay, a clinging scent that could only be cigarette smoke, and pine.

Distantly, as though in a trance, Mallory felt the cards in her hand rapidly shuffling, moving of their own volition.

And then it was over.

A part of her wondered if she just imagined the whole thing. She only felt it for a moment.
Avery reached over, and drew the top three cards, "the Devil. A force of darkness comes for you, meaning you harm."


"Yes," said Avery, "next is Eight of Coins. You get a gift? A tool to fight with, from..." he drew the third card, "The Hierophant, a wise man with a connection to the divine."

"The divine?" Mallory asked.

"Powerful magic," replied Avery, "Coins generally refer to money or power. In this case, powerful magic is the most likely interpretation. The Hierophant refers to an individual with a connection to the gods. Again, powerful magic."

Vaisey had taken out a piece of parchment, and was now taking notes with a feathery quill.

Mallory raised her brows, "gods? And it couldn't be more specific about the tool of power?" None of that was very specific.

"It's symbolic," said Avery, sounding a bit frustrated, "I'm not a master at this, my Great-Aunt is. It'd be easier if we had a circle, or if you'd met the killer before." He looked up, noticing Mallory's confusion, "the closer you are to what you're sensing, the clearer it is."

"Me?" Mallory asked.

"It's your future," Avery replied. "And unless you've seen a wax man and a tower of silver fire, I'm assuming they're symbols for The Hierophant and the gift."

"No, no one and nothing like that."

"Try again?" asked Avery.

"Sure," Mallory said.

Avery shuffled the deck, and placed it back on her palm.

"Do you have the question in-mind?" he asked, fingers hovering above the deck.

"Yeah," Mallory nodded.

This time, the sensations came in faster.

Avery touched the deck of cards, and she felt it.

She could smell clay, the grimy scent of cigarette smoke and pine wood. Her palms and arms tingled, almost burning like she was touching something too hot, and didn't have the sense to let go.

_Iron tang of blood in her mouth._

Mallory sucked in a breath, almost jolting out of her seat.

"You felt something that time?" asked Avery, as he picked the three cards from the top of the deck. She hadn't even felt them shuffle this time.

"Yeah," Mallory said. She felt a little ill. When Avery went to pick out the cards, she'd looked
down at her hands expecting them to be on fire.

Disconcerting wasn't even the word for it.

Avery gave her an odd look, "can you tell me what you sensed?"

"Er— blood in my mouth? My hands were on fire. I dunno. My feet were freezing, though."

"That's unusual," said Avery, staring at her like she was a bug under a microscope, "muggleborns aren't usually sensitive to this kind of magic."

Mallory crinkled her nose, "I'm not making it up."

"I don't think you are," Avery said, "and this is actually helpful. It's not as good as having a circle of wizards sensitive to this kind of magic, but it's better than only me."

"Sure," said Mallory, uncomprehending.

The results were the same as the last time. Devil, Eight of Coins, and The Hierophant.

The cards went back in the deck, and Avery held the tips of his fingers to the deck.

It was exactly like last time, except it wasn't.

She could smell the clay, the cigarette smoke, pine. Burning flesh.

*Heart in her throat, she snatches up the blade. Only it's a blade of Silver Fire and it burns, burns, burns—*

Mallory jolted, hands jerking back reflexively. The deck scattered across the table.

"Are you an idiot, Hopkins?" asked Montague, "it won't work if you jerk around like a mermaid on land."

"I just—" she was checking her hands. She couldn't help it. They felt like they'd been burning up. Her heart was thudding in her chest, mouth dry. For a second she thought—

"Did you get the cards before she had her fit?" asked Vaisey.

Avery held them up, "The Devil, Nine of Wands, and The Hierophant. Same as last time, except for the Wands. A wand is— well, a tool. Three cast three times, a powerful tool. It can also symbolize connection. A powerful connection to, I'd guess, whatever the Hierophant plans to give you."

"That's comforting," Mallory replied, sarcastic.

"Do you want to go again?" asked Avery, "though wait— if you're sensing things, you should tell me what you sense. We can work out what they mean, and this way we'll have a clearer picture."

He sounded excited. It was almost funny.
The Masters of Misdirection, Part 6

A man formed out of wax loomed before her. She lit the wick and he burned with a Silver Flame. Dark weight pushing her down. Pressure, like her ears were about to pop. Lipstick smeared across a girl's cheek. The taste of blood in her mouth. And now in her hands she wielded a blade of Silver Fire, and burned it burned it burned—

Mallory jerked back, sharply inhaling.

Montague said nothing. He'd stopped commenting on her jerking limbs four readings ago. Avery simply picked up the cards, frowning at them.

It was like dunking her head into a dream where everything made sense while she was there. Except the moment she emerged from the trance, all clarity fled. Worse, the emotions stayed.

Her future-self's terror clung to her like thick tar. Couldn't shake it off.

Every reading it got a little worse, took her a little longer to put her head back together after the visions scrambled it. Avery said she was getting the backlash from the visions because she'd broken the vow. Magic was punishing her for her transgression, making her vulnerable to what she was sensing.

"What did you feel?" Avery asked, after waiting a moment for her to recover.

"Same as before," Mallory croaked, "the Silver Flame and… wait, lipstick?"

"What did you hear?" asked Vaisey, to Avery. He mostly heard things. Sounds, music, and sometimes tastes.

"A deep voice, a man's voice, shouting an oath," Avery said, "and the snk-snk-snk noise of bone sliding over wood. It's not the wizard, it's the monster, again."

Vaisey scowled at her page of parchment, now covered in scrawling notes. She'd copied down everything Mallory and Avery told her, as well as Avery's interpretations of the visions.

For all that Mallory could see things, Avery could see more. He was also the only one out of all of them that could interpret the visions.

He'd determined that the monster that had attacked Harper, Rowle, and Mallory in the woods was indeed a monster. It was being controlled by a wizard. The wizard in question was breaking an oath, or otherwise a betrayer.

Beyond that, they had nothing on the puppet master behind the murders. Whoever they were, they knew about divination and occluded themselves. According to Avery, that wasn't entirely
uncommon. But for the Slytherins, it meant their investigation into the killer's identity was hampered.

What's worse was that they were almost certain the monster would attack, again. Avery said that whatever power (necromancy, no doubt) the wizard used to control the monster was failing. The beast was reversing the connection, and might be controlling the wizard.

And fuck, didn't that validate all her worst nightmares.

The Carver was coming for her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Seriously, fuck this shit. Fuck this touchy-feely tarot bullshit. She never wanted this. She joined up thinking she'd be slinging fireballs and levitating trucks, not getting bloody visions.

And the only way she might survive, was if she took up a blade of Silver Fire and immolated herself with it.

Great.

It wasn't even a guarantee that'd save her, because they only got the sense that Mallory could fight against the beast if she had it. The visions said nothing about her winning. Avery wasn't skilled enough yet to see past the fight.

"You didn't die, this time," said Avery. She thought he was trying to be encouraging.

That happened thrice. Three times she felt herself die of what she thought was hypothermia. She'd feel her breath going ragged, clothes weighed down by mud and grit. Her legs would go so numb she couldn't run anymore, and then— then she got the sensation of time passing, of freezing limbs and a final burst of heat, blood rushing to her extremities in one final act of defiance.

In those visions, there was no Silver Flame.

Avery said the difficulty was in telling the difference between the symbolic and the literal. Depending on how entangled she was with the object, meaning could be abstract. In other words, the Hierophant who'd give Mallory her Silver Fire wouldn't literally be made of wax.

Tallow was made from animal fat. It could mean the man had a strong connection to the natural world. Hunting, killing, using an animal's fur and fat. A wax man could also mean an effigy, false life. Or it might refer to wax's ability to burn. A powerful man who burns out too fast?

He smelled like clay, pine, and cigarette smoke. Avery broke that down into two dozen possible meanings, and gave Mallory a splitting headache in the process. She was beginning to understand why he'd need decades of training to be a real cartomancer.

Clay, of new beginnings. A man changing his identity. Pine, of winter and longevity. Also a kind of wand-wood, so she might be looking for a man with a pine-wood wand.

How she was supposed to recognize a pine-wood wand, she didn't know.

Avery had no idea what a cigarette was, and Mallory guessed that The Hierophant had cancer. Avery didn't know what that was, either.

Unfortunately, it seemed likely that the blade of Silver Fire was really a blade of Silver Fire. Avery said it presented itself a lot like a Magical Artifact. And Magical Artifacts held significance. It'd look like itself, even in a vision.
In other words, she was going to have to literally take up a blade that burned her as she used it.

Fuck cartomancy.

"Did you see Rowle's killer?" asked Vaisey, "what about the puppet-master?"

"I didn't," Mallory responded, somewhat belatedly. Speaking felt like moving through molasses. She was still putting herself back together.

Head scrambled.

Each time they did a reading, the backlash from the visions got worse.

Avery frowned, "are you sure you want to go, again?"

"Yeah," Mallory said, before she could talk herself out of it. She needed to know more about the wizard behind it. She needed to figure out who her helper was supposed to be, since apparently he was hidden, too.

He wasn't nearly as well hidden as the puppet master, but it was still frustrating when finding him was life-or-death for her.

"Are you sure?" asked Avery, repeating himself.

"She said she's fine," said Vaisey. Heartless bint.

"I'm fine," Mallory echoed.

She stretched out the palms of her hands, trying to psych herself up to feeling some version of her future self fighting for her life. Again.

Avery dropped the deck into her palms, and placed the tips of his fingers.

Only this time, she didn't manage to gather the necessary focus to keep the question in her mind. This time, she saw something entirely different.

It smelled like home. Grits sizzling on the pan, mum and dad talking in low voices over breakfast.

Something was wrong.

Feeling of rustling through a sock drawer, the sound of fingertips hitting and scraping along wood. A billfold and a necklace.

Glass pressing against her cheek while the low rattle of the train shook her. Anticipation.

She stood alone on a sunny field, the smell of hollyhocks tickling her nose.

Something was wrong.

Her chest felt like someone'd scooped out her heart while compressing her ribs. Backs of her eyes burned and she wished she could go back— anything anything just make it not happen—

Mallory scrambled back in her seat, eyes wide and unseeing.
What was that— no. No. No.

Wanted to cry. Wanted to vomit, her stomach churning. Couldn't let herself. Pressure on her chest weighing her down, but crying wouldn't make it better because she'd been there. She'd cried in the vision and there was no relief.

"What—" Mallory's voice sounded off, strange like it was coming from the wrong end of a telescope. Mixing metaphors. Couldn't think.

Montague stood up. His tone and body language bled concern. Couldn't hear what he was saying. Wrong end of the telescope.

"—backfire—"

Gone. Couldn't wrap her head around the idea. Didn't want to think about it, but those feelings etched themselves into her mind. Couldn't forget them if she tried.

"What did—" tried speaking again. Too detached, couldn't get the words past the lump in her throat. Felt like a great beast took a claw to her chest and ripped her open.

Mallory sat on the floor, hugging her arms to her body. She'd knocked herself out of the chair in her haste to get back. Right. She was in Hogwarts. Not in the Forest. Not at home.

Right. Focus.

Couldn't speak because she was crying. Hadn't realized that. Gasping, heaving sobs shook her frame. Voice sounded funny because she was crying.

She didn't— it wasn't—

"Hopkins!" said Avery, sounding alarmed. He was trying to get her attention.

Mallory kept crying. She couldn't stop crying. She didn't know why she was crying.

"What's wrong with her?" hissed Vaisey.

Okay. Okay, just try. Exhale. She let her breath out, hands shaking. Rest of her was shaking, too.

She could see in her mind's eye, mum and dad standing in the kitchen. Something was wrong. And then that feeling. Mallory drew in a deep, shuddering breath. This wasn't like The Forest. She'd seen Rowle die, sure. It was fucking awful. But this?

This? What would she do without her parents? Without Danny? She'd been out on the field alone. Knew what that meant. Didn't need five years of reading cards to know what that meant.

"What did I see?" Mallory finally croaked, voice breaking on the last word. She couldn't see the Slytherins, either. Eyes had water in them.

Fuck.

"Hey, Hopkins, can you listen?" Montague's voice, thick with some kind of sympathy, "you're in Hogwarts. It hasn't happened yet, whatever it was. It might not happen at all."

Mallory wiped her face, hands shaking. Blinked a couple times, clearing the grit out of the corners of her eyes.
"What did I see?" her voice was hoarse. She couldn't stop shaking. "I don't know what I saw."

Gone.

Didn't want to admit it out loud. Wanted Avery to tell her she was wrong, that she saw something else. Just backlash, just her own worst nightmares made flesh.

Avery took a few steps back from where he'd been sitting, grabbing the cards off the table.

"Did you see the murderer?" asked Vaisey, "do you know who he is?"

"Merlin, Vaisey," spoke Montague, "give it a rest, will you?"

"Page of Cups," Avery spoke over Vaisey's sharp reply, "there's an important message coming from a wizard—muggle you care about. Three of Swords Reversed, but something gets lost in translation. You're miscommunicating. The Hanged Man. I think—I think your family is coming with a message. Except you've miscommunicated, and they're walking into a trap."

Fuck Avery. It was exactly as she feared.

"Mum and dad," Mallory sniffed, wiping her nose on the back of her hand, "they—" she cut herself off.

She told her mum, dad, and Danny about the Carver. They knew she was in danger. And her family, they loved her more than anything. If they didn't hear back from her, if they tried calling the Ministry and got told to fuck off, they'd come to Hogwarts.

Of course they would. They loved her.

"Miscommunication?" Mallory asked, "how? What do I do?"

"I don't know," said Avery, as though he were offended she was even asking him.

"I felt—I never want to feel like that. I felt—" she choked. She didn't have words for it. She felt like a walking wound, like something had gouged out her soul.

"It might not happen," Avery reminded her, "they're probabilistic. It might be a one-in-twenty chance that comes to pass."

Mallory shook her head, "it was my family. They know about the Carver. They—I can't believe I was so stupid I didn't think— they're coming here. To Hogwarts."

"Muggles?" Avery raised his brow, "they won't make it in. There are muggle-repelling charms surrounding the castle. They'll turn around thinking they left the stove on."

"No," Mallory said, "you don't get it. They wouldn't stop. They won't stop. They'll keep—they think I'm in danger and they'll never stop."

Mum and dad were both clever and tenacious. Danny might break their promise and tell Mallory's parents he knew about magic. And if the three of them were working together, they'd no doubt arrive in Dufftown ready to take on the muggle-repelling charms. If she wasn't mistaken, they had amulets given to them by Professor McGonagall to help them navigate Diagon Alley.

Feeling of rustling through a sock drawer, the sound of fingertips hitting and scraping along wood. A billfold and a necklace.
Not a necklace, but an amulet.

They weren't the sort of people to sit back and shrug helplessly when Mallory needed them. Mum, dad, and Danny would take every weapon available to them, and burn Hogwarts to the ground if they had to.

But the Carver was here. Mum and dad were no more capable than Mallory, at fighting monsters. They'd _die._

"You _are_ in danger," said Montague, looking rather put off by Mallory's fit.

"I need—" Mallory broke off, pulling herself to her feet and wiping her face again, "I need one of you to send off a letter. No, two letters. I need to tell them not to come. And then, I need to read the cards—"

_The vision wasn't even slightly symbolic. Because they were her family. Entanglement. She saw them clear as day._

"No," said Avery, "I'm not reading the cards, again. The backfire is worse than I thought. If you keep doing this today, you'll get really sick."

"It's my parents!" Mallory said. _It's Danny._

"I won't do it," said Avery, "and no one else would, either."

"Why can't you send off the letters yourself?" asked Vaisey, "we're not—"

"I can't leave the dorms," Mallory said. "I'm not allowed, not without a prefect or an Auror."

"Alright," said Montague, "I can send them."

Vaisey and Avery both looked shocked.

"You took Harper to safety," said Montague, "consider us even."

"Thanks," Mallory nodded, then turned to Avery, "what did you hear?"

"A train. Mournful music. They must take a train north, get here, and something unfortunate happens."

Rising panic.

Mallory wiped her eyes again, "I've got a pencil and paper in my bag. Give me— I don't know."

"Hopkins?" asked Avery, "I still have to give you information. Sit. Calm down. Remember, it was miscommunication issues that causes whatever happens. Think through what you want to say."

"Right," Mallory squeezed her eyes shut. _Right._

It was some time later, after Mallory managed to calm down, that they approached the second part of their bargain.

"This is harder than I thought," mused Avery, after he failed to think of anything.

Apparently, it's very difficult to think of the unwritten rules of magic. Information so obvious no
wizard would think to say was hard to call to mind, by definition.

Now, Vaisey and Montague were trying to prompt him with ideas.

"She kept gesturing with her wand before," suggested Montague, "that's really rude."

He kept glancing over at Mallory, brow furrowed like he was afraid she'd start crying again. Every time he did, it reminded her of why she wanted to cry, and she had to blink her eyes fiercely until the sensation went away.

Avery nodded, "true, but that isn't enough to fulfill the oath."

"Oh, I have an idea," said Vaisey, "one thing muggleborns do that's annoying is how they all try and make friends with us. But we have friends already, I've known every first year since I—"

"No," interrupted Avery, "that's not in the spirit of the vow. Though pointing out that the Wizarding community is very small and that everyone knows each other would count toward it."

Mallory Hopkins felt hollowed out.

She hunkered down in her seat, tucking her hands under her armpits like a particularly pathetic hug. She knew she needed to get into gear, figure out what to write to her family. She couldn't let them die, not when she could stop it.

"Drat," said Vaisey, "what about Werewolf cubs? I read there aren't any, but most witches think werewolves are breeding them."

"I don't think so," said Montague, "I heard there really are werewolf cubs."

"Either way, that doesn't fulfill the vow," said Avery.

There was a moment of silence while Avery thought, a little crease appearing between his brows. Then his eyes drifted over to his Magical Theory textbook, discarded on the table. His eyes lit up.

"Hopkins," Avery said, "you said earlier you thought witches and wizards drew power from themselves, right?"

"Yeah," Mallory shrugged. She didn't really care, but she also wasn't willing to let her loss of magic be a waste.

"You don't know anything about magic. Not even the kind of thing we'd learn before we're six," Avery stated, as though realizing this for the first time.

"Er—" Mallory stuttered, "no?"

Well, she knew some things. She knew there were spells, that magic could be broken up into classes that professors taught. She also knew that focus and intent were a big part of a spell's success. Beyond that, she didn't know much.

Was there something worth Lord and Lady Malfoy in a child's education about magic? Was it something she could use to defend her family?

"Alright," spoke Avery, gaining confidence, "you're not casting from your own life force. I mean, you could, but you'd die. When you cast a spell, you're actually drawing power from the world around you. Think of it like asking magic to carry out your will."
"Think of it like asking… because magic can refuse?" Mallory guessed.

"Yes," replied Avery. "My tutor says magic is a component of the world, and is better described as many small magics, existing in and around us, picking up concepts and becoming of those concepts. Those magics respond to a caster's will, drawing together and acting on their behalf."

"Okay," Mallory said, wondering if that was all or if he was going to continue. Magical Theory was interesting, sure, but she wasn't sure how she could use that to save her family.

"Magic doesn't just absorb natural concepts, but human concepts as well. Words, constructs, ideas, they all have magical impact. The very idea of Slytherin House carries weight. As Slytherins, we all gain strength through the embodiment of tradition, resourcefulness, cunning, and ambition."

Huh. Okay. So her spells got a Dungeons-and-Dragons style passive buff if she acted more Slytherin-like? Great. She could make bigger fireballs. That would help her defend her family against whatever trap awaited them.

"How much strength?" Mallory asked, regardless. "And what counts towards cunning and ambition?" Maybe she could do some minor cunning things. Re-gain the power she lost by breaking the vow. Then Avery might let her read the cards again, so she could get a better sense of what was threatening her family.

The magic itself was next to useless. She only knew the wand-lighting and fire-making charms. She hardly even counted *reparo*, since every time she cast it the object broke worse. But getting the chance to read the cards again was more than useful.

"It's complicated," Avery grimaced. "if Slytherins respect you, magic in service to cunning flows to you more readily. Likewise, the older you get the more respected you are, therefore the more magic responds to your command. Magical society as a whole believes that elders are wiser and deserve respect. So as you age, you gain power. Likewise, the more cunning you are, the more Slytherins believe you represent their House."

Mallory thought for a moment before responding, "you're saying that if the rest of Slytherin House thinks I've done something cunning or ambitious, then I'll become more powerful. Except… no. Wait. Is *that* why everyone is so afraid of Lords and Ladies? Everyone's afraid so the Lords get more power, and because they get more power they're more scary?"

"Yes," said Avery, "pretty much."

"Why aren't they gods by now?" Mallory asked, feeling prickles of alarm creeping up her arms. They should be gods. She could picture it in her head as a sort of reinforcing spiral, shooting ever-upward.

Avery startled for a moment, as though he'd never had to consider that before.

Vaisey, meanwhile, scooted her seat further away from Avery.

