A Tale of Two Sides

by EmiliyaWolfe

Summary

James and Emma Potter are twins - inseparable. They have their Hogwarts years planned out: pull amazing pranks, find all of the castle's secrets and stuff their brains out. There was no question about their House: "Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!" James says, lifting an imaginary sword. But what happens when the impossible happens?

Eventual pairing: RegulusxEmma, slight SiriusxOC
Emma Potter took a deep breath and tightened her grip on the trolley handles until her knuckles were white.

‘Meow,’ her cat Fluffy said questioningly from atop her trunk.

*Just ignore what James said,* she told herself. Her brother had pretended to get stuck halfway through the barrier - just to scare her, she knew - but in Hogwarts, A History (her mum had forced her to read it) it said that this sort of thing happened more often than you would think. And it had even happened to someone they knew! Well, sort of... Some guy named Longbottom in her dad’s year had got stuck, and they had to owl Hogwarts to fix it. She refused to let that kind of thing happen to her, and be branded “that girl who got stuck in between platforms”.

She ran as fast as she could, hurtling towards platform 9 ¾ and... she was through!

She let go of the trolley in awe, looking at the busy platform and the red steam-engine her parents had talked about. She didn’t think they even used steam engines anymore.

‘Emma!’ Charles Potter’s shout broke her from her wide-eyed gazing.

She realised that she one; was blocking the entrance, two; her trolley had disappeared, three; said trolley had careened off into her brother, knocking him off his feet. He was now rubbing his arm and staring at her, hurt and aggravated.

*Best payback ever!* she thought to herself gleefully, before running off to help her brother - and recover her trunk. Luckily, James was just shaken up, and soon saw the funny side. Soon the whole Potter family were laughing, the sounds echoing through the rapidly emptying station, and diffusing any lasting goodbye sadness.

‘Remember to be good, children!’ their mother said, hugging the twins one last time before they got on the train.

Emma buried her face in her mother’s greying hair, taking in the scent of her flowery shampoo. James and she would never admit it, but they were both wary of spending so much time away from their parents.

‘Muuuum,’ James whined for effect, but allowed her a final kiss on his forehead.

‘Family huddle!’ Charles Potter cried, the way he did in their mock-Quidditch matches - which were basically James and Emma trying to get the Quaffle past him. They now gleefully locked arms and stuck their heads in the “conspiracy circle” as their mum liked to call it.

‘Now,’ their dad said, eyes twinkling with laughter. ‘You’re going to go to that school and eat as much of the feast food as you can?’

‘Yes sir!’ the twins shouted on cue.

‘You’re going to earn as many House points as possible?’
‘Yes sir!’

‘You’re going to train up, and make sure that Gryffindor wins the Quidditch cup for six years running, one and for all?’

‘Yes sir!’ the twins thundered excitedly.

‘Just checking,’ their father winked. ‘Now I’ve been keeping this for a special occasion. May it help you as it did me during my Hogwarts years.’ He produced a silvery package from under his cloak. ‘But not a word to your mother!’

‘Charles! The train’s leaving!’ their mother cried worriedly, as the conductor blew the whistle.

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‘So sis,’ James Potter started, craning his head to get a good look at the compartments.

‘Somewhere where there’s no one!’ she interrupted immediately, clutching the mysterious parcel in her arms. ‘Come on, there must be somewhere free!’

They were so busy peering into the compartments that they didn’t notice the boy until Emma almost trod on his foot.

‘Excuse me but, um, I think this is yours,’ he said timidly, offering up the enormous black cat.

‘Fluffy!’ Emma cried guiltily; she had forgotten all about her cat.

‘I’ll take him,’ James said importantly, tucking the resigned-looking cat under his arm. ‘How did you know he was Emma’s? Who’re you anyway? Are you a first year like us?’

Before the boy could reply, a head popped out of the compartment window. ‘That’s my little brother Regulus!’ A hand emerged. ‘I’m Sirius, nice to meet you.’

‘I’m Emma,’ she said, shaking the proffered hand. ‘This is James, my brother.’

‘Come in!’ the head said and withdrew. A moment later, the compartment door slid open to reveal a tall and lanky eleven-year old. ‘Come on little bro, don’t be shy.’

James raised his eyebrows, should we go?

Emma shrugged, we can’t really say no. We’ll just have to wait until later to see dad’s present.

James pouted slightly, but I wanna know now! Fine...

With a nod to each other, the twins entered the compartment, Emma stuffing the parcel in her robes. Oblivious to the telepathic conversation, Regulus re-entered the compartment, darkly muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “only by ten months” before flopping down by the window.

‘So...’ James said. ‘Are you guys twins too?’

Regulus and Sirius shared looks of horror before denying the question as though it were an accusation. Soon they had a friendly banter going. Regulus was younger by ten months, but was still in the same school year. They both loved Quidditch as much as the twins, but Regulus liked chasing
after the snitch whereas Sirius just liked watching it. When asked whether they played with their parents, they both went strangely quiet.

As they were playing a game of exploding snap, the compartment door was opened again to reveal yet another black-haired eleven-year old boy, along with a red-headed girl.

‘Bloody hell!’ Sirius exclaimed as the cards blew up in his face.

‘Sorry, but is it okay if we sit here? Everywhere else is full,’ the girl said nervously.

James gestured to the seat next to him with a bit too much enthusiasm, in Emma’s opinion. Apparently, in the other girl’s opinion too, because she made sure to sit by the window, as far away from James as she could. After introducing themselves as Lily and Severus, the four went back to their game, when a word grabbed their attention.

‘Slytherin?’ Emma asked in disgust.

‘Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?’ James continued, looking towards Sirius.

‘My whole family have been in Slytherin,’ he replied sheepishly.

‘Blimey,’ said James, ‘and I thought you seemed all right!’

Sirius and Regulus looked uncomfortable. This seemed to be a touchy subject between the two of them, but in a bid to secure their new friendship, the older brother grinned. ‘Maybe I’ll break the tradition. Where are you heading, if you’ve got the choice?’

‘All Potters have been Gryffindors,’ Emma laughed.

As if on cue James lifted an invisible sword. ‘Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!’ Like my dad.’

Severus made a small, disparaging noise. James turned on him, jaw set.

‘Got a problem with that?’

‘No,’ said Severus, though his slight sneer said otherwise. ‘If you’d rather be brawny than brainy –’

‘Where’re you hoping to go, seeing as you’re neither?’ interjected Sirius, wanting to defend his new friends.

James roared with laughter. Regulus rolled his eyes, and returned to staring out of the window. Lily sat up, rather flushed, and looked from James to Sirius in dislike.

‘Come on, Severus, let’s find another compartment.’

‘Oooooo…’ James and Sirius imitated her lofty voice; James tried to trip Severus as he passed.

‘See ya, Snivellus!’ a Sirius sang, as the compartment door slammed.

Emma raised an eyebrow at them. ‘Well that went well.’

James had the decency to flush with embarrassment. Sirius, however, had no such sense.

‘Aw come on, Emma,’ he cajoled. ‘He was asking for it! Admit it, you found it funny.’
Emma tried to keep a straight face, but couldn’t help the smile creeping up on her. It was true that Severus had insulted her House. Well, almost hers. Regulus looked at her and shook his head, as if to say he couldn’t believe her joining their side. Sirius let out a bark-like laugh.

‘That’s the spirit!’
'Firs' years! Firs' years over ter me!' 

Emma stood some distance away from the giant man, but he was easily visible, waist-high in a sea of eleven-year-olds. She wasn't sure what to think of him: he seemed nice, but she was scared he would squash her. Also, she had never met a wizard that big. And he was waving a pink umbrella around. That just seemed to be asking for trouble. She stared at him for a bit, not sure whether to laugh at him, or be scared, and still hadn't made up her mind when a voice broke through her thoughts.

'What?'

'I asked if you didn't like crowds either,' Regulus asked again, sounding slightly exasperated.

She looked around: in her mistrust, she hadn't noticed that most of the other students were already off on boats of three or four people. James wasn't in sight. Probably managed to get on the first boat; or the one the giant man will be in. James always loved to be the first to do something exciting. Not that Emma didn't like exciting; she just preferred to get comfortable with the thing before being seen by others. James would always tease her if she was scared of something, but she just liked to know exactly what she was in for beforehand. If she had time to prepare and think, she'd do anything as dangerous as James. He usually dragged her into his mad schemes anyway.

'Want to share a boat?' she asked Regulus out of politeness. There was only one boat left anyway, with a frizzy red-headed girl in it.

He smiled, and helped her climb in, "trained gallantry", as he called it with a grimace, explaining that he had etiquette lessons as a kid. Emma didn't know what etiquette was, but it sounded boring, and annoying.

He was more talkative than on the train, she noticed. Probably because Sirius had talked over him for most of the time. She was lucky to have a brother like James. He always listened to her, and would go on about sharing things exactly equally, because that was the "honourable Gryffindor thing to do". Sounded more like Hufflepuff, but she never told him that. Especially when he took the blame for most of their pranks, though that might have had to do with the soft spot their father reserved for his only daughter. She always snuck him chocolates afterwards though, so it had become a tradition. He would do the risky parts of the plan, her the stealthy. They were a team.

'Whoa,' said Regulus, once again breaking into her thoughts. One would think that she would be more concentrated on the fact that she was actually at Hogwarts!

'Whoa' was an accurate description for the turreted castle looming on the horizon, surrounded by acres of grounds, and owls hooting all around. Night had fallen, and it looked like the start of a Beedle the Bard fairytale. However, Emma barely had time to appreciate the view, and wonder what it looked like from the inside before a stern-looking witch in green robes and glasses came out and explained a bit about the Houses and the Sorting Ceremony. Probably for the benefit of the Muggleborns, though Emma wished that they had told them about it sooner, or gave them a book or something.

*Just start the Sorting already!* she mentally yelled as McGonagall went on and on about house points and rules. She knew she would be in Gryffindor - where else? - but her mind drifted to a conversation she had with her mother.
'You know it doesn't really matter which House you're sorted into dear,' Natalie Potter said, sitting on the edge of her fierce little daughter's bed. 'But if it worries you, remember there are perks to every house. Did you know that Merlin was in Slytherin? And the ghostly Far Friar apparently leads Hufflepuff students to the kitchens, where they can eat whatever they want, whenever they want! Doesn't that sound great?'

'I'm not worried,' the eight-year-old said petulantly.

'Good!' her mother laughed, affectionately ruffling her hair.

But when her mother was gone, Emma let out a sigh of relief. She hated the idea of Hufflepuff, though James assured her that there wasn't a badger bone in her body (though she was sure that it was just because he liked saying that). But maybe, it wasn't as bad as she thought. After all, there was a reason other Houses existed. And also... maybe if she wasn't in the same House as James, with his affable outgoing nature, then she wouldn't feel put to the side. Though James reassured her it wasn't true, sometimes she thought her parents didn't have time for her, being occupied by her brother's loud nature. After all, she didn't want to be known as just "James's sister".

When McGonagall finished droning on, they shuffled into the Great Hall, lining up through the gap between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. Emma thought they all looked a bit like sheep being herded into a pen, but then again, that might have been a reaction to the nerves she was trying her best to ignore.

'I hope you're in Gryffindor,' she whispered to Regulus. It would be nice to have one of the only people she knew in her House from the start.

But Regulus only shook his head dejectedly, saying that everyone knew that Blacks belonged in Slytherin as much as Potters did in Gryffindor. Well, she couldn't fault him there, though Sirius seemed adamant on changing the tradition. She had no time to dwell on it though, because James had pushed his way excitedly to his sister.

'There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you! Wasn't the lake cool? Sirius dared me to put my hand in the water, and I felt this slimy tentacle, must have been the Giant Squid! Isn't that just awesome?'

Emma smiled at her beaming brother. At least she could count on James being in her every class for now. She grinned as she thought of all the new potions she could learn for their pranks. As if reading her thoughts James leaned over to whisper in her ear.

'I can't wait to see what Dad got us for Hogwarts that Mum wasn't allowed to see.'

She was about to reply when Regulus exclaimed excitedly, pointing to an old hat sat atop a stool. 'The Sorting's starting!'

'When you're not sure on where to go

The Sorting Hat will always know

They bring me out once a year

So I can tell you loud and clear

That Gryffindor is really swell
Where all of the brave hearts dwell
Loyalty is their middle name
Honour they have, with no shame

(James shot an excited look towards Emma)

Hufflepuff is for the just and kind
Whoever you are, they don't mind
They'll be your friend
Until the very end

As for Rowena Ravenclaw
She told me in person to make sure
That bright and witty students
Chose curiosity over prudence

Which brings me to silver and green
Slytherin only accepts the cunning and keen
His proud and ambitious kin
Are sure to make friends within

Four Houses do stand tall
But Hogwarts stands above all
Red, green, blue and yellow
All should remember their fellow
Stand together, and you will not fall'

There was a rush of hushed whispers, and some half-hearted clapping. Even the teachers frowned, looking slightly worried.

'Is the hat always that ominous?' Emma asked Sirius, who had appeared next to her. She racked her brains for what her parents had said about it.
Sirius just shrugged, his standard response to questions he didn't care about/didn't know the answer to, as she was quickly learning. Before she could pester him about it, the actual Sorting started, and she forgot all about it.

'Adams, Bertie,' McGonagall called.

A blond boy walked up and sat on the stool, visibly shaking. The Hat was placed on his head, and there was a moment of silence before it opened its wide brimmed mouth.

'RAVENCLAW!' Cheers erupted from the table on their right as Adams, Bertie joined their ranks.

'Aimsworth, Helen.'

'HUFFLEPUFF!'

'Aimsworth, Patricia.'

'Twins!' Emma exclaimed to James.

'Did you think we were the only ones?' James teased.

'HUFFLEPUFF!;

'They try not to separate family members,' they heard someone in front of them say.

The names went on by until 'Black, Regulus.'

'Go on, little bro,' Sirius clapped him on the back. 'Forget about Mum and Dad for once.'

'What was that about?' asked James.

'Well, our parents are really big on the Black family being the "purist" and "noblest" and the "best" family in the world. They think that everyone should worship us because we've intermarried the least among all of the pure-bloods. But really,' Sirius's voice went quiet. 'They don't really care about us apart from holding up their reputation. That's why we didn't want to talk about Quidditch, or family activities. I'd much rather have your parents.'

James and Emma looked surprised. They hadn't talked that much about their family, had they?

'Oh come on,' Sirius looked impatient. 'Everyone heard you all laughing, and saying you'd miss each other, and your mum threatening to send you a Howler if she didn't hear from you at least once a month. I know Reggie wants that too, though he's still clinging onto the hope that if he makes our parents proud then they'll be nicer to us.'

There was a moment of awkward silence. Emma didn't really know what to say, having only just met each other. Of course, it was James who broke the tension.

'Serious words, Sirius.'

Sirius snorted, but just then the Sorting hat cried out.

'SLYTHERIN!' The table on the far left cheered, and a sixth year with a mass of black curls yelled out. 'Knew you
had it in you, cousin!'

'Black, Sirius.'

Sirius had made a face at his brother's Sorting, but walked - almost angrily - towards the stool. The hat barely touched his head before yelling.

'GRYFFINDOR!' 

*Sirius's P.O.V*

Sirius hadn't even felt the hat graze his hear before it told him it knew just where to put him. And he knew exactly why. Whenever his family spoke of Gryffindors, with their brash attitudes and reckless ways, Sirius would go off into an action-packed daydream: a world where everyone said what they thought instead of making snide comments that you were supposed to understand. A world where impulsiveness was applauded, and not hexed into having to wash out your mouth with soap. Seven years without his overbearing cousins breathing down his neck, seven years of not having to do the "right and proper" thing, seven years of pure, unadulterated FREEDOM. Well, apart from holidays.

He had walked up to the stool mentally chanting "Gryffindor, Gryffindor, Gryffindor" and the hat had heard his prayers. Briefly, he thought of Regulus, but the kid would do just fine. He was always better suited to their family's lifestyle. This was the one thing that Sirius had to do for himself. And he couldn't be happier.

*Regulus's POV*

Regulus's heart dropped to his stomach upon hearing the gold and red clad students cheering and clapping. But it wasn't as if it was unexpected. After all, the Hat hadn't known whether to put Regulus in Gryffindor or Slytherin to start with. He had begged it for Slytherin of course - he wasn't prepared to give up his family for people who may not even like him. He admired his brother's courage as he wondered when the first Howler would arrive. He resolved that he wouldn't give Sirius away. If Bellatrix or Narcissa wrote home, then it would take at least a couple of days for the news to get to their parents. Let Sirius settle in first.

*Emma's POV*

The Gryffindors had gone wild, but the rest of the students just stared. Even at the teachers' table, they looked shocked, though Dumbledore was quietly clapping under the table. Beaming, Sirius slid off his seat to the welcoming arms of Gryffindor students.

'Take that Slytherin!' 

'Not 'toujours pur' after all, are you Blacks?'

'Good on you mate!'

Sirius looked nervous, but excited as they made room for him at the table. James was shaking his head, as if Sirius had pulled off the greatest prank in history, and had been applauded for it. Emma merely grinned, thinking that Sirius got the new chance at a family he wanted. Maybe he could come
to their house if his parents were really so bad. The rest of the names passed in a blur, as the twins talked excitedly about Sirius's Sorting.

Finally, 'Potter, Emma.'

Her stomach gave a jolt at the name, but she refused to acknowledge it. She wouldn't give James the satisfaction of teasing her about nerves as soon as they went home for the holidays. She was going to walk up there as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Or at least try to.

It was eerily quiet under the hat, as if the tearing fabric was able to muffle all outside sound.

Well, what do we have here?

Emma widened her eyes in surprise. Her parents had never said the hat talked!

Aha, a Potter I see! This should be easy: loyalty and courage, better be... Wait. What is this I see? Trying to hide any non-Gryffindor traits? Very clever, very clever my dear, but there's no fooling me! You remind me of another I Sorted today, but ah - I digress. The perfect House for you, there's no denying it, is

'SLYTHERIN!'

Emma couldn't believe it. No one could. The Hall was quiet for a second time, but she could dimly hear whispers that she and Sirius had swapped places. Her mother had told her that Slytherin was a good House, that it had won the House cup more than any other, but... Emma's mind went blank. Empty. She had truly believed that she would only ever be in Gryffindor. How could it be otherwise? But it was otherwise.

McGonagall prodded her a little towards the right table. That's right, I still have the Hat on, she thought absently, before sliding off the stool and quickly walking towards the Slytherin table. Why does it have to be so far away? She concentrated on not tripping over the new robes her mother had bought for the occasion, and tried to ignore James's stare that she could feel heating up the back of her neck.

Regulus quickly made room for her - thank Merlin he was actually sorted here after all - though he too seemed too surprised to say anything. But the guy next to him had no such trouble.

'Three cheers for the first Potter in Slytherin!'

So the Slytherins got their revenge on the cat-calling of the Gryffindors from before. A pretty third year with silvery-blond hair shyly introduced herself as Narcissa, Regulus and Sirius's cousin, and confessed that the latter was never Slytherin material anyway. She looked forward to getting to know Emma, and was the only one except from Regulus who called her by her first name.

James of course got sorted into Gryffindor "where dwell the brave at heart!" and for the first time since Emma could remember, she didn't have her twin by her side to count on. It was Emma's fault anyway, as she thought back again to when her mother had talked to her. She was the one who thought she might make friends without him. Now she was alone.

James's POV
'SLYTHERIN!'

James felt his jaw go slack. Never had he thought it possible. He racked his brains for anything that would put his sister in Slytherin, according to his father's standards. Backstabbing? Nope, Emma was loyal to a fault, though she was better at keeping them out of trouble than James was. Power-hungry and attention-seeking? Once, they had put on a play at Christmas with their cousins from France. Emma had needed James to coax her into it, and still stuttered during her lines.

He remembered what Sirius had said about his family. Maybe Emma was in Slytherin to help Sirius and Regulus, so they wouldn't be the odd ones out. But it sounded weird that a hat would ruin her life just to even things out. But then another thought occurred to him: maybe the Sorting Hat is separating us so that Hogwarts will look united. *It must know that our twin-bond is stronger than any silly House loyalty.*

Yes. That was it. It had to be it.

'Emma!' he called upon reaching this conclusion, staring at her retreating head.

*If only I was really telepathic,* he fumed inwardly. *Surely she knows that I don't care that she's in Slytherin? Well... I know it's not her fault at least.*

'Potter, James.'

With one more look towards his sister, who was lost among the celebrating Slytherin students, he climbed onto the dreaded stool. McGonagall cleared her throat, magic making it louder than usual, in order to hush the student.

*Another Potter,* the Hat said, and James gave a jolt of surprise. It talked?

*Yes I do,* Though you can stop wondering how it works. That level of magic is far too advanced for an eleven-year-old. There is pride, and a certain disregard for rules that wouldn't go amiss in Slytherin. But all of that is overshadowed by courage - an astounding amount of courage. I hope that you will not have to need it in the years to come. But for the meantime, join your father and his fathers in the House meant for your family...

'GRYFFINDOR!'

He happily bounced over to the Gryffindor table where Sirius was beaming at him. Only one thought marred this perfect day: for the first time in my life, he couldn't share it with his sister.
Slytherin

Emma’s heart was in her throat. She barely noticed Dumbledore’s speech, and had lost her appetite. Even bearing in mind that her Dad had said to enjoy the feast as much as possible - and she and James took these mock challenges very seriously - the supposedly delicious start-of-term food tasted like cardboard in her mouth. She was dimly aware of Regulus trying to talk to her, but he soon desisted upon seeing her gaze fixed upon the Gryffindor table, and settled for giving her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

Regulus, for his part, wondered how Sirius was feeling, but it seemed that he and James were laughing and joking like no tomorrow.

‘How am I ever going to talk to James again?’ Emma asked suddenly. ‘He’s going to hate me. He probably already does.’

The boy felt slightly affronted at that. Was Slytherin really so bad? He was in Slytherin, wasn’t he? But he pushed those feelings aside - after all, he was used to doing that sort of thing - and thought about it. He had seen James’s look after his twin’s Sorting, and he didn’t seem angry, only worried, and maybe surprised, but so was everyone else. So was Regulus, for that matter. He felt an odd twinge of jealousy. He wished his brother cared about him as much as the twins seemed to; Sirius had barely glanced his way. He was just about to offer these words of comfort when the food vanished. The Great Hall immediately went silent.

‘I hope you’ve all enjoyed this meal. I know I did!’ Dumbledore patted his belly, much to the first-years’ surprise. ‘Prefects, lead our new students to their respective dormitories. As for the rest of you: off to bed!’

‘Follow me, first-year,’ a tall bossy-looking girl said, before sweeping off towards the exit.

Emma followed her dejectedly, still worrying. I brought this upon myself, she thought. I wanted to be somewhere without James, and now he’ll probably never want to speak to me again...

‘Emma! Emma!’

She would have recognised that voice anywhere.

Sure enough, James’s tousled head appeared, breathlessly squeezing itself through the mass of Slytherin students.

‘Emma!’ he said again when he got closer. ‘I want you to know: you’ll always be my sister. No matter what House you were Sorted in.’

‘Even if it’s Slytherin?’ she asked in a small voice.

‘Who cares?’ James asked joyfully. ‘I heard that the Slytherin common room was in the dungeons. The Gryffindor one is in the tower, so more coverage of the castle to discover its secrets!’ His face took on a dreamy expression.

Emma’s face broke into a grin, the first in hours, and she grabbed her brother to hug him as tightly as possible.

‘Tell me your timetable tomorrow!’ he lowered his voice, ‘and there’s still Dad’s present. Don’t unwrap it without me.’
And with those words, the eleven-year-old’s worries vanished. She hurried after Regulus and the gaggle of first-years disappearing around the corner.

‘Find James then, I take it?’ he asked, taking in her beaming appearance.

‘Yup!’

They fell into a comfortable silence as they descended into the candle-lit dungeons. The prefect stopped in front of a seemingly normal alcove in the corner of a side passage.

‘Whomping Willow.’

The alcove’s wall slid into the ground to reveal a spiralling staircase. It led into a rectangular room with low ceilings, lit only by a flickering fire in the middle of the back wall. There were huge windows on either side, reflecting an eerie green glow into the room. Above the fireplace was a huge banner of a snake, and what Emma supposed was the symbol of Slytherin, as the name was etched into the bottom of the fabric. Similar cloth was draped on the side of the stone walls, presumably to keep the chill out. The first years stared awestruck as a ghost rose from an armchair, saluted, and drifted off through a wall.

Emma instantly liked it. Regulus would later say that it was the soothing sound of the lake lapping against the windows, but Emma personally thought it was the old squishy leather armchairs and sofas grouped around the fireplace. The prefect showed them the way to the boys’ and girls’ dormitories before sweeping back out the way she came.

As Regulus turned to say goodnight, Emma felt a wave of guilt rush over her. Here she was, bemoaning the fact that she was in Slytherin and away from her brother, and Regulus was in the same situation. Except that Regulus actually wanted to be here. How is he not insulted right now?

‘Listen, Regulus,’ she started sheepishly. ‘I’m sorry for hating on Slytherin. It’s just that James and I have never been apart. We even share the same room at home! Though I am trying to work on that... But anyway, I wanted to say thanks for being a good friend. I mean, we haven’t even known each other for that long but -’

She was cut off by Regulus laughing at her. ‘No it’s fine. We can be friends.’

‘Cool. Well, good night I guess. See you tomorrow.’

By the time she made it up to the first year’s dormitory, the other girls were already getting ready for bed. The bed closest to the window was empty, except for a trunk, and she suspected that the other girls didn’t really want a view of the giant squid in the morning. They stopped what they were doing as she walked in. A girl with almost luminous white skin and long red hair plaited down her back was the first to act.

‘Hi I’m Alecto. I guess we’re roommates now. We,’ she gestured to herself and the other two girls, ‘all got to know each other already. No need to ask who you are: Emma Potter, right?’

‘Yeah no need to ask who you are,’ repeated a sneering girl with short brown hair. ‘How did you fool the Sorting Hat?’

‘Um, fool the hat?’ Emma asked, frowning.

‘Yeah. We all know you’re just a blood-traitor spy. Don’t expect to get cosy here or anything,’ the girl retorted, before Alecto rounded on her.

‘Shut up, she’s a pure blood like us. Just because her family’s in Gryffindor... Emma here obviously
knows where her loyalties lie.’

Emma didn’t know whether to thank her, or get angry at her. Her loyalties? She had been in Slytherin for not even one day! Though she knew how seriously the Houses were taken...

‘At least she’s not a half-blood,’ the mean girl faltered under Alecto’s fiery stare.

‘Hey! Half-blood is better than none,’ said the last girl in a sing-song voice. ‘Ignore Helen, she’s an idiot. We grew up together, she’s not actually that bad once you get to know her. I’m Lucinda by the way, Lucinda Rosier.’

Whilst Emma digested all of this information, the other girls, having satisfied their curiosity, all got into bed, drawing their curtains closed for privacy, and it was over as quickly as it had begun. She realised that most of the Slytherin house, if their reputation was to go by, would have a similar reaction to Helen. Potters didn’t belong in Slytherin, and she’d better not forget it. As if to prove her point, a flash of colour caught her eye on the inside of her school robes.

Though the neutral Hogwarts insignia had automatically changed to green and silver upon her Sorting, there was an inside pocket with a little gold lion sewn onto it. Inside has a note, folded into four.

This is how much we’re sure of you getting into Gryffindor! I can’t wait for your first owl to tell me how you found the common room. Some of your best years will be spent in that tower!

- Love Dad

I’m sorry dear, your father really is full of himself. I sewed the lion on there so that you’d remember to be brave. I remember my first night at Hogwarts - after the initial excitement, I began to feel very homesick. So this way, you bring a little bit of home with you. I’ve done the same for James. - Love Mum

Tears sprang to Emma’s eyes, and she shredded the paper in a fit of rage. Like she could believe her mother’s story. She knew that her dad had begged her mum, and that her mum had probably capitulated, thinking there was no harm to it. After all, her house Ravenclaw was very close to the Gryffindors. Emma doubted either of them would believe where she really ended up in. Closing the curtains around her, she curled up in a ball and cried herself to sleep.

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The next morning saw her blearily pouring cereal into a bowl while trying not to yawn. She had taken an extra-cold shower that morning to wake up, but the restless night still showed. Luckily, most first years couldn’t sleep on the first night anyway, usually from excitement.

James had made sure to appear at the Slytherin table to wish her a good morning, and prove that he didn’t care about her House at all. He told her about his new roommates: Remus and Peter, and how an instant friendship had formed between the four of them. He said that she would like them, and would like her to meet them for lunch if it was a nice day. The unspoken agreement was that they should eat lunch with their respective Houses if not. They saw that they had Potions and Charms together, and the Quidditch practice was for all years anyway. James moaned in a typical James fashion about having to learn broomstick basics again, but Emma was looking forward to flying. She had learnt that first years weren’t allowed to fly unsupervised and she knew that she would miss it.

When Regulus appeared at the Slytherin table, his eyes slid to James and then to the Gryffindor table. He blanched for a second, and the twins followed his line of sight. There, between the heaps of bacon and eggs, was Sirius, staring murderously at James. The latter sighed, and swung his legs over
the bench.

‘Catch you later, Ems’,’ he winked, before sauntering off to his friends.

Regulus rolled his eyes, but made no pretense at trying to eat anything. Trying to take his mind off it
in return for his support from the night before, Emma suggested that they made their way to their first
lessons of the day.

The rest of the week passed without much incident, but on Saturday Emma realised that she had to
write to her parents. She decided to sit by the Black Lake, feeling odd seeing it from above water this
time. Soon, a pile of crumpled parchment was by her side, and she was throwing pebbles into the
lake in frustration.

Dear Mum and Dad,
Guess what? I’m in Slytherin -

Dear Mum and Dad,
I don’t know if you already know this by now, but I’m -
Mum, Dad, I’m in Slytherin -

In the end, she copped out altogether.

Hi Mum and Dad,
How’s your week been? Hogwarts is good, the sight from my room is amazing! (no lies there) I
was disappointed that first years weren’t allowed their own broomsticks, but I guess you’ve
already got mine and James’s back by now. Luckily Fluffy’s still here, keeping the end of my bed
warm, and looking out for potential intruders! So far my favourite class is Potions, or maybe
Charms. I made some new friends, Regulus Black, I think James might have told you about his
brother Sirius, and a girl called Alecto Carrow. She’s really nice, but she doesn’t understand why
I like Potions so much. She thinks that Defence against the Dark Arts is the most interesting
subject.
The weather’s nice here, I’m writing from the Hogwarts grounds. There are no holidays for
Halloween, so we’ll see each other at Christmas.
Lots of love from
Emma

Hopefully, they wouldn’t notice the gaping hole in her letter.