"We're not gods," Avery gave Vaisey a sour look, "magic responds to belief. For thousands of years, many wizards haven't expected Lords and Ladies to have that kind of power. Tradition carries weight."

"I don't get it," said Mallory, feeling uncomfortable and overwhelmed. This happened far too often. She was getting tired of being blindsided by some new angle she hadn't factored into the equation. What was she supposed to *do* with this?
"I'll explain it to you like my tutor did," said Avery, "imagine a piece of forest that becomes more path-like the more wizards use it like a road."

He continued, "a few ancient wizards, before there was apparition, wore a path through the woods. The more they used that path, the wider the path grew. No trees would grow there, because horsehooves would keep them from rooting themselves. And as the path became easier to tread, more wizards would use it. In turn, the path would become ever-easier to navigate."

"For as many years as there have been witches and wizards, paths have been worn into magic like that path through the forest. Changing its direction is hard, because all magic prefers to use the wide well-lit paths maintained for millennia."

"Everyone expects the Lords and Ladies to have a certain sway over magic. No more, no less. Any deviance from that specific sway is like stepping off of the path. You can do it, but it's a harder road. Likewise, when you make an oath, you're following in traditions set down long ago, traditions maintained for millennia. And yes, they can change, but only a little at a time. Lords have power because the concept of Lords have been around for a very long time. Wizarding politicians gain power, but not as much as the Lords, as they're fairly new, magically speaking."

"The inverse is also true," continued Avery. "If a group of wizards has traditionally been considered weak by magical society, they lose their sway over magic. Likewise, if you break with tradition and betray your bonds, magic won't respond to you as—"

"Wait," Mallory interrupted, "so you're saying because everyone going back to Merlin thinks muggleborns are lowly and weak, we're actually weaker?"

"Yes," said Avery, "not by a lot, but yes."

"Why?" asked Mallory, horrified. "Why would wizards decide to make one group weaker?"

If her muggleborn weakness contributed to her family's death, she'd grow up and kill these backwards fuckers.

"I..." Avery trailed off, "there's only so much magic to go around. I don't..." He cleared his throat, "there are other aspects to magic. Practice, knowledge, your force of will... it all plays a role. You're intuitive enough that you can sense magic... so you might end up stronger than other muggleborns and even some half bloods."

She could tell this was the first time he'd ever really thought about it. He felt bad because he was now imagining what it'd be like to be told that no matter what he did, he'd always be weak.

Fuck him. Fuck him and his pity.

"That doesn't make it better," hissed Mallory. Her fists were clenched hard, short nails digging into her palms.

She understood. There was only so much magic in the world, so it made sense for those who had it to hoard it. They'd harp for centuries on how weak muggleborns were, until they actually became weaker. As a result, those without muggle blood became stronger.

And there were far more purebloods than muggleborns in Great Britain. The combined weight of the wizard-born would've out-competed the muggleborns every year.

"Confidence matters, too," spoke Vaisey, who looked rather cross. Mallory recalled that she was a half blood. She'd know about getting around tradition.
"Thanks," Mallory spat through clenched teeth. Couldn't bring herself to even think about sounding sincere.

"If you believe in yourself," continued Vaisey, "if you believe you deserve the magic to work for you, your spells will be stronger. It's not all tradition. And if you work hard and gain a position of authority, you'll get even more powerful."

"Right," Mallory shook her head, letting out a huff of air. How was she supposed to be a superhero if she was doomed to be weak? How was she supposed to keep her family safe?

Fuck, she couldn't even keep herself safe. She was going to have to find some shortcut, some new angle to get the Silver Fire and protect her family.

If it came down to it, she'd put her family first.

"She's right," said Avery, "there are a number of factors that go into a spell's success. But that isn't why I've explained this. I'm trying to explain why Slytherin House finds you so repulsive."

Mallory scoffed, "really? You want to say that to me, right now?"

Right now, while my parents and Danny are in danger? You want to talk about bigotry?

"I'm saying that Slytherin House is more fragile than you think," said Avery. "If we're going back to the path through the forest analogy, you're a big rock tossed in the middle of the road. The Sorting Hat, in defiance of a thousand years worth of tradition, placed a muggleborn within Slytherin. It's happened before, and each time Slytherin House magic has gotten weaker as a result."

Oh. Not bigotry. What was he getting at?

"The magic can't flow down the path as easily," Mallory nodded, then frowned, "but didn't you say there was incremental change?"

If muggleborns occasionally ended up in Slytherin, she'd expect the Slytherin identity would adapt over time to include muggleborns.

"Yes, but Slytherin's been changing in the opposite direction over the last fifty or so years," answered Avery, "the Heir of Slytherin took up the pureblood cause."

In other words, instead of becoming more inclusive, the House turned even more hostile.

"Huh," Mallory frowned, "but you said there were muggleborns before me?"

"Yes," said Avery, "but the more we acknowledge them, the greater their impact." He almost grimaced.

"What did they do?" Mallory asked, "how did they survive Slytherin?"

"You'd have to look them up in the library," Avery said, looking uncomfortable.

Right. The more they acknowledged them, the greater their impact. Huh. Now, that gave her an idea.

"Okay," Mallory said, changing the topic, "but why make it about purebloods versus muggleborns, or even bravery versus cunning, at all? Why have Houses? You said there's only so much magic, so why not make it——"
They could've emphasized any traits they wanted. No doubt, some ideas were easier to identify with than others, but wizards were jumping through additional hoops, here. It made sense to pick the easiest and broadest categories, infusing them with magical power.

"You gain power through definition," interrupted Avery, "if we made the category of powerful wizards include everyone, then no one would gain power. The strength of magic is defined by how much it excludes."

Among other things. Apparently, tradition, force of will, practice, knowledge, and oaths all carried weight, too.

"So if I made a bunch of oaths, I'd gain power? What's to stop me from swearing a bunch of things, just to gain power by keeping oaths?" Mallory asked. She was getting over her rage and starting to think. How could she use this?

"But then you'd have to keep those oaths," replied Avery. "Oaths are only powerful if there are others there to hear them. Declare your intent with your wand in your hand, for all to hear. Only, then those others know exactly how to defeat you. They'd force you to break your oaths."

"I get it," Mallory scowled, but didn't give up her mental search. There had to be some way to abuse that.

Wizards couldn't collectively believe themselves into gods, because of the weight of millions of wizards in the past who didn't. If one person wanted to declare themselves a god, they'd have to get every other wizard to give up their power in belief that wannabe-god deserved it more.

"What if," said Mallory, "I convinced a whole boatload of muggles I'm a god?"

"You'd break the Statute of Secrecy," said Avery, sounding irked, "and muggles don't count, magically speaking. You won't gain any sway over magic, using muggles."

Damn.

"What about if I forced an upper-year Slytherin to do Un-Slytherin things?" Mallory asked. "You said older people carry more magical weight."

She was running these ideas by him mostly because they were the obvious plans anyone would try. Mallory needed a better idea of how this whole thing worked, where the weak points were. He'd already given her one good idea: threaten to constantly bring up all the muggleborns before her, if the older Slytherins didn't give into her demands.

And that was why she was asking what would happen if she tried blackmailing older Slytherins.

Avery rolled his eyes, "everyone has thought of that. The older students take that sort of thing seriously, and would punish you for it."

"Worse than fifty detentions and the Slytherin Initiation ritual?" Mallory asked.

"Much worse," said Avery.

"Got it," nodded Mallory. Yikes. Alright, she'd leave that as a last resort.

Avery sighed, "I think you're missing the point, Hopkins."

"What?" Mallory asked.
"A muggleborn in Slytherin takes power away from the very idea of Slytherin House. Since everyone believes you're presence makes Slytherin weaker, you make Slytherin weaker."

"Headmaster Dumbledore already said I can't switch Houses. I don't know what to tell you."

She really didn't care about his House, outside of how she could use it. Right now, she needed to be writing that letter and coming up with plans. Get her friends on-board, rally the troops, do something.

There wasn't any way to use this information in the short term, to fix her problems.

"No one's ever switched Houses, either. That'd weaken the entire concept of sorting students which might weaken all the Houses."

"Okay," Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose, "what are you getting at?"

"Leave Hogwarts," said Avery, "that'd be the easiest way to restore Slytherin House. If you can't do that, then be Slytherin enough in every other way that it balances out the muggleborn taint."

Right. Of course. This was another convoluted scheme to get her to leave Slytherin House. Best part was, because of the vow, she knew he wasn't lying.

"I tried leaving. It didn't work," Mallory spoke, wishing she could spit in his face.

"Then triumph over a more powerful Slytherin in a contest of cunning, or make a gesture of respect toward tradition. I'd speak to Farley. She'd know more about that kind of thing."

Mallory groaned, "I never agreed to this."

"You agreed to be sorted," replied Avery, "That's almost the same thing. Everyone's going to hate you unless they think you're Slytherin enough that your blood isn't taking the strength out of our house."

Then, it clicked.

"Wait, are you saying someone might've tried to murder me because of this?" Mallory's eyes widened.

"Maybe, but they'd hardly undo the damage," said Avery, "you'd die a member of Slytherin House. The Hat chose you, so the damage is already done. If the Head of House Slytherin expels you, that might restore our power. It'd be better if Headmaster Dumbledore did, but we already know he won't."

But the murdering was sending his monster after her, again. If Harper were the target, he'd be taken instead of Mallory. For whatever reason, someone wanted her dead.

The question was, why were the Aurors ignoring this giant motive?

"The Headmaster would like it if House Slytherin grew weaker," griped Montague.

"Why?" Mallory asked.

"Everyone knows most of the Dark Lord's followers came from Slytherin. Not only that, but the Dark Lord was the Heir of Slytherin. Weakening Slytherin weakened the Dark Lord, and his followers. Now Dumbledore is saying the Dark Lord's risen from the dead, so he has reason to weaken Slytherin, again," spoke Avery.
That was why they wouldn't let her leave? Or maybe it was all about protection, keeping her safe from the Dark Lord's followers. Fuck. She didn't have the mental space for this problem right now. She needed to save her family.

"Maybe he meddled with The Hat," wondered Vaisey, "Hopkins might not be a real Slytherin, at all."

"I don't think so," said Avery, speculatively looking at Mallory.

"Right," Mallory spoke, "is that it? Vow complete?"

"Yes," spoke Avery.

"Okay, then I have to go rescue my family."

Mallory Hopkins stood in front of Snape's desk, looking down at her feet.

Before dinner, she asked an Auror to take her to see Snape. Avery hadn't forbidden her from speaking to the adults. And from his expression, she began to wonder if he intended for her to go to the Aurors or Snape, all along. Reading the cards for Mallory benefited his family, but it also enabled him to help the authorities in a roundabout way.

Whatever his motives, she didn't care. There was something far more important on her mind.

She put aside her pride and grudges, when it came to her family. If it took begging or crying, she'd do it. If it took telling Snape she'd be a good little obedient witch, she'd grit her teeth and fucking do it.

This was her parents. Danny. Nothing trumped their safety.

"What is it?" Snape spoke, "not more juvenile tales of bullies, Miss Hopkins?"

Mallory shut her eyes, and swallowed. He was a piece of garbage, but she needed his help.

"Professor," Mallory spoke carefully, "remember when you pulled me from the phone booth?"

She didn't want to remind him of that. Granted, she'd only yelled those things because she knew hollering about unsafe touches got adults running.

"Yes," Snape glowered, "I do."

Mallory looked down at the man's desk, cringing. Fuck. She couldn't even look him in the eye.

"I called my parents and let them know what had happened. Avery and I, we read my cards. Cartomancy. I lea—"

"Master Avery permitted you to have your cards read?" Snape interrupted.

"Yes, and I learned my parents are in danger. They're coming to Hogwarts, and—"

"No, they've been obliviated of the event. Cease your prattle and tell me what you've learned of Rowle's murderer."

Mallory blinked in shock, "you obliviated my parents?"
What the fuck? They *fucked with her parents' heads*?

"Yes, to prevent such an event as muggles attempting to enter Hogwarts. Now, explain to me what you learned of Rowle's murderer."

It was only after she left Snape's office, that she realized the full implications of what he'd said.

Thinking through her splitting headache, she drew the conclusion she should've reached a half hour ago. Her parents weren't gone. It was never about her parents. But if Danny saw her parents acting like nothing was wrong after he knew she'd called them, he'd freak. He'd take the amulets she told him about and head to Scotland, himself.

It wasn't her parents who were in danger. It was Danny.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't really think I'd leave that thread dangling, did you?
The Masters of Misdirection, Part 7

September 5, 1992. 8:12 AM

She must've fallen asleep in her bed at some point, because the next thing she knew, she was being shaken awake.

"Fuck," Mallory croaked, "what's it?"

"Early," said Vaisey, making a face. "Come on, Hopkins. Professor Snape's outside and he wants to see you."

Mallory groaned, rubbing her eyes. Her head was pounding, thoughts slow to get moving. Splitting headache. Bad enough she was having trouble thinking in complete sentences. Fuck.

"He said he needed to see you now. Come on."

Great. Fuck. Snape was a pimple on the arse of her life. The last thing she wanted to do was see that sack of dried bogies first thing in the morning.

She stumbled to her feet, hissing in pain. Putting weight on her legs hurt her backside. Fuck, she must've bruised it when she fell out of the chair, yesterday. Her hand, too, was black-and-blue where she automatically braced herself. She hadn't expected that one to bruise. It barely hurt at all, before.

Now, she felt like the walking dead.

Stuffing her feet into her trainers without bothering to find socks, Mallory shuffled after Vaisey out the door.

"Why's he want to see me?" Mallory asked, yawning. She tried blinking the sleep out of her eyes, but it didn't help. Drained.

"I wouldn't know," Vaisey made another face.

It wasn't as bad as how she felt after The Forest, but she felt weakened in a way that was hard to put into words. Each step took extra effort, like slogging uphill on a windy day. Her arms and legs were heavy, dead weights dragging her down.

She caught her reflection in a mirror, and almost did a double-take. Her skin was chalky, dark bruises under her eyes like she hadn't slept for a week. Fuck, was this from the broken vow? But it was only supposed to cause her magic to weaken. This wasn't part of the deal.

Avery said the Oathbreaker's Curse would wear off, but fuck. If she'd known she'd be fighting some monster in a sword fight, she would've— no. No. Thanks to that broken vow, she learned about the danger to Danny. At the end of the day her family walked away from this, safe.

It was worth it.
They were walking into the Common Room, Vaisey leading the way past the upper years who'd turned to stare. Mallory almost cringed. It took longer than it should have for her to realize why they were looking. She stood out like a sore thumb. Witches didn't wear flannel jammies with pandas prints.

Mallory was attracting attention, now, and not just from incredulous sixth years. Avery and Montague glanced up from their spot on the steps of the Common Room.

The steps were the least favorable seat in Slytherin. Firsties weren't awarded armchairs in the Common Room, not unless they wanted to be hexed. Already, the chairs and couches were in use by upper years talking amongst each other or studying.

Firsties socialized in their dorms or on the steps.

"What are you wearing, Hopkins?" asked Avery.

"They're called clothes, arsehole," she was really too tired for this.

"Are you alright?" Montague asked. She knew exactly how bad she looked.

"Not good," Mallory rubbed her head, "something's wrong." Beyond the headache, she felt mentally sluggish, as though she were treading through molasses.

The symptoms were slow to appear. It started getting worse as the night wore on. Odd, given that Avery said the backfire during the tarot card reading was due to oathbreaking. She naively thought the cost would be immediate and obvious. He'd asked her to cast that proof-laden *lumos*, after all.

At this point, she was wondering if it was the oath or something more sinister.

"Don't make vows unless you intend to keep them," said Avery, then he paused, "though if it's very terrible, you might want to speak to the Nurse."

Mallory grimaced and looked back at Montague, "you sent the letter, yeah?"

"Right after dinner," replied Montague, nodding.

"Thanks," Mallory said.

Yesterday, she'd thought long and hard on what to write to Danny.

She read enough comic books to know about paradoxes. There was the possibility that by acting, she'd bring about the very fate she hoped to prevent. But Mallory also knew she couldn't do nothing.

Worse, it was likely the Aurors were intercepting the mail. It was the obvious thing to do, when you expected a murderer to have minions inside the castle.

Danny was a muggle, and talking to him about magic broke the Statute of Secrecy. Aurors wouldn't let it slide, even if they weren't looking for Statute-breakers. After all, the Statute was their most revered law.

Last night, she took it upon herself to figure out code that'd be obvious to Danny, but not obvious to the Aurors. It had been a difficult undertaking, balancing the need for obfuscation against the need to avoid the fatal miscommunication.

Mallory didn't think herself smart enough to outfox adults, which made it scarier. That Danny's life
was on the line had her near shaking.

"Oh," Avery pulled out a rolled up newspaper out of the pocket of his robe, "take a look. You're in
the paper."

"Me?" Mallory asked, mouth running on automatic.

"I'm taking her to see Professor Snape," interrupted Vaisey.

"It's Snape," said Avery, "if it was that important, he'd fetch her, himself."

Vaisey made a noise, crossing her arms.

"I'm in a newspaper?" Mallory asked, haltingly. Hard to focus on the here-and-now. Could only
hope she'd get it together before she saw Snape.

"School paper," replied Avery, tossing it to her. She fumbled, almost failing to catch it. Fuck, her
reflexes her shot. What was wrong with her?

Mallory unfolded it, "the Pickwick Wampus?" Her fingers felt practically numb. Dulled of
sensation. It wasn't getting worse, that she could tell. But it also wasn't getting any better.

"It's the secret school paper," answered Vaisey.

Mallory skimmed the headlines. Across the top was written The product of numerous concerned
and anonymous students. All hail the Great Squid and his wriggling Tentacles.

"Okay," Mallory replied, a tad late. Usually she'd make a funny quip, but she couldn't get in that
headspace, right now. Even her usual trick of 'thinking about how she thought the last time she did
something clever' wasn't working.

Still, pretending to read the paper would delay the meeting with Snape for a few minutes. It'd give
her some time to gather her thoughts, if she could.

"Hopkins," said Vaisey, tone of voice gone strange.

"This is neat," Mallory blurted out, pointing semi-randomly to a spot on the paper.

The semi-random spot featured a rather poorly-drawn caricature of Professor Snape, compliments
of an anonymous student who 'does not wish to be tormented more by the devilsome dungeon bat.'

"If he comes in here and sees us with it, he'll put us in detention," replied Vaisey.

"I'm on the front page," Mallory interrupted, repeating Avery. The funny thing was, that even with
this dull sickness pressing down on her, her mind went on thinking, anyway. She was still
sluggishly inventing excuses to avoid seeing Snape.

And now that she was looking, the paper was almost interesting. It didn't take that much effort to
read a paper, after all.

FILCH THREATENS STUDENT WITH DISMEMBERMENT Again. In a shocking
twist of events, our beloved caretaker and his mangy cat threatened to "feed
miscreants to the trolls! You'll see! They'll suck the marrow out your bones!"

Yesterday marks Filch's first death threat of the year. Last year totalled us at 117 death threats! At this rate, he'll beat his old record by winter holidays. Naturally, several students have petitioned to have him sacked. To no one's surprise, requests have been ignored. Further complaints will be tossed into the bin. With every other complaint we have made. Justice, it seemed, is a fickle beast.

She thought she ought to feel something about that, but couldn't puzzle out what.

Flich's cat, unfortunately, has recovered from last year's completely accidental indigestion of Angel's Trumpet, Love potion, bloodroot, and baneberry. I repeat, this was definitely an accident. We're still figuring out how she survived. Again, she has recovered from her completely accidental poisoning, and is back on the prowl. Be warned, be wary.

"They poisoned his cat and bragged about it," Mallory summarized. Instinct said there was something about that sentence that should bother her. Another part said she'd usually say something like that with some flair. She wasn't sure now, though. How would it come across?

"I know," intoned Vaisey, "the Weasley twins are dead stupid."

"I heard from Derrick that Farley runs the Wampus, not the Weasleys," said Montague.

"That's a load of rubbish. Farley'd never be behind something so sloppy."

"That's why it's perfect, don't you see?" asked Montague, "And besides, Fred and George Weasley couldn't run a newspaper if someone handed it to them."

"This week's front page was an ode to Lee Jordan's dead pet spider, and they're constantly ragging on Snape," argued Vaisey.

"Snape's rubbish, anyway," interrupted Avery, "any self-respecting Slytherin would rag on him. He doesn't take care of himself, walks around in stained robes, yellow teeth, greasy hair, and a bad attitude. How's he supposed to teach anyone subtle trickery?"

"Gemma Farley told someone she owns the paper," stated Mallory, thinking out loud. It felt like reaching for something just out of her grasp. Frustrating.

The other Slytherins looked at her like she said something intolerably stupid.

"No, but she implied it so we'll all be properly afraid of her," answered Vaisey. "She doesn't want to expend her fantastic powers of blackmail."

"Eh," Avery shrugged, "if I were her, I'd let everyone think I was secretly in charge of the rumor mill, but I'd double-secretly run the potions smuggling ring. That way I'd get rich on top of gaining power."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Vaisey, "no one could pull that off, not even Farley."

"Lore says someone did in 1944."
"It's exaggerated," replied Vaisey. "Everyone knows the lore is, just so we feel the pressure of high
expectations, and know we can never live up to them."

"I'm telling you, someone did it."

"There's good money in it, though," interjected Montague, "think of all the galleons."

"Alright," said Vaisey, "enough. Professor Snape will blame me if she's late. We have to move,
Hopkins."

Mallory frowned. She could look down at the paper again, distrac—

"No," said Vaisey, "we need to go."

"Fine," Mallory said, for lack of a better thing to say. She didn't feel any better. She ought to feel
better, by now. That was the point of stalling.

Snape stood outside the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room, accompanied by Headmaster
Dumbledore. Fuck, what did she do, now?

"Miss Hopkins," spoke the Headmaster, "you're needed in the Auror office. I believe you have
some information you'd like to share with us, and a specialist would like to speak with you, as
well."

"Okay," Mallory said, struggling to figure out what she'd want to share with them.

Headmaster Dumbledore looked at her for a moment, then said, "Miss Hopkins, it is imperative
that you say nothing of your involvement in last night's events. I ask with utter seriousness that you
say nothing of what you saw in the cards. Mr. Avery was the only one who saw such visions, and
that is what you will tell the Aurors and the specialist. Your own insight must not come to light. Do
you understand?"

No. "I'm not supposed to..." she stuttered.

"You are a talented young witch, Miss Hopkins. However, there are times when discretion is not
only advised but is necessary," the Headmaster intoned, beard twitching.

"Okay," Mallory spoke, for lack of anything better to say. The tarot reading? This was about the
tarot reading? Why?

Fuck.

She couldn't operate like this. She felt like she'd gone three days without sleeping, stumbling along
after the adults like a miniature zombie.

"My head hurts," Mallory said, out loud, "I broke a—"

"Be silent," said Snape.

Adults wouldn't help. Well, Snape wouldn't help. But she wasn't sure who would. Professor Sprout
helped before, but she wasn't here. The Headmaster might help, but that wasn't guaranteed. She'd
no idea what the Aurors would do.

The Pickwick Wampus was rolled up in her hand. She'd forgotten to give it back to Avery. She was
realizing this just now.
"I don't—" Mallory tried, again.

"Silence!" commanded Snape, and it was as though he'd uttered a spell, because she found herself unable to speak another word.

They stopped in front of the door to the Auror Department, but didn't go in. The Aurors met them outside.

Mallory watched at the adults, who were making faces at one another. Tonks was rotating through colors and facial shapes. Mousy brown featured prominently.

"Miss Hopkins," Headmaster Dumbledore's tone changed, "I must request that you stay by me at all times when we're in the presence of the specialist."

"Okay," Mallory said. She could speak? Then, "I think there's someth—"

"You say 'yes, Headmaster Dumbledore,'" spoke Snape, "cease—"

"Ah, Severus," interrupted the Headmaster, "now is not the time to quibble amongst ourselves."

Snape gave him a look, and the Headmaster turned away from him.

"The wizard in question, Mr. Blackthorn," spoke Auror Kingsley, "is a dark wizard of some note. He's aiding us in this case, and he shouldn't hurt you, but we want to be careful."

"I need—" Mallory tried, because they were adults, and she didn't know what to do.

"Miss Hopkins," interrupted the Headmaster, "we don't have much time. If you wish to speak to me, you must wait until after the meeting."

At that, he and the other adults walked straight into the Aurors' Office.

She wanted to cry. A sort of empty despair was clawing at her throat. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't think. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't—

Auror Moody stood in the corner of the Auror's office, wand out. His bulbous rotating eye focused solely on the man sitting at Kingsley's desk.

Mallory wasn't good at taking the measure of an adult, even on a good day. Today wasn't a good day. Between the emotions bubbling up and the sluggish crawl of her thoughts, she ought not even try.

But it wasn't in Mallory Hopkins' nature to quit.

Even still, Mr. Corvinus Blackthorn was hard to categorize. He looked off. She'd expected someone like Snape, someone menacing and shifty-eyed, in a black stained cloak.

Mr. Blackthorn wasn't ancient, but his blonde hair was already thinning at the temples. His unlined skin looked somehow wrong. Waxy, or maybe a bit sallow. Her first impression was that all the color'd been drained out of him. Desaturated.

He lounged back in his chair, leafing through parchments and marking them with a quill. Mallory got the impression it was now his desk, and not Kingsley's. The man seemed entirely at ease, not at all concerned by the wand pointed in his direction.
Blackthorn looked up, took in the new arrivals, and made a face.

"Severus Snape, I presume?" he asked, putting the papers down on the desk.

"We've not met," spoke Snape.

Blackthorn leaned forward in his desk, addressed the Headmaster, "Severus Snape allowed the Slytherin Initiation Ceremony to continue when he knew the Cracklewood Carver was about to strike."

Snape curled his lip, "never before has a—"

The man's eyes burned with some kind of inner light, "Never before have I seen such a collection of imbeciles! You did nothing, nothing while your students marched into that forest and to their deaths. There were no extra patrols, no Aurors guarding the gates. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you intended this very outcome." His voice carried through the room.

Mallory's heart lept, jerking back like she'd been stung. Even at her best, it'd never occurred to her that the adults might've anticipated the attack.

At least, she didn't think it had. She couldn't really remember, right now.

"Preposterous!" Snape's voice rose.

"You suspect Hogwarts' staff is culpable?" asked Headmaster Dumbledore.

All the air had gone out of the room. And Tonks, who hadn't said a single word the entire time, squeaked.

Blackthorn fingered the scroll on his desk, as though thinking, "what reason would you have, to wish these students ill?" He looked up at Dumbledore, "they're just children, after all. One the daughter of a Lord, the other two of no significance, no?"

"I'm afraid I'm not in the practice of calling children insignificant." said Headmaster Dumbledore.

"How cold you must get, up on that moral high ground of yours." The man leaned back in his chair, then made another face, "but perhaps we ought to look into this angle further. Why not have your Aurors investigate the backgrounds of these students, and their families. We might find something of value, there."

"Aurors have already spoken to the parents—" Snape was cut off.

"Aurors spoke to my parents?" Mallory blurted out, and immediately regretted it. Fuck.

"No," Blackthorn addressed her, "I daresay they did not. Muggles aren't included in these proceedings."

"Mr. Blackthorn," spoke the Headmaster, only to be interrupted.

"Professor Blackthorn, or Master Blackthorn, if you must," the man looked shark-like, "I insist."

"Professor Blackthorn," Headmaster Dumbledore said, "I must ask that you refrain from making more baseless accusations and focus on this case. We've received credible evidence that our students are in danger."

Blackthorn nodded, "of course. You said earlier a student skilled in cartomancy revealed some
details about the nature of murderer. Is this her?"

"Miss Hopkins," Headmaster Dumbledore spoke for her, "is one of the Carver's victims. She made friends with a young cartomancer, who offered his aid."

"Er—" Mallory halted herself, "yeah."

"Silence!" interrupted Snape, then continued, "Mr. Avery observed that in seven of ten cases, a burning blade did damage to the demon. They also came to the conclusion that the demon is controlling the wizard, or that the summoning otherwise failed."

"I see," spoke Professor Blackthorn, making a face. Then he glanced at Mallory. "Speak up, Miss Hopkins. Watching you dither is becoming painful."

She wanted to cry.

"I..." she swallowed, "something's wrong. I can't think. I can't—"

"Silence!" interrupted Snape, again.

Mallory shrank back, swallowing around the lump in her throat. Fuck, he wouldn't even let her talk. But while she was getting herself under control, the adults were giving each other significant looks.

"Professor Snape," Auror Kingsley spoke, "were you in the room during the tarot reading?"

"Of course not," replied Snape, "but this filthy brat has proven herself incapable of controlling her emotions. She's a fool and a liar. I'll not have her maligning the name of my House and my students—"

"Right," interrupted Auror Kingsley, turning to Auror Moody, "Moody?"

"Get out," said Auror Moody to Snape, "Dumbledore, tell your pet Death Eater to get out of my damn office."

"This is an outra—" Snape started, but then the Headmaster interrupted him, again.

"Severus, if you could wait outside?" asked the Headmaster.

Thirty seconds later, Severus Snape and his puckered arsehole was gone.

Mr. Blackthorn stood, walked around the front of the desk to crouch in front of Mallory. The smell of pine, clay, and cigarette smoke caught in her throat. Holy fuck. The Heirophant.

"You don't look well," he paused, "you said you're having trouble thinking?"

She was having trouble ordering her thoughts, caught off guard. Mr. Blackthorn was her Heirophant, the man who was meant to give her the blade of Silver Fire. But there was a chance he wouldn't give it to her, and the fragments of her future were unclear on why. If she couldn't get him to give her the blade, she'd die.

"I..." Mallory shook her head, voice wobbling, "I broke an oath. Avery had me light a lumos. I started feeling sick later last night. I can't— it's important, but I can't—"

The Headmaster spoke, "you broke an oath, Miss Hopkins?" just as Auror Moody said, "are you an idiot, kid?"
"It shouldn't make a child *that* ill," said Auror Kingsley, "they'd only—"

"The universe seeks to balance the scales," Mr. Blackthorn stood up. "Young Avery would likely be incapacitated by a loss of his magic, but not this young girl. The consequences of the oath couldn't be fulfilled through the loss of her magic, so it took something else."

"Her life-force," spoke the Headmaster.

That meant something. She heard about it, before. She couldn't think.

"I can fix it," spoke Mr— no, Professor Blackthorn.

At that, the room erupted into adults shouting over one another. Mallory couldn't even hope to sort out who was saying what or when. Her throat was clogged and she wanted to cry, because she couldn't understand what was going on or why. Her fists were clenched, heart pounding and ears ringing.

Meanwhile, Professor Blackthorn took out a small pouch and began digging through it. His whole arm fit inside it, which should be entirely impossible since the pouch was much too small for his arm.

From it, he retrieved a small stone amulet with a thin leather band in place of a chain.

And before anyone could object, Professor Blackthorn dropped the amulet over Mallory's head.

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Chapter End Notes

AN: I've been waiting to find the right time to release the Pickwick Wampus for ages. Do you know how absurdly happy I was when JKR used "wampus" in Fantastic Beasts? I'd been trying to mimic her naming conventions and got it too right.
Chapter 25

Mallory staggered.

Then she clapped a hand over her mouth so she wouldn't throw up. Holy fuck. Holy fuck, this felt like waking up.

For all this morning and part of last night, she'd been utterly incapacitated. It was like someone took a scalpel to all the parts of her brain she cared about and obliterated them.

Even her physical senses had been affected. Before she'd felt nothing, but now the Auror's Office felt chilly, cold enough that the fine hairs on her arms were rising. Fuck, it was making her skin crawl. The cold invariably reminded her of The Forest, of icy puddles and blind terror. She could practically taste the blood in her mouth.

The bruises, unfortunately, hadn't faded. If anything, they were worse. Her backside ached, and her scraped palm hurt when she flexed her hand.

"Be very careful, now," spoke Professor Blackthorn, eyebrows drawn together in concern. "You will not leave this on for more than three days, hm?"

"You gonna tell the kid about the cost, or should I?" barked Auror Moody, glowering at Blackthorn like he was the spawn of Satan.

Oh thank fuck, she could read faces again. She hadn't even realized she couldn't until the amulet was on.

Professor Blackthorn stared down Auror Moody with cold eyes.

"Mm," he grunted in assent, before turning to face Mallory.

"Leave the amulet on for longer, and you will die," said Professor Blackthorn in his odd, clipped manner of speaking. "You do not evade the cost of your blunder, only delay it. I will cure your illness, but first I will capture this demon." Another pause, "you're safe here, child. All will be well."

"You're not doing dark magic mumbo-jumbo on that kid, you hear?" threatened Auror Moody, "you do that, and you're breaking our oath."

The adults all looked at one another, brows furrowing and lips downturned. They all looked incredibly uncomfortable, like Professor Blackthorn's mere presence was painful.

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful," Mallory said. Her voice was cracking, anxiety crawling up her throat. "But what do you mean by cost, professor?"

Professor Blackthorn regarded her dispassionately, "it accrues interest. The longer it's worn, the greater the cost once I remove it. Should I wait too long, the price will kill you," answered Professor Blackthorn.

Christ, it'd be worse than before? Fuck, but she'd felt awful. Going back would be like dying, losing all the parts of herself that she loved. Sure, it'd only be temporary, but the thought of it was
"I — but—" Mallory spoke again, "professor, why did it take so long for the oath to punish me?"

It should've kicked in immediately. That's why Avery had her cast *lumos*.

Headmaster Dumbledore responded, instead, "it is not for young minds to worry about, Miss Hopkins." His tone was gentle, but it came out patronizing.

Mallory scowled, irritated. If she wanted to avoid this mistake in the future, she needed more to go on than that. Professor Blackthorn's amulet weighed heavily against her throat. She never *ever* wanted to feel that way, again.

"You first felt tired. Later, the drain sapped the strength from your mind," Professor Blackthorn ignored the Headmaster, "you should not make vows at your age. This will not kill you, but should you keep taking oaths and breaking them..." he gave her a significant look, "that will kill you."

"This isn't a topic—"

"I'm not teaching the girl to draw on her life-force to power blood magic," Blackthorn's voice was sharp and biting, "I teach her the folly of making vows when she has nothing to offer but her own life."

"Be that as it may, I do not believe we need to frighten Miss Hopkins," spoke the Headmaster, "she's already been through a terrible ordeal."

Mallory took the time the adults spent quibbling over bullshit to pull her thoughts together.

Professor Blackthorn spent half of that conversation fucking with Headmaster Dumbledore. Looking back, she got the distinct impression the man was idly amused, baiting the Headmaster like a fish on a hook. The whole conversation had been tense, rife with insults and meaningful looks.

She didn't know what to make of that. He kept ragging on the Headmaster and Snape. Was it because he enjoyed it, poking their buttons? Provoke some specific reaction? Maybe there was a larger goal, there.

It spooked her. She didn't get adults.

Her memory wasn't exact enough to put all that back together, regardless, so she'd have to shelve it for now.

What else?

The Aurors outside of Moody were entirely uncomfortable. Auror Kingsley looked ready to jump out of his skin, and the other Auror looked as though he were about to sick up all over the floor.

Mallory, on the other hand, couldn't be more relieved.

*A waxy-skinned man who offered her a gift, connected to powerful magic.* Gee, she wondered who that might be. Professor Blackthorn fit the bill. In fact, she was surprised. Avery went on and on about how abstract and symbolic it all was, but in reality the magic was quite concrete.

She'd been looking for a man with waxy skin, who smelled like pine, clay, and cigarette smoke. Avery was such an arsehole.
Now, confronted with the Heirophant, Mallory's palms were sweating.

She wasn't sure speaking up was the brightest idea. Professor Blackthorn was legitimately intimidating. The *adults* were scared of him, and obviously didn't want her talking to him for some reason. If she said the wrong thing and pissed him off, would he refuse to give her the blade of Silver Fire?

Was *that* why she died in those three visions?

But she didn't have much of a choice.

"Professor Blackthorn?" Mallory spoke up hesitantly, interrupting the adults' still-ongoing pissing contest.

A brief flicker of irritation crossed the Professor's face, "speak, child."

"The visions didn't show a blade of fire. It's a blade of *Silver* Fire. It was pretty clear on that," her voice shook. "A wax man with a connection to the divine is supposed to give me a tool, the blade, and I'm supposed to fight it. Only, I think if I do I'll die. If I— but if I don't, I'll definitely die."

All of her fears, bottled up, tumbled their way past her lips in a rush.

"I know the blade you speak of," said Professor Blackthorn, "you'll not fight the demon."

*Demon?*

"Thank you, professor," Mallory said, for lack of anything better to say. She was unable to form the words she needed to express what she was thinking.

In a sense, he was right.

Even if she got her hands on the supposed blade of Silver Fire, Mallory Hopkins was eleven years old. She had no idea how to fight with a sword. And even if she did, swords were made for adults. It'd be far too big for her.

The vision only said she'd get a chance to fight. It said nothing about her winning.

That meant that without the help of adults, she'd be dead. An adult could wield a sword, no problem. But Mallory? She was eleven. This was a fight she didn't expect to win, even on a good day.

Yet, the vision clearly showed her dying if she didn't have the blade on her. And it wasn't like Mallory trusted a dark wizard to protect her.

"Actually," Mallory spoke up again, mouth dry as a desert. "Professor Blackthorn, if it's not too much of a bother, can I keep the sword on me? I know that's a lot to ask, but the visions were really clear on *me* carrying the sword. I don't want to, because I don't think I can—"

"Little girl," Professor Blackthorn's lips quirked up in a humorless smile. "to wield the Blade of the Impure Flame, you must defeat me in combat. The sword would not accept you as its master, otherwise."

Mallory swallowed past the lump in her throat, wondering just how far she could push it.

"Er—" she carefully considered her wording, "I could be kidnapped while you're sleeping, or taken from the Slytherin Common Room. I thought of a bunch of ways I could be kidnapped, and if I can
think of it, so can the murderer's minions. It might be ages before you figure out I'm taken, so..." she trailed off.

Professor Blackthorn glanced over at the Aurors, raising his eyebrows, as though to say *ah, now I understand.*

Tonks, who'd been trying and failing not to laugh, snorted. Her hair had returned to its usual vibrancy. Before, it was the mousy-brown of the terrified.

"That's quite enough," spoke the Headmaster. "Miss Hopkins, artifacts such as that are not meant for the hands of children. Nor, for that matter, the hands of any witch or wizard. *Professor Blackthorn,*" and he spoke the word *Professor* like calling Blackthorn a professor was an insult to the profession, "was remiss in telling you such a thing."

Right. More forbidden knowledge.

People were going to think she had a disorder, because wizards couldn't stop saying things that made her roll her eyes.

"Sure," Mallory kept pushing, this time appealing to the Headmaster, "but... I might di— I mean, during the tarot readings I felt myself die three times. I lived through it, the — my last breaths, you know? And the only way that doesn't happen is if I have that blade. Seven times I had the blade, and seven times I at least had a chance."

Sometimes, where reasonable arguments failed, tugging on an adult's heartstrings succeeded. Granted, adults rarely listened to eleven year olds in the first place. But when they did, it was because they were moved to action.

"Miss Hopkins," Headmaster Dumbledore spoke sharply, "such an attempt to stretch the truth is not befitting of a witch your age. Further, you'll fight nothing. This battle is not your responsibility."

The Headmaster looked at her with such alarm that Mallory wondered what faux pas she could've possibly—*oh right.* She'd forgotten. The Headmaster didn't want her saying anything about her role in the tarot reading. Wait a second, *why?*

"For once," added Professor Blackthorn, rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration. "I agree with your Headmaster. The visions Mr. Avery saw were what would've happened had you not engaged in cartomancy. Interacting with the future changes it. In this future, I'll fight in your stead."

Mallory blinked, taking that in. Professor Blackthorn gave no indication that he noticed her slip-up, which was almost suspicious, in and of itself. Then again, if no one expected them to be lying, then perhaps no one was looking for the lie.

Five different trains of thought warred at once, ideas and strategies battled with each other. Under that was the knowledge that this, here, might be her only chance to convince her Heirophant to help her.

Thinking out loud, she said, "I think I get it, professor. It's like wands, with the whole master-owner thing that bloke, er — Olive-something — said. Except if you died to the Carver, the monster couldn't take the blade because only witches and wizards can use wands? That's how I must've ended up taking it."

"No," answered Professor Blackthorn, interrupting whatever useless platitudes the Headmaster opened his mouth to offer. "Magical creatures by British law aren't permitted to use wands, but
some are more than capable. I fear for your education, if this is what you've been taught. The
demon summoned will be master of the blade, should I fall. If you were to take up the Sword of
the Impure Flame following my defeat, it would burn you alive."

"Okay," Mallory cringed. That wasn't alarming at all, "for the record, that's exactly what Avery felt
happen. Seven times."

The memory of her hands burning hadn't faded at all. Simply thinking about it had her reflexively
flinching.

"Well," Auror Moody spoke with relish, "looks like Koldovstoretz will be down one Necromancer.
How about that." His ruined face contorted into a grin, like Christmas had come early.

"I would not have lived this long without knowing my limitations," said Professor Blackthorn. He
was frowning, now, "but it is possible that one of my enemies might think to arrange a trap.
Rumors have spread of my actions at the ICW. It would not surprise me if an enemy predicted that
Auror Moody would call on my aid." He was treating the Headmaster to a rather pointed look.

Mallory's hands were sweating. Now that she could see the tension between the adults, it was
making her increasingly uncomfortable. Moreover, that was another scenario she hadn't considered.

"There are no Solomonari spies in this castle," replied the Headmaster, bristling.

At that, the realization hit her like a truck. Fuck, she was so slow. Mallory Hopkins, always a step
behind, always on the back foot. Fuck.