***

The next day was Sunday: the traditional day normal post came in - a little dig at the Muggles. Every
owned owl came in, post or no post, because treats were served in little bowls at breakfast for them.
Emma made her way to the Gryffindor table where her brother was joking with Sirius.

‘Hey James,’ she smiled. ‘Mind if I borrow Elewyn?’

‘Sure, no problem,’ he replied, gesturing towards the snowy owl greedily eating out of Sirius’s hand.

Sirius stiffened as she gently tied the roll to the owl’s leg and told her the destination. Emma looked
at him questioningly. ‘Did she dig her claws in?’ Elewyn had a nasty habit of doing that before
taking off.

‘No,’ he replied coldly. ‘I just don’t take kindly to Slytherins sitting at my table.’

‘Watch it, that’s my sister!’ James warned, before turning to Emma. Why don’t we go and see what
Dad’s gift is, now we have the time?’

‘But, I -‘ she tried saying as James steered her into the Entrance Hall. ‘What was that for?’

‘Just before you arrived, Sirius got a Howler from his parents. He’s in a bad mood,’ her brother explained, then shifted awkwardly. ‘I think it’d be better if we came to see each other outside of the Great Hall. Some of the Gryffindors have told us stories about the older Slytherins, and... well... it’s not exactly pretty.’

Emma was hurt and surprised, and James seemed to see that, because he tried again. ‘Look, I’m really sorry. You’re my sister, you always will be, but I’m scared the Gryffindors will get riled up if they see someone from Slytherin appearing at our table. The Great Hall is supposed to be some kind of “truce” place, and they think it’s being ruined and... I don’t want you to get hurt. You know, the old Gryffindor act before you think thing.’

His attempt at a joke stung even more. They weren’t James and Emma anymore, they were James the Gryffindor, and Emma the non-Gryffindor, and it had only been a week. A couple of students were looking at them curiously, and Emma realised she had tears in her eyes. She cast around for something to take her mind off it.

‘Wait, if Sirius got a Howler, how come I didn’t hear it?’

James coloured at that. ‘Well, he got it but -‘

He was interrupted by a shriek, and they hurried into the Great Hall to see a mass of students craning their head to look at the Gryffindor table.

‘SIRIUS ORION BLACK! WE GAVE YOU A CHANCE TO REDEEM YOURSELF, YOU ONLY HAD TO GET SORTED, FOR MERLIN’S SAKE, AND YOU MANAGED TO RUIN EVEN THAT! DID YOU THINK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES TO YOUR FATHER AND I? WE’VE BEEN ASKED WHETHER WE MISTREATED YOU AND DROVE YOU INTO THE ARMS OF THOSE MUGGLE-LOVING TRAITORS. WE ARE VERY DISAPPOINTED IN YOU, AND DON’T YOU DARE SAY IT WAS THE HAT’S DECISION. EVEN THE POTTER GIRL MANAGED TO HONOUR HER PURE BLOOD BY GETTING INTO SLYTHERIN. WE WILL BE HAVING A DISCUSSION ABOUT THIS WHEN YOU GET HOME, MARK MY WORDS. AND DON’T YOU DARE SPEND TIME WITH ANY MUDBLOODS WHILE YOU’RE THERE.’

James and Emma looked at each other with horrified expressions. A Howler was rare, and this one seemed extreme. Plus, Sirius’s mother hadn’t exactly been the most tolerant person of what must have made up half of the student body. Glancing towards the Slytherin table, Emma noticed that Regulus had sunk as far into his seat as humanely possible, whereas Bellatrix, his cousin, was looking particularly smug. No doubt she was the one to inform her aunt of her cousin’s transgressions.

When the angry woman mentioned Emma, she reddened. No doubt her father was feeling the complete opposite of Walburga Black’s words. But she hadn’t expected half of the Gryffindors in the room to turn around and stare at her in disgust. So far, she had flown under the radar with them, as they were preoccupied with Sirius, but no doubt that would change now. Her gaze flickered towards James, who was looking half-bemused, half-protective, as though he sensed a danger but didn’t really know what it was yet.

But the worst was Sirius. He slowly got off the table and walked stiffly over towards the twins.
‘Have fun with my family,’ he said scathingly, before pushing exiting the Hall. ‘One wasn’t enough for you, was it?’

‘Emma,’ James began, but his sister cut him off.

‘Go after Sirius, James. He probably needs you more than me.’

*And I can’t hide out in the Slytherin common room if you’re following,* she added privately to herself.

James rushed off after his friend, and Emma made her way down to the dungeons as quickly as she could without running. However, a group of older Slytherins blocked her path before she got to the entrance.

‘Slytherins only, Potter,’ a tall blond boy stated coldly.

She wordlessly pointed to her badge, but a heavy-set fifth-year boy slammed his arm across the passageway when she tried to get past. Startled, she jumped, and the rest of his group laughed.

‘Aww, is wickle Potter scared without her brave Gwyffindor brother?’ the girl she recognised as Bellatrix Black taunted.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Emma replied, her heart beating quickly.

‘Simple,’ the brawny boy said leeringly. ‘Either you’re with us, or with them.’

Emma stared at him.

‘You have to spell it out for her, Rodolphus,’ the blond boy smirked. ‘After all, Gryffindor blood runs through her veins.’ He turned to Emma. ‘Sorry, Rodolphus is only good for flexing his muscles. What he means is, we’ve seen you gallivanting off with the Gryffindors. Now, I’m a fair-minded man, so I’ll excuse you for now. But we’re your family now. That means that everything you do reflects upon us. I understand if you want to see your brother, but make it private. We wouldn’t want people having the wrong impression now, would we? How could a Slytherin ever trust you if you’re secretly Gryffindor at heart? So make a choice,’ he leaned closer and whispered in her ear, ‘and remember who can get to you when you’re sleeping at night.’

The eleven-year-old stammered a reply and ducked under Rodolphus’s arm into the common room. She heard the older students laughing, but none of them tried to follow her. Luckily, most students were either at breakfast or enjoying the last few days of summer in the grounds. Though it was a warm day, the fire was lit.

*I suppose the sun can’t reach under the lake,* she thought to herself, sitting down on the rug and hugging her knees to herself. This wasn’t supposed to have happened. She felt sorry for Sirius, but she felt more sorry for herself. Hogwarts was supposed to be a magical place, the best seven years of her life. A chill went through her that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room, and to her dismay she started crying.

A few minutes later she felt a tap on her shoulder.

‘Hi,’ Regulus was awkwardly squatting next to her, wringing his hands. ‘I remembered you saying that you liked Quidditch on the train.’

She quickly, if not graciously, wiped her face with her sleeve and took a deep breath. To his credit, Regulus didn’t react. She was grateful for it.
'But McGonagall said first years weren’t allowed,’ she frowned.

‘The way I see it,’ Regulus grinned, ‘we’re only not allowed if people see us.’

Emma felt a grin forming on her face despite herself. Her troubles forgotten, she scrambled up excitedly and followed him to the grounds, where they pretended they were second years picking up a broomstick for practice. Luckily Madam Hooch was occupied with some new Bludgers, and didn’t look too closely at them.

‘Now we just need to find somewhere we can’t get caught,’ Regulus said.

‘The Forbidden Forest!’ Emma exclaimed at once. At his shocked look, she went on. ‘No one will think students are sneaking in on a Sunday morning. It’s usually at night and stuff.’

Regulus conceded that she had a point, and they snuck around the gamekeeper’s hut into the woods. Emma had never been in the Forbidden Forest before, but she had imagined it to be dark and gloomy, with giant spiders everywhere, and lots of other mythical creatures. She supposed they all came out at night, because they soon came upon a sunny clearing, and the forest was just like the one behind her house: a slightly damp smell and toadstools everywhere.

Though the broom was only an old Shooting Star and kept on flying to the left, she didn’t care. She was free - or as close to free as a witch could get - and the slight breeze felt good on her face. They flew around in circles so that the leftward flying didn’t matter, and as all young wizards do, they tried to make a sort of tornado with the air currents, loop around to end up exactly where they were before, and generally had a good time. When Emma finally landed, she had forgotten all about the morning’s incident and she was breathless from all the laughing. Her stomach grumbled noisily, reminding her that they had missed lunch. As they raced each other back to the castle, she thought that maybe being in Slytherin wasn’t so bad after all.
Adaptation

Time seemed to fly by after that. Emma quickly learned that the older Slytherins were probing for weaknesses in everyone, and they didn’t seem to hold a grudge against the fact that her family was in Gryffindor. As long as she didn't give them a reason to hate her, they didn't. In fact, she and Narcissa became friendly, if not friends, and Lucius sometimes helped her with her transfiguration homework, in exchange for her running errands for him. One thing the first years had picked up on was that everything was an exchange, and everything was allowed. Show your weakness, and someone will find a way to use it. Show a strength, and you'd suddenly find people clamouring to be your friend.

Those were the times she missed James and his straightforward honesty. Besides, his knack for picking up transfiguration spells might have helped her. McGonagall loved him, and whereas another might have got detention, he was merely let off with a stern warning. Several times.

Emma was better at Potions, which quickly became one of her favourite subjects, and she quickly became one of Slughorn’s favourite students. He paired her with Lily Evans and if their potions were perfect, he let them keep them afterwards. Needless to say, Severus Snape wasn’t very pleased. The older Slytherins were pressuring him about his friendship with a Mudblood, and a Gryffindor to boot, so he didn’t see much of Lily as it was.

The girls in her dormitory soon became her closest friends, though she got her revenge on Helen by turning her shampoo pink. Nobody suspected her, and it was put down to a faulty delivery. In fact, the ones giving her the hardest time were the Gryffindors. Though the hatred between Slytherin and Gryffindor was legendary, they nursed a special hatred towards Emma, who thanks to Sirius was now known as a traitor to her family, even though no one chose where the Sorting Hat placed them. Thankfully James ignored his stupid friend, and they discovered the invisibility cloak their father gave them in the Astronomy Tower one night. After that, two nights a week they would pick a place in the castle to explore, and laugh at Filch getting annoyed with Mrs Norris over “nothing”.

One October night, they discovered the kitchens. House elves bustled around, making sure that they stuffed themselves with pumpkin pastries, treacle tarts, and hot chocolate filled with tiny marshmallows. James excitedly told her that it was Sirius’s birthday soon, and Emma drew the cake James wanted to surprise his best friend with. Though they didn’t get along well, she wanted to help James, and she secretly hoped that Sirius hating her was just a show. When James talked about him he seemed like a completely different person. The cake was in the shape of a roaring lion. The house elves made it so that it wouldn’t crumble, James bewitched it to shake its mane, and Emma found a charm that made it talk. They burst out laughing on the first try: James had been trying to imitate Sirius’s voice, and the lion somehow ended up sounding like Peter Carson, a rather dim-witted Hufflepuff boy they swapped stories about. James decided that it just would not do, and they devoured the whole cake in a single evening. The second attempt was put off for several days, as they both came down with a “stomach ailment” that had Madame Pomfrey shaking her head in disappointment.

And then suddenly, the Christmas holidays were upon them, and it was time to go home. Their mother was ecstatic, telling them how the house hadn’t been the same without them. Sirius and Regulus both agreed to ask their parents if they could come for the New Year’s. In the carriage on the way to the train, Sirius joked that their mother would be ecstatic at the opportunity to try and marry him off to a pureblood other than his cousins, and they all laughed at that, even Emma. She caught Sirius’s eye, and for a split second there was an understanding between them.

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On the train, Emma sat with Alecto and a few other girls from the first year. They reminisced about the past four months, and marvelled at how the year passed so quickly. Emma and Alecto amused the others by using a couple of charms they had learnt, taking advantage of their magic before the start of the holidays. Emma was in the process of turning Alecto’s chocolate frog yellow when the Slytherin prefect slid open the compartment door.

‘Listen up everyone!’ she started, before frowning. ‘Alecto, I wouldn’t eat that chocolate frog if I were you.’ The frog had turned a murky colour with a yellow tinge. Needless to say, it did not look appetizing. Alecto started to speak before the prefect cut through with a wink. ‘If I don’t hear about it, I can’t deduct points. Anyway, I was just going to say that we’re almost in London. You lot had better get changed quickly.’

‘Aww,’ whined Sophie Parkinson, looking sadly at her robes. ‘I was hoping to show off my new Slytherin badge to my parents.’

‘Me too,’ agreed Lucinda. ‘They’ll be so happy and besides,’ she tossed her hair over her shoulder, ‘green’s always been my colour.’

Everyone laughed, and started pulling their trunks down to stow away their robes.

‘Um…I forgot my jumper in James’s trunk,’ she said.

‘I find it so weird that James has your jumper,’ Lucinda said. ‘I mean, how did it end up there?’

‘Well, we shoved our stuff into the trunks at random when we arrived at Hogwarts,’ Emma said, putting on a guilty look.

The rest of the girls laughed and shook their heads, but Alecto gave Emma a knowing look. She and Regulus alone knew that Emma had hidden her school House from her parents up until now. Sliding open the compartment door, she made her way down the train, peering at the compartments. She was so occupied that she bumped into someone without looking.

‘Oh sorry,’ she said automatically.

‘Save the apology,’ Severus Snape said with a sneer. ‘You may have everyone else fooled, but not me.’

‘Um, what?’

‘Strutting around the school like you own it. You’re so like your brother you make me sick. How did you do it huh? Pretend you’re a Slytherin?’. He lowered his voice. ‘What are you doing for the others to let them give you special treatment? Tell me!’ He grabbed her wrist, and Emma gasped, trying to squirm out of his grasp. ‘How come you’re allowed to hang out with a Gryffindor? Fine, don’t tell me. How long do you think you can last until everyone realises that you’re just a pathetic, treacherous Gryffindor and -‘

‘And what, Snivellus?’

Sirius Black, of all people, was standing in the doorway, twirling his wand, looking like he hadn’t a care in the world.

‘I think he was just about to say that he needed to wash his greasy hair,’ James appeared, a lop-sided grin on his face.
‘You know what James? I’m in a generous mood. Why don’t we give it a wash for him?’

‘Excellent idea, Sirius.’

‘Scourgify!’ they both yelled in unison, and bubbles started appearing among Severus’s lanky locks. When he tried to rub them out, they only multiplied. He cursed and headed towards the bathroom, shooting them a filthy look over his shoulder.

‘Thanks,’ Emma said, turning towards Sirius.

‘I needed something to do,’ he shrugged. ‘I was bored.’

They both knew that he wasn’t just bored. So Emma just gave him her most sincere smile, and internally forgave him for everything he said at the start of the year. Though she was slightly embarrassed at James coming to save her yet again, and coming to tell him her worries, yet again. But she couldn’t turn back now. Neither of them could ever hide anything from each other. James was already giving her his “worried brother” look, but he knew better than to ask about it in front of Sirius.

‘So,’ Sirius said, slinging an arm over her shoulder. ‘What brings you to our side of the train? Come on, let’s introduce you to the rest of the gang.’ He pointed to a short, plump boy. ‘That’s Peter. Not the Hufflepuff Peter, this one’s cool. And this,’ he pointed to the other boy with floppy brown hair, who waved at her shyly, ‘is Remus.’

‘Hi,’ Emma said awkwardly. She knew them from sight, but not much more. She wanted to get to know James’s friends, but if they were already in London she had about fifteen minutes before they arrived. ‘Hey James, you have my jumper.’

This was what she loved about her twin. He took one look at the school robes folded neatly in her arms, understood, and said nothing. He took out a jumper that was clearly his, but it would fit her anyway so it didn’t matter, and declared dramatically that it was his brotherly duty to make sure she got back to her compartment safely. His friends all laughed, and they emerged into the slightly more private corridor. Emma pulled on the jumper, which was ironically red with gold snitched stitched into the sleeves. At least her dad wouldn’t suspect anything until they got home. Hopefully. She had carefully ignored any House-related topics in her letters, and had tactfully replied to inquiries with answers such as ‘you were right about the moth-eaten armchairs! The one to the left of the fire is my favourite’. True, but not true.

‘You still haven’t told them,’ James said quietly.

‘I thought it would be better face to face,’ she replied.

Her twin looked at her with the special look reserved for idiotic replies. They both laughed, but it soon died down.

‘They’ll be fine about it,’ he reassured her.

‘Yeah maybe Mum, but can you imagine Dad’s face?’

The whistle blew as the train entered the station.

‘Looks like I won’t have to imagine.’

***
‘So?’ Charles Potter asked excitedly as their mother left to check on the food. ‘Let’s see you in your House robes!’

They were sitting in the living room around the fireplace, watching - and occasionally helping - their mother make her speciality: Sunday roast. Even though it was Saturday. It had always been James and Emma’s favourite meal, and the Hogwarts roast didn’t quite come up to scratch. All the car ride home, the twins had babbled about their lessons, funny stories about spilled potions and wrongly-cast spells on classmates, just Hogwarts in general. Their parents had laughed in all the right places, and quickly established what was whose favourite class: James loved Transfiguration like their mother; they both enjoyed Charms, and Emma shared a talent in Potions with Charles.

Their father had joked that his lessons had all paled next to Quidditch, so they would have another discussion in their second year about the positions they wanted to play. When James and Emma had both immediately replied chaser, and teased each other about the goals they would mark against each other, Charles had assumed they were talking about tryouts.

Now, James bounded up the stairs and Emma traipsed after him, wondering what to do. James suddenly stopped in the hallway and turned to her, but she ushered him back into his room. She knew how much being a Gryffindor meant to him, and how long he had held it in just for her.

Besides, she had an idea. Well, half an idea. She stared at the robes with their snake sigil and green lining folded in the top of her trunk, and took a deep breath.

‘Mum!’ she yelled. ‘Mum I can’t find my trunk!’

‘It’s on your bed honey,’ Natalie called back up to her.

‘Well it’s not anymore! Where did you put it?’

As expected, her mother came grumbling up the stairs. When she spotted Emma standing next to her trunk, she frowned furiously and opened her mouth to scold her, but quickly shut it and the door when she saw what her daughter was wearing.

‘Oh Emma,’ she sighed, and the eleven-year-old burst into tears, running into her arms.

‘I’m so-sorry,’ Emma sobbed. ‘I di-didn’t know how to tell you, and Dad -’ she sniffed noisily. ‘I don’t know what Dad would say. I didn’t want to ruin it for James. I didn’t do it on purpose.’

Natalie Potter sighed and pulled a tissue out of the box on the bedside table. As her only daughter blew her nose, sniffing all the while, she wondered not for the first time about the effect that the Houses had in Hogwarts. Of course, it helped you find friends with similar basic personality traits, and studies showed that you integrated better but…The problem was the rivalry. She herself had been subject to a Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw competition, but Gryffindor and Slytherin were different. And then this. Charles wasn’t the only one to carry on a House rivalry into his older years. Looking at her daughter, she had to hide a smile thinking about the ruse to get Natalie into the room. There was a lot of Charles in her: proud, unwilling to show fear.

She wondered why her daughter wasn’t in Gryffindor. Then again, Emma was always the quiet, cautious one compared to James. She thought about the little girl’s words: “I didn’t want to ruin it for James”. They had waited so long to have children, Natalie was glad that she had twins. She was worried at first: she had heard of the rivalry, the fighting and problems with twins, but James and Emma were like two parts of one person. They seemed to have a sixth sense on how to help each other, and that comforted her when she sent them off to Hogwarts. She hoped that the House rivalry
wouldn’t tear them apart.

After a little while, Emma’s sobs subsided, but it took many words of comfort before she went downstairs. By that time, James was holding up an imaginary sword in his favourite Gryffindor expression, and telling his dad all about his exploits with the Fat Lady and her silly passwords. When Charles noticed Emma standing in the doorway he got up off of the sofa.

‘There she is! Found your robes then? Come here and give your old man a good look.’

James watched awkwardly from the side, wanting to help but not knowing what to do. Emma had put on a brave face after her moment of weakness: she didn’t want her dad thinking she had inherited no Gryffindor traits at all. She walked up to her father, who hugged her and twirled her around, laughing. It was only when he set her back down that he noticed the colour on the inside of her robes.

‘Emma,’ he said in a strangled voice. ‘I think they mixed up your robes.’

‘Nope!’ she said, opening one side so that he could see the lion sewn into the side. ‘I’m in Slytherin Dad. Didn’t I mention it in my letters?’

‘You most certainly did not.’

‘Emma,’ her mother warned, but now that it was out in the open, Emma felt a reckless giddiness take hold of her. It was surreal.

‘What’s the matter Dad?’ she teased. ‘You thought I’d be in Gryffindor just because James is?’

‘They’ve made a mistake,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘No child of mine could possibly be in Slytherin. They’re not good enough for you.’

‘Well apparently the Hat thought they were. Maybe I’m just not good enough for you.’

‘Maybe,’ Charles agreed, before he realised what came out of his mouth. ‘Emma, I didn’t -’

‘Mum!’ James said loudly. ‘The stove’s on fire.’ And so it was.

‘The onions!’ Natalie moaned, rushing over to her wand.

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In the end dinner was saved, but the damage had already been done thanks to Charles. James was quiet all throughout dinner, and Emma picked at her food. It was quickly over with and as the children went up to bed Natalie shot a reproachful look towards her husband.

‘You could have handled that better,’ she started.

‘I know.’

‘She’s our daughter Charles. Not some thick-headed prejudiced meat-head from your old school days. She’s the same person she was this summer. The children she’s been sorted with aren’t responsible for the crimes committed by our generation and Grindelwald. They probably don’t even know about the Muggle hatred. Emma doesn’t. All she knows is that she’s scared her father doesn’t love her anymore because of a two thousand year old Hat.’

‘I know,’ Charles replied, a little angrily.’
‘You need to fix this.’

‘I know,’ he sighed, running a hand through the messy hair their children had inherited. His was completely grey now, a reminder of how late in life they had their children. Both knew they had to make every year count.

As Emma was about to turn off the light, she heard a knock on the door.

‘Can I come in?’ Charles asked, ducking his head through the doorway.

‘You already have,’ she grumbled, but she was secretly hopeful.

He sat heavily on the end of her bed, folding a blanket that she had kicked into a pile.

‘I won’t say I’m not disappointed you’re in Gryffindor. I won’t lie. And I have to admit that Slytherin is a shock too. But you know Emma, I’ll let you in on a little secret. The reason that most Gryffindors and Slytherins hate each other is because they’re reminded of themselves. Gryffindors put on a brave face and pretend they’re never scared. Slytherins are too proud that they need help once in a while. And both are fiercely loyal to their House. But a Slytherin will never admit that they’re glad a Gryffindor tried something first, and a Gryffindor will deny the fact that they want to succeed just as much as Slytherins do. I’m just sad that I won’t be able to share the same Hogwarts experience as you, that’s all.’

Emma thought about this for a little while. Then she reached under her bed and pulled out a silvery cloak. ‘We can share this.’

Charles laughed, and ruffled his daughter’s hair. It had grown during the first term, almost to her shoulders. Yet another difference between her and James. He hoped that the differences would stop there.
By the time New Year’s Eve rolled around, everything was almost back to normal. Charles even joked about finally understanding why Emma and James talked about different classmates in their letters. Apparently, they had thought that there were an abnormally large amount of Gryffindors Sorted that year. The Potter parents had agreed to have Regulus and Sirius come over for a sleepover and - being unable to refuse their darling twins anything - agreed to let them camp in the garden for the night. The twins spent the day excitedly shopping for sweets as Natalie and Charles puzzled over the renewal of heating charms. They had invited their friends’ parents over too, so Emma wasn’t surprised to see an elegant-looking blonde woman emerge from the green flames of their fireplace at seven o’clock on the dot. She was surprised, however, at how dejected Sirius looked when he followed a second later. He had been forced into a suit, and didn’t look very pleased about it. However, upon seeing the Potter’s house, he cheered up immensely and immediately asked where James was.

‘Manners, Sirius!’ his mother scolded.

‘Sorry mother,’ he said, before turning to Natalie Potter, who had just bustled out of the kitchen. ‘Hello Mrs Potter. Thank you for inviting us. Could you tell me where James is, please?’

Mrs Black opened her mouth to tell him off, but Natalie just laughed. ‘He’s out buying the sweets with Charles, my husband. I’m surprised Emma didn’t go with him.’ As a side to Mrs Black she explained. ‘They’re as thick as thieves. Honestly, we almost had to force them into separate rooms.’

‘I know what you mean. I’m Walburga Black, nice to meet you,’ Mrs Black smiled graciously, and in a blink her features were perfectly composed.

As Emma was admiring how Mrs Black looked like a beautiful model rather than a homely mum, Regulus and Mr Black arrived, dusting off soot before stepping out into the living room. Mr Black greeted Emma’s mother with a bouquet of flowers and introduced himself as Orion. Regulus shyly said hello, complimented the house and thanked Mrs Potter for having them.

‘It’s nice of you to let us come over,’ he said. Mrs Black beamed with pride.

‘That’s how you properly greet your host, Sirius,’ she said loftily.

Sirius muttered something darkly beneath his breath and glared at his brother. Emma hurriedly suggested that she show them the tent where the kids would be sleeping, and her mother offered to show their guests around the house while they waited.

‘Don’t mind him,’ Regulus said. ‘He’s just upset because our parents are still annoyed about him being in Gryffindor. They almost didn’t let him come, but they changed their mind when they found out James was a pureblood with a sister in Slytherin.’
Don’t remind me, Emma said with a laugh, though she was burning with curiosity about every detail. She wanted to know how it went compared to her own experience, but she knew better than to ask while Sirius was sulking. She still wasn’t sure if they were friends or not.

Miss me? a voice sang, and a shower of chocolate frogs, Bertie Bott’s every flavour beans, and any other tasty treat they could think of rained down into their make-shift fort.

I like what you’ve done with the place, said James, fluffing up n one of their many cushions. But Mum says food’s ready.

After an awkward dinner with the parents, the four of them scurried into their den to start the real fun. Walburga had mostly talked about how nice it was to find another pure-blood family and how relieved they were when they realised that Sirius wasn’t cohorting with Muggleborns. Upon seeing Charles’s face, Orion hastily clarified that he was happy because they would have similar backgrounds, so as not to feel too homesick. In the end, the adults laughed about adult stuff, and the kids chatted about what they wanted to do afterwards.

Okay so you all know the rules, James said, shaking four beans onto each of their outstretched palms. Choose one for each of us. The one with the worst beans gets dared by the one with the best.

Emma stared at her beans: there was one weird-looking brown one which she immediately reserved for James, and she selected a red one for herself. The red ones were never that bad. Once the beans were distributed, they ate each of the three given to them. The weird brown one turned out to be baked beans: James high-fived Sirius who had got lucky with chocolate, sugared violet and toasted marshmallow. He evilly rubbed his hands together, thinking of a dare. Regulus mouthed a sorry to Emma, who was quickly spitting out her dirt-flavoured bean.

I never knew a sweet could taste so awful, she spluttered as James poured her another hot chocolate. I don’t know what you’re laughing at, dear brother. The elusive bogey flavour has been discovered.

James made a face. They both had two awful beans, and one neutral. Time to see if we sink or save ourselves.

One. Two. Three!

They both shoved their last bean into their mouth, chewing furiously.

Aaaaahhh! Hot, hot hot! Emma fanned her mouth. Her not-so-bad bean was in fact chilli-flavoured.


Sirius shook his head at his friend’s weird taste, but there were more important things on his mind. He stood up, and grandly pronounced: Emma Jane Potter, I dare you to steal one of my mother’s socks.

James and Regulus gaped at him, but Emma didn’t hesitate for a second. Done, she said. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.

In actual fact, she had no idea of what to do as she ran across the lawn to the house. She had agreed to the dare only to prove that she was just as daring as Sirius could be. And to see James’s proud face when she got back. And to see Regulus shocked at her audacity. She wanted to prove to the boys
that she wasn’t just some girl that needed comforting and who cried about her Sorting all the time. By the time she made it to the dining room, she knew what to do. It was just a matter of the execution. As predicted, the parents hadn’t left the dinner table, and were in an animated discussion about Quidditch. As she entered, her mother rolled her eyes at her. Natalie Potter had never been a huge sports fan, and was engaged in a conversation about mini-skirts and dresses with Mrs Black. She moved to her mother’s side.

‘Do you know where the spare blankets are?’ she asked quietly. ‘James doesn’t want to get cold when we change into our pyjamas.’

This was a plausible excuse. James had always been a sissy when it came to bedcovers. Her mother excused herself, but while she was getting up, Emma “accidentally” knocked the water jug onto Mrs Black. She felt slightly bad about it: her dress was very pretty, and looked very expensive. Luckily she had aimed well, and the water only splashed on one leg and foot.

‘Oh!’ she cried, quickly standing up. Emma had forgotten to take into account the fact that the glass water jug would smash.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry Mrs Black,’ Emma said. ‘I wasn’t looking, I didn’t mean to!’ And she looked at Walburga Black with her best guilty look.

‘That’s quite alright my dear,’ the blonde woman replied, softening. ‘After all, it’s only a bit of water.’

‘Careful!’ Charles said. ‘The glass is dangerous!’

Luckily Mr Black kept a calm head in this kind of situations. After all, there were many accidents in the House of Black, especially when his niece Bellatrix was around. ‘Come dear, let’s get you cleaned up. Emma, you should go back to the tent; I’m sure your mother can bring the blankets when we’ve sorted this out.’

Mrs Black was told to put her wet socks on the radiator to dry, and Natalie looked for something for her to wear while her dress dried. On her way out, Emma filched the sock. Though she had seen her mother’s look saying that she was not impressed with her behaviour, it was worth seeing the boys’ face when she dangled the sopping pink sock in Sirius’s face.

‘Done,’ she said, blowing out the oil lamp and picking up a glowing wand. ‘Now who’s up for some ghost stories?’

‘Oh, I’ll go first!’ Regulus said. ‘I know a good one.’

The other three were surprised: Regulus was usually quiet, only participating once in a while, but they all huddled up on one side of the den, waiting expectantly.

‘You all know the Bloody Baron,’ he started. They nodded, shuddering a little. The Bloody Baron was scary.

‘Well, there was once a young wizard who was a favourite of the Four Founders of Hogwarts. Many men admired him, and many women fell in love with him, because he was a passionate person. But he only had eyes for one girl, who he had loved from the day of their first Sorting, though she had rejected him. One day, her mother fell fatally ill, and asked him as a final request to find her estranged daughter so that she could make peace with her once and for all. The baron swore to never rest until he did, and he travelled many days and nights before finding her. She refused him once again though, and they quarrelled bitterly. She told him that she didn’t love him, and he - in a fit of rage and jealousy - told her that if she couldn’t love him, then she couldn’t love anyone at all and he
stabbed her to death.’