All this time she'd been thinking of the Heirophant as a guardian, someone who would want to save
her, regardless of the circumstances. Except Professor Blackthorn didn't seem nice at all. In fact, he
spent most of this meeting needling the Headmaster and humiliating Snape.

Professor Blackthorn said the future had changed, and he was right. Mallory changed it by telling
him he'd lend her the blade of Silver Fire.

Only, she'd misunderstood the vision. Professor Blackthorn didn't give her the blade. In the
original timeline, he died fighting the demon. And she, in a desperate last stand, picked up the
fallen man's blade.

Now, the Professor knew that fighting the demon would kill him. He said he knew his limitations.
In other words, he picked fights he knew he'd win.

No doubt he would make his excuses and go home, now. He didn't look like the type to put his life
on the line for some kid he didn't know. She didn't know why she'd convinced herself the
Heirophant would be a staunch ally. Blind hope, she guessed. He was all the hope she had, after
learning no one else could help her.

Dumbledore was next to useless, shackled by politics and whatever else. The Aurors went about
their business, but were outwitted by four eleven year olds. Other professors might help, but they'd
be going against their boss. That left her with her friends, her own wits, and the Heirophant.

"Okay," Mallory said, swallowing past the lump in her throat, "but Professor Blackthorn, you won't
die now, right? I reckon you can think of a better plan, now that you know what the demon's about.
Is there a better weapon? Like, a super-demon-slaying extra-fire hammer?"

Maybe she could convince him. She couldn't die just because of this, because of some stupid
mistake. She wasn't going to die of hypothermia, alone in the Forbidden Forest, right?
"Miss Hopkins," Dumbledore sounded tired, "it isn't your place to question our investigation. You are not knowledgeable on these matters."

I wasn't asking you.

"If there is a better weapon," spoke Professor Blackthorn, "I do not have it."

Except, that was exactly what was going to happen. She'd die, never having grown up. Just like Darla Rowle. Just like every other victim of the Carver.

Mallory swallowed, controlling her breathing.

"But—" Mallory blinked hard, "but professor, I — there must be something you can do. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be all that stuff Sna — I mean, Professor Snape — said I am. But really, I can't —" she took in a deep, shuddering breath, "you know all about these demons. There must be some other way."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tonks cringe. She kept flinching anytime someone said the word 'demon.' Of course, another forbidden word.

Dumbledore interrupted before Professor Blackthorn could speak, "I believe this talk is upsetting the young Miss Hopkins."

"'course I'm upset," spat Mallory, without thinking.

"Please comport yourself," chided Dumbledore.

She scrubbed her face with her hands, trying to cool down.

Looking at the adults, only Tonks looked upset. The Headmaster was scowling at her, and the Aurors managed to look uncomfortable. She got the sense she'd made some sort of social gaffe, like farting loudly in the middle of a serious conversation.

Professor Blackthorn's face was unreadable.

This wasn't working. Her Heirophant wouldn't be enough. In less than three days, she'd be facing the demon alone, with only her wits.

If it took any longer than that, she wouldn't even have that.

The realization left her grappling with the reality that she might die in the next couple days. For real. Her Heirophant wouldn't be enough.

In the next couple days, Mallory Hopkins would die.

She had very little reason to hold back.

"I was right," Mallory's tone hardened, "I said the murderer was after me. I said they'd try to kidnap me again. It's not safe, here. Can't you take me and my family out of Britain, now?" Her hands were clenched in fists. She knew it wasn't in the cards, but she had to ask.

Blood was pounding through her head, cheeks red with fury.

"I cannot," spoke the Headmaster, "Hogwarts is the safest place—"

"You all had my parents obliviated." Her hands were clenched into fists so tight the bruises burned,
"the only people who'd really try, who love me more than anything and you make them forget I'm even in danger. Because they're muggles? It's not—"

"Miss Hopkins!" thundered the Headmaster of Hogwarts, "you'd do well to be silent. You speak of things you know not."

"—fair! They're not even going to remember the last phone call I had with them! I told them I loved them and that I'm sorry and they won't even remember!" her voice cracked on the last word, water blurring her vision.

Auror Kingsley spoke in the sudden silence that overtook the room, "perhaps the child can wait outside? We still need to disc—"

"I'm speaking!" Mallory shrieked, "why won't you listen?"

"Miss Hopkins, you need not fear." Dumbledore looked down at her, tone stern as though she'd arrived tardy for a class. The condescending fuck. "Every professor and Auror in this school seeks to aid you. I, myself, will be on guard to prevent any further danger. I understand this is a trying and confusing time, but you must trust that we're doing all we can to keep you safe."

"I'm not fucking confused," Mallory spat, "I know what's going on and I want out of here!"
Mallory's teeth hurt from how hard she was clenching them. This was her life on the line. It wasn't fucking confusing, it was clear as day.

"Right," the Headmaster nodded to himself, "Kingsley, you're quite right. We have much to discuss that isn't for the ears of young children. Trainee Tonks, would you mind escorting Miss Hopkins to wait in the hall until after we're done?"

"Sure, Headmaster," Tonks nodded, though she looked a great deal more sympathetic than the Aurors. She put a hand on Mallory's shoulder to guide her out of the room. Mallory almost shook her off.

"I'd ask you excuse the young Miss Hopkins' behavior," spoke Dumbledore, as Mallory stalked out of the room, "it's been a trying time."

"It's no bother," replied one of the Aurors, "I remember it being quite difficult to control my emotions, at that age."

"Indeed, why I remember—" the door shut behind them, and Mallory heard no more.

It was just like them, wasn't it?

As Tonks escorted her out into the corridor, Mallory burned with rage. They'd erased her parents' memories of what could be their last conversation. She might very well die, and the adults were letting it happen. They got fucking prophetic visions of exactly what to do, and they weren't even trying to save her.

Without the sword, she was doomed to die of hypothermia in the fucking Forbidden Forest.

Well, she could always fight without the sword, but that held all the promise of a snowfall in July.

"We're going to wait out here until they're done speaking, alright?" asked Tonks. Her tone was gentle, as though she were walking on eggshells.
"Can we—" Mallory shook her head, "can we just go?"

"I think Headmaster Dumbledore will want to speak with you, after that." Her tone was gentle, "you were unspeakably rude."

"In the next couple days I'm gonna die, yeah?" Mallory stared at the wall and the tapestries, unblinking. "I think I've earned a pass."

"If you think you're going to shout again, get a calming potion from Madame Pomfrey. Really, you can't go around speaking like that." A pause, "are you okay, now?"

"I'm going to die." Mallory twisted to face Tonks.

"It doesn't help any to feel awful on top of it all," replied Tonks, shrugging.

"You do think I'll die, then," Mallory said.

Tonks flinched like she'd been caught out. "No, no of course not. The professors and Auror Moody will think of something."

"Hah," Mallory smiled without any humor. "You're a really bad liar, Tonks."

"Oh no," Tonks looked stricken, "no, I'm not lying. They're doing everything they— you don't have to be scared, okay?"

"If you want to be a good police offi— Auror, you need to get better at lying. I mean, you can turn into anyone you want, yeah? You'd be like, the best undercover agent."

"I'm not lying," lied Tonks.

Mallory glanced back at the tapestry, "you could help me, you know."

"I know what you're going to ask," replied Tonks, regret coloring her tone, "but I can't. I can't take you home to your parents. It's just not safe."

"I had to ask," Mallory's lips twitched up in another humorless grin.

Ambient light from the window at the end of the hall filtered in, cool and gray. Even so, it was much warmer in the corridor than in the Auror’s Office. Mallory let out a huff of air, leaning against the wall.

She was always too slow, one step behind. She should've never blurted out the truth about Blackthorn's coming death. He was sure to leave, now. That was on her, for being too slow on the uptake.

If she survived this, she was looking into Harper's whatsit-potions. There was no way she'd survive seven years, if they were all like this. Mallory needed all the help she could get.

That in mind, she picked at the amulet Professor Blackthorn had given her. She'd mostly yelled at the Headmaster, not him. Even if he were unwilling to march to his death for her sake, he'd given her a gift.

So long as she had her wits and her friends, she stood a chance. It wasn't much of a chance, but it was better than nothing. Before the tarot cards were read, Mallory had no idea what she was up against. Now, she knew it was a demon capable of killing a necromancer.
It didn't look good.

Even if she could get her hands on the blade, it probably wouldn't help her, at all. The odds were stacked against her, but Mallory wasn't one to give up. Blackthorn had given her back her wits, and even if she did die, she'd die as herself.

It was sobering.

Death was supposed to be a far-off nightmare. It was something that'd happen to her as an adult, a worry for the future. She wasn't supposed to die at eleven. She was supposed to help her parents with their plans. Danny and Mallory were going to be superheroes and sling fireballs at badguys. How did she square all this away?

She was glad her parents were safe because they didn't remember, but they'd now never know how — she squeezed her eyes shut, exhaling sharply.

Fuck this.

She'd find some other way. Fuck this, fuck the Carver, the Aurors, professors, the lot of them. She was Mallory Hopkins, one of the few muggleborns to ever get into Slytherin. She was Danny Peace's best friend, and they were going to grow up to be superheroes.

Live or die, she'd fight tooth and nail for that future. And no matter what she did, she'd do it fighting.
Hogwarts' library overflowed with reading material. Bookshelves towered over squishy chairs, their tables groaning under heaps of discarded texts. There were so many that the wobbly stacks were spilling out onto the floor.

Mallory's eyes widened, stunned. Here were more books here than she'd seen in her entire life. And that was even counting mum's collection.

The library took up at least three floors of the castle, with balconies looming over the lower levels. Shelves stood perpendicular to the walls, forming countless nooks for one to settle down with a dusty book.

Her nose twitched at the very thought, and she hurried to rub it before the itch turned into a sneeze.

"You're to stay in sight," murmured Tonks, from her side.

Mallory nodded in lieu of a response, sniffing to clear her nose. She suspected Tonks felt terrible about her earlier blunder. After surprisingly little needling, Tonks agreed to escort Mallory to the library, instead of waiting outside the Auror Office for an adult to scold her.

Getting away from the adults did much to take the sting out of losing her Heirophant. Outside of that oppressively cold room, her situation was already looking less dire. In the library, she could contact her friends, figure out a strategy.

She wasn't here to read, that was for certain.

The library was impressive, but its utility was lost on Mallory. She wasn't the sort of girl to sit and read for hours in a dusty room. The mere thought of research made her drowsy, sitting still more-so.

Unfortunately, it was the only place Tonks was willing to take her, outside of the Common Room. If Mallory wanted to meet up with her friends, she'd have to do it in the wretched lair of the beady-eyed librarian and her comically long nails.

"I don't see the point in them," Mallory spoke in a soft undertone. Her words must've disturbed the dust, because not a moment later she was sneezing into her elbow.

The walk from the Auror's Office to the library had been awkward, to say the least. Tonks was uncomfortable around Mallory, off-balance after their painful conversation in the corridor. She was the sort of adult who cared what others thought of her.

The trainee valued Auror Moody's opinion. She orbited him, looked to him for direction. Danny must've pointed out that kind of behavior a hundred times to Mallory, the hidden meanings in the tilt of a person's neck, in the way they qualified their words. Tonks didn't want to take a strong
position when she knew Auror Moody could contradict her.

And Auror Moody made it clear that Mallory was to remain in the dark. Like most adults, he wanted her to stay out from underfoot. But Tonks let it slip that the adults did think Mallory was doomed, and felt guilty about it.

Mallory glanced up at Tonks' face, catching her eye. Tonks startled out of her thoughts, "what? Sorry."

"Look," Mallory stopped shy of pointing at the librarian. It wouldn't do to get kicked out of the library for being rude.

She glanced over to where Mallory was staring, frowning in confusion, "her nails?" The trainee Auror had a certain inability to act that fascinated Mallory. Every thought that crossed Tonks' face was as plain as day.

The guilt was as plain as day.

If the circumstances were different, Mallory might've taken advantage of Tonks' guilt. In fact, a good part of her was convinced she should press Tonks for more help. But the thought of it left her feeling ill at ease.

Or perhaps that was another sneeze coming on.

At any rate, Tonks looked very guilty, face pinched like she was battling a particularly determined dust creature. Mallory could imagine that Tonks was afraid any further escape attempts would be blamed on her. She might even be upset about being unable to help her.

And Mallory could further imagine how Tonks would feel, if Mallory was murdered after saying something like 'if you don't help me, I'll die and it'll all be your fault.'

Mallory felt awful just imagining it, and that wasn't the dust.

Vaisey's crushed expression during the Potions' Incident was fresh in her mind. Cokebottles-Vaisey felt guilty because she hadn't prevented Rowle's murder. Mallory knew there was no possible way Vaisey could've saved Rowle. Yet, the girl still blamed herself.

If Vaisey could manage to blame herself for Rowle's death, then there was no doubt Tonks would blame herself for Mallory's. And Mallory didn't think it right for Tonks to blame herself.

Tonks feared going against her boss. After being pressured into lighting Harper on fire during the Slytherin Initiation, Mallory had developed a new understanding of how difficult it was to be a good person. It was only out of shame that Mallory later stood up to Farley. Tonks didn't have a physical wand pointed at her, but that hardly meant anything. For whatever reason, Tonks was deathly afraid of breaking the rules. She wanted to help, but felt she couldn't.

Mallory didn't know how else to phrase it, but she suspected it'd be un-heroic to let Tonks think things weren't right between them. Professor X wouldn't do that, and neither would The Doctor.

She wasn't about to make the same mistake twice in two days, especially when these might be her last few days. Mum and dad didn't know anymore about how she'd disappointed them, and they likely wouldn't learn about how she treated Tonks, but Mallory would know.

She was supposed to be a hero.
"Yeah, her nails," Mallory shuddered, eyes flicking over at the librarian again before looking back to Tonks, "'s mental. What'll she do if she's got an itch in her eye?"

Tonks, the trainee police officer, would undoubtedly find long nails impractical, and their mutual disdain would soften the awkward silence between them. Plus, fake nails were fucking weird.

"I don't know," Tonks glanced back down at Mallory, and then to the librarian. Her expression was a cross of bafflement and residual guilt.

"And what if she has to use the loo?" Mallory asked, hamming it up, "or if she has a boyfriend?"

She didn't get what adult private things had to do with fake nails, but the older girls in the village said fake nails interfered with intimate relations. And when Mallory asked her parents about it, they'd started laughing like it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard.

Tonks let out a huff of air, "you're a funny kid."

"I wouldn't do it," Mallory intoned, as though the mere idea of acrylic nails was offensive to her very being, "not ever."

"The nails, the loo, or the boyfriend?" Tonks' eyes twinkled, lips split in a sly grin, "because one of those is a necessity."

"The nails and the boyfriend," Mallory responded, decisively.

"Not ready for boyfriends, eh?" Tonks grinned, "just wait a year or two, and you'll be mad for them."

The minute Tonks said those words, her expression shuttered, like it just occurred to her that Mallory wouldn't have another two years.

"I don't think so," Mallory responded, attempting to distract her, "Kit stuck her finger up my nose and it was completely gross. And that wasn't just because she's a girl."

Mallory knew quite a bit about adult relationships, and was happy to use her above-average knowledge to distract Tonks. It served a double purpose, since she was still irked at Tonks for treating her so condescendingly. If Tonks thought she was knowledgeable, then perhaps she would stop treating Mallory like such a baby.

"I—" Tonks' baffled look was back, "what exactly do you think I mean by a boyfriend?"

"It's really gross," Mallory started, before Tonks interrupted her.

"I'm going to regret asking this, aren't I?" Tonks sighed.

"Mum and dad say it means sharing spit and other fluids, like, on purpose. And my dad said girls wear ribbons and perfumes, but mum started going on about some bloke named Fromm, and about love. And... I don't remember everything she said, but... it's not like how I love my parents or Danny, it's some other sort of extra-special love." Mallory replied, being completely honest, "It's stupid, because being a part of a super-team is an awesome idea. And what about hocking a loogie?" Mallory's gestures became more expansive as she went on, "sometimes you have to spit-shake on it, you know? The whole point of a spit-shake is that it's gross so you'd better be sure before you shake on it, otherwise it's just a handshake. And Danny's not my boyfriend because we spit-shake. It's so stupid."
What was more stupid was that Danny's parents weren't willing to talk about it, at all. It was like the wizards' Taboo Curse, a forbidden topic. His parents said they'd tell him when he's older. Not Mallory's parents, though.

When Mallory asked her parents about adult relationships, mum whipped out her copy of some musty philosophy text and started quoting this old fogy named Fromm. Dad insisted it was too complicated for her, but Mallory got the gist of it. Love meant taking the time to know someone well enough to see the world from their point of view. The eventual goal was to understand a person's strengths and weaknesses, and become a super-team of awesomeness.

Dad interrupted mum to say that wasn't what Mallory was asking, and started on a long explanation about how when little girls grow up they start having special feelings about boys, and those feelings cause them to wear ribbons and perfumes so that the boys will like them that way, too.

And then mum interrupted dad to say how dad had it all wrong, and how feelings had nothing to do with it. 'Love is how you treat people, not just how you feel,' she said, and that was something she said often. Dad, who heard that statement at least twice a day, started up some argument about intimate relations, saliva, and fluids.

At that point, Mallory ran out of the room with her ears covered, hollering how they were gross.

She didn't get why any of that was taboo, or what naked photographs had to do with it. Adults were strange.

Unfortunately, it seemed she'd somehow gotten it wrong, because Tonks was staring at her like she'd grown another head, face twisted up in an effort not to laugh.

Mallory sighed, irritated.

She should be used to it by now. When Mallory started talking a lot, adults typically laughed or became annoyed at her. That usually wasn't the effect she was going for. But in this case, annoyed or amused was preferable to guilty. And Mallory wasn't good enough at understanding adults to invoke more specific responses.

It was still annoying, though.

"It's serious. Wizards have oaths or vows or whatever, but norm— muggles don't. So, you've either got to get a solicitor, spit-shake, or pinkie-swear. And only babies pinkie-swear," everyone knew that. Mallory sometimes wondered if all the adults around her suffered from laser-guided amnesia. It seemed as though not one of them could remember being her age.

"That's not—" Tonks opened her mouth and shut it again, "no, I'm not explaining this to you. Next time— yes, next time you see your parent— oh." The smile drained from her face.

Fuck.

Tonks really thought Mallory was going to die, didn't she?

Now the trainee Auror looked grim and morose, again. And Mallory blamed herself.

It all came back to her inability to understand adults. In fact, upon learning about love and boyfriends, Mallory spent all night awake in bed, sick to her stomach.

Because while Mallory felt a deep affection for her parents, she didn't understand them at all.
By her mum's standards, she didn't love any adult. She knew her parents wanted her to be good and do well in school, and Mallory certainly cared deeply for them and wanted to make them happy. But she couldn't understand them well enough to model their viewpoints. It scared her, and she'd started wondering if there was something wrong with her.

Mum and dad ended up sitting down with her and explaining that the love Fromm talked about was an ideal. When that failed to clear the confusion, mum said that so long as Mallory tried her best to understand and respect people, that counted as love. Dad, of course, insisted that love was also an emotion, and that he knew Mallory loved them dearly.

It was on her mind, now, because she wondered if she'd tried her best. Perhaps, if she'd tried harder to understand adults in the past, it'd be easier to convince these adults to let her go home. She couldn't understand their motivations, so she couldn't come up with an argument that would persuade them.

"I know you—" Mallory stuttered, "you do want to help. I know you do, I can tell."

"I can't," Tonks looked stricken, "I'm sorry, but—"

"I know," Mallory insisted, "that's what I'm saying. I know there's something... something wrong. Something's scaring you really bad, and—"

"Merlin, I'm not working for the Carver! Why would you even—"

"I know!" Mallory insisted.

The librarian, with her sinister-long nails and beady-eyes, glowering behind horned glasses, hissed, "you're in the library. Be quiet."

"Yes, Madame Pince," replied Tonks, by-rote.

"Right, yeah," Mallory lowered her voice, "s'lots of things you can't say or do, yeah? And you're freaked out 'coz... I guess something really awful happens if you break the rules?"

Something dogged Tonks' steps, scaring her into submission. Back in South Brent, no adult was terrified of the law. Many respected it, but respect wasn't the same as fear. Tonks was afraid.

"I'm not breaking any laws," whispered Tonks, harshly, "and I don't know anything about that sort of thing, so don't ask me."

Tonks was a really bad liar.

"'m not saying you are," Mallory replied, instead of calling her out on it. "'m saying I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at— at Blackthorn, at the people in charge, you know?"

She couldn't say 'I'm mad at Auror Moody and the professors you admire' without insulting her. Granted, that was pretty much what she was saying. Hard to get around it.

"They're doing everything they can, we're all doing everything we can," Tonks scrubbed her face in frustration, "you don't need to be upset. You can just— didn't Madame Pomfrey give you any calming potions?"

"I'm not a bloody robot, of course I'm upset. I'm not mad at you, s'all," though, every time Tonks opened her mouth to suggest a calming potion, Mallory got a little angrier. Someone was trying to kill her, and the adults around her wouldn't help. Of course she was upset, anyone would be upset.
in her position.