James gasped, and Emma reached for his hand. It was scary how easily people could be killed. But the hand she found wasn’t familiar like her twin’s, and she glanced across to meet Sirius’s surprised eyes. He looked away, but tightened his grasp. She supposed that even Sirius could be scared once in a while. As Regulus continued his story, she thought about Walburga Black and wondered if they were allowed to be scared. She didn’t seem like the type to comfort you with a hug and bedtime story.

‘And to this day he still wears her blood and his chains in penance for what he did,’ Regulus concluded.

‘How do you even know this story?’ James demanded in awe.

Regulus shrugged. ‘I just hear things in Hogwarts.’
Their 12th birthday was on a Sunday, a week before Easter. Emma and James eagerly awaited their parents’ owl and they were not disappointed. Unfortunately Hermes didn’t know whether to fly to the Gryffindor or Slytherin table, and ended up flying in dizzy circles until it dropped between the two tables. The twins looked at each other: they always sat facing each other out of habit - they could still have their twin conversations in peace. The Great Hall burst into laughter as McGonagall called for silence.

‘And whose bird is this, may I ask?’

‘Mine miss!’ the twins chimed.

‘Would you mind removing it from obstructing the path, Potter?’ She raised an eyebrow.

Albus Dumbledore chuckled quietly at the unintended joke. McGonagall blushed a little as she sat back down.

They rushed to the owl.

‘Okay so this is for you, and this is for me,’ James said, separating the two parcels. ‘Mine is bigger than yours,’ he stuck his tongue out and skipped back to his table.

Emma rolled her eyes and glanced back at the Slytherin table: all the first years were pretending not to be interested in her present.

‘Better get Hermes to the Owlery,’ she said.

‘I’ll come too,’ Alecto hurried over.

Half an hour later, the owl was looking a lot happier. Alecto was pampering him with Owl Treats while Emma turned the parcel around and around in her hands. It was simple brown paper, held in place with knotted string.

‘So? Do you think your parents are still annoyed that you’re in Slytherin? I thought they were okay with it?’ Alecto asked in a rush.

‘I don’t know,’ Emma said thoughtfully. ‘My mum is, not too sure about Dad.’

‘Only one way to find out!’

Emma pulled the string off. A small box fell out of the wrapping paper.

‘Well go on,’ Alecto said quietly. ‘Open it.’

‘I’m scared of what it’ll be,’ Emma admitted.
‘Okay, so imagine if it’s the worst,’ Alecto put a hand over her friend’s. ‘You still have us.’

‘Does that “us” include Helen?’ Emma asked sarcastically.

‘Oh come on Ems, nobody gives a flying rat’s arse about Helen,’ Alecto laughed. ‘Besides, Narcissa and Bellatrix Black love you, and no one messes with a Black.’

Emma thought of Regulus, the quiet boy who had managed to get her throughout the first few weeks, before the others had deigned to give her a chance. Even at eleven he had that quiet aura of control that had other kids clamouring to be his friend.

‘You don’t, do you?’ Emma smiled. ‘Thanks, Alecto.’

‘Anytime,’ her best friend winked. ‘So…Are you going to make me die of curiosity, or what?’

But neither of them expected what they saw next. An oval locket with a silver chain and glass covering was nestled on a piece of parchment that said “Open me”. Emma quickly found the catch on the side. The inside was black velvet, and another piece of parchment was folded up.

Dear Emma,

Happy 12th Birthday! We just wanted you to know, that it doesn’t matter what House you were sorted in. It only matters that you are happy, make friends and enjoy yourself at Hogwarts. If that means you have to be in Slytherin…Well the Sorting Hat has its reasons.

PS. Anytime your father seems to forget that, just look at the front of the locket! (love Mum)
PPS. Don’t lose it Ems! (love Dad)

Emma quickly turned it back around. Beneath the glass casing was a green snake made up of tiny emeralds, set on a background of gold. The snake was shaped like an S.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Alecto breathed, as Emma blinked back tears. ‘Here, let me put it on you.’

It must have been made of solid gold, because it fell heavily on Emma’s chest. But she liked the weight, it seemed like a physical proof that her family still loved her.

I’ll never take it off,

she swore,

but she hid the note from Alecto. This was something she wouldn’t share with anyone, not even James.

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The rest of the year passed quickly, but Regulus and Sirius’s parents never came back to the Potter’s house. When pressed, Natalie and Charles would reply with vague answers about being busy, or not having the same interests. Besides, their parents had their own friends anyway. The summer was spent at Natalie’s sister’s house in France and their cousins: Lou and Pierre. Pierre was five years older than them, and a distant stranger, but Lou was only a year older and they had fun at the beach. When Dumbledore came to visit, James and Emma were scared that he had caught onto their nightly walks and was there to expel them, but he just wanted to talk to Lou’s parents in private. They told her about their lives in Hogwarts, and she told them about Beauxbatons and etiquette lessons.

In the second year, to their great surprise and Charles’s great pride, both twins became chasers for their respective teams. Emma was respected for being the youngest player, but it was a bit daunting to play with the others towering over her. Luckily the team captain Rachel was a girl, and she was a Chaser too. Regulus was made Seeker, and was a pretty good one at that. They won their first game against Gryffindor 180-60, but James liked to remind Emma that he had scored three of Gryffindor’s
goals, so he still beat her. In the summer, she found him reading about Animagi, though she didn’t believe him when he said he was just curious. In the end she got him to admit that he wanted to try it, and though he spent the majority of the summer at his friend Remus’s house, she weaselled information out of Lou, who learnt a lot more about Animagi in Beauxbatons.

By the end of their third year, Emma and James hardly saw each other anymore. James was keeping a secret from her, and it hurt more than she cared to admit. The older Gryffindors jeered at her, saying that she couldn’t deal without her brother to protect her, but she used a hex Bellatrix had taught her on one of her nicer days. They stopped, but they looked so angry that she wasn't sure if that was a good thing. Severus Snape was worse, because he was everywhere she looked. He knew exactly how to get under her skin, though she had developed the impregnable mask that so many Slytherins did to survive, though everyone's was different.

Hers was the chameleon kind, adapted to the person in front of her, but with Severus Snape he knew just what to say to make her hurt. She blamed it on that shared train ride in first year. Though they had grown apart, James still hexed Snape - “Snivellus” - whenever he got the chance, so she knew that her brother was still on her side no matter what. The outside world seemed a far-off place, but rumours of wizards torturing Muggles for fun reached even Hogwarts, and people whispered of a new Grindelwald.

She had underestimated the Gryffindors. One day she went to the Gryffindor Tower to wait for James - it was his turn for the Invisibility Cloak, and the only class they had together was Care of Magical Creatures. They had come out of the portrait hole and seen her standing opposite. She had asked them if they could get James - politely, in her opinion. But they ignored her, telling her that she was lucky James wasn't there, because then he would know that she had used Dark Magic on them - it turned out that Bellatrix's hex wasn't so innocent after all - and that she would pay. They didn't use magic, but they hauled her to the window to watch them drop her bag in the fountain below. When she went to retrieve it, all of her quills had been broken and her textbooks ruined. She went back up to the Tower: after all, she had promised James, but he never came out, and she never forgave him.

Fourth year rolled around, and James confessed his secret - Remus’s secret, though only because he didn’t want her in the Forbidden Forest when it was the full moon. Emma also discovered the Marauder’s Map and their shouting matches could be heard from the other side of the grounds. Emma felt like James had betrayed all the secrets they found together and she was hurt that he had hidden it from her. James defended himself and his friends with the eternal excuse that they had sworn not to speak of it to anyone. In the end they made a deal: Emma could borrow the map if she told James about any secrets she found without him, but it wasn’t the same.

That summer, Lou and Pierre’s parents died. By now Pierre was a curse-breaker travelling around the globe, but Lou was in her fifth year at Beauxbatons. Natalie and Charles wouldn’t tell the teens what happened, but they learnt from eavesdropping that Lou’s parents were working for Dumbledore on something dangerous. Apparently, he had promised Lou’s parents to take care of her, so she was Sorted into Ravenclaw in Hogwarts and moved to Dumbledore's own home. Emma had wanted her to move to the Potter’s, but Dumbledore refused. When James asked if Lou could help them become Animagi, she was glad of the project to take her mind off it. By the end of summer, James had managed to turn himself into a stag.
‘Merlin, your brother got hot over the summer,’ Alecto sighed, pretending to fan herself.

‘And my, my, Sirius is quite a catch,’ Lucinda murmured, looking over at the four boys caper about near the Great Lake.

‘I thought you were interested in Regulus last year,’ Emma said to Lucinda.

‘Ah, but the forbidden fruit is always the sweetest,’ they laughed, and Lucinda muttered. ‘Besides, Regulus doesn’t seem to notice.’

It was true that Regulus mostly kept himself to himself. Oh, he joked around on the Quidditch pitch and was always friendly, but his cool facade never slipped off. Of course, girls loved his mysterious aura, thinking that they could be the one to bring down his walls. When Emma mentioned this to him once he laughed, and she couldn’t tell if he was pleased or annoyed. Maybe both. It probably reminded him of Sirius - the two brothers were barely on speaking terms, and he never told her why. She had grown to accept his silence: it was oddly comforting next to James and Sirius’s constant stream of chatter.

A shadow fell over them, and they looked up to see Rabastan and Regulus exaggeratedly swaggering over. *It's like he goes out of his way to prove me wrong,* Emma thought, though it was probably Rabastan who had talked him into it.

‘S’up?’ Rabastan asked, raking a hand through his light brown hair. ‘Name’s Potter, but you can call me “Quidditch God”.’

Emma giggled despite herself. Her brother had become slightly big-headed over the last few years. And though she quietly approved of his and Sirius’s pranks, she was not impressed at how often they got caught. “Gotta live up to my reputation, darling,” he had said when she asked him why he let himself get put in detention. “Give the ladies something to talk about.”

Rabastan enchanted a rolled up ball of paper to fly around his head like a Snitch and made a show of arranging himself in a lounging position. Then Regulus gave a lop-sided grin - it was uncanny how much he looked like his brother when he did that - and slid into the seat next to Emma.

‘Hey babe,’ he said, wiggling an eyebrow. ‘I’m Sirius Black. You might have heard of me, self-confessed ladies man. Want to…go somewhere a bit more private?’

‘Careful there Black,’ Emma shoved his face away, but smiled anyway. ‘You wouldn’t want to go provoking the wrath of the Quidditch God over there.’

‘Oh I can take him,’ he winked, pulling her closer. She shook her head, but swung her legs onto his lap. She knew it annoyed him. Lucinda shot her a look of reproach, but she didn’t care. Merlin, that girl could be annoying, swaying between both brothers. She hoped Regulus didn’t return her
feelings, even if she was Emma's friend.

By this time Rabastan had noticed what was going on, and challenged Regulus to a duel, mostly consisting in sending flashes of light in each other’s direction. Losing interest, Emma looked back across the Lake. James might be a bit of an idiot, but he was still her brother. At least she thought she was. Though he had confessed his secret to her, she felt like they were drifting further and further apart. When they were little it was almost like they were the same person. Now he was an acquaintance she exchanged the Invisibility Cloak with. It didn’t help that Regulus and Sirius couldn’t stand to be in the same room as each other either. Regulus noticed the direction she was gazing in and frowned.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘I think the grounds are getting too crowded around here. Besides, it’s getting late.’

Rabastan agreed with him, he always did, but it was true that the sky was darkening. They all trooped up to the Great Hall where a girl their age with bright red hair they recognised as Lily Evans pushed past them, looking like she was about to cry.

‘Watch it Mudblood!’ Alecto said angrily, brushing her robes where she had been touched.

‘I think that’s the girl James fancies,’ Emma said without thinking, hoping that her brother hadn’t messed up again.

‘What?’ Barty Crouch asked in a dangerously low voice. Emma hadn’t seen him come up behind them. ‘I thought his blood was pure.’

‘Well yeah but that doesn’t mean that -’ Emma was cut off by Narcissa gliding over to them.

‘Don’t let Bella catch you saying that,’ she warned.

‘Bella ain’t here anymore,’ Alecto said in a sing-song voice. It was true that the middle Black sister had graduated at the end of their first year. ‘Come on Emma, we’re going to miss all the good lasagne!’

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‘Congratulations on getting Prefect,’ Regulus said a couple of days later.

They had missed each other on the train and hadn’t realised it until they were scheduled for patrols together. Emma didn’t quite know how, since there was supposed to be a meeting in the prefect compartment. Maybe he had left before she had arrived. In any case, it was a pleasant surprise when she had checked the patrol roster and found his name next to hers.

‘Congratulations yourself,’ Emma grinned. ‘We only have the fourth floor to patrol today.’

They walked around the halls in silence, checking empty classrooms and broom closets. It was odd to be on the other side of the rules, she thought. She was so used to exploring with James under cover, and later helped her friends get to their secret rendezvous without getting caught. None of them knew about the Invisibility Cloak, and she liked seeing their amazed faces when she managed to sneak up on them. She hadn’t found any new passageways in Hogwarts for ages. James was always busy with the Marauders.

‘Hey Regulus,’ she said suddenly. He looked at her inquiringly. ‘You like secrets, don’t you?’
It wasn’t a question, not really. She remembered how quickly he had found out about the little-known story of the Bloody Baron. And she always ended up telling him things she hadn’t meant to leave her mouth.

‘As much as the next person,’ Regulus said carefully, but she had caught the glint in his eye. One of the reasons he was so respected in Slytherin was because he had dirt on everyone.

‘What do you say to taking a few detours on our next patrol?’

He looked at her, puzzled. ‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Nothing,’ she said. James had agreed to lend her the Marauder’s Map the next week. It would be easier to explain then, though she wasn’t allowed to show him.

‘You’re a strange one Emma, you know that?’ Regulus said as he opened the next closet.

Whatever Emma was about to say next died in her throat as the girl inside shrieked and dove for her clothes. It wasn’t so much as the what, but the who.

‘Alecto?’ Regulus asked incredulously. ‘And who’s this? I don’t recognise him.’

But Emma did. ‘Regulus, I’ll take care of this. You can go back to do the report.’

Regulus narrowed his eyes. He didn’t take to being sent to bed like a child. ‘If you think you can get her out of this just because she’s your friend -’

‘I’m not trying to get her out of this!’ Emma said, her temper flaring. ‘Just do it.’ She softened her tone. ‘Please.’

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Regulus, but she didn’t trust him with this. Everyone had a way of surviving in Slytherin: Regulus dealt in secrets, and this was a juicy one.

‘Fine,’ he said stiffly, brushing past her. ‘But you owe me one.’

‘Thanks,’ Alecto said weakly when he had gone.

‘Don’t thank me yet,’ Emma said, turning on her. ‘Get him dressed.’

‘But I -’ the boy started to protest, fully-clothed.

‘Silencio,’ Emma pointed her wand at him.

Alecto still looked confused, so Emma cast the illusion charm on him herself. The t-shirt and trousers shimmered and turned into black robes with yellow lining. Now it was the boy’s turn to look confused. He was still opening and closing his mouth, trying to speak.

‘A Hufflepuff?’ Alecto asked disgustedly, pulling on her shoes.

‘You’re lucky I’m not as good at transfiguration as my brother or he’d be a toad right now,’ she replied shortly, shoving the boy towards the hunched witch. ‘I can’t believe you’d be so stupid as to bring him here. What if your brother saw him? Worse, a teacher? You could have been expelled!’

Alecto had the grace to look shameful, all the way down the passageway, but she still kissed the Muggle when they left him in Hogsmeade and wiped his memory. Emma didn’t bother removing the Silencing charm: it would wear off and she was still annoyed at her friend - mostly because she had used the passage without telling Emma - but also because she was worried about her. What would
people say if Alecto Carrow, whose parents were staunch believers in keeping blood pure, was dating a Muggle? No wonder she went overboard with the whole "Mudblood" thing.

She fumed all the way down to the Great Hall where she found a second year Hufflepuff trying to hide under a statue. She grabbed the frightened boy by the scruff of his neck and gave him detention before shoving him in the direction of the kitchens. She then deducted twenty point from Slytherin and threatened to take away more if her friend didn’t go straight to the dungeons. Alecto knew better than to protest when her friend was in a bad mood and rushed down the corridor.

Emma was about to follow, but instead slipped through the double door outside and made her way to the stadium. Lying spread eagled on the Quidditch pitch, she felt the breeze cool her cheeks and stared at the stars. She could make out Orion - barely - but she didn’t know any other constellations. Note to self: pay more attention in Astronomy lessons. A million other thoughts zipped through her mind, and she jumped when she heard the crunch of boots on the ground next to her.

‘Hey,’ Regulus said, sitting down next to her.

She groaned and pulled herself into a sitting position. She didn’t bother to ask him how he found her.

‘You never left,’ she said, guessing. He blinked in reply. She sighed.

‘What’s so important about blood anyway?’ she asked.

‘Well,’ Regulus said slowly. ‘My parents think that Muggles are dirty scum that need to be eliminated. They say that Muggleborns stole their magic somehow, and many pure-bloods agree with them.’

‘What do you think?’

For a second her black-haired friend blinked in surprise, and she was oddly reminded of James. Then his features smoothed the way Walburga’s did when she hid something, and Regulus was back.

‘The way I see it, Muggles led witch hunts whenever they found out about wizards. So it’s natural for us to want to get our revenge. I mean, skulking in the shadows? Having to refuse to use magic because their minds can’t cope with it? I’ve been collecting newspaper clippings about this guy that’s rising in power. He calls himself “Lord Voldemort”. A bit pretentious, but it catches your attention. He wants to educate Muggles. Think about how we could help them with our superior abilities, instead of them bumbling around like idiots and destroying our home. Why should we have to hide from Muggles when we’re better equipped to make life easier for both us and themselves?’

‘You’ve been thinking about this a lot, haven’t you?’ Emma asked quietly.

‘Look, I’m not saying that calling Muggleborns “Mudbloods” is okay. But statistically, they’ve been known to do poorly in exams, and magic doesn’t come as naturally to them. Most don’t like flying, simply because they’re not used to the idea of magic.’

‘I think Lily Evans would beg to differ!’ Emma joked, but then grew serious. ‘But I do understand what you mean. Lots of magical creatures have been forced into nearly uninhabitable places because Muggles would hunt them down. Unicorns became nearly extinct when their properties were found out.’

‘Exactly!’ Regulus said.

‘What would you say if I was dating a Muggle-born?’ she asked abruptly, thinking of Alecto.

‘Are you?’ Regulus smiled. ‘Come on, Emma. I wouldn’t care about their blood. They’re proper
wizards. Now if you were dating a Muggle...’
The Muggle

‘Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?’ James hissed, sliding onto the bench next to her in the library. He glanced from side to side to make sure nobody was listening. The group of Ravenclaws at the nearly table continued working peacefully.

Emma stopped leaning her head on her hand, taking her eyes off of the fat potions book. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Come on Emma,’ James said. ‘I can’t believe who you’re hanging out with. Lestrange? Rosier? You wouldn’t believe the rumours we hear about that group. And Sirius said his brother...’

‘Regulus didn’t do anything!’ she protested.

‘Even this book you’re reading,’ James continued as if he hadn’t heard. ‘The Draught of the Living Death? This is Dark magic, Emma.’

‘Relax James,’ his twin replied, yawning. ‘It’s our Potions essay.’

‘Oh, right,’ he was quiet for a second. ‘But still, Lily says Snivellus -’

‘Oh Lily says, does she?’ Emma asked, her eyes flashing with hurt. She shut her book, there was no way she was going to be able to get back to work after this. ‘Lily says Snape is doing Dark magic and so I automatically am too? Well news-flash for you James: I hate Snape as much as you do! Why don’t you get mad at Lily, since she’s the one who’s actively hanging out with Snape? Or is it because I’m in Slytherin?’

‘Don’t bring that up again,’ James said exasperatedly, glancing around. People were starting to murmur.

Emma took a deep breath and composed herself. ‘Just because your friends have problems with my House doesn’t mean I’m doing Dark magic. Anyway, stop trying to act as though you care.’

James opened his mouth and then closed it again. He had been distant lately.

‘Tell you what,’ he said. ‘Let’s go to Hogsmeade this weekend, just you and me.’

‘But this weekend isn’t a Hogsmeade one,’ Emma said stupidly. But her annoyance at him had vanished.

‘Oh dear sister, you have missed me,’ James winked and ruffled her now waist-length hair.

‘Hey!’ she said, combing it back down. ‘Just because you like looking like you just woke up doesn’t mean I have to too.’

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‘Do you prefer the red one or the blue?’ Emma asked, holding the dresses up in front of the mirror. They were in the Slytherin dorm, and she was deciding on what to wear.

Lucinda sat down on the corner of Emma's bed and took a long look at each of them. ‘What’s it for?’
‘Emma’s going on a date,’ replied Alecto, lazily flicking through a magazine. She was sprawled on her own bed, but occasionally lifted her eyes to see what was going on.

‘A date?’ Helen squealed, putting her makeup box down. She loved dressing up. She took a long look at Emma. ‘So first things first: you don’t nearly have enough lipstick on. A girl’s got to look the part. It makes a boy want to kiss you, but he knows he’s got to work for it, coz you ain’t smudging your makeup on the first date.’

‘Good thing I’m not planning on kissing him then,’ Emma said, amused. ‘I think I’ll pick the red. It’s warmer.’

‘It’s not as if you’re going outside of Hogwarts,’ Helen shook her head. ‘The red one’s nice, but the blue brings out your eyes and it’s sexier!’

‘She has a point,’ Alecto said without looking up.

‘Okay that settles it,’ Emma laughed. ‘Definitely the red. Besides, he loves his House colours.’

‘I don’t know why I give advice, you never seem to take it,’ Helen pretended to huff dramatically. ‘You’re going on a date with a Gryffindor? How did you manage that one? I thought they all hated us.’

‘Hey, I do take your advice!’ Emma pulled on the red dress. ‘I don’t think James would really appreciate me looking sexy, thanks. But I’ll keep the lipstick thing in mind.’

Helen’s face went the same colour as her dress. ‘I- I didn’t realise,’ she stammered, shooting an evil look towards Alecto, who laughed at her own joke.

‘Have fun!’ she waved. ‘Bring me lots of juicy gossip when you come back.’

‘And Honeydukes for me!’ Lucinda chimed in. Helen looked at her wordlessly.

‘I have my ways,’ Emma replied mysteriously to the unspoken question, dancing down into the common room.

‘Where are you going all dolled up?’ Rabastan asked, looking at her approvingly. He had been reading a book near the fireplace.

‘On a date,’ Emma smiled, repeating Alecto’s words. Let them have fun with that while I’m away, she thought mischievously.

‘What? Regulus, did you hear that?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Regulus murmured, not looking up from his game of wizard’s chess with Narcissa.

***

It was cold in Hogsmeade, but the good kind of chill that made your cheeks flush pink. James insisted on escorting Emma everywhere arm in arm, and once they reached Honeydukes the twins were back to their old selves. Emma had a way of calming James down, making him less of a prat, and her brother made her as carefree and wild as he was for a while. They had snowball fights and dared each other to eat owl treats. Emma insisted on getting some sugar mice for Fluffy as well as
Lucinda, and James told her all about his next prank idea.

‘Just don’t eat any fairy cakes at the Yule Ball,’ he warned her as they warmed their hands over butterbeer. ‘Speaking of, who are you going with?’

Dumbledore had caught wind of the tensions between the Houses, and had reinstated the Yule Ball: a Christmas fancy party where your date had to be somebody from a different House. Their parents obviously knew about it beforehand, because they were to be sent dresses and dress robes that weekend.

‘Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that,’ Emma said, putting on a hurt face. ‘There’s this boy I really want to ask me in Gryffindor, but I’m scared he never will.’

‘Oh? Tell me more about this boy,’ James said, leaning forwards with a serious air.

‘Well, he’s in our year, likes Transfiguration, and always seems to end up in detention. Everyone says he’s a womaniser, but I think he’s a real romantic at heart and I know for a fact that he’s never kissed a girl before.’

‘Sorry to break this to you Ems, but Sirius is already taken,’ James laughed, though he went slightly red. No one but his sister knew that he was saving his first kiss for Lily Evans. ‘Looks like our cousin Lou has tamed the wild lion.’

‘Really?’ Emma asked, surprised. She hadn’t seen much of their cousin recently, though she knew that she had immediately fallen under Sirius’s charm. ‘Lucinda won’t be happy about that.’

‘Sirius would never live up to his parents expectations by dating a Slytherin,’ James shook his head. ‘I hear about some of the things they do, and… Ems, they’re not very nice people. Present company excluded.’

‘Regulus doesn’t seem to have a problem with them,’ Emma pointed out, slightly heatedly.

‘Regulus wasn’t sorted into Gryffindor,’ James retorted. ‘Do you know how lucky we are to have our parents? I mean seriously.’

‘You were sorted into Gryffindor,’ Emma repeated his words under her breath, but her twin heard all the same. He gave her a look filled with compassion, but she knew that deep down he didn’t understand. He never had to see their dad force a smile every time he talked about a Quidditch win, or earning House points. It was fine as long as they didn’t speak about their Houses… or their friends… or…

‘Anyway, enough about that!’ James said a bit too cheerfully. ‘We were talking about the Yule Ball. Now let me see. I think Peter mentioned his crush on you…oh only forty times a day.’

‘Peter?’ Emma asked, shuddering. ‘I know he’s your friend, but he’s really creepy.’

Once she had forgotten her clothes in the Quidditch locker room, and had returned to find Peter sniffing her T-shirt with a dreamy expression. Of course, Alecto had burst out laughing, but Lucinda had looked suitably horrified.

‘Fine, not Peter then,’ James replied smiling. ‘But we had better get back before we’re missed. After all, it’s not really a Hogsmeade weekend.’ He called over to the barmaid. ‘Hey Rosemerta. You’ll keep our secret, won’t you?’ And the twins beamed their identical hopeful smiles.

‘Ah, who could ever give away the two of you,’ Rosemerta chuckled. ‘Though I hope to see you when you’re not breaking the rules one day James.'
’I do believe she has a soft spot for you,’ Emma said later, winking like Rosemerta, and the twins burst out laughing.
The Inter-House Ball

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to those who left kudos. If you have the time, please let me know what you think! Any feedback is appreciated.

That weekend was an eventful one for Emma. It was the start of the Christmas holidays, but for once no one went home. The train was instead scheduled for the following Monday. The Great Hall was bustling with activity: the decorations were being overseen by Flitwick, standing on a stack of enchanted books. Discreet love notes and loud proclamations in the Great Hall were becoming frequent as students realised that they still needed dates. For the first time, Emma saw Regulus turn red as he was handed a singing rose. He thanked the girl solemnly and politely declined. A gaggle of girls in robes of all colours sighed as Sirius tossed his head in his most handsome manner and made it rain confetti.

On the Friday evening, the fifth year Slytherin girls decided that it was high time they had a sleepover. Helen procured a number of makeup appliances, Lucinda unveiled her stash of hidden sweets and Emma got a house-elf to bring them frothing butterbeer and hot chocolate. Sophie Parkinson made them all laugh and gasp with tales of her sexual exploits. But the real gem of the evening was Alecto. Through means best left secret, she revealed a little bottle of clear liquid and squeezed a few drops into each of their mugs.

'Veritaserum,' she said with a smirk. 'This is where the real fun begins. Emma, you have the lion brother. You can start: truth or dare?'

'Dare,' Emma replied immediately. The other girls gasped, but Alecto knew better.

'Wrong! We all know you can sweet talk your way out of anything. I'm not wasting this Veritaserum. What I meant was: truth or truth?'

'Gee, that leaves me loads of choice doesn't it?' she asked sarcastically.

'Ooh, I get the question,' Lucinda said. 'We can take it in turns.' She turned to Emma, watching her take a gulp of her drink. 'Who do you fancy?'

Emma rolled her eyes. 'How long had you been waiting to ask me that one? No, for the last time, I am not secretly in a relationship with Regulus, Sirius, or my brother,' she said the last one to Helen. 'Ew.'

'Hey, twincest happens all the time,' Helen shrugged. 'It's your turn to choose.'

'Wait, you haven't properly replied,' Lucinda pointed out.

'Fine... Maybe Avery, but he's way too -'

'Intense,' Lucinda agreed. He had been their Quidditch captain for three years, but something about him seemed dangerous. There had been a rumour involving him, Dark Magic, and a Gryffindor Muggleborn named Mary McDonald.
'Otherwise, your brother's pretty good-looking! And recently single, I heard,' Emma added with a smirk.

'Forget I asked,' Lucinda replied immediately. 'Who's up next?'

Emma opened her mouth, but Alecto drank without being asked. 'No need. I knew it was me.'

'Is it true your brother's a Death Eater?'

'Yeah. Well, he doesn't have a... you-know-what yet,' Alecto said, tapping her left forearm meaningfully. 'You have to wait 'til you're out of school for that. But you have to keep it quiet for now. They're still amassing power, you know? Lots of the wizarding world thing that their views are too extreme for now. I'll tell you one thing though, they're - What was that?'

A loud noise cracked just outside their window. They all rushed to peer outside.

'Looks like fireworks,' Lucinda said. 'Come on, you can see better from upstairs.'

The words were all in their mouths: fireworks didn't work underwater, but as they entered the common room with its glass walls, they saw that she was right. A series of sparklers lit up the water in a vaguely humanoid shape. It seemed to be waving some kind of stick, a wand? It turned gold and Emma laughed as she realised what it was. The James-shape was waving around the sword the way he did when they were young, except that it spelled out a silvery sentence in the green water.

*Emmsy-poo, it read. Leave Fluffy alone for a night and come to the Yule Ball with me. It'll be fun: trust me. Your brother always knows best.*

Some of the other students had emerged upon hearing the noise, but for once Emma didn't care about the attention. Her brother was back, in all of his endearing idiocy.

***

Alecto nervously smoothed her dress down one last time and checked her makeup in the mirror. True to her Slytherin House, she was wearing a green dress that seemed to ripple as she walked. In honour of the occasion, she had slicked on some bright red lipstick to match her hair, which she kept readjusting in its bun.

'Why are you so nervous?' asked Emma, hunting for her shoe under the bed. They were the last two in the dorm room. 'It's not as if your boyfriend's going to see you.'

'Keep your voice down,' her friend hissed, glancing around. 'I think Rabastan knows.'

'What?' Emma exclaimed loudly. 'Sorry, what?'

'I'm pretty sure he saw us in Hogsmeade last visit, but hopefully he thinks Simon's just another student. Still, I need to throw him off the scent.'

'Oh I see,' Emma said knowingly. 'Seductress mode then.'

'You have no idea what my brother would do to him - or me - if he found out, Emma.'

'Hey no judgement here,' Emma held her hands up. 'A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.'

'Are you hiding something from me?' Alecto narrowed her eyes suspiciously.
'Honestly, you're too paranoid Alecto,' Emma sighed. 'Now shoo. William Davies probably thinks you've stood him up. But if you really want to sell the single factor... As I said, Evan Rosier is available.' She grinned.

'Alright,' she replied dubiously, and left with a practiced twirl.

When she was sure Alecto had gone, Emma put on her other shoe and hauled a huge tome from under the bed. After the incident with the Gryffindors in third year, she had wanted to learn how to defend herself. Of course, Defence Against the Dark Arts did that. Then she realised that she wanted revenge, to make them feel as powerless as she had felt back then. Naturally, Slughorn signed the permission slip for the Restricted Section, but there were immensely complex hand gestures. Only in fifth year had she begun to be able to understand them. And tonight would be the perfect opportunity to test one of them out. Hector Miller was in his seventh year now, so it was her last chance. *Entomorphius*, she whispered, committing it to memory.

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'Finally!' James exclaimed. 'I was beginning to think I'd been dumped by my own sister. Isn't that dress...a bit much?'

'Mum sent it,' Emma replied, looking down. She quite liked it: silver and shimmery, with a floaty material.

'Isn't it a bit...you know...Revealing? I mean are we supposed to see your legs? And there are no sleeves!'

'James, if you had your way I'd be wearing a ski suit,' Emma said.

'Yeah shut up Prongs,' Sirius said. 'You look hot, female James.'

'Don't listen to your brother Emma,' Lou rolled her eyes, dressed in sky-blue to match Sirius's dress robes. Her eyes were covered with a smoky eye shadow that made them seem amber in the candlelight. Boys were looking at her admiringly, and girls were angrily tugging their gawking dates past them. Though that might have had something to do with Sirius winking at a couple of them. Trust Sirius to make even girls jealous.

'So shall we go?' James asked, giving up and proffering an arm to his sister.

'We shall.'

The twins really did look alike: though Emma's eyes were blue and James's were hazel, they were the same shape and were framed by long, dark lashes; for once James had tried to flatten his straight black hair and Emma had simply left hers loose. She had once confessed to her brother that she kept her hair so long because the weight tamed the messiness. Their parents had sent James elegant but simple black dress-robos, and with Emma's heels they were exactly the same height as they took to the dance floor, where most of the older Hogwarts students were already swaying in time to the first formal dance. Apparently McGonagall had waited for all the students to appear before opening the Hall.

At first James's fan club stopped to gawk at them, wondering who had captured the heart meant for Lily Evans. Slytherins mostly kept themselves to themselves, and James had purposefully told his fans that he would be going stag so as not to break any hearts. Since the twins had spent so much time apart, many had forgotten that they weren't merely siblings, and something about them seemed
out of the ordinary. Dancing together came naturally to them, they knew each other so well that they could predict where the other was going flawlessly. To the Gryffindors, it seemed like James was dancing with a female version of himself, and vice-versa to the Slytherins. They had forgotten that Gryffindors and Slytherins could even look alike, let alone come from the same family.

'Mind if I cut in?' Sirius asked once the song ended. 'Only you're making even the ghosts look like they've seen a ghost.'

'Do you really think I would give my sister up to a womaniser like you?' James asked, raising his eyebrows. 'I mean you're my best mate, but she's my sister, Sirius.'

'What if I told you Lily Evans wanted to dance with you?' Sirius's eyes twinkled.

'Sorry Emma, you're on your own. But be warned!' James sprinted off in the direction of the redhead, who to his disgust, was with Snivellus.

'Hello Evans,' James gave his best charming smile. 'Sorry Snivellus, but I'm stealing your date.'

He ignored Lily's squeal of protest and dragged her off to the dance floor, where he was soon intercepted by Professor McGonagall who gave them a lecture on the meaning of INTER-House dancing.

'Works like a charm,' Sirius winked at Emma. 'Want a drink?'

'What was that for?' Emma asked, following him to the punch table.

'I don't know if you've noticed, Emma, but you really do look like a female James,' Sirius said, handing her a goblet.

'What's that supposed to mean?' she asked, taking a gulp to hide her frustration. 'Urgh, I think someone spiked this.'

'That was me, duh. It means you look freaking hot tonight,' he replied, but he was looking towards the dance floor.

'Um...Thank you,' Emma said cautiously. ' Aren't you with Lou tonight?'

'Meh, we're just friends. I'm serious though. You know girls find James good-looking? Well a lot of guys are interested in you. Need proof? Come here for a second,' he dragged her by the hand to one of the low-lit corner tables, still shooting glances behind him. He looked back towards her distractedly. 'What would you say if I said I was into you?'

'I'd say that's rubbish,' Emma replied immediately. 'You're not even really paying attention to this weird conversation.'

'You're right,' Sirius said, amused. 'You look too much like James. Keep that in mind, I don't want you getting any ideas.'

'About wha-'

Sirius slid a hand into her hair and pulled her forwards, crashing his mouth onto hers, ignoring her muted sounds of protest. After a couple of seconds, she got a grip on his chest and pushed him away, eyes flashing with anger. 'What the hell was that?'

'Nothing personal,' he replied. 'Thanks for helping. As I was saying, a lot of guys are interested in
you. But I'm only interested in one. He should arrive in about oh, three two one.' He held a finger up, and Regulus appeared.

'Is my brother bothering you?' he asked Emma, but he was looking at Sirius with an expression of utmost disgust.

'Nope,' Sirius said. 'We were getting along just fine. But I should get going. See you later, Ems.' he used James's nickname and sauntered off with a smug expression on his face. Emma stared at him with a slight frown on her face. What the hell just happened?

'See you later?' Regulus demanded. Only his brother could make him lose his cool.

'It's nothing,' Emma replied. 'Your brother is an idiot. I need a drink.'

Regulus went to hold her back, but to her surprise his hand shot back as if there was a Protection charm on her. 'Shit,' he said, massaging his wrist. 'I forgot Dumbledore enchanted the punch so that you can't touch your fellow housemates. Emma, what were you doing with Sirius? He's -'

Emma didn't listen to what Sirius was, suddenly annoyed with their brotherly feud. She pushed past her friend to the spiked punch. Sirius Black just kissed me. Sirius. Black. She didn't live in a cave. Even she could admit that Sirius Black was one of the best-looking guys in Hogwarts, and wouldn't deny that she had fantasised about snogging him in fourth-year Potions when she was bored. But she also knew that she wasn't interested in him, and he her. So what was that for? What did he get out of randomly kissing her? It seemed a little far-fetched that it was just to annoy his brother, though she was sure that Regulus he wouldn't put it past him. She downed her third goblet, but before she could serve herself another it was whisked out of her hand. "Who decided it was drag around Emma Potter day?" she asked herself, as she came face to face with - as fate would have it - Hector Miller, looking very pleased with himself.

'Emma Potter,' he slurred slightly. 'Emma Potter, the Slytherin who should have been a Gryffindor. I gotta thank Dumbledore for this. You know I'm a Muggleborn. Yep, I'm a Muggleborn. See all those Slytherins?' he waved to the right, where she saw Rabastan, Avery and the Carrow siblings looking at them with varying shades of annoyance. 'They think I'm dirt, they think Purebloods are too good for me, but they can't do nothing.' He giggled. 'You're not like them. You're different. Like a Muggleborn.'

Emma was about to push him off her, but she realised that it was the perfect opportunity for her revenge plan. Instead, she smiled sweetly. 'I don't think you're dirt.'

'No. Youssh…youshh…youssh special. And pretty. Pretty hair,' he lifted one of her black locks.

How much has he had to drink? What do I do now? Okay think, what would Sirius do? "You look freaking hot". Use it Emma, Salazar knows that you won't have another chance.

'How about we go somewhere private?' she asked, brushing up closer. Godric, he makes me want to vomit.

Miller looked as if he couldn't believe it as she led him off the dance-floor. No one would notice them gone, except maybe Regulus, but she could handle him if he followed them. She nearly stumbled as she went down the steps of the dungeons corridor. Sirius had spiked the punch more than she thought. Entomorphious, she whispered to herself, drawing her wand discreetly. Maybe this is a bad idea. He didn't look that drunk anymore. Too late now: he had pushed her into the Potions supply closet and shoved her against the wall.
'I can't believe you fell for that. Call yourself a Slytherin? I thought they were supposed to be clever,' he laughed cruelly. 'I know what your lot did to Brian's parents, don't try to deny it. Was that your little revenge? Find out which of us were Muggleborn and tell them all about it? This is payback for them.'

'I swear I have no idea,' Emma pleaded, all thoughts of revenge flown from her mind. She really did have no idea.

'You and your brother, you're as bad as each other. Pretend you're all high and mighty but what? His friend stole my girlfriend, and James hexed me for it. Lucky for me you're a whimpering coward who hides behind your Slytherin friends. Not here now though, are they? Brian wanted to hex you, but I'll say this for you, you're good at duelling. And I wasn't going to ruin this pretty little face of yours. This is payback for me too.' He ran a finger across her cheek and she froze. 'Besides, I can't wait to see James's face when his precious little sister turns up battered in the Hospital Wing.'

He pulled her closer to him, leaning close. Too close. Something inside Emma reacted, and she realised that she was still holding her wand. *I need more room to use the spell*, she thought. She went limp, as though the fight had left her. He moved her towards the wall and bit at her throat savagely before moving onto her mouth. *His eyes are closed, here's my chance.* She suddenly pushed him to the side.

'Entomorphis!' she cried, moving her wand with more confidence than she felt.

Miller's eyes flew open and he fell to the floor on hands, feet and two extra beetle legs, feelers sprouting from his head. He tried to speak, but all he could do was click the pair of pincers that emerged from his mouth. She smiled, feeling proud of herself, and opened the door before she realised that the spell wasn't continuing. He grabbed a hold of her leg and pulled her down, wriggling until he was on top of her. She shrieked in surprise and dropped her wand. She turned her head, and the pincers snapped closed on a piece of hair. This is so not going as planned.

'Emma!' she heard a familiar voice cry.

*Oh no, not Regulus. Please don't let Regulus see this.* She wouldn't be able to look him in the eye if he came and saw this. She didn't need help, or his pity. She didn't think she could get over that. In a desperate burst of energy, she kicked Miller away and twisted around, scrabbling for her wand. *There!*

'Entomorphious,' she said. Her arm trembled, but she completed the spell successfully. He turned into a humanoid insect, flopping around on his back. She looked at him in disgust, hating for making her feel weak once again.

'Like a Muggleborn am I?' she shrieked, angry at him for making her scared, angry at herself for falling for his trick. She stomped on one of the feelers and the bug-Miller made a strangled sound. 'Don't you for once dare to compare me to scum like you.'

'Diffindo!' she yelled, breaking one of the six legs. *Diffindo, diffindo!*

Feeling slightly better, and calmer, she forced herself to compose herself, wiping the blood from her lips. What was she going to do now? She had just planned on turning him into an insect for a couple of minutes and reverse the curse to shake him up a bit. She couldn't turn him back into a human now, what would he say? She felt disgusted that even he knew how helpless she could have been if she didn't have her wand. She looked up, thinking, and spotted a jar of earthworms.

'My friends were right about you, Mudblood,' she sneered, unstoppering it and casting a shrinking
charm on the helpless bug. 'Now you can live up to your name.'

She took a deep breath, trying to smooth down her dress and raked her fingers through her hair before going back to her room to hide the jar. But when she turned around, she saw Regulus, Alecto and Amycus staring at her with their jaws hanging open.

'What?' she asked defensively, not sure what to say, or if she had the energy to say it.

'Remind me never to get on your bad side,' was all Alecto said in reply.
An Unexpected Invitation

Emma was worried at how much her friends had seen, but from what Alecto said it seemed that they had only arrived after she had stepped on the feelers. Regulus hadn’t mentioned the incident, or anything about that night, having lapsed into one of his silent moods. Amycus shot her a few odd looks at breakfast, but also said nothing. Her friends were currently chatting to pass time on the train ride home, their compartment filled as ever.

'Emma,' Helen said suddenly. 'Is that a love bite on your neck?'

Emma's hand shot to her bruised throat. *I knew I should have worn a scarf,* she cursed quietly to herself. "A" love bite. *So she only saw one.* Thinking quickly, she leaned forwards conspiratorially, letting her hair hang in front of the marks.

'You know I went with James to the Yule Ball?' she drew out the sentence.

'Merlin's saggy underpants, are you two really..?' Helen asked, half-horrified, half-fascinated.

'Don't be disgusting,' Emma replied immediately, then gave what she hoped to be a secretive smile. 'Let's just say I spent some time "getting to know" one of his friends.'

'Which one?' she cooed immediately.

'Well, that's for me to know, isn't it?' Emma winked. It almost seemed unreal, how easy the pretence was.

'Come on,' Helen looked at her with puppy-dog eyes.

Alecto's ears had perked up, though she feigned indifference. Lucinda pretended no such thing.

'It's Sirius, isn't it?' she asked. 'I thought I saw you together, but I wasn't quite sure...'

'Is that true?' Rabastan looked at her, wide-eyed. Oddly, he was the one that minded Gryffindors the least among their gang. 'Good on you Ems, though don't let Regulus find out. He hates his brother so badly!'

'What's Sirius done this time?' Regulus asked from the compartment doorway. Emma inwardly jumped; she hadn't heard the door slide open.

Apparently he had returned from the Prefect meeting earlier than expected. Emma had decided to "forget", since Miller's friend Brian Fuller would be there. The incident was too recent to be able to lie well about it, and she suspected that he would be able to put two and two together if he knew about Miller's plan for the Yule Ball.

'Nothing,' Emma said casually. 'How was the corridor patrol?'

'I had to go with Lupin since somebody decided to shirk her responsibilities,' he gave her a dirty look before throwing himself into a seat. 'Come on, what's the idiot done? I'm in a detention giving mood, and I know which compartment he's in.'

'Emma hooked up with him,' Lucinda said, smirking.

Emma elbowed her, but the damage had been done. There was a silence as Regulus expected her to deny it. She stared at him coolly, hating herself as she did so. If there was one way she could have
hurt him, this was it. She waited for him to yell at her, to ask for an explanation, even hex her. But that wasn't Regulus's way. He simply looked at her for a long time as though seeing right through her lie, before turning his head. Eventually the conversation resumed, but he didn't join in and nobody asked him to.

***

'Pierre!' Lou cried, running over to hug her brother.

Charles and Natalie smiled at each other. They had convinced Dumbledore to let Lou come for Christmas instead of staying at Hogwarts, but they weren't sure if Pierre could come. You never knew when something would come up. But here he was in Godric's Hollow, grinning and dusting off the remnants of Floo Powder that still stuck to his clothing.

'Have you got any more tattoos?' James immediately wanted to know.

For every major curse he managed to break, Pierre would celebrate and remember that victory with a tattoo. A job like his wasn't easy, and it was all too rare for a curse to be broken without casualty. Usually they had to deal with the aftermath instead, so they ended up needing more Healers than Breakers.

Pierre grinned and shook his arm out of his sleeve, revealing a black skull enclosed in a yellow triangle. As they watched, the triangle grew brighter and the skull dimmed.

'Wicked!' the twins exclaimed in unison.

'I got it just before the news...' his voice trailed off and he cleared his throat before continuing. 'I forgot to tell you about it: going to Egypt means that I'm a proper curse-breaker now, not a recruit in training.'

They all congratulated him and Lou slapped him on the arm for not mentioning it in his letters.

'I hear that you've been keeping things from me too,' he teased her. 'What's this I hear about a cheeky prankster falling under your charms?'

Lou blushed crimson, but Emma shook her head. It wasn't me.

'I've been waiting for so long for Sirius to become part of the family, now it's going to come true!' James shouted with glee, drawing out the "oo" like a howl.

'James!' Lou admonished, but she smiled anyway.

'I thought Sirius said he "wasn't going to be tied down by anything"? Natalie asked, clearly finding the whole thing funny. 'I distinctly remember a twelve year old telling me girls were poo and got in the way of Quidditch.'

'What can I say, my sister's just that charming,' Pierre teased. 'But now that the fun part's over, he gets to meet the mighty big curse-breaker brother, who will tell him that curses won't be the only thing breaking if I hear something I don't like.'

Lou complained, but everyone could tell that she had been missing her brother. When their parents died, he had been on site in Egypt on his last stage of apprenticeship. All of the wizards working there had been placed under quarantine until they cleared up the whole sight. She had eventually
seen him in November for Aunt Anne and Uncle Jean's funeral, but even then, it was only for a weekend. He was looking a lot more cheerful now.

'So Ems,' Pierre turned to his cousin when everyone else was grabbing more snacks. 'You've been rather quiet. How's Hogwarts?'

'Oh you know,' she replied. 'Learning and all that.'

'Nothing wrong?' he inquired.

Emma thought back to how she had wanted to make the Mudblood pay for what he tried to do. 'Nothing at all,' she lied. She didn't want to bother her cousin when he had so much more going on.

'Because you know, even though I'm in France, we're still family. James and Lou write, but I hardly get any letters from you. Lou says she's worried you hate her new friend,' he gave her a weighted look. 'I'm guessing this is the infamous boyfriend.'

'Sirius? I don't dislike him. More like... there's nothing to like.'

'Then you're the perfect person to keep an eye on him!' her cousin grinned.

Emma privately thought that she wouldn't like to come within ten feet of Sirius Black, but she nodded all the same. They lapsed into a comfortable silence.

'Pierre,' she said after a while, glancing towards the kitchen. The others were still making dip. 'Have you ever... done something. Something you never thought you could do?'

'Like what?' he asked, frowning.

'Never mind,' she said hurriedly, then thought better of it and blurted. 'Something... not very nice. But only because you had to.'

'My job is filled with not very nice somethings, Ems,' he laughed. 'Actually, I always thought you'd want to be a curse-breaker when you grew up.'

'Why's that?' she asked. She hadn't really thought much of her future.

'Well, you don't go rushing headlong into situations, but you're still curious,' he replied. 'Actually you and James are both too curious for your own good. But my job mostly relies on instincts. You don't do something because it's right, you do it in order to survive. Not everyone can do what needs to be done if a particularly bad curse explodes.'

Emma didn't know whether to be proud: that Pierre still thought she and James were alike, flattered: because Pierre's job was really hard, or scared: that her cousin thought that she'd do anything to survive. Plus, his words sounded rather ominous. Pierre obviously saw her face, because he patted her on the back.

'Think about it. Look it up. But I could use someone having my back out there.'

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At the end of January, she had almost forgotten about the beetle on her windowsill when Avery appeared next to her at lunch.
'Go for a walk with me, Potter?' he asked, gesturing. From the way Rabastan was looking expectantly at them, she didn’t think it wise to ask why.

As they made their way around the Great Lake in silence, she realised that she didn’t know Avery’s first name. She didn’t think anyone knew. Everyone just called him Avery. She stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. He was quite handsome: tall, blonde, athletic. He had taken over captaincy of the Quidditch team after Rachel graduated. But there was a cold look in his eye that made most students afraid of him, and rumours of his practicing Dark Magic had reached even James’s deaf ears.

‘Carrow told me about what happened with Miller,’ he said.

He always called people by their surnames, the same way Regulus didn’t like nicknames. Emma wondered which Carrow had told him. Probably Amycus. She didn’t reply, unsure of what to say.

‘You’re quiet. I like that,’ he said. ‘Loud people don’t always get the job done.’ He stopped walking and turned to her. ‘Look, I’m not going to grass on you or anything.’

‘I wasn’t expecting you to,’ Emma replied. Avery wouldn’t bother talking to her if he was.

He smiled. ‘You seem to really hate Mudbloods.’

Emma thought of Lily Evans, James’s crush since second year. And then she thought about Brian Fuller, and the bug she fed once a week in the jar on her windowsill. ‘You could say that.’

‘Look, your reasons are your own, but I know someone who would really like to meet you.’ She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to puzzle out his meaning. ‘I’ll do you a deal: come to Lucius Malfoy’s house during the holidays for his engagement party, and in exchange I can make your bug problem disappear. Or more precisely reappear. He’ll only remember the past week as a beetle.’

‘I don’t know where Malfoy lives,’ Emma said, buying time.

‘Regulus does. Tell your parents you’re staying at the Blacks’.’

***

‘You’ve gone completely mad!’ Sirius was pacing around in the cramped compartment space, shaking his head. It was a strange vision of déjà vu: the twins and the Black brothers had found an empty compartment on their own. ‘Was this your idea?’ He addressed this question to his younger brother, who was looking slightly bored.

‘Give her some credit, Sirius. Emma can make her own mind up. Yes, I invited her over for the holidays, but I’m not holding her hostage,’ Regulus replied scathingly. The brothers' relationship had done nothing but deteriorate between Christmas and Easter.

‘Why anyone would willingly enter that house is beyond me,’ Sirius muttered. ‘You’re my friend James, back me up here!’

‘You’re just annoyed that James is grounded and you can't go there,’ his brother said, going back to staring out of the window.

James shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. ‘What? That Valentine’s prank on the girls, turning their faces pink when they talked to the person they liked, was genius. I had to take full responsibility.’
Sirius grinned despite himself. ‘Why do you want to come again?’ he asked Emma. ‘Couldn’t get enough of me at the Inter-House ball?’

‘Inter....’ James’s face went white. Sirius leered, obviously regretting nothing. Regulus’s head snapped back to the conversation, looking at Emma with an odd expression on his face. Emma ignored them all.

‘Regulus and I have an Astronomy project on the movement of stars for a consecutive month,’ she replied. ‘Separately, our charts wouldn’t match, and I think Dad would have a fit if there was another Slytherin in the house.’

It was true, though the projects were actually individual. Miller had turned up in the Hospital Wing with no recollection of where he had spent the past month and a strange craving for dirt. Rumours chalked it up to the hate against Mudbloods, but most thought it happened outside of school. Though Emma was apprehensive about the visit to Malfoy’s mansion, she was excited to spend the week at the Black’s. Her father had taken to shaking his head at her recently, as if every slur against Muggleborns was her fault. She had made the mistake at Christmas of agreeing that there should be a separate policy on Muggleborns at the start of Hogwarts to explain what was going on - remembering the tedious McGonagall lecture of first-year - and he had taken it as blood discrimination. Of course, she had made no move to deny his accusations - saying that it was positive discrimination - and the tension only grew.

‘Who takes Astronomy for their OWLs anyway?’

But this time the grumble was general: he and James had dropped the subject in favour of Care of Magical Creatures as soon as possible. Though he hadn’t joined Sirius’s hate-party, which seemed more about having to go home for a week than not wanting Emma to stay, James hadn’t been pleased. Apparently Sirius had convinced James that Regulus was in love with Emma, and her twin had not liked the idea of her going to his house one bit. Emma then pointed out that she and Regulus had shared the same common room for the past five years, and that Sirius would be the last person that Regulus would talk to about girls even if he did like her that way, so James relented.

Besides, after Sirius's new revelation, James had decided that he would be having words with the older of the Black brothers about his sister.
A chauffeur took them from the station to the middle of London, to a house Regulus said was called "12 Grimmauld Place". As they stood in the street, alone with their luggage (James had brought Fluffy back with him), a tall black townhouse seemed to squeeze itself out of thin air. The iron gate swung open easily enough, though Emma was surprised none of the neighbours heard the creaking. Sirius marched up to the door and flung it open. Apparently, the Black family had no need of locks.

‘Home sweet home,’ he muttered darkly under his breath, and ran straight up the stairs with his trunk, ignoring the house-elf which appeared next to him, trying to take the luggage in vain. 'Get away! I don't need you clawing around in my stuff.'

‘Hi Kreacher,’ Regulus smiled, and for a minute he looked like a completely different person from Emma’s taciturn friend. But the mask didn’t return when she thought it would, and she was surprised to see Regulus look like Sirius.

‘So this is the living room,’ he said showing her around, explaining that his parents would be back from their business trip in a couple of days. ‘And this is my room, where you’ll be staying,’ he said finally as they reached the top floor, indicating a door with the words “Do Not Enter Without Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black”.

Emma looked at him, amused.

‘Don’t ask,’ Regulus said wearily. ‘It comes from the days this house was filled with people. Plus, Rabastan and I have an inside joke: my initials are R.A.B and the start of his name is RAB...’

Inside, she looked around with interest. Her friend wasn’t one to talk much about home - or himself, for that matter - and she wanted to know what his room was like. Predictably, it was spotlessly tidy, with Slytherin banners hanging around the walls. A crest with the words “Toujours Pur” was painted above the bed, which she supposed belonged to the Blacks. Opposite the four-poster bed was a picture of their Quidditch team, and a collage of newspaper clippings were stuck to the left of it. She moved closer, and saw that it retraced this Lord Voldemort’s footprints as he steadily rose in power and popularity.

‘Did you do this?’ she asked, impressed.

He nodded, standing awkwardly to the side. Things hadn't been the same between them since Lucinda had blurted out that Emma had hooked up with Sirius. Better he think that than the truth, Emma thought, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks at the thought of it. She tried to distract herself.

‘I didn’t know he was gathering the magical creatures too,’ she said, scanning the articles. ‘Can it really be that Voldemort will bring back the wizardry of old times?’

‘I hope so,’ Regulus said, eyes shining. ‘I hope that I’ll be able to -’

The door banged open and Sirius stood in the doorway. ‘Just making sure you’re not getting up to any funny business. I told James I’d keep an eye on you two.’

‘More like I should keep an eye on you,’ Emma muttered, remembering the Yule Ball and his strange behaviour - which she had attributed to the over-spiked punch. Though that did help me find an excuse in the end.

Regulus seemed to be thinking the same thing, because the look he was giving his brother was less
‘What’cha looking at?’ Sirius chuckled, and strolled over. ‘Oh Reggie, did you do that for our parents? I’m sure they’ll be pleased their favourite son is following in their bigoted footsteps.’

Regulus’s face darkened and he looked like he was about to say something, but restricted himself to ‘get out Sirius.’

‘Oh don’t tone down the insults on the behalf of female James here. But anyway, I’m off: you won’t be able to contain yourself all week. Emma, you know where to find me,’ he winked and sauntered off.

Regulus rolled his eyes, but said nothing, daring Emma to make a comment. She ignored it and moved to the little balcony, saying casually, ‘I’m beginning to see where your hatred of nicknames came from.’

He gave a short laugh before following her outside. ‘I guess we had better get the telescope ready while we have time.’

***

Both brothers had warned her that dinner was a formal affair at their house, and Emma was glad that she had brought her nicer clothes with her. That didn’t stop her feeling awkward and ungainly as they ate, trying to keep her back as straight and stiff as their parents’. She could see where Sirius and Regulus got their grace from.

They were sitting around a mahogany table with a fancy white table cloth. White napkins were placed on their laps, but Emma had a feeling that they were more for decoration than for using to wipe your face. Kreacher came and went in silence, bringing the soup and bread baskets and occasionally refilling Orion and Walburga’s wine glasses. The first course passed in silence, save the clatter of Kreacher levitating the empty bowls back to the kitchen. It was only upon his re-entry with silver platters of magically sliced meat and vegetables that somebody spoke. Though Emma had to admit Kreacher was a very good cook.

‘So Emma,’ Walburga said, breaking the silence as she dabbed delicately at the corner of her mouth. ‘I hear you’re on the Quidditch team.’

‘Chaser,’ Emma agreed, though her mind drew a blank upon trying to continue. *Why do I always clam up when I’m nervous?*

‘Regulus says you’re a good flier,’ Orion said. Emma blushed.

‘Not as good as him,’ she replied, her gaze flickering towards the younger Black brother. She remembered a story from third year. ‘He once caught the Snitch in five minutes flat. Or Sirius. I don’t know how many Bludgers I’ve had to dodge because our team’s Beaters weren’t fast enough.’

Walburga tutted at Sirius, reprimanding him for shooting Bludgers at a girl.

‘That’s the aim of the game, Mother,’ Sirius said shortly, and there was another lull, punctuated by Sirius apparently murdering his food. Walburga opened her mouth, perhaps for another reprimand, but Regulus quickly asked his dad how work was going.

‘Things at the Ministry are really heating up,’ Orion replied animatedly. This was obviously a
favourite topic of discussion. ‘People are being divided into three camps: those who support Lord Voldemort’s actions, even if they are a bit drastic; those who are against the way he’s treating Mudbloods; and those who are caught in the middle.’

‘Muggleborns, father. You call them Muggleborns,’ Sirius said, raising his voice.

‘Yes, well,’ his father brushed him off. ‘Rumour has it he’s planning on a revolution that would overturn the order of things around here. The Ministry has reported sightings of massing troll armies in Scotland, and there have been attacks on Muggles who are reputed to know about magic. His followers have started calling themselves the “Death Eaters”, because they won’t give up their vision even in the face of death itself.’

‘It’s finally happening,’ Walburga said in a hushed voice, almost reverent. ‘We must go to see our cousins, tell them how proud we are of Bellatrix and congratulate Cissa on her engagement to Lucius Malfoy. I always knew that boy would go far in life.’

‘What did Bellatrix do?’ Emma asked, wondering what she had got herself into this week. It seemed like a bizarre mirror-image of her own home.

‘It’s all over the papers,’ Orion answered. ‘A group of Mudbloods had tried to attack a clan of werewolves, apparently in self-defence, though we all know that werewolves have been shunned from society. They killed a wizard named Yaxley in the process, but Bellatrix led a group in retaliation to round them up and put them in Azkaban.’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘These Mudbloods think they can do anything: it’s their fault we we’re in this mess. If only Muggles could learn to accept wizards, we wouldn’t have to hide away like rats in sewers. But no, they hate anything that isn’t like them!’

‘As opposed to what?’ Sirius stood up, slamming his hands on the table. ‘You?’ he laughed. ‘Crooning over Bellatrix like she’s some hero; our cousin is sick! She tortured those wizards for hours before handing them over to the authorities!’

‘For interrogation purposes,’ his mother said calmly.

‘Oh yeah, and I bet you just love the fact that she’s killing Muggles instead of being locked up in an insane asylum where she belongs!’

‘It is sad about the growing number of Muggle deaths, but there are many of them, and it is for the greater good,’ Orion said firmly to his son. ‘Now sit down -’

‘No I don’t think I will,’ Sirius said coldly. ‘Don’t pretend to care, we all know you think Muggles are like sheep. What’s next, Regulus becoming a Death Eater?’

‘Oh wouldn’t it be fantastic?’ Walburga cried. ‘Don’t make a joke out of this, Sirius. Regulus has always made this family proud, unlike you! Even your room is disgusting: half-naked Muggles plastered on the walls, wanting one of those rotten Muggle-powered bikes which kills more people than even dragons. Anyone would think you didn’t care about the Black name!’

‘Well they thought right!’ Sirius yelled back, shoving his chair to the side and storming out.