"But you don't have to be upset, okay? You shouldn't have to feel like this," Tonks gave her a worried look, brows drawn together in concern.

*I was fucking making jokes. You're the one who brought it up.* She clenched her fist and exhaled, trying to cool down. It would do her no good to get kicked out of the library.

Mallory was getting the feeling they were talking past one other.

"Right," Mallory rubbed the bridge of her nose, "I'm saying we're square, alright? So long as you help me get my friends here in the library, we're good."

Tonks' brows rose in disbelief, then she shook her head, "just take your calming potion, alright? Then we'll be *square.*"

Mallory elected not to say anything about her tone. After all, she'd come to this library for a reason, and that reason had little to do with trainee Auror Tonks.

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"Hullo," Mallory greeted an older Gryffindor girl with her sweetest smile, "I'm sorry to bother you. I just wanted to ask you a quick question."

The Gryffindor was camped out in a cozy looking armchair with brass buttons stamped into the leather. She didn't even look up from her book, "go away."

"Are you going back to your common room, soon?" Mallory asked, ignoring the girl's demand.

The girl looked up, letting out a huff of irritation, "if you keep speaking to me, I might." Then her eyes flicked over to Tonks and widened in recognition, "Tonks? What are you doing here?"

"Babysitting," Tonks' voice dripped with irritation.

"But I thought you were going to be an Auror," then the pin dropped, "wait, *she* isn't one of the Carver survivors, is she?"

"Afraid so," Tonks gave her a thin-lipped smile, "and I'm here to make sure she stays among the living."

At that, the Gryffindor girl put a bookmark in her book, sitting up straight in her chair, "Tonks, you *must* tell me what's happening. Everyone's gone mad. They're saying the Carver's attacked the school again, and that somehow the Selwyns are behind it all," her eyes were wide, glimmering with curiosity.

Tonks glanced down at Mallory, giving her a rather sharp look.

"I'll tell you everything," Mallory interrupted, before Tonks could get a word in, "but only if you help me, first."

The girl gave her a disdainful glare, but Mallory soldiered on, "I need you to tell Colin Creevey—he's a first year Gryffindor, to meet me in the library. He's in the common room, now, I think. And —"

"What do *you* want with one of my firsties, little Slytherin?" the girl's tone turned suspicious, eyes narrowed in distaste.
"He's my friend," Mallory drew back, almost affronted, "a best friend."

"They are," Tonks interrupted, confirming Mallory's story, "and she's friends with Hufflepuffs, too. They're all the muggleborns in their year."

Wow. Tonks was actually helping her.

"Oh," the girl's eyes widened, nodding as though suddenly everything made sense. And Mallory supposed it did. Felix and Kit were both outsiders in Hufflepuff. Despite Colin's claims that the Gryffindors were friendly, he spoke of no other friends outside their circle.

The common factor in their isolation was blood.

"Could you, please?" Mallory asked, "it's really important."

"Creevey?" the girl asked, "I don't know who that is."

"He's got blonde hair, blue eyes," at the girl's blank expression, Mallory elaborated, "he's always got this camera on him, and he really likes Harry Potter."

The girl crinkled her nose, "oh, him," she sighed, "fine."

"And tell a Hufflepuff to get Felix Underwood and Kit Jennings," Mallory insisted.

"You're going to tell me everything that's going on?" the girl asked.

"Yep," Mallory nodded, "everything I know."

"Nope," replied Tonks, speaking over her, "not one word."

"Yes, I will," Mallory lied, praying for Tonks to play along. Of course she wouldn't. In fact, Mallory planned on making up some absurd lies to further mislead the general populace. All the better to confound the summoner's spies.

"You won't," insisted Tonks, "and you won't be swearing any more oaths, either."

"We can tell her some things," Mallory widened her eyes, pleading. "Please, Tonks?"

"Merlin," groaned Tonks, "you're the most manipulative little shi— firstie, I swear."

Mallory couldn't signal Tonks to say she was lying. And it wasn't like she could whisper or mouth the words without the Gryffindor girl cottoning on.

"I won't say anything really secret," Mallory continued, "and I haven't seen them in ages."

"You saw them yesterday," responded Tonks, tone flat and unmoved.

"That was ages ago, it feels like months!" Mallory insisted. "Please? I promise if you do I'll be good."

She was laying it on a bit thick, but Mallory knew Tonks wanted her 'babysitting' gig to go smoothly. Bribery was preferable to emotional blackmail. Her other option was to remind Tonks about her impending death.

Tonks gave her a flat look of disbelief, "the last time you cried 'please-please,' you almost got me fired."
Great. Tonks had learned her lesson about letting people pull on her heartstrings in a tense
environment. Some teachers back in South Brent took years to learn that lesson. Why did she have
to get the competent trainee Auror?

"I won't do anything like that, this time," Mallory insisted, again. "I promise."

"And," Tonks continued, "you might think I'm stupid, but I'm certainly not deaf. I know you're up
to something, but what piranhas, dragons, and secret-identities have to do with the Carver, I don't
know. All I can guess is that you're planning another ridiculous escape attempt, and I'll have no
part in it."

Alright. Tonks was losing sympathy points by the second, here.

"No you didn't," Mallory said, voice shaking a bit. She hadn't considered how easily Tonks could
overhear their conversation, "you didn't hear that. It's just your imagination."

Tonks' face twisted in exasperation, "no it isn't."

It didn't work last time, either.

"Well, you're a boring girl," Mallory wanted to stick out her tongue, "and that's not even why I
want to see them."

"Witch," Tonks corrected, "and I'm not a boring witch. You're contradicting yourself."

The Gryffindor girl's book slapped down on the heavy wood desk, scowling at them. "I'm trying to
study. Now, can you tell me right now what you know, and at least make this interruption
interesting?"

"If I tell you now," Mallory said, "you'll have no reason to help me after I do."

"Well, we know why you got into Slytherin," intoned the Gryffindor girl.

Tonks let out a huff of air, scraping her hair back from her scalp in one frustrated movement, "I'm
ready to tear my hair out, Angelina, I really am."

Angelina the Gryffindor girl narrowed her eyes conspiratorially at Tonks, "though really, what can
you tell me?"

Tonks sighed, "nothing, Angelina. It's an active investigation."

"Drat," spoke the Gryffindor girl, slumping back in her seat.

Mallory sneezed.

It was not even five minutes later, when Professor Blackthorn caught her alone. Well, she said
'caught her alone.' But she really meant that he did some sort of Jedi mind trick on trainee Tonks.

"Mr— uh, Professor Blackthorn," Tonks' eyes were wide, "what are you doing here?"

"You wish to stand in that corner and not move, now," spoke Professor Blackthorn, waving his
hand exactly like Obi-Wan Kenobi in Star Wars.

"I want to go over there," echoed Tonks, jerking awkwardly and turning around on the spot.
What.

Heart pounding, Mallory's brain skipped right into fight-or-flight mode.

Blackthorn looked entirely calm, as though performing Jedi mind tricks were the most ordinary thing in the world.

Her brain kicked into overdrive, trying to figure out if he was actually the murderer coming to kidnap her in Hogwarts' library.

Fuck.

Mallory jerked forward, attempting to run away, but her feet were fucking glued to the floor, because apparently scary necromancers were more than capable of predicting that Mallory would bolt the moment she realized something was wrong.

"L-let me go," Mallory stuttered out, heart filling with a sick kind of nervousness. His gaze lingered on Tonks' retreating back, before turning to face Mallory.

Blackthorn's eyes were cold and flat.

"I have use for you, girl," there was a pause for a moment, and he drew back like he'd seen something unpleasant, "ah, forgive me, no. I am not your killer and you have nothing to fear from me."

"That's exactly what a murdering kidnapper would say," Mallory promptly replied. It gave her a brief twinge of pride that her voice barely shook this time.

Blackthorn shook his head, "your caution is admirable, child, but misplaced. I came here with a purpose, to—"

Mallory decided that was the moment to begin screaming.

So she did, until her lungs ran out of air.

It was the obvious thing to do, if she couldn't get away.

"The people in this library will see and hear nothing," he said, lips quirked again in that dry, humorless smile, "I used a spell."

Mallory screamed, again, as loud and high-pitched as she could. Her face turned red, fists clenched.

Professor Blackthorn gave her a flat stare, waiting her out. Eventually, she ran out of air and stopped screaming, pausing to catch her breath, again.

Instead of silencing her or whatever other horrible spells of torture she imagined he might perform, Professor Blackthorn withdrew a crumpled paper from his pocket.

"This is yours, hm?" he handed her Avery's copy of The Pickwick Wampus.

She took it, hand shaking.

"You didn't Jedi mind trick a trainee Auror so you can give me back a school newspaper," Mallory swallowed, voice scratchy and palms sweaty. Tonks stood in the corner, unmoving. It was no doubt some kind of awful spell, but Mallory didn't know how to undo it. The trainee hadn't reacted at all
to Mallory's screams.

She didn't understand. The Heirophant was supposed to protect her, not kidnap her. This wasn't supposed to be happening.

"No," said Blackthorn, lips twitching upward in amusement, "I was told I must not speak to Hogwarts students without a member of the department present," he gestured at Tonks, who was still staring at a bookshelf in the corner, "but too many have loose tongues. I do not trust them, you understand?"

"What," Mallory said, entirely confused. He didn't trust Tonks?

"I offer you my aid, child."

"What kind of aid? I don't— I thought you were leaving. Are you— are you leaving?"

"I have no fear of this demon," spoke Blackthorn, through his odd, clipped accent, "and it will not kill me. These things you see in your visions, they are not as they appear. Death will not come for either of us this day, child."

"Okay," Mallory swallowed, nodding a bit too quickly, "w-what— how are you helping me?"

Blackthorn pointed to a table, gesturing for her to sit. Legs inexplicably un-glued, Mallory stumbled into the seat with only a moment's hesitation.

Once again she was at war with herself. One part of her mind insisted this was all some kind of terrible trap. The other part was looking at Professor Blackthorn with something akin to hope.

It would be quite some time before Mallory realized Professor Blackthorn said your visions, and not Avery's visions.

Chapter End Notes

Patricia Hopkins the philosopher strikes again. This time, we're referring to Erich Fromm's 'The Art of Loving.' Mallory's recollection of the contents is fairly inaccurate. The key takeaway there isn't that 'Mallory can't love,' but that Patricia Hopkins lectures Mallory as though she's a philosophy undergrad. Fromm's definition really is an ideal, a rejection of love as simple sentimentality, focusing instead on developing an understanding of the self and what he calls the 'four elements of love:' care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. A large part of this involves developing a realistic understanding of your own (and your partner's) strengths and weaknesses.
I'm doing something unusual, and making a major edit to a previous chapter. When I wrote Dumbledore's interlude, I feared I was overloading my readers with too much information. Recall, I introduced Quirrell's escape with the stone, Voldemort's resurrection, the state of the Wizengamot, and my take on legilimency. Then I went on to imply that parts of wizarding Europe were a war-torn hellscape, and finally, brought up the existence of other dimensions ("Beyond the Veil.")

The original version, which I did not publish, contained even more details. However, talking to my readers has convinced me that removing that information was a mistake. I ended up cutting out a lot of context to the past (and next) few chapters. What's more, in editing them out, Dumbledore ends up thinking around the topics, where no real person ever would.

I've added most of the content back in, and will summarize those additions here, for those that don't want to go back and re-read "Aftermath: Dumbledore":

1. Dumbledore no longer "forgets" he dropped off a child in the prologue. He notes Mallory's resemblance to someone, but doesn't believe anyone else will notice. Later, he contemplates whether it might be safer for Mallory to leave Hogwarts, long term.

2. I explain why Corvinus Blackthorn dislikes Death Eaters (Snape) so much, as well as why he has an entire country wishing him dead. Dumbledore first learned of Blackthorn in the 1960s, when he was establishing a radical muggleborn recruitment program for Koldovstretz. The ICW was forced to censor Blackthorn when an affected country threatened military action. Several years later, Dumbledore heard rumors about how Voldemort tried to recruit Blackthorn through his apprentice, a young Bellatrix Black. By all accounts, it went very badly for Ms Black.

Blackthorn sat at a diagonal from Mallory, perfectly positioned to spy on interlopers. Not one person could pass by the secluded reading nook without him noticing.

Tonks, slack-jawed and useless, stared into the corner.

"I came to your school with a purpose," spoke the calm voice of Professor Blackthorn. "I will find this demon and I will kill it. Until I do, I strongly suggest you follow my instructions."

It was clear that the only answer he wanted from her was a deferential 'yes, professor.'

"Okay," Mallory said to the man who'd Jedi-mind-tricked Trainee Tonks, "why?"

"For the purpose of keeping you alive," Blackthorn said dryly, as though he were stating the painfully obvious.

Mallory stared at him, disbelieving, and a flicker of frustration crossed Blackthorn's face.

His tone was flat when he spoke, "I hear rumours of the castle's defenses, passing through these
walls and out into the wilderness. Do you understand? If you are to survive, you must do more than what your Aurors tell you."

"I— no, not really," Mallory furrowed her brows in confusion.

"Your Aurors use spells and strategies that rely on secrecy to maintain their effects. Should this summoner learn of these defenses, he or she will uncover their weaknesses, much like you did."

She almost hesitated, "but… that's what I've been saying all along."

"Yes," replied Blackthorn, lips quirked upwards in quiet amusement, "so I have designed for them better protections, and will give you your own."

"Why are you helping me?"

She didn't want to anger the man with too many questions, but this was far too important to hold back.

So far, every adult besides Professor Sprout did the absolute minimum to help her. Some even went out of their way to make her life miserable, like Snape. The Aurors dismissed each and every one of her warnings, and every time she tried to help herself she got punished for it.

In the wizarding world, adults didn't help unless they were incredibly kind or had an ulterior motive.

Blackthorn didn't seem incredibly kind.

"Little girl," he spoke softly, "I would go to lengths for you, or for any child hunted by demons. This is why Moody sent for me, and this is why I came to your school."

Mallory frowned, reaching over to scratch the scrape on her palm, fidgeting. Was that why Moody taunted Professor Blackthorn about dying? Moody knew he'd stay and fight for her and Harper, even if it meant his death?

She broke eye contact with the man, staring down at the lacquer-wood table, which was dimly reflecting the candlelight. Nicks and scratches marred the surface, evidence of countless years worth of abuse.

If he was telling the truth, then he'd be an invaluable ally.

"Thank you," she replied, "what do you want me to do?"

__It was less about what he wanted her to do, and more about what he gave her.__

Blackthorn handed her two sets of portkeys she could use to escape the Carver. Apparently, there were no anti-portkey jinxes on the Forbidden Forest. Once activated, the portkey would take her to Diagon Alley, right by the Leaky Cauldron.

He supplied her with two sets of portkeys instead of one, as Professor Blackthorn believed in contingencies.

She heartily approved of that mindset.

The second portkey was meant to be worn on her foot. If she rubbed a spot on the ring against a second activator ring on her other toe, it would teleport her to safety. Same went for the rings on
her fingers. Both sets of rings could also be activated through a trigger phrase. Professor Blackthorn said it was a common enough protection among the pure blood children. The kidnapper might not expect Mallory to have them.

"If your kidnapper forgets to silence you," he gave her a significant look, as though he'd be amazed if anyone managed to forget, "these portkeys will still give you passage to safety. You speak the word," he pointed to a piece of paper where a trigger word was printed, "and the portkey will take you out of danger. Do not speak it aloud while wearing the rings, otherwise. Understand?"

"Okay," said Mallory, digesting his words.

Rowle hadn't worn any jewelry the night of the Slytherin Initiation. She must've taken her portkeys off before she went to bed, only to find herself without protection when she needed it the most.

Mallory shivered, a sour taste in her mouth.

"Do not keep the paper on you, and memorize the trigger phrase," ordered Professor Blackthorn, "do not speak the phrase unless you wish to use the portkey."

"I got it," Mallory said, barely refraining from sassing him. Professor Blackthorn treated her like a nine year old. She was eleven, for Chrissake. But he was helping her, so she couldn't kick him in the shins or swear at him.

"Good," he said. But Mallory could tell he wasn't convinced, because he still stared at her as though she was about to speak the trigger phrase at any second.

After a moment, he nodded to himself and reached back into his pocket.

"This mirror," he placed an ornate pocket-mirror onto the desk, "is much like the communication mirrors your Aurors use. You will keep it hidden. Only Aurors are fit to have them. If you find yourself in danger, and the portkeys fail, you will call my name into this mirror, and I will hear you."

The third item was another amulet, "and this amulet will allow me to find you when you call."

"Thank you," Mallory said, for lack of anything better to say. She studied the silver edge of the mirror, thinking. Mallory hadn't even suspected magical items like this could exist. What else was out there? Was every piece of jewelry worn by a witch or wizard a magical item?

She shook her head, shoving those thoughts aside. There were far more important mysteries to solve, in the moment. Mallory knew it was awful thing, to be be ungrateful in face of such generosity. But Professor Blackthorn's gifts were almost too generous. Her better sense was telling her they couldn't be anything other than a trap.

"Can we try out the rings and all the rest?" Mallory asked, glancing up from the table. "I mean, you'd want to make sure everything works, just in case, right?"

It was a sorry fact that her comic books failed to prepare her for this sort of situation. Sure, they had examples of suspicious characters who offered to help to the resident hero. But the problem was, most of those characters betrayed them.

Was Professor Blackthorn a Han Solo or a Lex Luthor?

The portkey rings could be THE ring, the one true ring to rule them all. She might use it and have her arm rot off. They might not even take her to London.
"Try them out?" Professor Blackthorn furrowed his brow in confusion, "what do you mean?"

"Well, how can we be sure they'll work? Shouldn't we check?" Mallory asked, feigning innocent curiosity. Of course, if the rings did work, she'd be making a bid for her escape the moment they touched ground in London. It'd be too good an opportunity to waste.

And if he were willing to use the mirror, she'd at least know it wouldn't stab out her eyes the moment she looked into it.

If the gifts were a trap, he'd find some excuse to avoid using them, himself.

Professor Blackthorn's voice was stern, "you must not misunderstand me. These things I give you, they are to keep you alive. You will not waste them on childish games."

"It's not a game—"

"Little girl," Professor Blackthorn leaned forward and spoke, tone deceptively soft, "I am not some trainee Auror to be tricked into setting you free in London." He paused, "if you need to practice speaking my name into a mirror, you may attempt this now and only now. After this meeting, you will not summon me unless you are in imminent danger. Do you understand?"

Yikes.

Mallory inched back in her seat. Up close, he looked artificial. His hair was plastered to his head, face waxy and smooth. She wondered if he had pores, if his hair was really his own. It looked like straw, stitched on after the fact.

It should've made his lecture comical, coming from a man that looked more like a thing than a person. But Mallory found the fine hairs on her arms rising, instinct screaming danger! Professor Blackthorn wanted her to feel small and stupid for trying to trick him. What's more, he was refusing to use his own magical items.

He could be refusing because testing the rings felt like playing to him. And everyone knew adults didn't play around, not ever. Adults were serious, and only ever did serious work-things. All fun and childish things were to be scorned and discarded, lest the other adults think them irresponsible.

Mallory's own parents often made similar complaints about her 'games,' but they weren't mind-controlling a Trainee Auror. Sure, he'd explained why he didn't trust Tonks. But that only spoke to his skill at making up clever excuses. She had to keep the big picture in mind.

In other words, Blackthorn could very well be hiding some sinister trap in his 'gifts.'

Mallory knew with a quiet certainty that it'd be reckless to piss off the scary necromancer who could so easily mind-control trainee Tonks. If he wanted her to feel stupid and small, she could pretend to feel stupid and small.

"Right, sorry," Mallory's mouth was dry.

Blackthorn sighed, anger draining away, "I do not intend to discourage you. To check another's work is worthwhile policy, and I do praise your foresight. However, I know this is not your true intent. You plan to abuse my kindness and that is unacceptable."

Christ, it would hardly even be pretending at this point.

"Sorry," Mallory said, again, "but wouldn't it be safer to use them now? Before I'm kidnapped, I
mean. I know that's a lot to ask, but leaving now is safer."

She knew she was being reckless, but told herself it'd draw the conversation away from her real plan. Mallory didn't want him to realize she was looking his gift horse in the mouth.

"Yes," Professor Blackthorn's lips twisted into a bitter smile, "but you cannot. I have sworn oaths."

What?

"Oaths to keep me here?" Mallory sat up straight, all pretense of meekness forgotten, "why?"

"No, I am not made to keep you from leaving," Professor Blackthorn pinched the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes and muttering, "it is a complicated matter."

"Why?" Mallory asked.

"You are being a pest, child. And I have not yet finished explaining what you must do." Blackthorn paused, "I will need you to give me a lock of your hair, so that I might have another means of locating you. The summoner might think to take these gifts from you." He gestured toward the mirror and amulet on the table.

What? He wanted her hair?

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," said Mallory, hedging her words. In fact, she was pretty sure that was how Voodoo dolls were made. There were whole books where the moral of the story was 'don't give the scary magician your hair or blood.' She wasn't that stupid.