‘What happened Sirius?’ Walburga shouted, following her son out. ‘Where did I go wrong with you? Why can’t you just be more like your brother?’

Orion was about to follow, but seemed to realise that they had a guest. He gave her a strained smile. ‘Why don’t you two go up to do that Astronomy essay then?’

Emma slid a glance towards Regulus, who seemed to have frozen up during the whole conversation.
‘Sure,’ she said, pulling him by the arm up the four flights of stairs.

He blinked, and seemed to wake up, shrugging out of her grip and calling for Kreacher when they got to the top. He whispered quietly to him, and the house-elf disappeared with a loud crack. *What have I gotten myself into?* Emma asked herself desperately.

She followed Regulus, unsure as to what to say. They got out their homework in silence. Luckily, the sky was clear that night, and most of the constellations were visible even to the naked eye. They worked in silence for a little while, before the tension grew too unbearable for Emma.

‘So is it often like that at your house?’ she asked quietly, as they marked Jupiter’s angle on the map.

‘More often than I’d like,’ he replied, shrugging his shoulders. He didn’t look at her, preferring to train the telescope on Gemini. ‘But then they’re so different. I wish Sirius would at least try to get along with them while he’s here.’

‘Like you do?’

The question was barely audible, but it seemed to strike a chord. He stood up and turned to her, running a hand through his usually neat hair. ‘I don’t know. I guess. What kid doesn’t want to make their parents proud?’

She had to agree with him there. They lapsed into silence, their homework forgotten. Emma stared at the constellations, wondering if the centaurs were right and you could predict things. *If the future can be predicted, how can we be blamed for what is inevitable?* She didn't know what was right anymore: her family disagreeing with her views, or the Blacks and the arguments with Sirius. She had a feeling that they were all wrong.

‘Emma,’ Regulus said slowly, the way he did when he was trying to figure something out. ‘Did you really sleep with Sirius at the ball?’

Emma gulped, disoriented. It was obvious that this had been in his mind since the train journey. She realised that before Sirius had mentioned their kiss, Regulus hadn't believed what the other Slytherins assumed to be true. *I suppose that explains his lack of reaction during the term.*

Regulus was one of the few people who she had never lied to, and she prided herself on keeping it that way. But the shame and the disgust of having to tell him what really happened was greater. He wasn't stupid: he could tell when she was hiding something, but he didn't know why she would. At least she hoped he didn't.

‘Y-yes,’ she stammered and a part of her was pleased that she sounded guilty. Probably because she did feel guilty, just not for the same reasons. ‘It... it just kind of happened...’

His jaw worked as though he wanted to say something, but he didn't. Oddly, instead of looking disgusted or betrayed, he seemed disappointed and almost... hurt. He just nodded and went outside to look through the telescope. It was ten times worse than if he'd been angry at her.

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Later that evening when she went to get a glass of water, Sirius was sitting forlornly at the kitchen table. Someone, probably Kreacher, had cleared away the plates. A huge welt was visible on his left forearm, but he pulled the sleeve down when he noticed her standing there.
‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘No worries.’ She sat down opposite him, unsure of what to do. If it had been Regulus, she would have just stayed silent. He seemed to like that. But Sirius was so exuberant, for better or for worse, that it seemed odd to see him look so drawn.

‘I can’t stay here,’ he said after a while. ‘I just can’t.’

‘But they’re your family. Surely they’ll come around?’ she asked, but as the words left her lips she realised that while she was in her pyjamas, Sirius was fully dressed, with a coat by his side. A sinking feeling came over her. Suddenly, she didn't think she could stomach her glass of water.

‘Not while I’m still a taint on the family honour,’ he laughed humourlessly. ‘I just can’t understand them, you know? I can’t stand them speaking like they’re so much better than Muggles and Muggleborns. I mean, we’re all human, right? What next, Squibs being exiled because they can’t do magic?’

‘Actually, there’s not really much point to Squibs being a part of this society....’ she trailed off as Sirius looked at her. Right, not the best time to be spouting politics and philosophy. She settled for a desperate plea. ‘Can’t you just ignore their point of view?’

‘What, like Regulus?’ he scoffed, making it clear what he thought of his younger brother's actions. ‘Not saying anything is just as bad. I can’t pretend that I’m okay with all of this.’

‘So what are you going to do?’ Emma asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Sirius sighed. ‘But I can’t go on as if these people are my family. Families accept each other, love each other. I would kill to have your parents.’

She thought of Charles and Natalie. They seemed to be growing more and more distant, hardly replying to her letters at all. Was James right? Was she changing too? What would they say if she told them she thought that Lord Voldemort had a point?

‘I’m going back to Hogwarts,’ Sirius said, breaking her train of thought. ‘Do me a favour... Look after Regulus will you? I wish he would stand up to our parents more. Maybe if I....’ he trailed off, shooting a regretful look towards the ceiling. ‘I guess it’s too late now.’

‘That sounds rather final,’ Emma said apprehensively.

‘It does, doesn’t it?’

She stood in the doorway as Sirius flagged down the Knight Bus. When it arrived, in all its purple triple-decker glory, he seemed to hesitate. He took one last look at the Victorian townhouse, seemingly committing it to memory, seemingly wavering in his resolve. But the moment passed. He climbed onto the bus and in a flash he disappeared.
‘Malfoy Manor,’ Emma said clearly, stepping into the green flames.

It had been a few days since Sirius had left. Walburga was furious, but when Regulus said he had gone to Hogwarts to study for his OWLs she had calmed down. When Emma had later pointed out that she probably didn’t believe it, Regulus had laughed, saying that his mother was happy once there was an excuse. It was easier to pretend. Emma didn’t dare ask what was easier for Regulus to pretend. His Hogwarts mask had reappeared, and not even Kreacher could shake it off. They finished the Astronomy project, and convinced Kreacher to throw them balls to help practice Quidditch.

It took Sirius’s disappearance and the house-elf for Emma to realise that her relationship with Regulus was mostly based on Quidditch, school and long periods of silence. She attempted to remedy this by chatting to Kreacher, who was more than happy to comply, with funny and sometimes embarrassing stories. He seemed to adore Regulus, which wasn’t too surprising: he was the only one to pay attention to the elf. When he found out about the stories, whereas most wizards would force a beating, Regulus pulled Kreacher to the side and forbade him to say anything without his consent. Kreacher took this a little too literally, and Orion was not pleased with the suddenly silent house-elf.

After that, the house went cold. Kreacher limped around on hot-iron shoes, and for the first time since she had met him, Regulus looked close to crying. When Emma apologised, he brushed her off, but he softened when she found a healing spell in their library. It was amazing how many different types of silences that boy had.

The day of Narcissa Black and Lucius Malfoy's engagement party was upon them. It was the weekend before they had to go back to Hogwarts. Emma wasn't sure whether to feel apprehensive or happy. At least there's hope of some things working out, she thought. Narcissa would graduate that year, but she insisted on the marriage taking place only after her year in the Healing program. Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius's father, hadn't been too pleased with that. It was an arranged marriage, after all, and he was worried that Narcissa would find a way to get out of it. This was the agreement they had settled on, though it was obvious to anyone with eyes that Lucius had courted Narcissa until she fell in love with him. It couldn't be more different from her sister Bellatrix's relationship - that was a different story entirely.

‘Emma!’ Narcissa cried, bringing her back to the present. ‘I'm so glad you could make it!’

Emma brushed off the ash from her robes and looked around. The manor looked much like her own home, though marble floors replaced the fluffy carpets and it didn’t have the sense of home that the Potter’s did. Huge windows ran from the floor to the ceiling, sending a flood of light into the room. To add to the brightness, airy white curtains billowed out. It was both simplistic and beautiful, though the room looked slightly empty. Emma supposed that the furniture had been moved to the side in preparation of the occasion. The only blonde of the Black family was standing in front of her in an elegant dress, and a ring that shined as brightly as her smile.

‘Congratulations on your engagement,’ she remembered to say, and Narcissa’s smile widened.

‘Come on, I’ll show you around. The Carrows are here by the way, you might be happy to see Alecto,’ the blonde girl (or woman, since she was already seventeen) took her by the arm. ‘I feel like we haven't spoken in ages, though it's barely been a week. I guess that's what comes from me being
in my N.E.W.Ts year and you doing your O.W.Ls.’

‘But Regulus,’ Emma said, half-turning. She didn't really want to abandon him with his parents. Though nice, his mother could be scary.

‘Oh don’t worry about him. My sister’s husband, Rodolphus Lestrange, and his brother Rabastan will take care of him. Besides, he’s been here before. But I think it’s cute you’re worried about your boyfriend.’

‘My boyfriend?’ Emma asked, surprised.

‘Yeah, tell me all about it! Is it an arranged marriage like mine? I was so glad it ended up being Lucius, imagine being married to Crabbe or Goyle!’ Narcissa laughed.

Emma thought of the hulking boys she privately thought must be part troll and shuddered. Luckily, they had left school a couple of years ago, and more importantly: her parents didn't believe in the whole "arranged-marriage" theory. *I guess there are some perks to not caring about blood status*, she thought.

‘I think you may have got the wrong impression,’ she said aloud as Alecto joined them.

‘Come on,’ the older girl wheedled. ‘You can tell me, I won’t repeat it around the school.’

‘Tell her Alecto: Regulus and I aren’t dating,’ Emma appealed to her friend.

‘The day those two get together, pigs will fly,’ the redhead said matter-of-factly.

‘But she spent the entire week at my cousin’s house!’ Narcissa pouted.

‘Yeah, but that was because I needed someone to bring me to your party,’ Emma explained. ‘Avery said I had to come and my parents aren’t -’

‘Wait, what?’ Alecto asked, suddenly very interested. ‘Avery asked you to come? But I thought Narcissa...’ she trailed off, giving the older girl an odd look.

‘I sent an owl, but Potter answered for her,’ Narcissa frowned. It was odd to hear James be called “Potter”. ‘I just assumed...’

‘There you are,’ Avery, the Slytherin Quidditch captain appeared next to them. He turned to Narcissa and kissed her hand. ‘Congratulations on the engagement, Black. Malfoy’s a good match for you: already in the Ministry at age 21, and well on the way to a promotion.’

‘Thank you,’ Narcissa said courteously.

‘Potter, come with me.’ He turned and left, expecting her to follow without glancing back. Alecto held her back.

‘Tell me what he says to you, lucky,’ she said in an undertone. ‘But be careful about Avery. The things my brother tells me...’

And then Emma knew who she was going to meet. She cursed herself for not having realised before, and her mind started panicking. *What am I going to do?* Before she could formulate a plan, she found herself in a corridor surrounded by familiar faces. All of the sixth-years that had scared her in her first year were here, looking even more scary now they had grown up. They were looking at her expectantly, but she stupidly stood there, unsure of what to do. Fortunately for her, Lord Voldemort
was not one to waste time on unimportant business.

‘In here,’ a voice called, and she was ushered into a small study-like room.

It provided a sharp contrast to the rest of the Manor. If the situation had been any less dire, Emma would have giggled and made a remark about it looking like Abraxas Malfoy’s secret lair. The shutters were closed and the fireplace lit, giving the room an odd half-light. There was a faint smell of cigars in the air, whereas the rest of the house smelt like the fresh flowers that had been artistically placed in vases around the rooms. Here there were no flowers. There weren’t even any pictures, nor family photos. A chest with seven locks was placed in a corner, and the desk was covered in neat stacks of paper.

But Emma’s assessment of the room seemed to fade upon seeing the infamous Dark Lord. A man was sitting in the high-backed chair, his hands casually placed on the armrests. He was handsome, in a certain kind of way: tall, with jet black hair and aristocratic features that reminded her of the Black family. The similarities stopped there though. Lord Voldemort had bright red eyes with snake-like pupils, and his skin was so pale it was nearly translucent. Still, he radiated some sort of charm and ease that made you feel like you were in the presence of greatness. A thrill ran through her spine, though of fear or excitement, she couldn’t tell.

‘Do I live up to the tales?’ he asked sardonically as she stared.

‘Yes,’ Emma said before she could stop herself and blushed.

‘Avery tells me that you’re interested in my ideas,’ he said. He spoke softly, but his words were as clear as if he had been whispering in her ear. ‘Normally, I would let you prove yourself along with the rest of them, but your circumstances are rather…particular.’ He paused. ‘Your parents are unpronounced on the matter of the current political situation, yes?’

‘You could say that,’ Emma replied diplomatically, the knot in her stomach curling tightly. What did he want with her?

‘You’re probably wondering why you are here,’ he voiced her thoughts. ‘Tell me, Emma Potter. Why did you do what you did to Harold Miller?’

‘I hate Mudbloods,’ she said automatically. This had been a favourite topic of discussion among the older Slytherins of late. ‘He thought he was better than any pureblood Slytherin, so I cursed him.’

‘Tell me the real reason he provoked you,’ he leaned forwards, his mouth curling up in one corner.

‘James hexed him, so he thought he could get back at him through me, so I hexed him,’ Emma corrected herself. She couldn’t break her gaze away from his eyes.

‘True,’ Lord Voldemort said. ‘Now, tell me the real reason you cursed him.’

‘I -’ she started, but the eyes boring into her made it impossible to lie. Her voice grew small. ‘I hated feeling powerless. I hated him even more for seeing the weakness.’

She blushed as the words came out, thanking Merlin once more that her fellow Slytherins had seen nothing of the ordeal. In truth, in the moment she hadn’t cared what blood type he was, just that she wanted to make him pay. Lord Voldemort smiled, seemingly pleased with the response.

‘That’s what I wanted to hear,’ he said. ‘I see potential in you, Emma Potter.’

He called the others back in. ‘Time to put on a little show. Carrow, are you ready to earn your
Amycus had entered along with Rodolphus and Bellatrix (now) Lestrange. He nodded eagerly. *He’s already a Death Eater*, Emma thought. *What is this about a mark?* She knew that there were various ranks in the Dark Lord’s followers. The useful, but weak were allowed the special robes. Apparently, though they were black, they were unlike any other robe. Then there was the mask. The closer you got to Lord Voldemort, the riskier your position became. The mask was to protect you from the Ministry’s extreme actions. Finally, there was the inner circle. Emma knew Lucius and Bellatrix belonged to it, but it mostly remained a mystery. To many Slytherins, this was the height of ambition, and of pride. This inner circle was where the real magic happened.

‘Potter, Carrow, you know the rules of duelling. Now forget them. Disable your opponent by any means necessary.’

‘But she’s just a girl,’ Amycus said, face falling. Emma looked alarmed: *a duel? With a seventh-year?* Lord Voldemort nodded to Bellatrix.

‘*Diffindo,*’ she said carelessly, and Alecto’s brother pulled his arm towards him, drawing in a sharp gasp of pain.

‘I need people that can take this war seriously and are capable fighters. We could meet resistance, and resistance with magic. The loser will become... intimately acquainted with Bellatrix,’ Voldemort said shortly.

The curly-haired witch thanked him breathlessly. *Merlin, Sirius was right. She’s insane.* However, Emma didn’t have time to think about the unfairness or the unexpectedness of this duel. Survive first, think later. This is unreal...

They duelled: Amycus lashing out with hex after hex, and Emma dodging most of them, repelling others. Lots were non-verbal: Amycus was in his seventh year. She couldn’t get a spell in edgeway, but Amycus wasn’t getting anywhere either and was visibly becoming more and more frustrated. *Maybe I can just wait until he tires out,* she thought. The boy wasn’t exactly fit, and was already wheezing from their dance around the small room. She hid behind a couch, thinking. He seemed to predict every spell she knew, and she hadn’t started non-verbal classes yet. *I need an angle,* she thought.

‘Stop cheating!’ Amycus complained, reducing the couch to ash.

Emma grabbed a book from the desk and threw it at him with all of the strength Quidditch had given her. He stumbled back in surprise and it hit him in the shoulder, knocking his wand arm off-balance. Perfect. They hadn’t learnt the spell to bind hands yet, though James had used it on her during several of their mock-duels, but she could transfigure some pens into rope and magically wrap it around his hands and feet.

‘Silencio!’ she said quickly before he could think of a spell, feeling proud of herself.

Amycus struggled angrily for a while with his bonds until he slumped over, defeated. Emma plucked his wand out of his grasp before undoing the charm.

‘I give up,’ he said, panting heavily. ‘Untie me.’

She did as he asked, and turned triumphantly to where Lord Voldemort was watching, but he looked at her coolly with his eerie red eyes. Suddenly, she was tackled to the ground, biting her tongue as she landed. Amycus was wrestling his wand out of her grasp.
'Diffindo!' he used the same spell as Bellatrix on her wand arm and she dropped it with a hiss of pain. He then did something she didn’t expect at all: punched her in the face. She tasted blood as her head made contact with the floor.

‘What the hell?’ she asked, but the Death Eaters looked at her silently. *Disable your opponent by any means necessary.* She shouldn’t have let Amycus go. But it wasn’t fair, the duel was over! She turned back to Amycus, but he was looking murderously at her, probably furious at being humiliated by a fifth-year.

‘Deprimo!’ he shouted, seeming to have forgotten that he could do non-verbal spells.

Emma’s eyes widened and she scrambled out of the way, but her foot got caught by the ray of light. Something invisible and heavy pressed down on it excruciatingly until her ankle broke with a loud crack. Amycus grinned with sadistic pleasure. Her earlier fear returned: this is real to him, she thought. Maybe more real than anything else. Too late, she remembered a story Alecto had told her about Amycus pulling legs and wings off of flies and watching them wriggle around. *No wonder people are scared of Slytherins,* she thought, *when Amycus is in this mood.*

Her fear gave her strength and she dived for her wand, Amycus firing spells at her all the while, but it also made her angry. She remembered what Lord Voldemort had talked about and realised that it was a test to see how she would react under pressure. He had probably planned for this to happen all along. *Well, I’ll give him his show,* she thought furiously. In Quidditch James often took Bludgers to be able to score another goal for Gryffindor. Emma was always too scared to get hurt, because the injury wasn’t worth the penalty to her playing. For the first time, she understood why he was a better Chaser: it was better to take a hit if it enabled you to win the game.

She dragged herself to her feet, ignoring the sharp pain that lanced up her leg. She didn’t mind the pain. In fact, she could hardly feel it, her mind was clear as the world was reduced to her and her objective. She barely felt the *Flipendo* jinx push her back into the wall, but she would later remember how easily her own curse came to her lips.

‘Crucio.’

She thrust out a hand to balance herself, but her concentration was on the Unforgivable Curse. Initially used because she doubted Amycus could protect himself against it, she fed all of her pain and frustration into the curse, maintaining it for twenty seconds before it died out. Not wanting to risk turning her back again she performed the simple, but effective ‘*Petrificus Totalus*’ charm. Only then did she relax, looking Lord Voldemort dead in the eyes, too tired and hurt to worry about the consequences of her actions.

‘Happy now?’ she said in a cocky voice that James would be proud of.

‘How dare you speak to the Dark Lord - ’ Bellatrix started furiously.

‘No,’ Lord Voldemort held out a hand. ‘Go. I want a word alone with Miss Potter.’

The Death Eaters filed out, and Lord Voldemort stepped closer. ‘The hood is yours, if you wish it, but I have a better suited reward in mind. If you help out my campaign, I can teach you magic other wizards only dream of. But you are of no use to me while you act like a schoolgirl. You must learn to control your emotions, or they will hamper your abilities. Avery!’ he called in the seventh-year, who seemed to have been loitering outside the door.

‘Yes, my Lord?’ Avery asked respectfully, keeping his eyes down.
‘Escort Miss Potter back to Grimmauld Place. Give the Blacks’ my regards; their children have done them proud. Oh, and Emma?’ he said as an afterthought. ‘I’ve taken Avery’s word that you are someone to be trusted. Do not make me doubt that word, or there will be…consequences.’

Avery visibly gulped. When Emma took too long limping out of the study, he swung her into his arms as easily as if she were a child and almost ran into the more welcoming part of the Manor. The corridor was deserted now; Emma wondered how long she had been in there for.

‘You’d better remember those words, Potter,’ Avery warned her. ‘My father and I have gone out on a limb for you.’

‘Why?’ she asked. It wasn’t as if she had been the most vehement in her hatred for Muggles, or love for pure-bloods. Her brother was even in Gryffindor.

‘My father thinks your family could have a huge influence on the wizarding way of thinking. They’re from respectable pure-blood families, but have stayed neutral throughout the crisis with Grindelwald in their youth, and even now they haven’t said anything. Personally, I’m not blind. Your brother is one of the best wizards of our generation and he seems to be the only one with any control over Black. And besides,’ he gave her one of his rare smiles. ‘I’ve never seen anyone use the Beetle Curse until you appeared. We’re taught that it passed out of common usage.’

They entered the anti-chamber to the ballroom, where Regulus and Rabastan were chatting in the corner. Regulus noticed them and hurried over. Emma felt slightly self-conscious at being held like an oversized-baby, but it was true her foot wouldn’t support the slightest bit of pressure.

‘Emma?’ he asked, looking worried. ‘What the hell did you do to her?’ he demanded, turning on Avery, eyes sleet-grey with anger.

‘Relax,’ Avery said, unperturbed. He handed Emma over to Regulus like an object. ‘She can’t walk, but she won the duel. Make sure you get that ankle looked into, we’ve got practice next week on Tuesday,’ he winked at her, and her anger for him evaporated.

‘I wish you’d take better care of yourself,’ Regulus complained as he walked towards the fireplace, touching her swollen cheek. ‘Lucky for you, Kreacher knows a few healing spells.’

‘Ouch! Just get me home already,’ she said crossly.

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‘So you got initiated, did you?’ Regulus asked, as Kreacher dabbed Emma’s face with various creams and ointments.

They were in Regulus’s room, since he was unwilling to leave until she was healed. It was also the first time they had properly spoken since she had lied to him. For the moment, his concern was overriding his disappointment. Emma realised that she had acted coldly towards him too, the guilt making her put up barriers. I’ve got to stop acting so defensively, she thought.

‘How do you know that?’ Emma replied with a question of her own. Maybe not today.

‘My parents took me over the Christmas holidays,’ he replied, his mouth twisting contemptuously. ‘They wanted me to make a good impression. Avery wanted me to tell the Dark Lord about your bug-transfiguration.’
'I thought you wanted to be a Death Eater,' Emma frowned, ignoring the reference to Miller. Regulus’s aspiration to found a world where wizards ruled over Muggles was one of the subjects he talked freely about, and she never tired of hearing of it. It was one of the things that had drawn them close: something between the two extremes.

‘I do but...’ Regulus sighed. ‘It’s just that they’re so big on the purity thing. I want to make a difference: a place to live for magical creatures, the end of the secrecy pact, rights for House Elves,’ he gestured to Kreacher who beamed. ‘I mean of course there would be no way I’d associate with a Muggleborn, but it’s more for them than it is for me. I just wish they’d stop -’

‘Comparing you to Sirius?’ Emma finished, remembering a similar conversation with his brother.

‘Exactly. I had to win their affection, earn their respect. Sirius does whatever the hell he likes and they still forgive him. I’m sure that if I did half the things he did, I’d have been blasted off of the wall already,’ he rolled his eyes. ‘He doesn’t realise how spoiled he is.’

Emma grunted in response, unsure of how to reply and unwilling to break the thin ice she was walking on.

‘Anyway,’ Regulus said, lost in his memories. ‘The Dark Lord thinks I’m dedicated. He thinks I’m like Bellatrix.’

‘Are you?’ Emma asked.

‘Are you kidding?’ Regulus laughed. ‘No matter the cost now, once he’s firmly established his power, it’ll be a better world for both wizards and Muggles. You have to feel kind of sorry for them, don’t you? Muggles, I mean. They don’t know about magic. I don’t think I could live without it.’

‘I feel worse for Squibs,’ Emma said. ‘They know what magic is and can’t use it.’ She shuddered. ‘I would hate that. I don’t know what I would do.’

They sat in silence for a while, even after Kreacher had finished mending Emma’s wounds.

‘Don’t you find it scary how Lord Voldemort seems to be able to read minds?’ Emma asked hesitantly. ‘It was as though he was staring into my soul.’

‘The Dark Lord can use Legilimency and Bellatrix has been teaching me Occlumency ever since she found out how to use it too,’ Regulus explained, before adding. ‘You’ll probably need to learn it too, if you want to join up. If people can read you, then they can use you. Your feelings makes you vulnerable.’

Emma remembered what Voldemort had said about controlling her emotions. It was true that what couldn’t touch you didn’t hurt you. Is that why Regulus hides his all the time? But I know that he cares about his friends. I’m sure Rabastan does too.

‘I’m just worried that I won’t be able to,’ she said, making an effort to open up, since he so rarely did. ‘James is the brave one in our family. I guess that’s why he’s in Gryffindor. Besides, I...My parents are really anti-Voldemort, and I’m not sure I could go against them, even if it’s to help the wizards. It’s messed up: even though I know what I have to do, I just don’t. It’s frustrating. I just wish they could understand that.’

‘When we came back from Hogwarts for the first time, my mother beat Sirius for being placed in Gryffindor,’ he said. ‘Our dad was away, and she was just so mad. Sirius was begging for help, for anyone to hear him, but I stayed in my room doing nothing, listening to our mother insult him. It was only when I heard her go back down the stairs that I dared go across the hall. I brought him hot
water, and bandaged him up as well as I could, but it wasn’t enough. He just sat there crying, and I told him about all of the good things there were in Gryffindor. When the tears dried up, he just looked at me and told me to get out. I wasn’t there when he needed me because I was too afraid of our parents to help my own brother.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘That’s because I’ve never told anybody,’ he replied. ‘Sometimes your family is the one that’s messed up.’
‘Come on Emma!’ James encouraged. ‘You can do it.’

Emma scrunched her face up in concentration.

‘Nope,’ she said finally, letting her breath out in one go. ‘I’m just not Animagus-material.’

‘Nonsense,’ her brother replied. ‘We’ll make one of you yet.’

It was April and they were sunning themselves in their favourite spot by the Great Lake, enjoying the abnormally hot weather. It wasn’t often that the twins found some time to themselves, but they tried to enjoy every minute of it. Emma got up and started skipping stones. The Giant Squid started skipping them back. She turned to James to tell him, but he had sat up straight and was staring towards the castle with an expression of disgust.

‘Urgh, don’t you just hate Snivellus?’ he asked.

‘What’s he done this time?’ Emma laughed, following the direction of his look.

Snape was flanked by his usual cronies: Wilkes and Mulciber. Even the spring weather couldn’t bring lightness to Mulciber’s face. As usual, it looked like Snape hadn’t seen a bottle of shampoo in days. It might have been true, since he spent his days locked up with his books. After their initial spat, his anger had turned more towards James and his friends. Emma was impressed despite herself though, he had invented several useful spells that were fast becoming popular. Luckily for her brother, James was also an adept at combining spells - often in hilarious ways (though she was sure it did nothing to improve Lily Evans' opinion of him).

‘He called Lily a Mudblood,’ James replied darkly. Emma patiently waited for the rest of the story, dropping her stone. ‘Ems? A little indignation please?’

‘Oh sorry,’ she apologised. ‘I was waiting for the whole thing.’

He told her about the events leading up to the bad word. ‘And then,’ he finished. ‘When I tried to make him apologise, Evans told me I was as bad as he was! I would NEVER call her something like that, never! Ems, tell me I’m not as bad as he is?’

‘You’re not,’ she replied dutifully, though to her it was just a word. She did understand his annoyance at being put on the same level as Snape though. ‘But you know…Evans loves the rules. Maybe if you stopped hexing him then she’d warm up to you.’

‘Maybe,’ James said doubtfully, taking her stone and throwing it into the lake with a plop. He looked back towards Snape. ‘Hey what’s up with your friend?’ He nodded towards the Great Hall. Alecto had come running out, and even from this distance they could see that something was wrong. Her head was down and it seemed like she almost tripped with every step.
‘I’ll talk to you later,’ Emma said to her twin, before rushing up to the redhead. ‘What’s wrong?’

Alecto seemed out of sorts, pulling at her head and mumbling incoherently. Emma took a hold of her hands to calm her down. Her friend’s mouth turned down in a grimace as she burst out. ‘I’ll tell you what’s wrong! Amycus found out about William! He’s on his way to Hogsmeade right now with Rabastan and Regulus. You have to help me Emma! I don’t know what they’re going to do to him!’

‘Don’t worry, I know a shortcut,’ Emma swiftly made her way to the Whomping Willow, looking around for stray bystanders before using magic to lift a twig to press on the special knob. ‘After you.’

Alecto didn’t even stop to ask about the extra passageway, immediately dropping to her knees and crawling through the narrow gap. They arrived at William’s house out of breath and puffing thirty minutes later. *Maybe “house” is too kind a word. Hovel is more like it.* The Muggle outskirts of Hogsmeade was like some kind of shantytown. William's nearest neighbours kept goats and pigs in a pen not far, and on the other side of the shack it seemed like one of the buildings had collapsed in on itself.

‘Looks like they haven’t come yet,’ Emma said, checking the surrounding area. ‘Here’s your chance: tell him about magic and make him pretend he’s a Squib.’

Every time William had come into contact with magic, they had cast a Memory Charm on him straight afterwards: usually when Emma found them and hexed him before taking him home. Merlin knew how the Muggle outskirts of Hogsmeade didn’t know about the wizarding community within. Emma was beginning to think that they didn’t even know there was a village nearby.

‘I can’t,’ Alecto said. ‘I only just made him forget. You can’t use a Memory Charm twice in twenty four hours, it’s the law: otherwise he’ll get brain damage.’

‘Then you let him know you’re a witch. And you make sure he understands this time, because you’re not going to reverse it. Quickly!’

Alecto knocked on the door, and the overjoyed William let her in, exclaiming that she had barely left. Emma stood outside, staring at the peeling paint on the doorframe, until her friend called her in. She thought that it might once have been white, though now it was a faded brown.

‘And this is Emma,’ Alecto introduced her. Emma gave him a swift smile.

‘Is she a witch too?’ William asked slowly. He seemed to be taking it well.

‘Yes. I’ve told you all of this before, or at least you’ve seen it before, but I cast a Memory Charm to make you forget,’ Alecto explained.

‘Why would you do that?’ he asked.

‘Well, to protect you of course,’ she replied. ‘And I’m not supposed to tell anyone.’

‘So why are you telling me now?’

‘My brother doesn’t like Muggles - non-magic-users - and so you have to pretend you’re a Squib.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A non-magic-user born into a wizarding family.’

‘I see,’ William said, but Emma could tell he didn’t really. His eyes were as glassy as Lucinda’s in
History of Magic lessons. *Thank Merlin we were able to drop that. I can't believe Regulus actually enjoys the lesson.*

‘Well, this is the best joke I’ve had played on me in a long while,’ Alecto’s boyfriend was saying. ‘For a minute I actually believed you, but Squibs is just taking it a little too far. As if anyone would call their child a “Squib”.’