"The portkeys, mirror, and amulet are only additional obstacles for the summoner to overcome. Should he or she learn you have these items, they will simply take them from you. However, even if they learn of the locating charm, they will not be able to counter it. I will know the moment you leave Hogwarts grounds. In fact, you are welcome to tell all about this charm, because the summoner may then hesitate before kidnapping you."

How, exactly, was she supposed to politely say 'I don't trust you with that kind of power.'

"Can you…" Mallory trailed off, "what if you make it so they can't take the portkeys and things off me, instead? Is there a spell for that?"

"Yes," answered Blackthorn, "the permanent sticking charm. I could do this, but then the summoner would cut off your fingers to remove the rings."

Oh. Mallory stared at the table, feet leaden beneath her. She hadn't even thought of that. But that didn't mean Blackthorn was right. His locator charm wasn't that secure, either. In fact, she could think of one major weakness off the top of her head.

"You," Mallory spoke abruptly, "you'd be the one— I mean, if the summoner wanted to kidnap me, then all they'd have to do is attack you."

Or bribe him. He could be blackmailed or even hobbled in some way. If the summoner knew the one person standing between Mallory and the demon was Blackthorn, then they'd find a way to prevent him from defending her. They could even research some specific counter to the locator charm Blackthorn was using. There was nothing stopping them.

"Yes," Blackthorn leaned back in his chair, a thin smile on his lips, "an excellent deduction. The
answer is that they will find themselves outmatched. Of course," the smile became sharper, "they are welcome to try."

Great. Menacing necromancer talk. That wasn't any sort of answer.

"What about counter-charms?" Mallory asked.

Blackthorn responded by lifting a hand, and slicing the air with a single finger. A lock of her hair floated away and into his grasp.

"Hey!" Mallory sat up in her chair. "Give that back!"

"The counter charm is long and arduous, requiring a resource our summoner has precious little of: time." He pulled a thin metal pillbox from his robes and placed the lock of hair in it. He shut it with a snap.

Why did she feel like this was some sort of horrible trap?

"Give it back," said Mallory, firm.

"I keep it for your protection. I am to be sure this demon will not kill you."

"The demon? Sure," Mallory's words were tumbling out faster than she could think, "but anyone else could. You could sell it to Death Eaters, later. They'd love to kill a muggleborn. Or make it into a voodoo doll, and a hundred things I haven't even thought of because I've no idea what you can do with hair. But you shouldn't have taken it when I said not to!"

"Your Headmaster and your guardian gave me permission," replied Blackthorn, calm, "and I will not give it to Death Eaters or anyone else. It will only be used for your protection, this I swear."

"You're not holding your wand. It doesn't count."

That the Headmaster agreed to it made her feel slightly better. She didn't think the Headmaster wanted her dead. Snape, on the other hand, would celebrate. And there was no guarantee Blackthorn was telling the truth. The Headmaster may know nothing of the locator charm.

Blackthorn let out a frustrated sigh, "You will follow my instructions, and you will live. I and the other wizards tasked with protecting this school have no intention of letting you or any other student come to harm. These fears you have, they are not based in fact, but in fancy. Do you understand?"

No, as a matter of fact. She didn't.

If Mallory suspected there was something suspicious about Blackthorn before, she was certain of it, now. And it wasn't just that he bewitched Tonks into staring at the corner, in order to secretly offer her gift horses.

Blackthorn evaded her questions, refused to make a vow, and claimed he had a use for her. Did he think he could use her as bait? Because that was the obvious conclusion to draw in all this.

Motivation. Why was he offering to help her? Think.

Was he moved by her tearful plea in the Auror's Office? Did he take satisfaction in aiding her when her own teachers and Aurors wouldn't? Was it really just because he wanted to protect children?

She didn't know, and was having trouble puzzling out his behavior.
He could be working for the Carver, she thought. But then he'd just kidnap her. Why bother with the charade? He didn't need to hold back on account of the Aurors, since he could Jedi-mind trick anyone into obeying him. In bewitching a police officer, Blackthorn demonstrated that the law didn't apply to him. He was patently unafraid of being sent to Azkaban, or didn't believe the Aurors capable of restraining him. If he were working for the Carver, she would already be dead.

*Do you understand?* he asked. He expected her to say yes, to shrink under his gaze, ashamed and chastised.

"Yeah, I get it," she pocketed the two rings while he was distracted, careful to be sure the two didn't touch. If the rings were real, she wanted them for her own use.

Even this whole bit about the lock of hair was a distraction from the *real* question. *Blackthorn and the rest of the adults wouldn't let her go home.* They were reacting instead of acting, refusing to take her out of the dangerous situation. If they were *really* concerned for her safety, they'd help her *leave.*

"I see," spoke Blackthorn. He leaned forward and steepled his fingers, frowning.

"You *don't* understand," he sighed, "this is my mistake. I forget you do not have the advantage of your peers. There is no one who would have taught you these things."

A muggleborn, he meant.

She didn't have anyone to teach her the obvious things that any witch or wizard would know. Avery's one-time offer didn't count.

Mallory wasn't sure why he was bringing it up. Perhaps because she didn't know the uses for a lock of hair? From Snape, it would be an insult meant to hurt her, but Blackthorn wasn't Snape. She could take it as an authority figure cementing his position as a superior source of knowledge, but his expression and tone didn't mesh with that explanation.

He looked concerned, maybe. Pensive. It was difficult to read his face when his skin was stiff and cracking like wax where it should be wrinkling in fine lines.

*For one, her parents had impressed upon her the dangers of taking gifts from strangers.*

"No," Mallory managed, taking time to think through her reply, "but my parents taught me loads of other things. Why can't I leave the school? *Why won't you make a vow? You're not telling me anything, at all.*"

She guessed, after consideration, that he was luring her away from those questions. He couldn't or wouldn't tell her why she had to stay at Hogwarts. But Mallory would not be moved. Anything else was secondary to discerning *why* she couldn't leave.

Professor Blackthorn drummed his fingers on the table, then stopped. He stared at his hand, eyes distant. She got the sense he wasn't going to respond anytime soon.

"Professor?" Mallory prodded. She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable. Her scraped hand stung, and her backside was still aching from where she fell.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair to look out of their nook into the rest of the library, where students passed by, their eyes sliding past the necromancer and girl as though they weren't even there. "*when I was your age, Grindelwald and his armies invaded my country. Parents left to fight, they did not come home.*"
Mallory didn't know what to make of that non-sequitur. "My dad was in the army," Mallory said, "before he started as a G.P., I mean, he was an army doctor. In North Ireland." There was a pause, "er— a doctor's a healer."

She could talk about random, unrelated things, too. Though, she would bet her left pinky this was the beginning of a granddad-story: 'in my day when we walked uphill both ways to school in the snow…' The moral, of course, being that she ought to listen to her elders and stop asking questions.

"Yes," Blackthorn nodded absently. "But this was not like the muggle wars. Grindelwald and his generals brought with them armies of the dead, creatures that felt no pain or hunger. That was not what made people fear him, though. He had more terrible weapons, still: demons from Beyond the Veil. They turned villages to ash, and if the summoner thought to put up an anti-apparition jinx, one demon could crush entire armies of wizards."

Blackthorn stopped speaking, face expressionless. Suddenly, Mallory wondered if he was waiting for her response.

"That's… sorry? I mean, that's awful," it felt trite, but she was at a loss for words. How exactly was one supposed to respond to that story? Why was he telling her this?

"Yes," he frowned, looking her in the eye, "I tell you this… Grindelwald's war took much from me. I lost my grandfather when I was not much older than you. I think he expected to have more time, tell me the things I ought to know, so that I would not make so many mistakes. For a long time, I had no one to tell me such things, to give an advantage."

She'd been right, sort of. Except this wasn't the kind of story she felt comfortable mocking. Mallory imagined losing her family, and felt sick to her stomach.

"I'm sorry," she said. She knew he was telling this story to make her feel bad, but it worked anyway. And she could guess, now, that he was about to impart some 'advantageous' advice, and wanted her to feel grateful.

Either that, or he wanted to hammer in the danger of demons. Possibly both.

"It was a long time ago," spoke Blackthorn, voice quiet, "and I found new mentors."

Implication: he wanted to be her mentor? That did not sound like the best idea. She wanted to be a superhero, not a villainous necromancer-in-training. Plus, he didn't know her from Adam. Why on earth would he want to?

Mallory shifted in her seat, uncomfortable, "I read my textbooks a bit, over the summer. And— I mean, before I made the oath to Avery, I did read about it in the book. I'm not— I don't think that was a mistake." She had no idea how to turn him down without horribly offending him.

The worst part was, this entire digression into story-time was distracting her from the real questions. Why won't he test his own magical items? Why won't he tell her why she can't leave Hogwarts? Why was he insisting the locator charm was infallible? She still didn't really understand his motives. The series of events leading up to him helping her didn't flow naturally.

And now Darth Vader wanted her to become his next apprentice, and take her first steps into the Dark Side. With her luck, he'd turn out to secretly be the Master, and sacrifice her to a legion of Daleks for the fun of it.

Blackthorn let out a snort of laughter, startling Mallory out of her thoughts.
"What?" Mallory asked, irritated. *Was he laughing at her? What on earth for?*

"Forgive me," Blackthorn shook his head, grin evaporating, "I just—" he trailed off, rubbing the bridge of his nose and letting out a tired sigh. "This situation— it is absurd. You plan to run away with the portkeys the moment I leave. I do not know what intervention would sway you from this path. If I give you advice, you become angry. If I tell you to obey, you decide to do the opposite. I cannot tell you all I know, as I am bound," he looked up, "but if I ask you to trust me, you will not do this, either."

*How did he know?* She must've been giving away more clues than she thought. It rankled.

She felt vulnerable, like a villain was breathing down the back of her neck. It was that same feeling you get when you miss the bottom step on the staircase, or when you just realize you forgot your homework. There was no way Blackthorn was giving back that lock of hair, no way she could make him. And even though he hadn't bespelled her, she was as much at his mercy as Tonks.

"I do trust you," Mallory lied, because any other answer might make him angrier. She didn't know what he'd do if he got any angrier. She'd just have to think of some way around the locator charm. There had to be a way. Felix was clever with books, and if he couldn't sort it out, she'd go to someone else.

So long as he didn't mind-control her like he did Tonks, she still had a chance.

Blackthorn repressed another sigh, "You are lying, and I cannot fault you. Suspicion is good in such a situation. Perhaps..." he drummed his fingers on the table, frowning into empty space.

"I'm not lying. I won't run away."

"Enough," Blackthorn's face twisted, almost indignant, "I am no muggle villager to be tricked by an eleven year old."

That bastard. This was the second time he'd taken a dig at her parents.

"Don't talk about them like that," she spoke without thinking, "they're my *parents*, and they're the best parents I could ever have. I wouldn't trade them for all the magic in the world."

Silence.

Blackthorn could've been carved from stone. He didn't appear to have any reaction, as though someone had cut the strings to a particularly life-like puppet.

"Quite," he spoke, finally, "forgive me, Miss Hopkins. I will withdraw my criticism of your muggles."

Liar. He wasn't sorry at all, that was practically a mockery. But Blackthorn must've thought she bought it, because he had re-animated himself, and was tapping his fingers on the desk again.

*Irritating.*

Mallory scratched at the skin on her palm while she waited for him finish thinking. He was no doubt puzzling out some sort of strategy to win her obedience. *Fat chance of that working.* She turned away from him, examining her hand. The skin was scraped and raw. Parts were scabbing over, but the skin around it was puffy. Red. The injury was worse than she'd expect from falling out a chair.
There was a tapping noise on the table, and Mallory glanced up. Blackthorn wasn't staring off at a fixed point in space anymore. Instead, he was pointing to her hand, gesturing for her show him.

"It's just a scrape," Mallory said, almost combative.

Blackthorn ignored her, manipulating Mallory's hand, and twisting it into the light.

"No," Blackthorn frowned, studying the scrape, "this is an artifact of your broken oath."

"I fell," Mallory corrected him, pulling her hand away. His fingers were cold, and the texture was grainy, like dried clay. "And is that why you won't make an oath about the lock of hair? Are you afraid you'll have to break it?"

Blackthorn gave her a long look, "when you break an oath, it takes what is precious to you, your talents and skill. If you have talent for potions, you will find yourself unable to brew simple boil-cures. And if you have little talent or skill to give, it takes from you your life. A clumsy girl will be more-so. Fall down a flight of steps, maybe die. If you are sick, you become sicker."

He pointed to her hand, "this is made worse by the oath you took and broke. It will fester," he paused, "you will have your nurse look at it. Tonight." If she didn't know better, she'd wonder if she saw genuine worry in his eyes.

Mallory glared at him without speaking. A slow, throbbing ache was building behind her temples. She suffered more headaches since she started Hogwarts than all her eleven years in South Brent.

She blamed it on the stress.

People weren't built to handle prolonged stress. Brief episodes of worry were normal, but this was one thing after another. Every time she turned around there was a new enemy, another threat she had no idea how to handle.

She glanced up at Blackthorn, who was staring at her intently.

"You should not take oaths," he said, serious, "they are dangerous magic, and your classmates will likely be punished for manipulating you into taking one."

They wouldn't, but he could hardly know that.

"I don't think I was tricked," replied Mallory.

"Think, girl," Blackthorn said, "I could make an oath and say I am not working for this Carver. But I am working with Hogwarts' professors, staff, and Aurors. Say the Carver is your Defense Professor, and I do not know this. I would be forsworn. Do you see why oaths are so dangerous, now?"

"But you said you swore one when you came here, didn't you?"

"Yes," Blackthorn nodded, "crafted by solicitors, with terms agreed upon by both parties after much deliberation."

"Oh," Mallory frowned, "the book didn't say anything about that."

Either that, or she'd skimped over it.

"Do not swear any more oaths, and do not convince others to swear oaths to you. It is dangerous magic. Will you promise me that?"
"I..." Mallory almost said yes. "But no one said anything. Avery, Montague, and Vaisey. It was dangerous for Avery, too. He swore things, promised to tell me things. If it were that dangerous, he wouldn't have."

"A boy like Avery gets a letter from his mother, father. They write what oath he must make, and what words to say to have you take it. He would not make an oath otherwise, his parents taught him this."

"Right," Mallory managed, at a complete loss for words. But why? The effort, the cost, all for Harper? For her? Why?

It didn't make any sense, and only gave her more questions.

At least Blackthorn explained why Moody called her an idiot for taking a vow. He hadn't called her stupid for taking an oath with Avery, he called her stupid for taking any oath. She'd been confused about that. Of course, Blackthorn might be lying. Yet, Vaisey never explained why everyone wasn't making vows, and this explanation meshed with the serious consequences of a broken vow. It all fit.

He finally broke the silence, almost murmuring, "your headmaster said I should not tell you this, but he did not make me swear to it. He believes you too young to hear of such matters, but I suspect you will continue your ill-advised escape attempts unless I explain this to you."

Right. Because that wasn't obviously a lure to make her want to learn all about Blackthorn's 'forbidden knowledge.' He must really think she's a nine year old.

"Tell me, little girl, what do you expect will happen to you, should you make it home to your muggles?" demanded Blackthorn.

"I have a plan," Mallory spoke, words short and sharp. She didn't elaborate.

"Your home, it is in Devon, yes?"

"Why do you want to know?" At this point, she couldn't help herself. He was such a prick.

"A few hours from London, by bus or train, hm?" Blackthorn smiled without humor, "and here at your school, what happens while you are gone?"

"I don't know," Mallory shrugged one shoulder, "people freak out."

"And the summoner? What do they do?" Blackthorn asked, giving her a sharp look.

Mallory stared at the table, face stony. She knew where he was leading her. He wanted her to say the summoner follows her to her home and kidnaps her, either in transit or once she's home.

"The summoner doesn't know where I live," Mallory responded, instead, "neither does the demon."

"That information is easy to come by, should you possess the proper connections."

"The homunculus maps, you mean," Mallory said, "I know. But they'd have to do all that before I'm home. And by the time they're at my house, we'll be heading to the airport."

"Wizards can apparate," stated Blackthorn.

"I know," Mallory said. That was partly why she had aimed to create so much confusion during her last escape attempt. She knew exactly what he was doing. Blackthorn was walking her through the
scenario, reeling her in so she'd see the full impact of her supposed mistake.

"Littl— Miss Hopkins, your home is not safe," he sighed, "such creatures and wizards are not hindered by muggle locks. Most muggles aren't hindered by muggle locks. It would be…" the man rubbed the bridge of his nose again, "folly."

"Sure" Mallory's voice came out very, very tired. Blackthorn didn't know what the ghosts said. The adults were all making plans as though the castle were completely and totally safe. They thought that so long as Mallory stayed inside, the demon couldn't possibly get her.

They were wrong.

She shouldn't say anything. In fact, she'd broken an oath to avoid saying anything that would get Headmaster Dumbledore into trouble, believing it'd be better for her in the long run.

Only now, it wasn't looking like she'd have a long run.

Moreover, it wasn't like Blackthorn was working for the Carver. If he were working for summoner, he'd have kidnapped her already. Blackthorn might have an ulterior motive for helping her, but it wasn't to sacrifice her to a demon.

"Hogwarts isn't safe," Mallory spoke, words blunt. "The ghosts said the protections are failing, and that's why the demon got us."

Blackthorn froze in his seat, giving Mallory a sharp look, "have you said this to anyone else?"

"No," Mallory shook her head, unthinking.

"Good," Blackthorn said, "don't say a word to anyone. As of right now, only myself, Auror Moody, Professor Sprout, and your Headmaster know this."

"Alright, but," Mallory hesitated, "anyone might've overheard them. They were just talking in the middle of the corridor, all suspicious and weird. The castle isn't safe."

She wasn't about to tell Blackthorn that her friends knew.

"I see," Blackthorn frowned, "and yes, I agree. Hogwarts isn't safe, but your home is less safe. The demon cannot get inside the castle walls, even with the defenses lowered. The same is not true for your muggle home. You must be patient."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

In that moment, Blackthorn looked as though he wanted nothing more than to reach across the table and strangle her.

"It means that I took a lock of your hair and will use a locator charm on it. If I cannot take you out of this school and to a safehouse, then this is the best I can do."

The worst part was, Blackthorn was almost making sense.

"Right," Blackthorn leaned back in his chair, resting the palms of his hands on his knees, "do you intend to run away, again, little girl? Look me in the eye when you answer. I will know if you lie."

"No," she said, after a moment of thought, "I like my friends, here, and I want to learn more magic." All of that was technically true. She wasn't planning run away at this very instant, and she did like her friends here. But those statements had to be taken independently of one other.
Blackthorn shook his head, "let me be specific. Do you plan to leave the castle any time between now and three days from now?"

She must not have looked sullen and defeated enough for him to believe her. Either that, or her deception was especially transparent to him.

Mallory knew how this conversation would go. He wouldn't leave her alone until he got a sincere 'no' out of her. And she supposed she could at least accept that having Blackthorn and Dumbledore in the same building as her was safer than going off on her own.

Mallory slumped in her seat, sullen, "alright, I won't."

"Good," Blackthorn rubbed at his knees again, before standing up, "remember to speak to your nurse about your hand. It will fester. Now, is there anything else I can help you with, Miss Hopkins?"

She blinked, disconcerted for a moment, "er— no?" and then she thought about it for another moment, "actually, yeah?"

"Speak, then."

"I still want you to test the mirrors and the rings."

Blackthorn stopped in his tracks, sighed, and looked up at the ceiling like he was praying for divine intervention.

"Oh, for the love of—"
Mallory had detention.

No, she wasn't joking. The adults had decided the first years ought to start their detentions today. They thought it'd keep them occupied and away from further sources of mischief.

The Slytherins filed into the study hall, where they'd previously held prep with Snape. Luckily, Snape wasn't in charge of the detention this afternoon. That dubious honor was reserved for Professor Sprout.

Professor Sprout stood at the front of the room, smiling warmly, "would you like a biscuit, Miss Hopkins?"

"Er— thanks." Mallory took one. She need something to get her through what would undoubtedly be an afternoon spent in freakish silence, leaving her twitchy and sneezing at her desk. She'd rather remove her own spleen with a fork.

Mallory wouldn't be alone in her torment, though. The room was already filling up, all the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs migrating to opposite sides of the study hall. She spotted Dead-Eyes Selwyn, treating Mallory to the most malevolent glare she'd ever seen on the face of a boy. Cokebottles-Vaisey, Montague, and Avery formed their own coalition. They were separate from Selwyn but still on the Slytherin side. Mallory walked over to the Hufflepuff side, for obvious reasons.

Kit and Felix represented the whole of the Hufflepuff contingent.

Mallory dropped down next to Kit, letting out a miserable groan. This wasn't how she expected to spend her Saturday. She'd intended to use a good portion of the afternoon figuring out what to do about the Carver. And by that, she meant she'd give Tonks the slip and sneak off to spy on the adults. Meeting Kit, Felix, and Colin was a part of her plan, but she wasn't sure they'd be allowed to talk in detention.

"I have so much to tell you," Mallory spoke under her breath, just loud enough for Kit and Felix to hear. Luckily, Professor Sprout didn't seem to mind.

"So do I!" said Kit, eyes gleaming with excitement, "did you know Professor Sprout gives out biscuits in detention? Biscuits! In detention!"

Mallory's lips twisted up in a fond smile, "yeah? I saw."

"I was about to be very cross with you about all this, but biscuits! We're going to have to get detention every weekend."

"We are in detention every weekend," replied Felix, sounding mighty sour about it.

Kit gave him a brilliant smile, "perfect."

Professor Sprout, it seemed, didn't give a hoot about punishment. Her version of detention consisted of an assignment in their Herbology textbook, which could be completed as a group or alone, so long as everyone kept their voices down. Complimentary biscuits were up at the front, if anyone got peckish.
Mallory privately wondered if Professor Sprout was actually this nice all the time, or if Dumbledore asked her to cut them a break.

Not even a minute later, the door to the study hall opened and a seventh year Ravenclaw prefect added another miscreant to their number.

"Miss Hobbs, come in," Professor Sprout gave the girl a warm smile, "would you like a biscuit?"

Seeing the girl's splotchy face and red-rimmed eyes, it became clear why Professor Sprout felt it necessary to be extra nice. Some first years never had detention before today, not ever. Some first years might even think detention was the worst thing that could ever happen to them, that this was the end of the world.

And those students, puffy-eyed and sniffling, got biscuits from the understanding Professor Sprout. Mallory almost smiled, raising her estimation of the professor a bit, in her mind.

Mallory glanced over at Felix, "so this isn't just for all of us who fought in the Battle on the Pitch?"

"The what?" asked Felix, puzzled.

"The flying lesson," translated Kit.

"Oh, no. This detention is for all first years who earned themselves a detention in the first week of class."

Mallory perked up, "ooh, then Colin will be here, soon."

"Mmmhmm," Kit drew out the sound, "I'm going to get another biscuit."

Mallory had intended to wait for Colin to arrive before explaining cartomancy and Professor Blackthorn to her friends. But the Gryffindors were late, and Mallory was getting impatient.

Felix was focusing on the assignment, completely uninterested in entertaining a bored Mallory. Kit, too, couldn't stand waiting, and had parked herself in front of the teacher's desk, conveniently close to the biscuits.

Every once in a while, Mallory would glance at the Slytherins, huddled around their papers in deep concentration.

Mallory found herself mulling over what Blackthorn said. A piece of the puzzle wasn't fitting, a loose thread dangling for her to pluck. Every adult she met so far said that taking an oath was a dumb idea, regardless of whether or not she broke it.

And Mallory wasn't naive enough to take Avery's word for it, when he claimed it was a common practice. She'd made him take out his textbook and skimmed the related chapter. It said nothing about life-endangering consequences, right? And it wouldn't be in the first year textbook if it were that dangerous, would it?

Granted, the books taught the cutting charm, which could be used to slice open someone's neck. Perhaps the books didn't shy away from dangerous spells. Still, she wondered if she skipped a page or missed the warnings. Blackthorn certainly thought she'd made a mistake, after all.

Mallory sighed, leaning back in her chair, "hey Felix? Do you need any books?"

There was silence for a moment, and then he responded, "I brought all the books I need, thank
you."

Had she offended him? Fuck.

"I know, I mean — do you want any more books? I'm getting up, taking a walk in the library. Figure I'd see if you need anything, you know?"

This time he looked up, "if I need books, I'll get them for myself."

Christ, that boy needed to come with a manual.

In times of stress and misfortune, what people wanted more than anything was for life to return to normal. A person might be willing to do anything, even trust in the good intentions of unlikely allies, if they promise normalcy.

Avery promised her something she wanted far more than normalcy. He promised her he'd show her the path that'd result in her survival.

Blackthorn had seen it. He never even met Avery and knew the moment she mentioned his name. Now, after reading the chapter in the Magical Theory textbook, Mallory understood why Blackthorn assumed the oath was a trap. The worst part was, she had all the information she'd needed. She'd skimmed over the words, too fast and too eager, making the conclusion she wanted to draw.

Mallory had wanted to believe Avery. She'd been in a rush, desperate to gain some advantage. She'd feared that the three Slytherins would get impatient with her. So Mallory had skimmed the contents of the chapter, instead of going through it line by line.

This was a mistake.

She understood the basics: magical vows were promises made while holding a wand. The oath-takers had to know they were making a vow, and it created a connection of trust between them.

But there was more.

Witches and Wizards didn't invoke vows in every day life because of the cost.

Skipped yesterday were two pages of warnings, explicitly outlining the dangers. The loss of magic was only the beginning. Oathbreakers, depending on what they valued, may find their talents altered. Oaths were magic of fasting, dealing in connections, that which bound people, concepts, and objects together. Fasting had the power to make or alter those bonds.

The oath itself influenced the mind of the oath-taker. Even if they didn't break it, they'd find themselves more willing reach out, even when that was a terrible idea.

In other words, since she broke an oath, she'd be weaker in some abstract way for a time. Depending on the severity of the break, the backlash could be small and temporary, or even large and permanent. People didn't usually make oaths as children, as the intent mattered less than the wording.

Briefly, Mallory wondered if Avery altered his Magical Theory textbook to exclude the warnings, since she wouldn't have taken the oath if she'd known. But then, the pages looked awful similar. He couldn't have stopped her from taking out her own copy of Magical Theory, either.
No, Avery hadn't tampered with the book. This was her own fault.

"Well, well, look what we have here, Gred."

Mallory spun around, startled. Shite. The twins. She hadn't been paying her surroundings any mind, too wrapped up in thinking. Now, the Weasley twins had her cornered in the stacks. Shite. They were definitely cross with her.

"If it isn't the snitching snake," spoke Gred, and unpleasant smile smeared across his face. Both twins had stacks of books in their arms, no doubt to be used in future mischief-making.

"My, my, brother mine," continued Forge, "what did we say we'd do if the little snakeling tattled to the teacher?"

Mallory stumbled backwards, leaning against a bookshelf. Crap.

"Oy! You two never learn, do you?" interrupted a prefect. He bore the same red hair as the twins, "I'll have you know I'm hearing every word of this, and I have half a mind to take points off Gryffindor."

Behind the prefect was Colin, who looked rumpled and a tad tired. Following him were three other Gryffindor first years.

"Colin!" Mallory shoved past the twins and the prefect, racing forward to hug Colin, "you're here!"

"Course I am," Colin grinned.

Arms still around him, Mallory gave Colin an extra squeeze, "I was worried, but only a little. I mean — with everything, and all."

It'd crossed her mind more than once that he might've been kidnapped. She'd known she was being paranoid, but as each second stretched out like gooey salt water taffy and no Colin appeared, she couldn't help but wonder. Relieved and a bit embarrassed, she let him go and turned her attention to the other kids.

Behind Colin, the prefect and the rest of the Gryffindor first years stood awkwardly, watching their reunion. The twins made retching noises.

"Right," the prefect cleared his throat, focusing on his brothers, "two points from Gryffindor, each, for disorderly conduct in the library."

"Percy, how could you?" spoke the twins, "he can't take points from us, can he?"

"Why, he'd have to be a prefect!" said Gred, with Forge taking over for his brother, "is our dear darling older brother a prefect?"

"It can't be possible. If he were, we'd have heard about it all summer."

"Yes, yes, how droll." Percy the Prefect rolled his eyes, "it's a great honor to be selected as prefect, as you well know. If you keep speaking like that, these young first years might get the wrong impression."

"It's too late for that," said Gred, a wry grin on his lips, "yeah, I don't think you can hide the giant stick up your arse, Perce."

"That's completely inappropriate—" sputtered Percy the Prefect, only to be interrupted by Mallory
"I didn't tattle," Mallory spoke up before the twins and Percy could start fighting, again. She had a strong suspicion the brothers would find any excuse to needle each other. "And I'm not the one who was secretly working for Farley all along."

"What? Slander and lies! We'd never!" replied the twins.

"The Aurors told me that hideout was Farley's hideout, not yours," Mallory accused.

"That—!" spoke the twins. "Only because we stole it from her."

"You did what?" Percy the Prefect looked almost apoplectic.

"It was her's all last year," Gred or Forge winked, "couldn't tell you how we know that."

"And thought we'd nab it from her for a laugh," they said, "It's a great spot. Bint keeps all the best lairs to herself."

The twins turned to Mallory, expressions intense, "so you didn't betray us, little snakeling."

"Betray you?" spoke the ignored prefect, "what sort of nonsense is this?"

"No," Mallory lied, shaking her head, "I don't need more enemies."

"Wait, why are they looking into Farley?" asked a twin. "Is she a suspect?" asked the other twin, hope blossoming across their faces.

"Yeah," lied Mallory, again, "they think it might've been her or another seventh year."

"Merlin's balls!" one twin high fived the other, "yes! We're going to be rich!"

"Whatever you're up to," spoke Percy the Prefect, primly, "I want you to know I disapprove."

"Gee, I had no idea." "Yeah, we'd never suspect our brother of disapproving of us."

Percy Weasley gave them a long-suffered look and sighed. "I'll be back to fetch you lot for dinner," he interjected, speaking to the first years, before turning to leave in a huff.

"Got a bodyguard, now?" Mallory asked, glancing at Percy the Prefect's retreating back. The other three first year Gryffindors were slinking toward the Prep room, and the twins had their own mischief to get up to — only Colin and Mallory were left.

"It's a new rule," replied Colin, "third years and below aren't allowed out without a prefect or professor."

Mallory smiled humorlessly, "they're getting serious, then?"

"Think so," Colin shrugged.

He sat down at the table where she'd discarded the Magical Theory textbook, dropping his bookbag on the ground next to the chair.

Last time they spoke, Mallory was in the Hospital Wing, telling them all about the Taboo and the secret maps. That was before the Tarot reading, before Mallory learned how she'd die.

"Mallory," spoke Colin haltingly, "you don't look so good."
"Yeah," Mallory ran her fingers through her hair. Nervous habit. She knew she looked terrible. Her face was as white as a sheet, eyes red-rimmed.

She'd spent the whole morning thinking, until she'd exhausted her imagination. After Blackthorn summarily refused to let her practice with the portkeys, Mallory did her best to imagine any kind of solution that didn't involve running home to her parents or trusting Blackthorn to save her.

She came up with one.

It wasn't even a good one. At most, it was a third-tier last-ditch backup plan.

Mallory needed a better plan, because she didn't trust Blackthorn to keep her among the living. Blackthorn never contradicted her regarding the demon-protectors on the castle. He simply told her not to tell anyone about it. And while Hogwarts was safer than home, it still wasn't safe.

Likewise, she didn't doubt that the lock of hair, portkeys, and magic mirror would help. Yet, there was no guarantee it'd be enough. Regardless of what Blackthorn said, in all visions where she didn't get the Sword of Silver Fire, Mallory Hopkins died.

There was a good chance, that in the next three days, she'd be dead.

She needed more time.

More time to come up with a better plan, come up with some moves and gather allies. Avery and Blackthorn weren't reliable. No matter what Blackthorn said, there was a reason she'd been warned off him. The Headmaster wouldn't have told her to keep her role in the cartomancy a secret if Blackthorn didn't have some malicious intent. He was positioning himself as the sole line of defense between her and the summoner, and Mallory didn't like it. What if he, too, had an ulterior motive? She couldn't simply trust that everything would turn out okay.

As it stood, Mallory was outmanned, outgunned, and running out of options. The branches on the tree of possible futures were being pruned, and every hour drew her closer to her death.

Mallory shook her head, she didn't have time to waste on this melancholy bellyaching.

"Mallory?" Colin prompted, concerned.

"I'm fine," Mallory smiled. "You'll never believe what I learned last night. I have so much to tell you, so much." Her voice shook. "Er— magical vows, magical power, and there's this secret school paper called the Pickwick Wampus that has all kinds of gossip."

"We've got a new plan, then?" Colin asked.

"Yeah," Mallory said, keeping her tone even. "But we need to get back to Felix and Kit, first. We've been waiting on you."

Back in the study hall, Mallory explained everything that had happened since they last saw her. Magical oaths, cartomancy, and why they shouldn't mention the castle protections to anyone. What really caught their attention, though, was how power flowed more readily to those with authority.

"This is unconscionable!" exclaimed Felix, recoiling in his seat.

"I think you can game it, though." Mallory frowned, having no idea what the word 'unconscionable' meant, "if everyone starts respecting you, or you act in the spirit of fairness and
Hufflepuff things, your spells will work better. And you'll have no problem doing that. You're plenty fair."

"But if I start sneaking around, I lose power?" Colin asked, interrupting.

"Yeah," Mallory nodded, "looks like."

"And I gain points if I'm loyal and fair, too!" grinned Kit, though the grin vanished off her face after a second. "Oh, but Mallory, you'll lose your power if you're brave."

Mallory shrugged, "dunno." There was no strength in her words. She didn't know. There wasn't time enough to find out, either.

"Sorry, mate." Kit patted her arm.

Mallory huffed out a laugh. Oh, Kit thought she was upset because it went against her self-image as a hero. Mallory's smile only grew at the thought. Wow, she hadn't even considered that. But there had to be some way to be a Slytherin hero. Heroism could be ambitious, after all.

A commotion on the other side of the room caught her attention, and Mallory corrected them unthinkingly, "I'd still be heroic."

It was Selwyn. He must've said something awful to Vaisey, because the girl with cokebottle glasses glared at him something fierce. Mallory could only guess, because they weren't sitting close enough for her to overhear.

She dragged her gaze away from Selwyn and turned back to her friends. They were looking at her as though she'd just announced her imminent death.

"You're talking like you won't get the chance," Colin spoke, brows drawn together in concern, "why are you talking like you won't get the chance? Didn't that Heirophant wizard help you?"

"Not all heroes run into battle, waving swords, you know?" Mallory answered, instead. "Doctors do heroing in their own way, and so do Slytherins."

If Mallory made it through this battle with the Carver, she'd be a strategic hero, and fight the bullies. Mindless bravery was out of the question, but calculated risks and clever gambits could be used to save people, too.

"You're avoiding the question," Colin chided. "Why are you talking about yourself like you won't get the chance?"

Because she wouldn't, probably. Blackthorn wouldn't give her the sword, and had placed himself as the sole line of defense between her and the Carver. Without knowing why — the real reason why, not all that bullhockey about pride in his job — she couldn't trust him. And that left her with only her backup plan, which was practically no plan at all.

Mallory wiped her palms on her robes, eyes fixed on the corner of the Magical Theory textbook.

"I'm going to die pretty soon," she swallowed, "I think."

Common sense. An eleven year old goes up against a terrible demon, what did you expect to happen, here? She didn't know how to teleport, didn't have a phoenix to flame her to safety. The portkeys were only good so long as they weren't traps, and weren't ripped off her limbs before she got the chance to use them.
This demon hunted kids for twenty-one years before Rowle, Mallory, and Harper caught its eye. All this time, and they were no closer to catching it now than they were twenty-one years ago.

Mallory might be persistent, but even she recognized when the odds weren't in her favor.

Felix finally spoke, "I don't accept that."

"I—," Mallory glanced up at him, "sorry," she swallowed, eyes flicking between the expressions on her friends' faces.

"You're not giving up because of those visions, are you?" Felix blinked at Mallory in bewilderment. "I, for one, don't think you should pay them any mind. This Avery fellow doesn't sound like a trustworthy sort, and I read in Magical Theory that any kind of divination is hard to interpret unless you're a seer."

Mallory blinked hard, swallowing down her emotions. Fuck.

"I'm not, but," she cleared her throat, "but I mean — I've thought and —" she trailed off. "I don't think I can trust the Heirphant," Mallory said, "I don't know why — can't put a name to it, not really. It just feels all wrong, like — like, I dunno."

"He's a suspicious character, you said," stated Felix.

She hadn't told them Blackthorn's name. Blackthorn hadn't specified whether or not she should tell anyone they met. But she suspected that she wasn't supposed say anything. That was only one of the reasons why she thought him suspicious.

"Yeah," Mallory gave another one-shouldered shrug, "but that's not — I dunno. It's like you can sort of put people together in your head, yeah? Like, where they're coming from and what they want. It makes a picture." She shrugged, noting her friends looked utterly confused, "dunno. Just— every time I try to put the Hierophant together in my head, it comes up wrong. I thought it might be 'coz he's an adult, and adults are complicated and hard to understand, but other adults aren't that confusing."

When mum and dad said they wanted her to be safe, it felt like a hundred lines were pointing in the same direction. They weren't lying, and all their previous actions — vaccinations, encouraging her to practice with her powers, refusing to let doctors draw her blood — stemmed from a desire to keep Mallory safe.

Adults had all kinds of tricky, confusing motivations. But Mallory could grasp the basics well enough to know that Blackthorn behaved oddly.

Blackthorn might wear the guise of the Hierophant, but he didn't feel trustworthy. Some part of her brain itched whenever she thought of him, like a splinter pricking the back of her mind. *Little observations and facts that didn't add up, plucking away like flies caught in a web.*

It wasn't an unusual feeling, but it unnerved her in this context. Usually, the feeling didn't last. Usually, Mallory figured out what was confusing her. It'd be because dad brought home her Christmas presents, and that's why he didn't want her snooping around in the boot of his car. The *pluck-prick* in the back of her brain was her subconscious noticing dad's evasions. The pieces clicked into place and the *pluck-prick* evaporated like smoke in a breeze.

This time, Mallory had no answer. That's what scared her the most.

Colin glanced between Kit and Felix, before speaking to Mallory, "Fine. Okay, but the Aurors and
professors know what you saw in the visions, right?"

"Yeah," she nodded, "but they're not doing anything, not really."

"But if they did, if you did, there might still be a chance?"

She bit her lip, "dunno. Yeah, maybe."

"Alright," Colin nodded to himself, "then we'll talk to Professor Sprout. She helped last time, right? And we could try the professors we haven't spoken to, yet. Professor Flitwick and a few others might think of something. And what about the floo?"

As far as Mallory could tell, Professor Sprout wasn't a strategic thinker. She didn't know a thing about Flitwick, but the adults would be covering the floos now that Mallory tried escaping through it, before.

It wouldn't work.

"Sure," Mallory spoke, then turned to Felix, "but can I ask— I need to ask you a favor."

It was time to enact phase one of the extremely-uncertain backup plan.

There was silence for a moment, where Felix regarded her coolly, "it depends on what you want me to do."

"I —" Mallory stuttered, "um, it's nothing bad. I just — I've a letter for my mum and dad. And a note, for you and Colin and Kit. Just in case."

Felix stared at her, confused. "In case?"

"Mallory, you won't die," Colin spoke, firm.

"I might," Mallory responded, fishing the note out of her bag. "And if I do, you'll read this after the Aurors are gone. It's important."

It was her backup plan, and it was the worst sort of backup plan, at that. It relied on a hunch and hope.

"You can do it," said Colin, firm. "That thing with the riot — you came up with that and it almost worked. And now we're all together and we know a lot more about what's happened. We'll come up with something, we just need to try."

"I'm not giving up," Mallory shook her head, "I'm really not. I just— I haven't— I—"

She swallowed again, and shook her head. Kit stared at her, eyes wide like Mallory's head had turned into a pumpkin. Felix was no better, sitting there stiff as a board.

"This isn't me giving up, but it is important," Mallory said. "Felix, can I have your word you won't open it unless I'm dead and the Aurors are gone?"

Felix nodded, "you have my word."

She asked Felix for this exact reason. Colin would open the letter, out of curiosity or concern. Kit might forget all about it, and certainly wouldn't care to keep her word about when to open it. Felix, however, was a stickler for rules and cared a great deal about promises. If he promised Mallory he'd only open it after the Aurors were gone, he'd only open it once they were gone.
"Thank you," Mallory smiled, and it was genuine.

She fully expected she'd die, you see.

She expected she'd die, but that didn't mean she needed to stay dead.

No, that note wasn't a last will and testament. It contained instructions.

Necro meant dead, like necrosis, which she knew to have something to do with dead limbs from listening to her dad. And a word-ending -mancy was found in words like cartomancy and arithmancy. She took it to mean the study of a certain sort of magic.

Necromancy likely meant the study of dead things. And if she knew anything from her comic books, people who studied the dead could raise the dead.

The Headmaster didn't say 'Lord Voldemort is back from his vacation in Latveria,' he said 'Lord Voldemort has risen!' That almost certainly implied the existence of some sort of resurrection magic. Except... well, the whole story about Potter and Lord Deathface made zero sense. Colin's book claimed a baby, of all things, killed him.

Were they joking? A baby? The least silly explanation involved baby Potter spilling his bottle, resulting in the Dark Lord slipping and impaling himself on a conveniently located pike.

But that didn't matter, not really.

The key takeaway from all the bull-hockey with Vadermort was this: If Colin's books weren't mistaken, then the only place Voldemort could've risen from was the dead. And that meant the Headmaster thought it possible to come back from the dead. Which left Mallory feeling puzzled. If resurrection were possible, then why was Rowle still dead? It must be super difficult, or perhaps the wizard constables had forbidden it, for some reason. She wasn't sure.