‘It’s true!’ Alecto said, pulling out her wand. William’s laugh grew louder. ‘I’ll prove it to you.’

And she tidied the room with a wave of her wand. William’s laugh stopped in its tracks, to be replaced by a look of awe.

‘Whoa,’ he said. There was a moment of silence. ‘How come you can’t tell anyone?’

‘Because Muggles are so xenophobic,’ Alecto explained.

‘Seems like an excuse to me,’ William replied. ‘I bet you could cure loads of diseases with magic.’

‘We would if you let us,’ Emma said, annoyed. ‘But last time we tried, your lot tried to burn us at the stake.’

‘I would never!’ William cried. ‘I think magic is great.’ Alecto smiled. ‘Teach me it! I swear I’ll be ready to learn. Then we don’t have to worry about your brother.’

‘It doesn’t work like that William,’ Alecto said gently. ‘You’re either born with it or you’re not.’

‘That’s what they said about loads of things! And now you have Paralympics, people with mental disabilities overcoming them and becoming doctors...’

‘Don’t you think we’d teach our Squibs if we could?’

‘They’re just not trying hard enough,’ William said stubbornly. ‘Why won’t you even try? Do you not want me to learn magic?’

‘It’s not that!’ Alecto was becoming frustrated.

‘Then what is it? Are you so selfish as to want to keep it to yourself? I bet that’s why it’s a secret, so you get to keep all the power to yourself. There must be some way to harness it. There’s something you’re not telling me.’

The door opened with a bang to reveal Rabastan, Regulus and Amycus. Emma shot a look at Regulus, who just shrugged. So he hadn’t been able to keep them away. Or he didn’t want to. Emma might bend the rules for her friends, but Regulus had his moral code. He didn’t like the idea of Alecto with a Muggle at all - though she wasn’t planning on marrying him, there was a greater risk of Squib children, which he hated above everything else.

‘Step aside, sister,’ Amycus said, sending William flying into the wall, sending plaster everywhere. The door fell off its hinges from the impact. Emma started to wonder whether the hut would cave in on them.

‘Wait, Amycus! He’s magical, he’s not a Muggle, I swear!’

Emma hated seeing her friend, usually so confident - almost cocky - reduced to a pleading mess by this Muggle. The desperate look on Alecto’s face was not one you saw often, and it was doing nothing to convince their classmates of the veracity of her words. Emma hoped he was worth it. She
stepped forwards, wanting to help. ‘He’s a Squib. How else do you think he could live in the magical village of Hogsmeade?’

Amycus, who was not known for his great intelligence, seemed to accept this logic. Rabastan, however, did not. ‘Get him to prove it then. Everyone knows that there’s a Muggle community living on the outskirts. Besides, only Muggles could stand to live in a place like this.’

He waved a hand towards the room. It was true that next to Hogwarts, it was rather pitiful. A dirty towel lay in a corner next to a cracked sink. *Though he’s probably just fallen on hard times*, Emma reminded herself. *Even wizards can’t fix everything with magic.*

Alecto ran over to where William lay, but he flinched at her touch. ‘Get away from me, witch!’

She flinched as if she had been slapped.

‘I’m not a squid.’

‘Squib,’ corrected Regulus. Not helping, Emma thought. She wasn’t sure, but she thought that he looked faintly amused.

‘Whatever. Just leave me alone. I don’t want anything to do with you. You’re unnatural. You’re freaks!’

‘I guess that solves the question then. Time for a painful lesson, I think. You can’t treat one of our own like that and get away,’ Rabastan rolled up his sleeves, but Alecto stopped him.

‘Let me. Crucio!’

It was the first time Emma had seen the Cruciatus Curse put properly to use - her own spell didn’t count, since it fizzled out - and it was both horrifying and fascinating to watch. The more Alecto used it, the more William cursed her with his words, and the more he insulted her, the more furious she became. In the end Rabastan wiped his memory, worried that his screams would attract attention. Alecto didn’t protest, in fact she seemed overjoyed when they left William a drooling mess in the farmhouse.

‘I’m never trusting another Muggle again,’ she said to Emma. ‘Never. I thought he was different. Now I hate them all.’
‘Last rounds of the school year,’ Regulus said, getting up and stretching. ‘Merlin, but this train ride is long. Are you ready?’

Emma grunted in reply, rubbing her eyes. Alecto had decided that they needed to celebrate the end of the OWLs with lots of firewhisky the night before, and she was still getting over the sleepless night. Around four in the morning, Alecto had burst into tears about William the Muggle, and Emma had to comfort her in the stone cold corridor for a couple of hours. Lucinda and Helen didn’t know: Alecto had sworn Rabastan and Regulus to secrecy and Amycus was too ashamed of his sister’s transgression to tell anyone.

Rabastan put it down to the “follies of youth” though he was the same age as them. Rodolphus was inducted into the Dark Lord’s inner circle, so he had been acting rather superior of late. Though he had finally resolved the mystery of how Lord Voldemort rewarded his most loyal followers: with a tattoo of his symbol branded on their forearm. One need only press their wand to the mark to show they were in danger and the others would be able to apparate to him or her on the spot.

‘He’s planning a coup this summer,’ he said over-conversationally as they patrolled the length of the train. ‘Bellatrix told me. She wants me to join her mission.’

‘Which is?’ asked Emma, trying not to look too concerned. She confiscated a Fanged Frisbee from a second-year appartent.

‘Rallying the powerful wizards who haven’t made choices yet. “Persuading” them if necessary. People are too blinded by fear of change at the moment, but she thinks that if they have something else to fear it might change their minds.’

Regulus paused before entering the next compartment, waiting to hear what she thought of such extreme measures.

‘Isn’t that coercing people, rather than persuading them?’ Emma frowned.

‘Yeah but don’t you think it’s worth it? And if I’m there, maybe I can try to tame Bellatrix a bit,’ he replied.

‘Be careful then,’ Emma warned, not only uneasy about Regulus’s cousin. ‘There are some people who want to see all pure-bloods dead with all of the chaos going around.’

‘Don’t worry. Rabastan will be there too.’

Small comfort, she thought, but it was true that he wasn't bad at duelling. I just hope he takes it seriously enough.

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‘And she scores!’ Emma cheered as she got the Quaffle past James.

‘You know I’m not Keeper material Ems,’ he huffed, touching down to the ground. ‘Anyway, we beat you in the Quidditch cup this year.’
'That’s because running around like a dog all the time has given Sirius serious arm muscles.'

James laughed at the pun. ‘That was pretty bad.’

‘Still made you laugh,’ Emma pointed out.

They lay in the middle of the lawn, catching their breath. Godric’s Hollow was the best place to be in August, in Emma's opinion. A small community of magic-users, they didn't have to worry about whether their Quaffle would land in somebody else's back yard. Their own back yard was just about big enough to place a Quidditch post in, though their mother had insisted on keeping warding spells on the patio after an unfortunate accident when they were nine - including but not restricted to the Quaffle being melted on the barbecue and several broken windows.

‘I hope I’m made Quidditch captain,’ James said, and Emma could hear the hope in his voice.

‘Me too.’

‘You’re already a Prefect Ems!’ he exclaimed, rolling over to look at her.

‘A true Slytherin has many ambitions,’ Emma said knowledgeably. ‘But I love Quidditch. I also want to beat you.’

‘Not if I beat you first!’

‘And how do you plan on doing that?’ Emma asked sceptically. ‘Everyone knows I got the brains of the family.’

James, who had received seven “Outstanding” in his OWLs, along with three “Exceeds Expectations”, scoffed. ‘Take that back! You failed Herbology!’

‘Who needs plants anyway?’ Emma asked, grinning. The Bowtruckle near the fence around the side of the house was her only plant-friend. ‘You can’t even do a Tickling Charm properly.’

‘That’s because I don’t need it,’ James tackled his sister to the ground, where they mock-wrestled/tickled until Natalie Potter arrived, standing behind the French doors (just in case they were still playing and a throw went wild).

‘James! Emma! Dinner’s ready!’ she called.

‘Coming Mum!’ They raced back to the house, pushing and shoving each other to the table.

‘What are we having? I’m starving!’ James complained dramatically as soon as they sat down, grabbing a slice of garlic bread from the bowl and stuffing it in his mouth.

‘Where’s Dad?’ Emma asked, noting that only three plates had been set out.

Natalie Potter didn’t reply at once as she disappeared behind the bar, but from her facial expression the twins instantly quietened down.

‘Your father’s running late,’ their mother said worriedly as she served the pasta. ‘Apparently Barty Crouch called him into the Ministry.’

‘But Dad’s been retired for ages now,’ James said, stopping his food rampage. ‘What did the Head Auror want with him?’

‘That’s what he’s gone to find out.’
They ate in silence for a while, chewing slowly or pushing the food around their plates until Charles Potter burst in through the door. Immediately they all clamoured for answers. Their mother waved another plate to the table and piled it high with food.

‘Hold on, let me take my coat off first,’ he said tiredly, easing himself into his chair with a groan. ‘One at a time.’

‘What happened?’ asked James, which pretty much summed up all of their questions.

‘Crouch wants to legalise using Unforgivable Curses on Death Eaters. They’ve tried to take the Ministry and failed - barely. The Minister for Magic has now declared it an open war and Crouch thinks the Aurors are losing the battles because they won’t use as extreme methods as Voldemort’s followers.’

‘What?’ Emma gasped, thinking of Regulus and Rabastan.

‘I know Emma, it’s shocking. But if we don’t quell this rebellion now, then we might have another Gellert Grindelwald on our hands. Torturing Muggles has become a sport for these people, a way to show who’s in control.’

Mr and Mrs Potter shared a look. Emma was frowning into her plate. Torturing Muggles? He must have it wrong...

‘I can’t believe it!’ James said loudly, clattering his fork down. ‘Some loon wants power and people are going along with it? How can they do such atrocious things?’

‘People fight for what they believe in, James,’ their mother said wisely.

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Later that evening James was pacing back and forth in Emma’s room as she watched him from her bed.

‘I wish I could do something about this,’ he fumed. ‘Lily said Snivellus was practicing Dark magic with Avery and Rosier, is that true?’ Before Emma could reply, his face went white. ‘Merlin, Lily lives near the slimy git! What if he tries something? What if he tries to kill her?’

‘James, relax. Snape’s only sixteen, I doubt he’d be ready to sacrifice his life just to kill Evans. Besides, didn’t he still want to be friends with her?’ his sister tried to be reasonable.

‘I don’t know Ems, people do strange things when they get emotional,’ James shook his head and grimaced. ‘I wish I could help. I wish I could be an Auror, protect those innocent people.’

‘I don’t know Ems, people do strange things when they get emotional,’ James shook his head and grimaced. ‘I wish I could help. I wish I could be an Auror, protect those innocent people.’

‘I don’t think they’re that innocent James,’ his twin muttered, but seeing him frown she hurriedly continued. ‘But would you be ready to do that? Risk your life for some Muggles?’

‘Like Mum said Ems, people fight for what they believe in. If you only let the evil people do so, then you’re as bad as them.’

‘They don’t think they’re evil though,’ Emma pointed out. ‘They think that they’re making things right.’

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That night Emma asked to borrow James’s owl. He nodded with a wave of his hand, absorbed in a
discussion with Sirius in the two-way mirrors they had invented. Back in her room, she penned out
three quick letters.

Dear Regulus,

Have you heard about Barty Crouch’s new policy? I hope you and Rabastan are okay, and that
the mission with Bellatrix went well. It’s odd to have something that James and I can’t talk about.
Other than that the summer’s been fun: James and I have been trying to practice new Chaser
moves, but with only two of us it’s practically impossible! How did your OWLs go? I got an O in
Charms (of course), Transfiguration (thanks to James) and Potions, E’s in Astronomy,
Arithmancy and DADA and As in Muggle Studies and Study of Ancient Runes (why do we even
take this class? What is the point of it? Oh yeah, curse-breaker). Considering the Mandrake died
as I pulled it out and I still have no idea why, you have probably safely guessed that I received a T
in Herbology.
Looking forward to seeing you in three weeks,
Emma.

Dear Alecto,

Guess what? 8 OWLs and my parents declared it “passable”. My Dad barely got 5, but of course
when you have a genius brother, this seems paltry in comparison. You’re lucky your family is easy
to please: get a respectable pure-blood marriage by the time you’re twenty five. Easy enough with
your looks. Too bad you scare the boys away with your sparkling personality. (Get it? Because
whenever you get angry with someone your wand sends out sparks?) Congratulate Amycus on
making it “in” for me. I can’t believe he’s still mad that it took him an extra year because of me.
What was I supposed to do, lie there and die? Okay, maybe I’m exaggerating. But still... I hope he
isn’t. Mad, that is. He can be scary when he wants to.
How are you doing, anyway? Does Lucinda still have a crush on Sirius Black? I’m so jealous
that you all get to spend the summer together, but I guess that’s what you get from living
somewhere as remote as Godric’s Hollow. I know. Even the name of my village is ironic.
We should meet up in Diagon Alley to get our books (and maybe ice-cream?) together. Owl me as
soon as you get this!
Emma

Dear Narcissa,

Sorry I haven’t been really keeping in touch lately, but yes I will definitely want to be one of your
bridesmaids! How could you think I’d refuse? You and Lucius are like the perfect couple.
Speaking of which, I have a favour to ask you. Lucius is in the Ministry now, isn’t he? What
exactly is going on with Barty Crouch? Does he even know that his son tags along behind
Rabastan and Regulus like some kind of lost puppy? More importantly, is there anything I can do
to help?
Tell me if you need anything,
Emma.

As she was tying the last of the parchments to the owl’s leg, she heard a loud crash outside, followed
by urgent knocking on the door. She went out onto the landing to see what was going on, but James
crashed down the stairs like an elephant, flinging open the front door.
A Permanent Visitor

Chapter Notes

The fifteenth installment! Thanks everyone who gave kudos, tell me what you think!

‘Sirius!’

A bedraggled Sirius was dripping water on the welcome mat. His hair clumped together limply, making a stark contrast to his usual flowing locks. A rather large suitcase was in his left hand and he held a backpack in his right. For the first time since Emma had known him he looked worried, even scared. There was no need to ask what happened.

‘Do you mind if I crash here for a while?’ he asked hopefully, in the voice of someone who was grasping at his last straws.

James and Emma, much to their shame, just stared, listening to the dripping of Sirius's clothes. The door was still open and they could hear the wind egging the rain on. The spell was broken when the twins' parents rushed in.

‘Goodness Sirius what happened?’ Natalie Potter asked, and Emma was reminded that her parents lived in some sort of bubble away from Hogwarts. Of course they didn't know about the Black family's predicament. ‘Let’s get you out of those wet clothes, and then you can tell us all about it.’

Fifteen minutes later, Sirius was nursing a cup of hot tea in the Potter’s kitchen. He explained about the situation with his parents: their love of blood purity and his openly defying them, his rebellious action of getting placed in Gryffindor and his hatred of his cousins: Narcissa, getting married to a potential Death Eater, and Bellatrix, a Death Eater herself. That summer, his remaining cousin Andromeda married a Muggleborn and his mother blew her off of the family tree: a tapestry with the whole Black family woven into it. The sarcasm was evident in his voice as he explained his mother’s manner of “purging” the family in order to keep it pure. She had pressured Sirius to take a side in the wizarding war and threatened to disown him if he chose wrongly.

‘So I told her that nothing would make me happier than to leave that family, so I left,’ he concluded. ‘It was raining in London though, and this is the only place I could think of to go. I hope you don’t mind.’

Emma was suddenly struck with a vision of Sirius climbing aboard the Knight Bus in the dead of the night, not knowing which destination to ask for.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Charles Potter laid a hand on Sirius’s shoulder. ‘You are always welcome in this house.’

***

Sirius moving in was a turning point in Emma’s summer. It was subtle at first, the change barely perceptible, but as the month went on it was obvious that Charles kept comparing Emma and Sirius’s situation. It started when Sirius was talking about how the Hat took into account his fervent wish to
be in Gryffindor. Charles remarked that maybe Emma should have done so too. When Sirius joked about pranks he would play on Slytherins in retaliation for their bullying Muggleborns, Charles asked if they were Emma’s friends and if so why. It came to a head when their Hogwarts letters arrived and in a true mother-hen fashion, Natalie was making a list of the new books they would buy later that day. She noticed that both Sirius and Emma were continuing Muggle Studies and was curious.

‘Why Muggle Studies then?’ Natalie asked, surprised.

‘Muggles are just fascinating,’ breathed Sirius, eyes lighting up at the mention of his favourite subject. ‘The things they invent to replace magic are amazing. I’m saving up for a motorcycle to see how they really work. Plus, it would make my parents mad.’

‘But Emma you haven’t shown an interest in Muggle transport. You even hate travelling by car! I thought you were more interested in spellcraft.’

‘It’s not the Muggle transport that interests me Mum,’ Emma explained. ‘I want to know just what divided Muggles and wizards in the first place. Why do we need a Statute of Secrecy? What went wrong? There must have been a reason for Muggles to start hating wizards the way they did.’

‘We fear what we do not understand,’ Natalie said.

‘Exactly,’ Emma grinned. It was the perfect moment to pitch her speech. She had planned it carefully, mentioning only the goals and not the methods she would be willing to use. ‘What if we showed them? What if Muggles saw the ways wizards could help them? They spend so much time on mundane tasks that we can accomplish in a flick of a wand. I just don’t understand. If they accepted magic, we could accept them into our hospitals, stop them from dying of diseases that have nearly been eradicated in the wizarding world. Take broken bones for example: Madame Pomfrey mended James’s arm in a couple of hours, and Muggles need months.’

‘Careful Emma,’ her father warned. ‘You’re starting to sound like Voldemort and his followers.’

‘But Dad,’ Emma said, seeing her opening to make them come around. ‘They do have a point on some things. If Muggles weren’t blinded by their jealousy of magic, giants and werewolves wouldn’t be forced into hiding. And they need us: their technology, though as impressive as Sirius says, doesn’t come close to what can be accomplished by magic. I think the world would be a better place if we make them understand. It might be hard for them at first, but like Mum says, that’s the problem at the moment. Do you know how many Muggle-born children have been sent to St Mungo’s because Muggles have tried to force magic out of them?’

‘I can’t believe I’m hearing this! From my own daughter!’ A horrified look came across Charles’ face. ‘Don’t tell me… Are those Death Eaters brain washing you?’

‘What?’ Emma asked, taken aback, *And here I was, thinking I was making reasonable points.* Her father had even complained at having to go to a Muggle hospital when they were on holiday, causing his arm to be put in a splint for the remainder of their stay. But he hadn’t finished speaking

‘It makes sense now. Those letters that were sealed with the Black family crest… After what Sirius has told me of his family, I decided to burn them. Who knew if there were curses in them? I thought they were for Sirius, but now I know otherwise.’

‘Oh and the fact that they probably had *Emma Potter* written on the front didn’t occur to you?’ Emma asked snarkily, her anger bubbling to the surface.
'It could have been a ruse,' Charles didn't look regretful at all.

‘Charles!’ Natalie reprimanded, but it was James who surprised them the most.

‘How could you do that Dad? Emma’s your daughter, my twin! If we can’t trust the people we love, then we’re just as bad as them,’ he said furiously, getting up from the table, his breakfast untouched. ‘Why don’t you rip up my letters too Dad? Did you know Remus is a werewolf? Are you going to suspect him because of something he can’t control too? Are you going to forbid my friendship with him?
Come on Ems, we should get to Diagon Alley before the shops close.’

He stormed back into the house. Emma and Sirius exchanged a look and hurried after him, both fearing what the Potters would say after James’s outburst.

‘I didn’t mean to,’ Sirius began.

‘I know you didn’t mean to. But you did anyway: your own family wasn’t enough for you, so you had to take mine too.’ She threw the words he said to her in first year back into his face.

Sirius’s face whitened. Emma immediately regretted her rashness: it wasn’t his fault that she was hurt. But it was too late to take it back now, so she just followed James into the Floo network. She squeezed her brother’s arm to show her thanks and hoped that it wouldn’t affect his relationship with their dad. Her own might have been damaged beyond repair, but there was no need to bring James down with her.

‘Look, there is no way I can thank you enough for what you did. But now that we’re here, dad’s kind of right. I want to see how Regulus is doing now Sirius is gone, and you’re known for being pro-Muggleborn. I don’t want to give his parents and the Slytherins reason to think he’s like his brother; who knows what could happen?’

‘But you’re in Slytherin and you’re with me,’ James pointed out.

‘Yeah but you’re my brother: family counts with that lot. I’ll be fine. And besides…I don’t really want to spend the day with Sirius.’

James wasn’t pleased, but nodded. It wasn’t Sirius’s fault that Charles was mad, but he represented what would happen if the problems at home continued. And anyway, I have to apologise for leaking Mooney’s secret, he thought guiltily.

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She wandered through various shops, buying quills and parchment here and potions ingredients there. By the time Emma finally found Regulus in Flourish and Blotts with Rabastan, her anger had dissipated somewhat.

‘Hey, look who’s back from the dead!’ Rabastan said joyfully, but reigned in his hug at a look from Emma. She felt too raw for any kind of physical contact. Plus, ever since that Christmas... ‘Why haven’t you replied to any of our letters?’

So dad got rid of the Lestranges’ letters too, she thought. Makes sense, considering Bellatrix is famous for her “Muggle hunts” and her husband is Rabastan’s brother. I wonder who else tried to contact me.
‘My dad’s been playing the interceptor,’ she laughed humourlessly. ‘He’s scared of you becoming a bad influence on me.’

‘Ouch,’ Rabastan winced, before a thought occurred to him. ‘Hey isn’t Sirius Black staying with you now that he’s been disowned?’

‘Don’t even mention his name in front of me,’ Regulus hissed at his friend, suddenly venomous. Emma turned to him in surprise.

‘Okay, okay,’ Rabastan backed away with his hands in the air, not wishing to receive any more of the brunt of Regulus’s anger against his brother. ‘I’m off to get Potions supplies, but Alecto told me she’d be at Fortescue’s with Rosier later on if you’re still here.’

‘Rosier?’ Emma asked Regulus, opting for a safe topic of conversation. ‘Since when does Rabastan call Lucinda Rosier?’

‘He’s talking about Evan,’ Regulus replied shortly. ‘They started dating during the summer. Since when are you best buddies with my brother?’

Emma bit the inside of her cheek. ‘We’re not “best buddies” and you know it. It’s James who’s friends with him.’

‘Yeah well, it seems like you’re pretty okay with it considering,’ Regulus retorted.

‘Considering what? Considering that he had nowhere else to go? That because of him my dad is ready to kick me out? Merlin Regulus, what is your problem all of a sudden?’

‘Sorry,’ he replied, sighing. He ran a hand through his hair - the only nervous habit he had. ‘It’s just that what with your silence these past few weeks and my blood-traitor of a brother staying at your house, people are starting to wonder if you’re really on our side of the war. I was starting to think that... That you’d taken his side.’

‘What? Of course not,’ she said, stunned. ‘You know that. I told you, my dad burned the letters. I’m only in Diagon Alley today because we had an argument. It’s still our side, Reg.’

This was the point where she’d normally put a hand on his arm to make her point, but the look that flashed across her friend’s face stopped her in her tracks. She didn’t have time to process what she saw before his features smoothed again. But by now she knew better than to think she was imagining it.

‘What is it?’ she asked resignedly.

‘I know that now, but they don’t. I’m serious Emma. They’ve even doubted my family’s loyalty, and it’s probably more dangerous if you’re a turncoat than if you were against them in the first place. Do you know what happens to Death Eaters that defect? The Dark Lord hunts them down personally and tortures them until they beg him to kill them.’

‘Good thing we’re not turncoats then,’ Emma replied.

‘Good thing. Oh and, congratulations on making Quidditch captain,’ Regulus said, pointing to the silver badge on her robes. ‘If you don't put me on the team, you won't even have to worry about Voldemort hunting you down. I'll do it myself.’

***
She found James and Sirius a couple of hours later to Floo back home, something that she was not looking forward to. She mentally prepared herself, trying to compartmentalise her feelings, separating herself from the ones that hurt too much. She wouldn’t let her father see how much his words hurt her - and how close they were to the truth. If she was honest with herself, the thing that really bothered her was that Sirius managed to fit seamlessly within her family, whereas she was becoming a stranger to Charles.

Over the years he and James had bonded more and more closely and the siblings was drifting apart. At least her mother still seemed somewhat understanding: they spent hours discussing different spells and their categories. Like Emma, she was fascinated with how the Dark Arts worked, and why curses were so easy to make and so hard to break, but Emma didn’t dare tell her about sometimes putting them into practice. Though she could easily cast a Shield Charm, it wasn’t the same as knowing that you could defend yourself, or knowing how the curse worked. The duel prepared by Voldemort had taught her that.

To her surprise though, neither her mother nor father mentioned the fight. In fact, they pretended it hadn’t happened at all. But sometimes Emma caught Charles looking at her in a way that seemed to throw a wrench in her heart. Why can’t he understand that it isn’t all bad? she thought angrily to herself a week later, charming her clothes to fold themselves in her trunk. She and James had figured out long ago that if their parents didn’t see them doing under-age magic, then they didn’t know about it. And she couldn’t be bothered to pack.

Instead she got out her Nimbus 1001 - an early Christmas present from her parents when they found out that both of their children had been made Quidditch captain - and started methodically taking it apart and cleaning it. Why can’t everything be as easy as Quidditch? Her father had given her one of his increasingly rare smiles when they found out the news. Quidditch seemed to be the one thing that breached the House differences. If the Gryffindor Seeker performed a Wronski Feint, then the whole Slytherin team would nod approvingly, knowing how hard it was to achieve.

‘Knock knock,’ Natalie Potter said, entering with a fresh batch of laundry. Emma hurriedly tried to get her socks to stop packing themselves, but merely succeeded in making them try to stretch from one side of the room to the other. Natalie stopped them with a flick of her wand.

‘Sometimes I think we were too lenient with you and James,’ she sighed. ‘I just found him doing the exact same thing. At least Sirius had the sense to pack yesterday: he even ironed all of his shirts by hand.’

Emma snorted. Sirius really did have an ego problem.

‘Don’t laugh Emma, I think he’s really trying.’

‘Yeah, trying to be your second child,’ Emma muttered, clipping the uneven twigs at the bottom of her broomstick.

‘That’s not fair Emma,’ her mother chided gently.

‘I know,’ she replied, but secretly thought that her father would have much preferred Sirius as a son than herself as a daughter.

‘You just make it so hard sometimes. You’re young and passionate, but I’m scared at how far you would go to make things the way you believe to be right. And then you inherited my interest for
spellcraft, and your father can’t distinguish the difference between studying curses and practicing them. Together, well...’ the older woman trailed off.

‘Don’t you think we should do anything in our power to make the world better?’ Emma asked, looking up at her mother.

‘It’s exactly when you say things like that. Promise me you’ll stay in the theory of these things. It’s dangerous, Emma,’ her mother pleaded. ‘There's a fine line between understanding Dark wizards and seeing the use in their methods.’

‘I promise,’ Emma lied.
It was the morning of their first day at Hogwarts. James had already managed to land himself a detention from swelling part a fourth-year’s head to the size of a balloon - his speciality spell. His excuse was that he wanted to see what his wart looked like when enlarged. Needless to say, Lily Evans had not been impressed, and her lecture could be heard all the way from the Slytherin table.

‘Urgh,’ Lucinda covered her ears. ‘It’s too early in the morning for this kind of shit.’

There was a murmured assent, but no one continued; Professor Flitwick was handing out their new timetables. Alecto grabbed Emma’s before she could even look at the first lesson.

‘We didn’t get any of your letters, so I don’t know what lessons you’re taking,’ she explained. ‘I need to know what times of the day I can have some girl talk and complain about stupid problems.’

Emma smiled, shaking her head. ‘You could have asked, you know.’

‘I want to hear too,’ Regulus said from the other side of the table, leaning forwards.

‘Okay, listen up people,’ Alecto scanned the timetable. ‘Our dear Potter is taking Charms, Potions, Arithmancy and Transfiguration, but also Defence Against the Dark Arts (good one Ems) and…. What? Muggle Studies? Why on earth would you continue with that crap? Third year, I could understand: hell, there was no way I was taking Care for Magical Creatures or Ancient Runes. But now... when you have so many other classes?’

A couple of heads shot up from their conversations.

‘Keep your voice down,’ Emma hissed.

‘Why should she?’ Rabastan asked loudly. ‘Our fellow Slytherins have a right to know if we have a blood-traitor within our midst.’

Regulus’s grey eyes were flat as he stared at her with what seemed to be a hint of betrayal.

‘Look, first of all I want to know if they have anything that we can’t deflect with magic,’ she said. ‘Imagine if any had guns.’

‘What’s a gun?’ asked Lucinda.

Alecto shrugged, though Emma knew she had studied them in class with her the year before. The red-head would never admit it, but she had received more than "Acceptable" in her Muggle Studies O.W.L. She only changed her mind after the Muggle, Emma thought spitefully, but kept it to herself.

‘It’s an electricity powered thing that shoots metal out of it really quickly. It’s like a Severing charm that punches holes instead,’ Emma explained, then lowered her voice. ‘Besides, if I do Muggle Studies, then who’s going to suspect me?’
‘Forward thinking,’ Regulus said, but she couldn’t tell if it was genuine or sarcastic.

‘Maybe I should sign up again,’ Alecto said thoughtfully. ‘There have been raids on our house by the Ministry. Of course they didn’t find anything, but someone tipped them off about Amycus. Yeah, I’ll go and see Slughorn about it.’

Emma shook her head in disbelief.

‘Or he just wasn’t careful enough,’ Rabastan said derisively. ‘He isn’t exactly what you would call subtle.’

‘One of these days he’s going to end up in Azkaban and I’m going to be the one to fish him out,’ Alecto sighed, rolling her eyes. ‘Anyway I’m off to find Evan, git’s probably sleeping in. Why do seventh years get so many free periods?’

With a shake of her bright red hair, she stalked from the table, scaring a few first years on her way out.

‘I guess that’s my cue to get to Potions,’ Emma sighed, regretfully eyeing a last piece of toast.

‘I have it too, we can go together,’ Regulus offered, though his plate was still half-full.

‘I’ll eat this then shall I?’ Rabastan asked, heaping the eggs onto his own plate. ‘Tell old Sluggy I have a stomach ache or something; he loves dad enough to let me off the hook. Wouldn’t do to have Prefects late to class though, run along now.’

Emma rolled her eyes at the boy’s sudden change in temperament: he could go from murderously angry to joking around in a second flat. She took a quick look at Regulus’s timetable, it was nearly identical to her own. At least she wouldn’t be on her own in Transfiguration - she knew that Helen, Lucinda and Rabastan had all received "Acceptable" in the class. Alecto was good at it, but couldn’t always be bothered to come to class. The only difference was that he was taking History of Magic instead of Arithmancy and was - of course - taking Herbology instead of Muggle Studies.

Handing it back, she looked at her friend, not for the first time wondering how he could be so calm. After his first outburst in the bookshop, he acted as though Sirius was just an acquaintance he barely knew. He had told her that Bellatrix had been teaching him Occlumency in preparation for receiving his Dark Mark, which had been hinted at coming soon, but even before that he had always managed to keep his cool. Watching him take his place in front of his potion, she envied the way everything just slid off him, untouchable.

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‘Today we’ll be starting on the Polyjuice Potion,’ Slughorn said, sweeping into class and shrugging Emma out of her thoughts, the same way he did every class.

Except today there are only about fifteen students, Emma noticed to her surprise. Sophie Parkinson was there, along with Severus Snape. They were as far from Sirius Black and her twin brother as possible, and Emma vowed to keep an eye on him. She didn’t put it past Snape to hex James while his back was turned. She also recognised Lily Evans, pointedly ignoring Snape and James, with someone Emma didn’t recognise from Ravenclaw. There were a couple of Hufflepuffs, and the rest were Ravenclaws.

‘Tell you what: to make this interesting, the one who brews the best potion gets a free sample! I have
some stock in my supply closet. Doesn’t that sounds exciting?’ Slughorn clapped his hands together eagerly. ‘Instructions are on the blackboard. You have two hours to start.’

‘I’ll get the ingredients,’ Emma muttered and Regulus nodded. In the closet she quickly found the stock and stole some. *Who knows when it'll come in handy?*

By the time the two hours were up, it was obvious that Severus Snape had won the challenge. His potion was already a dark green, bubbling away merrily while the other potions gurgled and spat out little bubbles. Even Emma had to grudgingly respect his skills as a Potioneer. However he nearly ran out of class as soon as it was over, so the “prize” fell to Lily Evans. Slughorn took out a large bottle of Polyjuice potion and made a big show in presenting it to her.

*Congratulations!* James grinned, going to hug her.

She moved back in alarm and tripped on the foot of his cauldron, the bottle going flying.

'No!' she cried, drawing her wand, but only succeeded in bursting the bottle in the air. The room was showered in thick goop.

James quickly took his own wand out and turned the potion to steam.

'There!' he said. 'Now no one can accidentally drink it.'

'Oh no,' Slughorn murmured. 'Take cover, everybody!'

Emma found herself hiding under a table with her brother.

'Smooth,' she said.

'Hey, no risk no reward, right?' he grinned.

'I'm not sure Lily would agree,' she replied, before noticing that his hair was almost shoulder-length. *How did I never see that?* 'What, did she tell you she liked long-haired guys, or something?'

James frowned. 'No she -'

'Oh dear Merlin, get away from me!' Rabastan's uncharacteristic screech interrupted him.

They poked their heads out from beneath the table. Rabastan had shoved the Hufflepuff across the room in horror, staring at his hands, which were becoming smaller and thinner. Thick yellow hair was growing from the top of his head. On the other hand, the Hufflepuff's robes were ripping as she grew bigger and stockier.

'It's happening,' Slughorn said in horror.

Emma looked over to him: he was standing in what appeared to be a huge bubble, Lily sitting on the floor next to him.

'You idiot!' she yelled on spotting James. 'What were you thinking?'

James was looking at Emma in awe. 'The steam. We must have soaked it up through our skin, and it must have taken the DNA of the person nearest to us, maybe their breath caught in the steam.'

'What?' Emma shook her head, blinking. The room was getting fuzzy. 'James, I can't really see. Your face is all blurry. What's happening?"
'Here,' he put his glasses on her face. 'I think we just got a dose of Polyjuice Potion.'

'What? How does that even happen?' she asked, but she saw that it was true. People were emerging from their hiding spots to watch the Hufflepuff-Slytherin duo and most had undergone some kind of physical change.

'I think I'm going to be sick,' the Hufflepuff looked green.

'You can use the basins used for washing ingredients!' Slughorn said cheerfully. He seemed to be rather enjoying the whole catastrophe now that it was clear that he hadn't been touched.

'Me too,' Sirius said in a strangled voice, rushing forwards.

Emma looked at her twin, who was somehow caught between both of them. The change wasn’t too shocking, though his hair was growing like a metal head’s before his face started shifting. Meanwhile Rabastan and the Hufflepuff - whose name was Hestia - had gotten past that stage. They had quickly shrugged off their shoes and robes and exchanged them, though Emma was sure that Hestia’s clothes underneath must have been four times too small. As if on cue, she rushed into the supply closet and locked herself in.

'Oh my,' Slughorn said. 'This is rather interesting.'

'Interesting is one word. Vomit-inducing is another,' Regulus said. 'And I don't mean in a literal sense.'

He blew Sirius's mane of glossy hair out of his face in annoyance. 'Do we have to attend class today?'

'Only if you don’t want extra detention Black,' Slughorn replied, but before Sirius could open his mouth he added. ‘And I’ll be sure to put them at every Quidditch match.’

'I forgot you were so short,' Sirius had returned. 'You got the better deal Reggie, you get to see what good-looking feels like.'

Regulus ignored his brother: it was odd to see his lofty look on Sirius’s features. Though as aristocratic as Regulus’s own, whereas Regulus barely showed his feelings, Sirius made it a point to exaggerate every expression on his face.

'I get to be a Prefect,' James said in a sing-song voice.

Emma had to admit that they got the better deal, considering. She and James were of a height, and when Hestia emerged wearing some very stained clothes (at which Rabastan looked in disgust), they didn't have much to exchange. Emma warned James not to take his shirt off and gave him her jumper for good measure. It was snug on her shoulders and they had to exchange skirt and trousers, but they kept their own shoes. She handed James her timetable, instructing him to try not to prank anyone. In return he told her to tell the Gryffindors that tryouts would be held that very weekend.

'You don’t lose time do you?' she asked, amazed.

'Gotta beat Slytherin after all,' he held out a hand for her robes.

'Efficient,' Slughorn said approvingly. 'Everybody exchange timetables! The Potion was administered in a small dosage, so you should be back to your old selves within eight hours. Oh and my little reward system is strictly under the radar, so I’m going to have to ask you to keep this to yourselves.'
‘He’s off his rocker!’ Rabastan exclaimed in a girly voice. ‘Using the Tongue-tying curse so that we can’t say who we really are? Did you do that on purpose Potter?’ he rounded on James-as-Emma.

‘Relax Lestrange,’ it was odd for Emma to hear her own voice. ‘Trust me, if it was up to me, I wouldn’t be the target. Anyway, we’re stuck like this, so you’d better get used to it. Luckily for you, you have a free period.’

The three Slytherins made their way down to their common room, Rabastan complaining about being a filthy Mudblood all the way. However just as Emma was about to say the password, Mulciber and Snape appeared.

‘Well, well, well,’ Snape said. ‘If it isn’t Potter and Black. Lost are you? And what’s this? Oh, a Mudblood present for us to play with. You shouldn’t have.’

‘You got no business being down here,’ Mulciber said, waving his wand around thoughtlessly. Emma kept an eye on it.

‘You don’t understand, we’re…Ah!’ Rabastan choked as his throat locked. He glared at Snape, who was intelligent enough to realise what had happened. ‘I hate you.’

‘Maybe you should have been nicer when you spilt my pumpkin juice this morning,’ Snape said snarkily. Mulciber looked confused. ‘Now get out, before I actually do hex you.’

‘Well that was idiotic,’ said Regulus, annoyed. He angrily flipped his hair out of his eyes. ‘And why can’t my bloody brother cut his hair properly?’

‘Hey Sirius,’ a Gryffindor girl with big brown eyes batted her eyelashes at him. Emma held in a laugh.

‘Uh…Hi,’ Regulus nervously ran his hand through his hair, not knowing what to do.

She smiled at him expectantly, before noticing Rabastan uncomfortably tugging at his Hufflepuff tie, his shirt buttons undone.

‘How could you?’ she rounded on him angrily. ‘I mean I had heard about your reputation, but did you really just forget about me in one night? We’ve been in the same House for years. I can’t believe you’ve already found some slut.’

Rabastan didn’t even try to protest. He wasn’t about to defend a Mudblood’s honour and he was still uncomfortably wearing his old clothes beneath his robes. Emma dug around in her back and offered him her Quidditch jumper.

‘It’s not like that…’ Regulus trailed off weakly, shooting a look at his friends. *Oops*, Emma thought, realising how bad their actions had looked.

‘Oh really? Then what’s my name Sirius?’ the girl demanded.

‘Umm…’ Regulus cast his eyes around helplessly. Rabastan and Emma looked at him with pity. ‘Katie?’

‘Not even close,’ she replied, slapping him and storming off.
‘You know what Prongs? I think I could get used to this,’ they heard Sirius using Regulus’s voice from behind them.

They turned around to face themselves. Emma blinked several times in surprise. Rabastan was busy swapping his jumpers.

‘Nice look Lestrange, but make sure to wash that jumper before you return it to my sister,’ James said, smirking. ‘She likes her clothes clean.’

‘As if I could even wash out the stain of a Mudblood,’ Rabastan retorted, before Emma could reprimand her brother. She rolled her eyes. Honestly, those two are more alike than they realise. Rabastan doesn't even mind Gryffindors...

‘Hey Ems, remember to scruff that hair up a bit,’ James mussed up her - or his - hair. ‘Wouldn’t want Evans walking by and not recognising me.’

‘Did someone mention my name?’

‘Salazar, is the whole Potions class in this courtyard?’ Regulus mentioned darkly.

‘Nice to see you too, Black,’ Lily replied coolly, before grinning smugly. ‘Actually I was just about to tell you that we have Defence Against the Dark Arts. We wouldn’t want James and Sirius to be cutting class. Besides, I’m curious to see what would happen today: I can’t wait until lunch.’

‘Lunch at the Hufflepuff table,’ Rabastan groaned. ‘I think that this witch is going to call in sick for the day.’

‘Where would you go?’ Emma asked matter-of-factly. ‘It’s not as if you could go back to the common room, and besides if a Slytherin catches you alone...’ She stopped herself, remembering that her brother was still there.

‘Oh don’t stop that sentence on my account,’ Sirius said snidely. ‘I know sweet Reggie has sensitive ears, but we know what you Slytherins do for “fun”.’

‘Says the person who hexes people at random,’ Emma started, before Regulus grabbed her arm and dragged her off to DADA.

‘C’mon,’ he said. ‘I can’t stand that git.’

***

In the DADA class there were a lot more students. It was for Gryffindors and Ravenclaws - Hufflepuffs and Slytherins having the class on a different day. Emma hurried into a seat, not realising that it was next to Lily Evans. I guess this is my chance to get to know who made my brother fall for head over heels. The teacher called for silence.

‘Today we will be starting on the famously difficult Patronus Charm. Now, Professor Flitwick and I will give complementary lessons on this, so to succeed in one is to succeed in the other. The objective of this Charm is to repel Dementors, one of the foulest beings on this Earth. There have been rumours of the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort amassing an army of them, so we felt it was in your best interests that you learnt as quickly as possible. However, as you all know, a fully corporeal Patronus is immensely difficult, even for wizards having graduated Hogwarts, so a non corporeal one will do.’
Most of the rest of the class was spent studying the theory of the Charm, but fifteen minutes before the end she had them practicing.

‘Think of a happy memory. The happiest you can. Hold it firmly in your mind. Do you all have one? Good, now repeat after me: Expecto Patronum!’

A silvery rabbit sprouted out of her wand to hop around the room before disappearing. Soon the whole classroom was filled with incantations that progressively became more and more annoyed. In the end, Lily Evans was the only one who had issued a white smoky substance out of her wand for a couple of seconds. The teacher awarded 10 points to Gryffindor.

‘Well done,’ Emma congratulated her, though refrained from asking her what her happy memory was. ‘That was really hard.’

Lily looked at her for a second in surprise: she obviously wasn’t used to James talking to her like a normal person.

‘Thanks Potter, I mean Emma,’ she replied. ‘Can I call you Emma?’

‘If it’s the only way you can differentiate James and I,’ Emma said with a laugh. She glanced back: “Sirius” had been approached by another fan girl. Lily saw the look.

‘I’m actually surprised there aren’t more girls after James,’ she admitted. ‘I mean, even I can concede that he’s good-looking, even if he is an arrogant toe-rag. Sorry.’

‘That’s okay,’ Emma replied. ‘It’s true. But James really likes you, Evans. Try not to crush his heart too much.’

Lily laughed. ‘Call me Lily. We’ve been on enough patrols together to be on first name terms. Anyway, I think it’s become a habit to ask me out, honestly.’

‘No,’ Emma said. ‘It’s not.’

And she left Lily to ponder her words.

***

In Charms class, James was struggling. So he was bright, that didn’t mean he studied every single subject over the summer. Besides, he was too busy missing Evans. Her infectious laughter, her brilliant green eyes…It may have started off as a joke, but now he knew she was the person he wanted to marry. He just had to make her realise that too. He glanced over at Sirius, who was examining his tie in disdain. Poor Padfoot, he’s been trying to go against his family’s wishes for years, and today he’s in some kind of parallel universe: what might have happened if he wasn’t so brave.

An unfortunate pug-faced girl sidled up to “Regulus”.

‘Is there something wrong with your tie?’ she asked. ‘I can fix it for you if you’d like.’

To James’s surprise, Sirius allowed her to. Then again, it was Sirius. The girl shot a worried look in James’s direction, as though she was scared that he would tell her off. James thought it would be funny to wink at her. She blushed and dropped Sirius’s tie as though she had been burned. Interesting, James thought. Obviously Emma knows this girl fancies Regulus. I wonder if she’s her
friend? If so, he was disappointed in his sister.

He had no idea how this girl had made it past OWL levels. They were doing a quick revision of all the fifth-year level spells, and so far he hadn’t seen her master a single one. A slip of paper slid itself onto James’s desk. He unfolded it: *What do you think? Should I get Reggie his first girlfriend?*

James grinned and sent it back: *I’m all for it, but I don’t think Emma would approve of their getting together… Good thing I’m Emma today.*

“Regulus” turned around with a wide Sirius-grin that was unnerving on his taciturn little brother.

‘Please don’t ever do that again,’ James said, shuddering.

He wasn’t sure he liked Regulus. He was too… cool, too distant. Though his sister seemed to have taken a shine to him. Then again, could James blame him, with the parents he had? But this girl - Sophie, he found out when Professor Flitwick reprimanded them - obviously liked this emotional Regulus. She probably thought that she was the one to get past his “mysterious” attitude. He snorted and went back to trying to silence his toad. It croaked pathetically, but it was still making noise. Next to him, Sirius had turned on a different type of charm.

‘You know I could help you with that,’ he nodded towards the pile of paper that Sophie was supposed to burn.

‘You’re so kind, but I think Flitwick would notice,’ she tried to use the spell again, but only succeeded in enlarging the paper.

‘I meant I could tutor you,’ Sirius clarified, and then lowered his voice, staring into Sophie’s eyes. ‘Privately.’

James thanked Merlin that Lily Evans seemed immune to Sirius’s charms. She was probably the only one. Even Emma seemed to have succumbed to a snog at the Yule Ball, though James had made sure that Sirius would never attempt that again. Apparently the threat of having his hair shorn off was greater than the attraction of his twin. Good.

The bell rang to mark the end of the lesson, but Flitwick called him back. ‘Miss Potter, a word?’

‘Yes Professor?’ James dragged his feet to the front desk, wondering what kind of trouble he had gotten his sister into on the first day of lessons.

‘Are you quite alright? I noticed that you had some trouble with your spells today,’ the wizened old teacher looked worried. ‘I hope you aren’t overworking yourself.’

‘Why would I be overworking myself?’ James asked, nonplussed.

‘Quidditch captain, Prefect,’ he pointed to the badges on Emma’s robes. ‘I also know that you’ve been working hard and aspire to be a Curse-breaker. I would advise you to relax for a couple of weeks. You’re exempt from the homework. It’s the first day of school, you can afford to have some fun whilst you can.’

With that he bade James farewell, a little twinkle in his eye. *So, Flitwick seems to have a soft spot for my sister, James thought with amusement. Lucky beggar, Flitwick assigned us a ton of homework.*

He then realised that he hadn’t had Charms class yet. *Maybe we’ll get less,* he thought hopefully. He didn’t know Emma wanted to become a Curse-breaker though. He realised that there was a lot he didn’t know about his twin anymore.
The rest of the day passed awkwardly for Regulus, who had learnt to perfect his imitation of Sirius quite well, but still had no idea who all of the girls were, resulting in a couple of jinxes and lots of hurt looks. Emma teased him for being a heart-breaker, but he was not amused. At lunch, Remus commented that Sirius seemed out of sorts, which he attributed to their stolen fake wands in Transfiguration, and that James was quiet, which he thought was a new way to grab Lily’s attention.

For their part, Sirius and James exchanged horrified looks at the casual way the Slytherins mocked Mudbloods. Twice, Sirius had tried to defend Muggleborns and James elbowed him. He may not like it, but if they wanted their siblings to still be alive at the end of the year, they had to pretend to go along with it. James found the perfect opportunity to fit in when Lestrange walked past as Hestia, and they had great fun hexing and jinxing him until he was sent to the hospital wing with six tentacles sprouting out of his purple face, frogs leaping out of his mouth whenever he tried to say something. James realised that maybe they had taken it too far when they saw Mulciber’s overjoyed expression.

‘Just like in fifth year!’ he said enthusiastically, shaking James’s hand until he thought his arm would fall off. *Fifth year? I really don’t know anything about Emma’s life.*

‘These people are sick,’ Sirius muttered to him as they went to find Hestia and see how she fared.

It turned out that she found them: they saw Lestrange run past them with strawberry blond hair.

‘Finally!’ Sirius fist-pumped the air. ‘Can’t wait to be rid of my smarmy little brother. I can’t believe half of these kids are scared of him, I mean have they seen what a wimp Regulus can be? Don’t they know he’s scared of drowning?’

James shook his head, but fervently agreed. Being his twin was weird, especially because she was a girl. He kept on accidentally touching his breasts when he crossed his arms and freaking himself out. Of course Sirius found it immensely funny. Plus, James didn’t know how long he could take the older Slytherins checking Emma out without hexing them. And to make things worse: no Lily.

But even after dinner they still looked like their siblings. James looked over at the Gryffindor table and caught his twin’s eye. She widened them, and pointed to the ceiling. It was already dark outside, after eight o’clock at least. Their Potions lesson had finished at 10.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, walking out of the Great Hall. A couple of minutes later, he was looking at himself. It was creepy.

‘What happened?’ Emma demanded with his voice. ‘Why isn’t the Potion wearing off? All of the others have, McKinnon came back to the Gryffindor table two hours ago. I heard her and Lily talking about it.’

‘I don’t know...’ James said. ‘We need to go and see Slughorn.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Slughorn shook his head at the four of them. ‘I forgot that the Polyjuice Potion has an odd reaction to family members. Your DNA is too similar for the returning effect to be triggered.’

‘You mean we’re stuck like this?’ Sirius squeaked.

‘Please do not make that sound out of my mouth again,’ Regulus narrowed Sirius’s eyes at his brother, who rolled his eyes.
'Okay this is not at all freaky,' Emma said. James had to agree: with the four of them together it looked like some sort of pantomime for people who knew them well.

'Please, children, don’t panic. I’ve heard of this before. All it requires is a simple Memory Potion mixed with Dittany. However, I won’t be able to procure the antidote before tomorrow.'

He closed the office door and the four of them were left staring at the panel of wood.

'What?’

'Tomorrow!'  

'But I’m a girl!’

The other three turned to Emma upon the sudden realisation that she would be sharing a dormitory with five sixteen year old boys.

'No, no, no! I won’t let you!’ James said furiously, stomping his feet. ‘Wormtail's too scared and Moony is okay but the others are pigs!’

'Hello? I’m one of the others,’ Sirius held up a hand.

'And you are a pig,’ Regulus said calmly. ‘Ask any of the girls that came up to me today. Besides, I’ll be one of the others.’

'Um, I don’t know if you noticed, but I am currently James,’ Emma said. ‘I was talking about James being in the Slytherin dorms. I know you love your Lily-flower, but you’re a sixteen year old boy and I don’t want you perving on my friends in the shower or something.’

'I won’t!’ James protested.

'Yes you will Prongs, we know you will,’ Sirius laughed.
'Nobody trusts me in this world,' James grumbled to Sirius as they walked to the dungeons, having had strict instructions on how to get to the Slytherin common room.

It had been decided that Sirius and James would go and sleep in the Prefect's bathroom, saying that Regulus and Emma had Prefect duty. When Sirius had joked that it made it sound like they were going to hook up, he was silenced by three cold stares, but James suggested that Sirius stay in the Slytherin dorms instead - an idea that everyone but Sirius liked.

'It's a hard life Prongs,' Sirius patted his shoulder. 'But don't worry, I still love you.'

'You do?' James looked at him with big puppy dog eyes.

'Okay, I can't do this when you look like your sister,' Sirius immediately withdrew his hand. 'No offense man, but it both turns me on and weirds me out.'

'Too much information Padfoot,' James shuddered. 'Why is it weird anyway? It's not like Emma and I have really different facial expressions. Not like you and your brother.'

'So firstly, that twit is not my brother,' Sirius ticked off his finger. 'And secondly, have you seen how she looks at me? I swear, even a piece of dog poo she found on her shoe would command more respect.'

'What a wonderful metaphor Padfoot,' he commented dryly. 'But why would she do that?'

'Um hello? My brother's poisoned her against me!' Sirius said in a dramatic manner. 'But seriously, maybe I shouldn't have come to yours this summer.'

'Are you kidding? My parents love you!'

'Maybe that's the problem.'

James didn't have an answer for that, especially since Sirius hadn't made his "serious" joke, so he changed the subject. 'Do you know the Slytherin password?'

'Probably "Pure-blood" or something,' Sirius muttered, still brooding.

A couple of hours later, Lestrange returned from the Hospital wing to see the two slouching in front of the alcove. Sirius had gotten himself comfortable between the two pillars, whereas James had adopted the sleep-where-you-stand method. Both started at the sudden darkness that his shadow cast on the entrance.

'Great,' Sirius said under his breath. 'Why couldn't it have been Reggie's admirer?'
'Remember, we're not us,' James whispered. 'If he suspected it was...'

'We'd have the whole Slytherin common room on us, yeah, yeah, I'm not an idiot,' Sirius said in a bored voice.

'Why are you two hanging around here?' Lestrange asked as he came nearer.

'Forgot the password,' James said with what he hoped was an innocuous shrug.

'Both of you?' he asked incredulously, a surprised grin forming on his face.

'Yeah it's very funny, now let us in,' Sirius said, rolling her eyes.

'Well someone's in a bad mood,' Lestrange raised his eyebrows. 'Locomotor Wibbly.'

*The Jelly-Legs jinx?* James bit back a laugh.

'You would be too, if you were stuck in your bloody brother's body for the day,' Sirius retorted.

'Excuse me? I was a Mudblood. On top of that, your bloody brother as you put it hexed me,' Lestrange said heatedly.

'And you just let it happen?' James feigned shock.

'A Mudblood girl against the entire Slytherin crew? You've got to be joking. I'll get back at him some other day. Now if you don't mind, I have some robes to burn.'

He strode off down the steps, Sirius and James hurrying after him. The latter couldn't resist nudging his friend and teasing him. 'Ooh, better watch your back now Lestrange is onto you.'

'Shut up,' was the answer, but Sirius chuckled all the same.

Inside the common room, the Slytherin sixth and seventh years were already doing work, whilst a group of fifth years played Exploding Snap in a corner. They looked around interestedly at the green light and black leather armchairs.

'Civilised, isn't it?' Sirius muttered. 'I was expecting skulls or at least torture chains.'

'Come on you two!' Emma's redheaded friend called them over to the fireplace. 'Anyone would think you'd never seen the common room before.'

'They couldn't remember the passwords either,' Lestrange chuckled. 'I think the fumes from Potions class Confunded them.'

'I saved you a spot Regulus,' a fourth-year called out.

'Don't tell me my brother's gay?' Sirius said in a joyful undertone to James. 'Oh I bet dear old Mum would love that: a blood-traitor blasted off the family tapestry, and the proper little son incapable of providing an heir. She'd die from the shame.'

They went and slumped on the sofa, which was surprisingly comfortable. *Act as if this was Gryffindor,* James told himself. *At least they have squishy furniture.* Another surprise to them was that the Slytherins talked of normal things. Quidditch: a question about the captaincy that James deflected easily, complaining about homework, asking each other about their OWLs and subjects they dropped, talking about Zonko's joke shop. Regulus's tag-along was Barty Crouch's son, to James's surprise. When James commented that he didn't look like his father, the kid looked at him
with shining eyes, and James thought that he might have made Emma a new friend. When Alecto
Carrow yawned and said she was going to turn in for the night, James had hardly noticed the time
fly.

'Merlin!' he said theatrically, jumping up. 'I forgot I was supposed to do the rounds tonight, show the
new fifth years how it works.'

'Bit late for that Potter,' Mulciber said. 'They left half an hour ago.'

*Perfect,* James thought, climbing the stairs to the exit. *I hope Sirius survives the night.*

'Hey Emma,' Wilkes, one of Snivellus's gang had followed her.

James pretended not to have heard him, but the Slytherin caught up with him outside the secret
entrance.

'Emma have you got a sec?' Wilkes asked. 'I was wondering. I mean I know it's early and
everything, but do you want to go to Hogsmeade with me? On the weekend when it's posted I
mean.'

'No!' James said, horrified at the thought of Emma being with one of Snivellus's cronies. Wilkes took
a step back, and James realised that he was acting like the brother. 'It's just I've got a lot of Prefect
duties, and I'm team captain - we might have tryouts or something.'

'Well maybe another time,' Wilkes started.

'No, I think I'm busy all the time. Every weekend until the end of the year. And maybe the year after
that,' James said definitely, and fled for the Prefect's bathroom.

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'So I guess we should make our way to the Gryffindor tower then,' Regulus said reluctantly.

'No way,' Emma replied. They were dawdling in the Great Hall, wondering how long it would take
for Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew to fall asleep. The excuse was that they were planning a great
prank, but Lupin had looked at Emma knowingly and mouthed: *I know it's about Lily.* 'If I'm going
to be stuck as my brother the rule breaker, then we should enjoy it as much as we can.'

'What are you saying?' Regulus asked, a hint of a smile playing on his... Sirius's... face.

'I missed your birthday,' Emma reminded him. She still felt guilty about that. She could only imagine
what had happened during the Sirius/Walburga fight. 'I thought you were on holiday with your
family or something, and that was why you never replied to my letters.'

'I replied to all of them,' Regulus protested.

'I know that now, don't I?' Emma said, rummaging in her bag before a thought struck her. 'Do you
realise that we all kept our own schoolbags? I wonder if anyone noticed.'

'Doubt it,' he made a face. 'What are you looking for?'

'Something that I haven't told anyone about,' she said enigmatically, enjoying the look on Regulus's
face. It wasn't often that he didn't know about something. 'Ah here it is!'
'A cloak?' Regulus asked dubiously. 'If you wanted a warmer one, you should have asked James when you had the chance.'

'Not just any cloak,' she said. 'Come here.'

He cautiously took a step closer and she threw the cloak over the both of them. *Merlin knows how James and Sirius can sneak around in this thing. It barely reaches his ankles!* But Regulus was more preoccupied about the nature of their dad's Hogwarts gift.

'You have an Invisibility Cloak?' he gasped. 'And you didn't tell me?'

'I was going to in fifth year, but I guess I just never got around to it. We were Prefects, and there wasn't much point. Remember when I asked you about liking secrets? Besides, it's not as if we sneak around much, do we? We just go down to the Quidditch pitch.'

The dungeons weren't too far from the Great Hall and since their first excursion down to the clearing in the Forbidden Forest, they had become adept at sneaking out into the grounds. They soon found out that no one ever surveyed the Quidditch pitch - after all, they turned a blind eye to players wanting to get in a last bit of practice before the game the next day.

'I guess you have a point,' he conceded.

She led him up to the Entrance Hall and then down to the basement level again, coming to a stop in front of a painting of a bowl of fruit.

'You brought me down here to look at pictures of food?'

She ignored him, tickling the pear until it turned into a doorknob, wrenching it open. The little entrance grew larger and larger, until it seemed like it had been human-sized all along.

'Master James! Master Sirius!' A cheerful elf came bounding up to them. 'Do you want the usual?'

Emma had no idea what the usual was. 'Actually...' she realised that she didn't know what Regulus liked. 'Regulus?'

'Banoffee pie,' Regulus grinned.

He didn't seem too surprised at the fact that the Hogwarts kitchens seemed to be run solely by house elves, maybe because Kreacher was the one to do all the cooking in the Black family household. Either way, he seemed excited to be there, examining pots and pans here and there, even going to stop a few house elves to ask them their name and tell them which foods he liked best.

Emma watched him incredulously. Though she knew he was friendly with Kreacher, she had expected his favourite food to be something fancy, like chocolate gateau, or treacle tart.

'What?' Regulus asked, noticing her stare. Sirius's face tinged red.

'I don't think I've ever seen you blush before,' Emma said, smiling. 'Unless you count the singing rose.'

'Technically you still haven't,' and in the blink of an eye Sirius was serious again. He sat down on one of the long benches. 'Urgh, these Gryffindor robes.'

'They're not that bad,' Emma sat next to him. 'It's only the tie and the crest that changes, really. Oh and the colour of the insides.'
'Yeah, but these even smell like Sirius,' Regulus said in disgust.

'What smell is that?' Emma laughed.

'Like wet dog and gunpowder.'

'What?'

He proffered a sleeve and Emma sniffed it. The worst part is that he's right, she thought.

'Odd,' she said, but by that time a huge banoffee pie had arrived. She conjured a couple of candles and lit them with her wand. 'Happy belated birthday Regulus.'

He hastily blew the candles and thanked the house elf for the forks, turning to her with Sirius's lopsided grin. 'Ready to tackle this?'

Without waiting for an answer, he started eating the dessert at a ferocious pace. It was funny how being given Sirius's appearance had made him forget about being careful with his expressions. Right now, he looked as carefree as his brother, and Emma wondered if he would have looked like that if he had been Sorted into Gryffindor. When they had finished, he sat back with a sigh.

'Best birthday I've had in a long time.'