If this were Danny, she'd ask him to wrangle a few wizards into resurrecting her, if it were at all possible. If this were Danny, it wouldn't even need to be said. It might take him a while, but he'd do it for her. He was that kind of friend.

And while she didn't doubt her friends would think her very clever for discovering such a loophole, she feared putting them in danger. If raising people from the dead was super illegal, the Aurors might punish them for even guessing resurrection existed. So she instructed Felix to read it after the Aurors had left. If Voldemort could take ten years to get resurrected, then her body could wait a couple days. The margin for error seemed pretty large.

The note told Felix, Kit, and Colin to go to her parents with this plan. Dad knew all about resurrection. He used those electric paddles on people at the hospital, the ones that restarted hearts. Mallory suspected Wizarding resurrection involved something like super-extra-magic-zapping paddles.

Or at least, that's what she hoped. Other possibilities included Doctor Who-style regeneration, a vat filled with healing potions, or even Wolverine's super-healing. Obviously, Mallory didn't want them doing anything evil to resurrect her. That wouldn't be heroic, at all. Further, if it put them in any danger, they shouldn't attempt it, either. Her life wasn't worth their own.

So it was a shaky, extremely unlikely plan that involved a lot of leaps and guesswork.

Needless to say, she wouldn't be counting on it.
"I need to know how I can help you," said Colin, interrupting her thoughts, "some way that isn't about you dying."

"I need…” Mallory stopped herself before she could speak, shaking her head. She wanted to tell them, at least to get their input. Felix might know of an anti-death spell or something like that. She didn't know. But if it was illegal, she really didn't want to put her friends in any more danger.

"You saw the future, but you said it isn't set in stone," said Colin, shifting tacks and prompting Mallory to speak.

"Yeah," Mallory shrugged. "It's the most likely thing to happen, though."

"I'm not going to solve the mystery once you're dead," Colin sounded almost angry. "We're going to solve it here, right now, together. With all of us here, we can do it."

"I'm not sure we can," Mallory said, quiet, "the Aurors and professors can't figure it out. They brought in a specialist, and the vision showed him dying to the monster. And the way he talked—he seemed far more clever than all the professors and Aurors, combined."

"Maybe this is the one thing the villain doesn't expect, that the cards don't expect. The last time we talked about catching the Carver was before you tried running away. But you know a lot more now, right?"

That… that was actually true. Somehow, in all her thinking, she'd missed it. She'd missed the obvious. A jolt of excitement shot through her, at the very thought.

"You're right," Mallory breathed, "I've been looking at this puzzle all wrong. Not one person, but two. The Carver's monster and the Carver. The Monster and the Man. All along, we've been looking in the wrong direction."

"What's that?" asked Felix.

Mallory sat up, breaking out into a grin. "Colin, Kit, Felix, come on. We've got a villain to catch."
Last time:

Mallory takes an oath to share information on the murder of Darla Rowle with another student, Castor Avery, in exchange for a tarot card reading. In reading the cards, Mallory learns she has a surprising talent for Divination. The future predicted in the cards, however, is dire. The Cracklewood Carver, a dreaded demon, will attack for a second time. The only weapon that can defeat it is a sword of silver flame, wielded by the mysterious necromancer, Professor Corvinus Blackthorn. However, the grownups are skeptical of the first-years' prediction, suggesting the children may have misread the cards. Mallory decides to take matters into her own hands. Blackthorn, disgusted by the ineptitude of Hogwarts and the Auror Department, also plans to take matters in hand, offering secret aid to Mallory. Now, Mallory and her allies meet to cook up a plan to catch the demon and its summoner. Meanwhile, Castor Avery is making a difficult choice.

**Castor Avery**

Less than one-in-twenty. That's how likely Vaisey and Montague were to solve the Carver Case, even with Castor Avery's help. Still, Montague and Vaisey puttered away at their table. They were working on the Carver Case, instead of Professor Sprout's detention assignment. Vaisey was scanning through old newspapers, hunting for clues to the Carver's identity. And Montague? He didn't even know where to start, kept looking to her and Castor for direction.

Castor Avery wasn't providing any.

Working with those two wouldn't move the investigation along, and he knew it.

Worse, he knew exactly who would.

It all started last night, after he spoke to his cousin, Celeste. This was before Snape's subsequent interrogation, before the obliviations and hastily-penned letters home.

Last night, he'd told Cousin Celeste about Hopkins' visions during the tarot reading. He'd meant it as idle conversation, or even as a way to re-connect with a cousin who'd grown distant, of late. Celeste just had her coming-of-age ceremony, and hadn't been the same, since. No one would tell him what had happened, least of all Celeste. So he'd tried to talk around it, bring up Hopkins' gift, just to get her laughing, again. Castor hadn't expected his cousin to recoil in shock, because he hadn't found Hopkins' gift all that shocking.

He'd read enough knout novels to guess Hopkins' story: *a lonely wizard meets a muggle woman, and she's an unusual sort of muggle, the wizard thinks, so they fall in love. Only, the muggle betrays the wizard and his magic, but not before she becomes pregnant with his child. The child grows up, and is invariably split between two worlds — between their loyalty to wizardkind, and their loyalty to the muggles.*
The likely-story behind Mallory Hopkins' unusual gift wasn't that unusual at all, he'd thought.

So he spoke about it to his cousin, more to tell a joke than anything. And Celeste, fifteen now, and a fully-grown adult in the eyes of the Avery family, recoiled in shock. Immediately, she'd tugged him into the empty fifth-year girl's dorm, eyes wide in the murky-green light.

At first, he'd been confused, because Hopkins' blood wasn't that big a deal. There were other muggle-raised witches with a wizarding parent. It didn't change anything, because Hopkins was still muggle-raised, and could never be a proper witch. She certainly didn't warrant the attention of their House. Celeste, practically vibrating with impatience, shook her head, "no, you're missing the point. You don't understand, not — not yet. The gift, it's a—" she'd cut herself off, there, swallowing, before continuing, "it's rare, Castor. Really really rare."

Of course, Castor Avery replied that he knew how Important and Special his family was, because they had their gift, and could use it to divine the future and pry secrets from the minds of others. Theirs was a gift of Revelation. It was the power to see the unseen, uncover that which others would conceal, and reveal what hides in the dark. Yes, he didn't know too many families that possessed the gift, but he'd always suspected this absence was merely a function of his own ignorance. Castor Avery could hardly be expected to know the names and gifts of every family in Magical Britain.

Castor was wrong.

Cousin Celeste shook her head, and said he didn't understand, that there were hardly any families out there with the gift, not anymore, especially not after The War. She said that they'd stumbled onto some sort of Terribly Important Secret, one they had to tell their family, straight away.

So, they did. They wrote a letter, and before he could blink, his cousin had obliviated him of the whole conversation.

Yes, Celeste obliviated him.

Obliviating him was their best option. Castor Avery wasn't yet fifteen, and had yet to learn Occlumency. Cousin Celeste had divined that someone in the castle knew Hopkins' secret, and that this someone wouldn't want the Avery family to know.

Sure enough, only an hour later, Professor Snape called Castor into his office.

...And then Snape must've obliviated him, because he couldn't remember the next part. He suspected Professor Snape asked him if he'd told anyone else, if he'd told his family. After that, Snape obliviated Castor's original memory of seeing Hopkins read her cards. So, he couldn't remember that Hopkins had seen visions during their cartomancy session. They could all remember that Hopkins had her cards read, but not her reaction.

Unfortunately for Snape, his state of relative ignorance didn't last.

Celeste undid her own obliviation once the Professor finished questioning him. With the memories of the conversation between cousins returned, he could recall talking with her about Hopkins' astonishing gift, a gift he couldn't remember witnessing, now. He suspected Vaisey and Montague also didn't recall Hopkins' visions during their cartomancy session. They could all remember that Hopkins had her cards read, but not her reaction.

But he was getting ahead of himself, again.

Celeste undid her obliviation because their great-aunt insisted. She needed both Castor and Celeste's help unraveling this conspiracy, much to Castor's aggravation. And the Avery family,
whose *gift of Revelation* translated to a natural advantage in the information business, wanted the leverage this secret could provide them.

They'd stayed up all night, reading tarot cards and attempting to puzzle out who's illegitimate mudspawn currently slept in the Slytherin dorms. It wasn't as simple as querying the cards until one family came back positive. Most families were very secretive about the origin of their gifts. Some hid their gifts, completely. Castor knew the Ollivanders and Lovegoods both had seer's blood, but that's only because they married into his family. The only other living people with the gift he knew of were Trelawney and Grindelwald. Hopkins didn't much look like the Divination Professor, and Grindelwald hadn't left Nurmengard since 1945.

If there were other families, too, Castor didn't know them. He suspected the grownups might have an idea, but they all had their own tasks. Their missions were of greater import than Mallory Hopkins' origins. This house-elf work was relegated to the youngest members of House Avery.

Without better information, the two cousins were left to debate Snape's involvement, and to attempt to decipher a particularly symbolic card reading. The cards, when asked, gave them a symbolic illustration of Hopkins' identity, one they weren't sure how to parse: *the wooden groan of a ship's keel strangled in roses, prickers creeping out of the wood. The slosh of water as it floated down a river so dark, the surface was indistinguishable from the night sky. In the depths, he could hear some great sea creature stirring.*

Neither her nor Celeste knew what to make of that, so they'd returned to Snape. They expected Snape acted on Dumbledore's orders, and wondered if Hopkins' father was allied with Dumbledore.

Celeste agreed, suspecting Hopkins' father might be another of Dumbledore's charity cases. She thought Hopkins might be the child of a runaway squib, arguing that no good wizarding family would let a muggle walk away pregnant.

However, some families failed to prune all their squibs. Those squibs could sometimes carry the gift, and pass it on to their offspring. She suspected one such squib escaped pruning, and when their child showed signs of magic, they went to Dumbledore for aid. That would explain the need for secrecy, and Snape's involvement.

Castor pointed out that accidents did happen, and how not everyone cared so much about maintaining their family's secrets. There was a good chance Hopkins might not be the daughter of a squib, at all. And they couldn't ignore the possibility her father was a wizard.

'Yes, but the families *do* care that much,' she insisted, and added that when he grew older, he'd understand. Castor kept up the argument, frustrated with her. In fact, he'd said, he recalled his parents talking about such a scandal, last year. Celeste responded with a scornful snort, and insisted that not all families were like theirs. Further argument resulted in her bringing up her blasted coming-of-age ceremony, again. He'd assume she was lording it over him, except every time it came up, she sounded almost harrowed, somber, like she was talking past some deep-seated fear. To be entirely honest, it scared him.

In the end, though, all it amounted to was speculation. They had no real leads.

Which meant that after staying up half the night, reading cards and researching, they found nothing. There was no connection between Mallory Hopkins and the Avery family, either. She certainly wasn't related to *them.*

Celeste wasn't daunted, though.
First thing this morning, she went looking for any relation between Mallory Hopkins and the Hufflepuff Hopkins. Castor hadn't even known there was a Hufflepuff named Hopkins. But apparently, Mallory Hopkins wasn't the only Hopkins at Hogwarts.

Unfortunately, the boy had never even heard of her. Moreover, the Hufflekins looked nothing like Mallory Hopkins, at all. He was a well-groomed, blonde-haired boy with hazel eyes, sporting a healthy tan. The Slytherin Hopkins had dark, frizzy hair, with equally dark eyes and a pasty complexion. Cousin Celeste said the muggleborn's only redeeming feature was her cheekbones, and noted she was rather tall. Castor, who found himself unmoved by the feminine figure, (or any other figure, for that matter,) professed that he hadn't noticed, lest his cousin come to the wrong conclusions.

Coming back from their hunt empty-handed, the cousins felt dejected. Their great-aunt would be displeased by their failure, and this weighed heavily on Celeste, who was supposed to be an adult witch now, with all the responsibilities that entailed. Castor, on the other hand, couldn't find it in himself to consider their venture a complete failure. Because in all their searching, in all their Cartomancy and divining, they had learned one thing: Mallory Hopkins was the key to solving the Carver Case, and bringing Darla Rowle's murderer to justice.

In fact, the cards said that of all the wizards in Hogwarts, the one most likely to solve Darla Rowle's murder was Mallory Hopkins. And that? That just ate at him. Solving Darla Rowle's murder hadn't mattered when he thought he couldn't do anything. If twenty-one years and multiple Auror investigations hadn't cracked the Carver Case, what hope did he have? But now he knew the case was eminently solvable, and by some mud-raised twerp who'd fallen for his "oh-I-have-the-exact-ulterior-motive-you-think-I-do" shtick, hook, line, and sinker. And yet she'd somehow managed to hide something important from him, something vital to the case. He'd sort of known that when she reacted badly to the oath, but thought it couldn't have been that critical. The oath didn't take into account the true value of information, only its perceived value, to that person. If she believed it important, the oath would hurt her. He'd suspected it was something stupid or trivial, that Hopkins only thought it important because she was ignorant. But now he wasn't so sure, and it rankled.

Worse, Celeste, the utter mooncalf, suggested he could solve all their problems by pretending to befriend Hopkins. For the next few days, she said, he should stick to Hopkins like bowtruckles on doxy eggs. That way, they could figure out the circumstances which lead to Hopkins solving the case. And in the mean time, he could pull any relevant knowledge of her family from her mind. It'd be the snitch they needed, leverage over the Harpers, and over whomever spawned Hopkins. No doubt her father's family, whoever they were, would want to know.

Castor couldn't complain enough about how much he detested this plan. Hopkins had what muggles called, "cooties."

He didn't think there was a proper wizarding word for the concept he was thinking of, but anyone who spent any time around Hopkins became a social pariah. No one liked her, because muggleborns were at the bottom of the social totem pole. But also because Hopkins had proven that she wasn't an ordinary muggleborn, at all.

She and her lunatic friends had the gall to pull off some kind of madcap stunt. They started a full-on riot in Ravenclaw Tower, and accused Selwyn of murdering Rowle. All the upper years were furious, because it was clear that her scheme blocked off all the secret passageways. No potions were getting in or out of Hogwarts, and everyone was suffering from their loss.

Worse, she and her friends lost more points than almost anyone in Hogwarts history, in the
first week of school. An aura of social exclusion practically radiated from the witch. Anyone who spent any time with her would be marked as equally loathsome, and shunned.

His cousin remained unmoved, though. She claimed he was complaining about losing a knut when they'd be gaining a galleon. From there, she declared the conversation over. As the elder cousin, she had authority in these things, and he had to do as she said. She also promised she'd hex anyone who'd dare bother him about befriending the mudkins, but he still didn't want to do it.

Why? he'd wondered. Why did he still feel like flinching away from the very thought of pretending to befriend Hopkins and her merry band of muggleborns?

Now, sitting in detention with Vaisey and Montague, Castor still didn't have an answer he liked.

There were so many reasons to want to do it. For example, Castor wanted to avenge Rowle's death, and according to the cards, going through Hopkins was the fastest way to do it. Rowle might've been an idiot, but she didn't deserve to die like that. Catch the Carver, kill the demon, and at least he could say he'd done something good with his life. It would be a win for himself, for Rowle, and an achievement not done in the name of his family. As guilty as it made him feel, acting not for the sake of his family, he knew he needed this for himself. Even if he didn't remember doing it in five years —

Well, the demon would be dead, regardless. It would be an external victory, something his gift couldn't take away.

So yes, he wanted to talk to Hopkins, work with her to solve the mystery. It'd please his family, please himself, and piss off Selwyn. All of that made pretend-befriending Hopkins sound swell.

...then why, exactly, did he find himself flinching away from the very thought?

Because it can't be the social cost of befriending a muggleborn with cooties, and it couldn't be because she'd managed to trick him. He can't be that bloody shallow, he thought. It was stupid, painful even, to consider. To know he cared that much about his own ego. A witch died, and he was debating over whether sidling up to a witch who'd tricked him was worth it.

Castor took a breath, taking a mental step back from those feelings.

He nodded at Vaisey, who was still working because she didn't know what else to do. Waited for his heart to stop racing and his palms to stop sweating. Met Montague's eyes, quirking his lips at the boy who didn't give a rat's arse about Darla Rowle, now that Harper was safe, but felt obligated to help, anyway.

Right. If he wanted justice for Rowle, he'd have to figure out why he felt so much mental discomfort at the thought of going to the witch who could catch her murderer. Often, that part of his mind had useful information, and he didn't want to ignore it.

He shifted his attention back to his own mind, digging into that resistance, into the part of himself that didn't want to go to Hopkins' table or work with her.

It wasn't the fear of social exclusion motivating him, he decided, or his humiliation at spending time with a muggleborn who'd tricked him. Celeste figured Hopkins would solve the case by being in the right place at the right time, not through deductions or concealed knowledge. She completely dismissed the idea that Hopkins could be deceiving them. To her, Hopkins was just another faithless muggleborn, with no family ties or loyalty. Mudkins knew nothing of magic, and could only solve the case through sheer dumb luck.
Castor, however, wasn't completely convinced.

After the Carver attacked, he'd gone to see Harper. And the difference between their conditions was striking. Hopkins hadn't gotten that sick from the demon's corruption. He'd spoken to Harper, before, and he was a mess. But Hopkins? Walking, talking, no hallucinations or vomiting. His parents always intimated that such power indicated good blood. Families like the Averys could resist demonic corruption, to some extent, but not some squib-spawn from nowhere. He didn't know why, but the fact remained that Hopkins wasn't half as sick as Harper. What's more, Harper hadn't wanted to say anything, but Castor gathered from their conversation that Hopkins had been the one to keep them moving after the demon murdered Rowle. Hopkins, who wasn't on any wit-sharpening or memory potions. Sharp as any of them, without the potions.

He knew he was looking at this from the wrong angle, taking that high probability of success and trying to fit it to what he knew about her. Could be that Celeste was right, and Hopkins had a better chance of being at the right place at the right time. Maybe Hopkins just overheard something, some vital clue.

Why did he keep circling back to it, then? *Maybe because of the oath, forcing his brain to find some reason to trust her, make her legible to him.*

He didn't know.

His cousin and his whole family expected him to *use* them, use Hopkins and her little merry band of mudbloods. Castor wondered if he even could. Sure, he didn't care much, now. But Hopkins' friends had *cooties*, and he almost liked them a little, anyway. That wasn't normal. He didn't like muggleborns at all, and he certainly didn't like muggleborns with the *cooties*. But apparently he didn't know himself very well, because he knew he already did.

But he didn't get it. Why should it hurt him to pretend to befriend them? He'd had friends, before. Darla Rowle had been his friend for years. They grew up together. Merlin, he'd only talked to Darla a few days ago. Now she was gone, just like that.

Granted, he hadn't liked her much.

She was obsessed with the game, intent on beating it. One family versus every other, an endless show of one-up-manship and pointless bloodshed. Castor found it stupid, but Darla had reveled in it. She was the sort of witch who would've grown up to coat her nails in poison. Tea with her would be a *game*, the sort where he'd have to check to make sure she hadn't dipped her finger in his cup.

He didn't like that, the sheer bloody waste of it all, how it trapped him into Cartomancy. If it were up to him, he'd never touch another tarot card, again. The cost was too high, no matter how much fun it was to play the odds.

But he couldn't use the cards for his own ends. Instead, everyone would get sacrificed at the altar of their family's war. His mother would sacrifice her own *bloody* son, just to score points against the Selwyns or whom-bloody-ever, and it never *mattered*. Kill off one of their's and they kill off one of your's. Everyone's worse off in the end and no one's gained any advantage.

And it sucked that any time he dug into how he felt, it always lead back to this. Cartomancy had a cost, and that cost was his memories. One day, he'd lose his mind. One day, he'd go insane and wouldn't even *notice*, would have no idea what he'd lost. It was the fucking *game*, the one Darla loved and he detested.
And now she was gone. *It was jarring.*

And perhaps, he thought, his feelings didn't matter. He'd have to pretend to befriend them, no matter how he felt. His duty and honor as a member of House Avery demanded it. The family mattered more than his own stupid preferences. He'd grown up hearing it since before he could remember. It was downright selfish to resent them for it, he knew that.

Yet... *the thought of pretending to befriend Hopkins bothered him.*

Why?

Because, if he were honest with himself, he knew how this would end. If Hopkins wasn't a muggleborn like his parents suspected, they'd use her for leverage. They'd find her family and tell them about her, and they'd react predictably. *Few would suffer the spawn of a squib to live.* He suspected that's why he'd argued so hard that she wasn't. Castor wanted to believe she was the daughter of a careless wizard. Then his actions wouldn't amount to leading her to her death.

He didn't want to befriend Hopkins because he knew it'd lead to her death. Hopkins might be an obnoxious jarvey, but she didn't deserve to die. He didn't want a hand in another person's murder, especially not when the goal was to score points in his family's stupid war.

He swallowed, again, squirming in his seat. *Because that's what this would amount to, right?* He had to choose, his family's honor or his own.

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