'Really?' Emma said. 'All it took was banoffee pie?'

'All it took was to be at Hogwarts instead,' Regulus admitted. 'Let's just say that things weren't easy when Sirius left.'
Revelations

Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry for my huge absence, been busy, but here is chapter 19! Enjoy!

‘Potter!’ Someone banged on the Gryffindor common room door.

‘How rude!’ the Fat Lady could be heard saying.

‘Potter, come out right now! I have the password, damn it!’

‘You are not a Gryffindor student, Mr Black.’

Regulus’s ears pricked up at that. What was Sirius doing? He quickly finished dressing and shook the still sleeping “James”.

‘James!’ There was no reply.

Remus entered the room and threw the covers off of the sleeping boy with an expert flick. ‘James! Regulus Black is waiting for you outside the corridor, and I don’t think I’ve seen anyone so angry in my entire life.’

‘Tell him to go away,’ Emma said but sat up anyway, rubbing her eyes. ‘Why are you calling me James anyway?’

‘Come on, there’s no time for your games Prongs,’ Remus said impatiently.

It seemed to dawn on Emma that she was still James. She looked at Regulus, wondering what had happened, but he still looked like Sirius.

‘I’m coming, I’m coming,’ she grumbled as she was called for again. She put on her robes over her (James’s) pyjamas, and wandered outside of the portrait door…right into Sirius Black’s wand.

‘Whoa. Why are you pointing your wand at me so early in the morning?’

‘Come with me,’ he marched out into a different corridor for privacy, but a gaggle of students followed them. ‘How dare you? I trusted you, I trusted you! I thought you were looking after him!’

‘Who?’ Emma racked her brains. Had Fluffy eaten Sirius’s pet rat by mistake? She didn’t think Sirius was the type to keep a rat, but she knew he didn’t have an owl or a cat.

‘My brother, you idiot!’ It was unnerving to have Regulus - usually so calm - scream at her.

‘He’s fine, isn’t he? I saw him this morning: he still looks like you though.’ Emma didn’t understand.

‘I woke up this morning to what? Lestrangle congratulating me on getting the call. The call from “the Dark Lord”. I specifically told you to help him stand up to our parents, to tell him that wizards aren’t all pure-blood fanatics. I TRUSTED YOU!’ he yelled again. ‘And you betrayed me. And him. HE’LL BE KILLED BECAUSE OF YOU! And I’m going to make you pay.’

The jinx barely missed her as Emma dodged behind a pillar. ‘What the hell, Black?’ she shouted, but
the hexes kept flying, and in the end she found herself on the defensive, shouting out “Protego” every two seconds whilst trying to process what Sirius had just said.

‘Don’t you think your brother has a mind of his own?’ she yelled back between hexes, backing down a flight of stairs. ‘Or are you blaming me because he hates you so much?’ she taunted.

‘Worried that your only brother was driven away by you abandoning him?’

‘I wasn’t the one who abandoned him,’ Sirius said, but she saw the flicker of hurt and uncertainty in his eyes. ‘I wasn’t! I tried my best to make him understand!’ He sent another jinx flying, but his heart wasn’t in it.

She drew a breath to hex him back, but just then she saw herself and Sirius-Regulus arrive at the top of the staircase, pushing the crowd of students aside. This must be an odd spectacle to watch...

‘What the hell do you two think you’re doing?’ James yelled with her voice, but Sirius ignored him, focusing on his brother.

‘I can’t believe you. If I could disown you twice, then I would.’

‘What? Where is this coming from?’ Regulus was as nonplussed as Emma was. He had spent as much time as possible ignoring Sirius.

‘Don’t play dumb with me dear brother,’ Sirius sneered. ‘You’re nothing to me now, do you hear that? You’re as bad as our parents. I still hoped that you might come around, but this…This is unforgivable.’

That seemed to anger Regulus. More students gathered around, anxious to hear the row between the Black brothers.

‘You know what’s unforgivable?’ he asked in a low voice, walking down the steps until they were nearly nose to nose. ‘You running out on your family. Did you even stop to think about anyone other than yourself? Did you know that our father - the one you say is “nothing” to you - went out to search for you every night for a week before he found out you were at the Potter’s?’

‘I -’

‘Did you know that he tried to convince our mother not to blast you off the tapestry, and put your running away down to “teenage antics”? Mother had to blast a hole in his hand before she could remove you from the tapestry.’ Regulus drew nearer with a cold expression on his face and dropped his voice to nearly a whisper.

‘Our parents were invited to Bellatrix’s Death Eater ceremony this summer. She told the Dark Lord she wanted to kill you for being a traitor. Our father, the noble Orion Black, begged for mercy and was rewarded with the Cruciatux Curse from Bellatrix - his own niece. The Dark Lord soon put a stop to it, but made it clear that our father better know where his true loyalties lied. That is unforgivable, Sirius, and that is why you were right all those years ago. You're not my brother at all.’

Just then, Professor Slughorn arrived. Regulus stepped back, visibly shaking, and the students dispersed, whispering among themselves.

‘Good, you’re all here. I was worried I would have to send a student to round you up. The Potion is ready,’ he seemed to notice Regulus. ‘Mr Black, are you quite alright?’

‘Yes Professor. I’m just eager to put this behind us.’
Emma didn’t think he was only talking about the Polyjuice Potion.

After that Regulus made sure Emma couldn’t catch him alone. He swapped the Prefect patrols so that they were paired up with different people, and suddenly became very concentrated in Potions class. Slughorn was thrilled. People asked him about his fight with Sirius, praising him to his face, saying he’d cracked behind his back. Only Rabastan had figured out what was going on, and he apologised profusely for having let slip the information.

Regulus wasn’t exactly his calm self either - when Sophie confronted him about their missed study date, he ended up hexing her teeth so that they didn’t stop growing until she reached the hospital wing. After that, the rumours quietened down. As for Sirius, he couldn’t resist making snide comments whenever they crossed paths; in retaliation Emma sent him scathing looks, but Regulus simply pretended he didn’t exist. Poor James was torn, unable to decide what to do, so he ended up not saying anything at all. The twins’ relationship didn’t exist much in school anyway, but it was enough for Emma to know he would defend her if it came to a head.

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Two weeks later, she was pinning the Slytherin tryouts in the common room, having finally found a time that coincided with her busy schedule. The Hufflepuff team seemed determined to beat them out of sheer number of practices that year.

‘Listen up!’ she stood on a table. The Slytherins quietened. ‘Tryouts will be held this Saturday morning, at breakfast. All positions are open, so those having previously been on the team have to sign up too! Oh, and the first Hogsmeade weekend will be three weeks from now. That’s all.’

Murmurs broke out throughout the room. Avery had played favourites, either keeping his friends or existing Quidditch players on the field, but the problem was that both Beaters and their Keeper had left the year before. They would be starting with half a fresh team, and Emma was worried. She planned to win the Cup, but it would only be possible through a combination of good coaching and raw talent. She had purposefully put the tryouts on a Saturday morning: only those dedicated to being on the team would miss their lie-in and breakfast.

‘Bit mean, isn’t it?’ Alecto raised an eyebrow.

‘I need the best,’ Emma replied, taking out her Transfiguration homework.

‘If this is your way of trying to make up with Regulus, I think it’s pointing out the obvious that this won’t work,’ her friend said. ‘Oh come on, don’t give me that look. You two have given up on your late-night mutterings in front of the fire. Face it Ems, you’ve been replaced by someone younger and more interesting.’

Emma laughed, but in a way it was true. Regulus and Barty had become fast friends, though the latter was two years their junior. She looked over towards the other side of the room. They were engaged in an animated game of chess, with several onlookers. The only person Emma had seen to beat Regulus was Lucius Malfoy, but it seemed like the younger boy had the upper hand here.

‘Is it because of... you know... what happened between you and Sirius last year?’ Alecto asked quietly. ‘Did something happen again?’

Emma appreciated her friend's tact. 'No, nothing like that.'

And for some reason she ended up telling Alecto about her dad burning everyone's letters.
'Regulus is upset that I missed his birthday. He thinks I ignored him, and when Sirius arrived at my house, well... he wasn't pleased,' Emma finished. It was at least part of the truth.

'Who would be, with a blood-traitor for a brother who went off to his friend's house? I can't believe you slept with someone who turned out so disappointing,' Alecto sighed. 'Well, I know better than anyone how easily a mistake like that can be made.'

'I never actually slept with Sirius,' Emma said, suddenly desperate for someone to know the truth other than her brother. If anyone could understand, it was her best friend. 'I... It was easier to let people believe that than tell you what really happened.'

Alecto gave her a long look. For a minute, she seemed like she was going to ask her about it. Then she picked up Emma's homework and tossed it aside.

'Who writes a three foot essay on Conjuration anyway?' she grinned.

'There's only so much you can say on the subject,' Emma smiled thankfully in return. 'I can't get past the two foot mark.'

'Write bigger,' Alecto advised. 'Hey, do you think Professor Imago will accept “being chased by centaurs and rescued by a stray hippogriff” as a divine dream?’

Emma snorted. 'Depends on the meaning you give to it.’

'I will be betrayed by what appears to be good, and saved by what appears to be dangerous?’ Alecto spouted, waving her quill theatrically.

‘He loves that kind of philosophical stuff,’ Emma laughed. ‘I can’t believe you even kept that class.’

‘Hey, easy pass,’ the redhead scrawled something on her parchment. ‘Not all of us can sweet-talk Flitwick into giving her two homework-free weeks. How did you do that exactly?’

Emma shrugged in what she hoped to be a mysteriously superior way. In truth, it was during the Polyjuice Potion, so she had no idea. She had been taking full advantage of it though.

‘Fine, keep your secrets. You know you’re becoming a lot like Regulus nowadays,’ Alecto complained. ‘You never tell me anything anymore. I’m off to bed, coming?’

‘Nah, I’m going to plan the Quidditch plays,’ Emma said, taking up a new roll of parchment.

‘On second thought, I’m not tired. You might be good at Quidditch, but I excel at making people suffer for what they want.’
Tryouts

Chapter Notes

One of my favourite chaps!

There were more people than Emma expected. Way more people. Then she realised that a third of them were wearing red robes. She glanced up at the stands where she could just make out her twin brother. She glared at him, knowing that he would have brought binoculars.

‘Just checking out the competition, Sis!’ his magically enhanced voice came booming across the stadium.

Great, she thought. The Marauder fan club is here.

‘Anyone who is not a Slytherin and at least a second-year, clear out of the stadium!’ Emma touched her wand to her throat. Two can play at this, James.

‘Let’s start with the Chasers,’ Emma said, her magnified voice echoing around the pitch. ‘Separate yourselves into groups of three.’

There were seventeen people who wanted the position, including Lucinda and Cassandra Greengrass, who were the Chasers from the other years. Emma flew towards them, and told them to use basic manoeuvres.

‘So Lucinda, Cassandra and I will be passing each other the Quaffle from one side of the pitch to the other. Each time, the trio will have to manage to take the Quaffle from us and score before we reach the other side,’ Emma explained.

Several people were easily eliminated with this simple tactic, and eventually she had six people. She flew to hover in the middle of the stadium to watch them more closely, and made sure Lucinda and Cassandra were both on different teams. She got them to perform more complex tactics like the Finbourgh Flick: using their broomstick to hit the Quaffle into the goal, and the Dionysus Dive.

One boy tried this so enthusiastically that he was too far from his broomstick, and plummeted to the ground. Several shocked gasps were audible from the stands: by now most of the students had finished breakfast, and many Slytherins had come to see their team try-out: the only practice it was permitted to watch. Emma quickly rushed up and grabbed him, but her broom was unaccustomed to the extra weight and it was only marginally slower that they both dropped to hover a couple of feet above the ground.

‘Now listen closely people. Only an idiot would try a Dionysus Dive if they didn’t know how without the proper safety measures. This,’ she dropped the boy, ‘is a mild version of what would have happened if he had tried this on his own.’

The fourth-year landed awkwardly and crumpled as his ankle gave way beneath him.

‘Rabastan, take him to the Hospital Wing please. Don’t worry, Beater tryouts will be held last.’

The boy ignored Rabastan’s proffered hand and tried to get up himself, but leaned on the older
Slytherin as he realised his ankle was broken. Emma had expected him to shoot her a filthy look, maybe get angry, but he looked at her with an expression of awe and respect. Drawing confidence from that, she got back to business.

‘Right, Chasers you can come back down. The results will be posted in the common room this evening, so relax and take a shower: you all did well.’

*After the stick, the carrot,* she thought. It had been Alecto’s idea to only post the results later, so as to go over who would work well together, but also to increase the suspense, as well as hiding their team members for as long as possible.

‘Seekers, you’re up! This one’s simple. I release the Snitch, and after thirty seconds,’ she produced an hourglass, ‘the first one to catch it is the Seeker.’

‘Wait a minute!’ James’s magnified voice cried out. ‘Snitches are only allowed at matches!’

‘Ah but Madam Hooch agreed to let me use this one if my players used gloves,’ Emma said smugly. She was proud of that, and knew James would be cursing the fact that he hadn’t thought of it first. She distributed dragon hide gloves usually used for Herbology out to each of the potential Seekers. Luckily there were only six of them, since she only had ten pairs.

‘How did you get these?’ Regulus asked as she handed him his gloves.

“Nicked ‘em” she mouthed. It wouldn’t do to confess with the increased volume of her voice. He grinned and mounted his broom.

‘On your marks,’ Emma released the Snitch and turned the hourglass around. ‘Get set…Go!’

The six potential players zoomed into the air. A couple decided to search methodically, doing laps around the pitch. Regulus soared high over the pitch and was completely motionless for a couple of minutes. Suddenly he zoomed towards the middle hoop of the goal and it was over before the others had a chance to realise what was going on. *Never doubted it,* Emma thought with a grin as he handed her the Snitch with a smirk and stalked off to the changing rooms.

For the Keepers, Emma had one man the hoops as the others zoomed around the field. She had four Bludgers in play, having also released the replacement ones for maximum distraction. She tried to score against them by herself, whilst the other players merely flew in front and behind. A couple were injured, but she noted with admiration that Bartemius Crouch managed to catch the Quaffle whilst nursing a broken limb. She had instructed Alecto to note down every catch and every miss with details. She was good at keeping notes.

They kept at it for thirty minutes: five for each possible Keeper, and by the time it had finished Emma was exhausted. Upon landing, one girl started complaining about the fouls and injuries.

‘That’s the game,’ Emma snapped at her. ‘Deal with it.’

They trooped off to the Hospital Wing, many supported by their friends who had ran out to see if they were alright. Emma received more than a few filthy looks, but she ignored them. Noticing that at some point Rabastan had rejoined the ranks of the twenty potential Beaters, she drew the remains of her energy together. She had to act quickly. Alecto had already handed half of them bats. The other half were looking slightly nervous. She was slightly nervous herself.

‘Okay, all Beaters who have bats form a line!’ she shouted. ‘Bludgers, as you know, are enchanted only to fly towards players on broomsticks. I want you to fly out two at a time, and aim to hit the Bludger within any of the six hoops. There are four Bludgers: you have four attempts. However, the
other Bludgers will also be trying to attack you, so you must avoid that. Once you have hit the Bludger four times, you may touch down, hand over your bat and come over to stand by me.’

As predicted by Alecto, there were many more injuries than with the potential Keepers. Emma had a bowl of Murtlap Essence brought out next to her on the pitch, provided by Severus Snape the potions genius, whose hate of Gryffindors exceeded his hatred of Emma, and who had mellowed ever since he had caught her using his own hex to dangle Sirius Black from his ankle in a deserted corridor. It didn’t hurt that he had an overwhelming desire to see James fail his first year in captaincy.

Each player thanked Merlin upon seeing the bowl, and soaked the potion up with towels which they then dabbed on their injured body parts. When the last player got off his broom, there was a collective sigh of relief, and many spectators started to leave the stands.

‘So here is the catch,’ Emma said, and the players exchanged looks of fear. ‘You’ve completed part one. Part two is a bonus. You don’t have to do it, but I will be noting down who tries. Being a Beater isn’t only about knowing how to hit a ball, it’s also about being able to understand angles and trajectories. Yes, it sounds like Arithmancy, so let me make myself more clear. Those four Bludgers aren’t going to put themselves away. So I want you to attempt to catch them and put them back in the box. You can try this with teams of two, four, five, I don’t really care. Just get them in.’

As she had foreseen, nearly everyone stayed, unwilling to be called cowards by the Gryffindors, or be beaten by their teammates when they had already gotten so far. This was done on purpose. Emma had noticed that Gryffindors were more willing to take risks, so unless Slytherins stopped attempting fouls, or had an exceptionally lucky day, the chasers almost always scored more goals.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t as gruesome as she feared, and Rabastan took particular pleasure in shoving the ball into its appropriate place. She thanked them all for coming and dismissed them, once again reminding them that they would be notified as soon as she had chosen the members.

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‘Wasn’t that a bit brutal?’ James commented as Emma came out of the showers.

‘Merlin, James!’ she shrieked. ‘What if I hadn’t brought my normal clothes into the showers with me?’

‘But you always do,’ James pointed out. ‘And it’s not like I haven’t seen you in a towel before, so stop being all indignant.’

‘Curse you for being right,’ Emma grumbled. ‘Anyway, they’ll live. I had to be sure to get the best players.’

‘But still...’ James said. ‘There were a lot of broken bones on the field today.’

‘And Madame Pomfrey will have them all healed up by evening,’ Emma finished for him.

‘Sometimes you scare me, you know,’ James shook his head.

‘Is that all you came for?’ his twin asked, locking her broomstick in the shed.

‘Nah,’ James replied, leaning against the wall. ‘I put the Slytherin common room on the Map, and I wanted to know if I got it right.’
'Let’s see,’ Emma scanned the piece of parchment. ‘There’s a passage just outside our common room around here,’ she jabbed the map with a finger. ‘It leads to the lower dungeons. You’ve confused it with the one that leads to the seventh floor in the Entrance Hall. What else…Oh yeah, not exactly anything to do with this, but as a gesture of goodwill from one captain to another, I can show you where the Hufflepuff common room is.’

‘Well then as one captain to another, I’ll tell you that Madame Pomfrey has got Filch out looking for you. She can’t award detentions, but she told him you were the one responsible for the bloody trails in the corridors and he’s baying for blood,’ James grinned. ‘Pun intended.’

‘And when were you planning on telling me this?’

‘After we got to the Great Hall,’ he replied. ‘Aren’t I a nice brother?’

She raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything. After all, were the roles reversed, she would have done the same thing.

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In the Great Hall she ate ravenously, having missed all of breakfast and having flown nearly as much as the people trying out. Alecto looked on with amusement as she started on her eighth slice of chicken.

‘I was going to hand you my notes, but I think I’ll wait until your brother has stopped possessing your body,’ she joked.

Emma swallowed with difficulty. ‘Thanks for that by the way. I promise I’ll help you in Charms now.’

‘Gees thanks, my best subject,’ the redhead said sarcastically. ‘Considering I’ve been helping you all week, I think you doing my homework for a week is more fitting.’

‘The teachers would immediately recognise my writing,’ Emma pointed out. ‘I’ll do mine in advance and let you copy?’

‘Deal,’ Alecto grinned, handing over the sheet of paper.

Emma tapped Regulus on the shoulder on her way out, who quickly grabbed a handful of peppermint humbugs on his way out, popping one in his mouth. The only thing he had to say was: ‘Don’t you already let her copy your homework?’

‘Yeah, but never in Transfiguration,’ Emma replied.

‘Don’t you copy my essays in that class?’ asked Regulus.

‘I don’t copy,’ Emma replied haughtily. ‘I draw inspiration. Besides, you never let anyone copy your work, so I wanted to respect that.’

Regulus was touched, until he realised that Emma had just bargained away his work and not hers.

‘Until now,’ she added, making her way to a secluded spot near the Great Lake.

‘Right,’ she said, plonking herself down on the ground and unfolding a makeshift map of the Quidditch field. ‘I’m counting on you to help me choose our teammates.’
‘You mean I’m already on the team?’ Regulus feigned shock. ‘I thought we were only supposed to know this evening!’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Emma punched his arm. ‘Now, I had an idea...’

She took out her quill and crudely drew seven stick figures on broomsticks, enchanting them to fly in the direction she waved her wand.

‘Nice,’ Regulus sniggered. ‘Wait a minute.’ He took her quill and added a mass of squiggly hair to one of the players, and a round dot next to it. ‘That one’s you losing the Quaffle.’

‘Regulus! You’re as bad as Rabastan; can’t you see I’m trying to do this seriously?’ Emma complained.

‘Then you shouldn’t have been so bad at drawing,’ he laughed, but picked up a sheet of Alecto’s scribbles. ‘Okay, this is for Chasers. I can’t believe you dropped that guy.’

‘Neither can I, really,’ Emma admitted. It had been a spur of the moment thing.

‘Well be careful. I heard Rabastan say that all he could talk about was how he always wanted a strong, independent woman.’

‘That kid has more problems than just a broken ankle,’ Emma shook her head. ‘Maybe I should have dropped him on his head.’

‘Maybe you should have,’ Regulus said not-quite-jokingly. She looked at him, but he had was already crossing the name off the list. ‘Anyway, I think you should keep Lucinda and Cassandra.’

‘So do I, but I thought you might say I was playing favourites.’

‘It’ll be our secret.’

They laughed, and Emma scrawled their names above two of the hovering players. As an afterthought, she added Regulus’s and her own as well.

‘I think it’s fairly obvious that you’ll be on the team,’ Regulus stated.

‘I was thinking of using a bigger version of this to show the plays I want us to do,’ she replied, scratching her head with her wand. Lucinda flew into the goalpost. ‘Whoops.’

‘Just as long as you don’t do that,’ he laughed. ‘Okay, so Keepers.’

‘Aha! This is what I wanted my map for,’ Emma said excitedly.

Regulus moved the Keeper with his wand as she moved her own little character. They put down the best saves, but also the ones that were most consistent in saving the most popular ways of trying to score. In the end, as Emma had suspected, they chose Barty Crouch. Regulus added a mop of yellow hair to the Keeper and wrote the name down.

‘Why do you have to have such beautiful handwriting?’ Emma complained. ‘I’m the girl here.’

‘Mother made me re-write each of my Christmas cards until they were perfect every year,’ Regulus grimaced. ‘You should see my brother’s -’

He stopped abruptly, his face darkening. Emma hurriedly pulled out the last roll of parchment. ‘So we still have the Beaters to choose from.’
Rabastan was put on the team, if only because he was taller and broader than any of the others, and third-year Anthony Nott was chosen too. He had a surprisingly large amount of strength behind that scrawny arm of his. Emma carefully copied out all of their names in large handwriting on a separate scroll.

‘Right, that’s sorted!’ she finished with her signature. ‘Now I just need to post this.’

‘Well I’ll be off then,’ Regulus got up.

‘What? Why?’

‘You wanted me to help you with the Quidditch team, right?’ Regulus asked. ‘Well it’s done.’

‘Oh come on, Regulus. I never see you anymore.’

‘You saw me all morning!’

‘You know that’s not what I mean,’ Emma huffed, frustrated. ‘Come on, I’m not going to talk to you about that. Even an idiot could tell you don’t want to.’

‘Maybe we should ask Helen then,’ Regulus joked, but stayed where he was. ‘What do you even want to do?’

‘I don’t know…Skip stones?’ she suggested randomly, spotting a couple of flat pebbles.

‘If that’s your idea of fun, then you do need me around,’ Regulus relented. ‘But let’s go back to the castle, it’s getting chilly out here.’

*Scottish weather,* Emma grumbled to herself. * Barely five in the afternoon and we already need coats in September.*

In the end, they decided to visit the Hospital Wing. Emma hid her surprise at just how many people from the Quidditch tryouts had ended up in there: there were at least fifteen Slytherins groaning in their beds.

‘Maybe this is a bad idea,’ she muttered. They didn’t know anyone besides Barty Crouch in here. She was trying to slink discreetly back out when a hand grabbed the back of her robes.

‘And just where do you think you’re going, Miss Potter?’ Madame Pomfrey said firmly.

‘Nowhere.’

‘That’s what I thought. Never have I seen so many students with Quidditch injuries in my care at once! And for tryouts?’

‘Quidditch is a rough sport, Madame Pomfrey.’

‘Rough enough without you adding to it! I don’t want this happening again, do I make myself clear? Now be off with you!’

‘Yes, Madame Pomfrey,’ Emma replied dutifully, privately adding, *besides, there are only seven players in a Quidditch team.*
'Hey Emma, tough luck against Gryffindor. Better luck next time, hey?'

Emma looked up from the textbook she was studying. Her cousin Lou was standing there with a stack of books in her arms. She plonked them down on the table next to Emma. The others barely looked up. It wasn't uncommon for people of different Houses to study together.

'Thanks,' Emma replied. 'Though it goes to show just how atrociously we played. We caught the Snitch, but lost by over fifty points.'

'I was wondering if you could do me a favour?'

Emma waited.

'In private,' Lou added, looking at the other Slytherins.

'I was done anyway,' Lucinda said tactfully, sloping off. At a glance from Emma, Alecto, Sophie and Helen reluctantly left too, and the cousins were alone in the library.

'I need some help,' Lou swung her legs over the bench, opening several of her books.

'I need some help,' Lou swung her legs over the bench, opening several of her books.

'You're in the year above me,' Emma pointed out. 'And top of the class.'

'But I need another person to help me with this Charm. More specifically, you.'

Lou dug around in her bag and produced a miniature motorcycle. At least Emma thought it was a motorcycle. It had two large wheels and a visibly powerful motor that revved as soon as you touched its tiny handlebars. Maybe it was a bicycle. *I need to revise my Muggle Studies*, she realised with an inward groan.

'What's it for?'

'Sirius,' her French cousin said apprehensively.

'I guessed,' Emma snorted. Her cousin and Sirius had been "officially" dating since the first week of class. *So much for "just friends"*, she thought to herself, remembering their game of cat and mouse from the year before. 'What's the spell?'

'I need it to detect hidden objects,' Lou explained. 'The problem is that it's a two-man spell, and I don't know anyone else who can cast it as well as you. I want it to last.'

'Flattery won't make me agree, you know,' Emma warned her.

'What?' Lou looked dismayed. 'I thought you loved casting challenging spells.'
'Not when it comes to Sirius Black,' Emma replied darkly.

'Come on Ems, give him some slack. He got kicked out of his home.'

'First of all, he left,' Emma corrected. 'And second: he seems to have made himself pretty cozy in mine.'

'So what, you don't like sharing James? Honestly, you two can be so selfish sometimes...'

'What's that supposed to mean?' the Slytherin asked hotly.

'It means that my aunt and uncle, though very sweet, spoiled you a bit. I love you to bits, but you can be self-centred sometimes,' her cousin blushed a little, but looked resolute.

'Me? Sirius has been poisoning my dad against since the day he arrived at our house! Did you know he burnt all my letters?'

'Was it really because of Sirius? From your letters, it sounded to me like you and Uncle Charles were already not getting along,' Lou said sympathetically. 'Besides, his family all but ignored his seventeenth birthday. He's got no one, and you still have your mum, James and me.'

'Fine,' Emma conceded. 'But don't you dare say I helped. I don't want anyone to know.'

'Mum are you okay?' James asked worriedly.

They were back for the Christmas holidays and Natalie Potter had just created giant slugs in the fireplace instead of lighting it. She had been complaining of a headache all day, and had accidentally animated the doorknob when Lou had arrived earlier that afternoon, much to the latter's amusement.

'Oh,' she said yawning. 'Sorry, I'm just tired. I think I might take a nap before dinner if you kids don't mind.'

'Not at all,' Sirius replied. 'We'll take care of the Christmas decorations. I'm actually looking forward to it!'

'Thank you dears,' she said, absentmindedly patting Sirius's head. A bemused expression appeared on his face.

'Incendio!' Emma waved her wand at the fire as soon as her mother left. There was a loud hiss and several popping sounds.

'Couldn't you have vanished the slugs first?' Sirius asked derisively. 'Besides, you're not allowed to use under-age magic.'

'Never stopped you,' she muttered in retaliation. Sirius had been turning his nose up at underage magic all holiday now.

'Guys, please!' Lou said, massaging her temples. 'Can't you leave it for one night?'

They quietened, fixing baubles into place the non-magical way.

'Found them!' Charles Potter announced, coming down from the attic with several cobwebs attached to him.

'Shhh! Mum's sleeping,' James said quickly. 'We think she's got the flu or something.'
'A little Pepper-up potion should fix that up,' Charles said, checking his wizarding watch. 'Emma, Sirius, would you two run down to the village and fetch some from the apothecary? If you hurry you'll make it before closing time. James, you can give me a hand in fixing these to the wall.'

'Wouldn't Sirius have been a better option? He can do magic legally now, you know,' James said, holding a stocking into place as Charles searched for a hammer.

'Some things are nicer without magic,' Charles pronounced. 'These will be hung up with love. Besides, I wanted to talk to you about Sirius.'

'Whatever you think he did, it was probably me!' James defended Sirius immediately. 'He loves it here, don't send him away.'

'What? What are you on about James? I'm talking about this,' he produced a red stocking with a black dog holding a candy cane in its mouth sewn on. As James watched, the dog bounded around happily, chasing its tail before going back to gnaw the cane. At the top bold letters etched in gold the word SIRIUS. 'You told me dogs were his favourite animal, do you think he'll like it?'

'I think he'll love it dad,' James said quietly.

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'Have you even say one nice word to him these holidays?' James asked his twin as they brushed their teeth the next morning. Sirius was still in bed, snoring.

'Nope, and I don't plan to,' Emma replied. 'He's the one who attacked me, he can be the one to apologise.'

'You're so stubborn, you know that?'

'Get it from you, Jamesy-poo,' Emma sang.

Downstairs, her mother ushered her into the kitchen. 'Did you know Sirius turned seventeen in October?'

'Uh yeah mum. They paraded a banner with his head on it shouting "Happy Birthday Sirius" all day. It was hard to miss.'

'Did they really?' Natalie looked impressed. 'Listen, I heard that his family didn't even acknowledge his birthday this year. It seems that they were pretty serious about him not being their son anymore.'

'That's usually the case when you get disowned,' Emma said snarkily, before biting her tongue. 'His uncle Alphard gave him some money, I heard.'

'It's not quite the same though, is it?' her mother looked sad. 'I was thinking we could make a birthday breakfast this morning. Your father and I have grown quite fond of him, and we want to do something special.'

'That's a good idea,' Emma was serious. She might not like Sirius, but she didn't want him to suffer either.

'Well, I was going to ask you - since it's a special occasion - to help me make a chocolate fountain. You see I've made the cake, in the shape of a Gryffindor lion because he's so proud of not -' she
'Of not following in his family's footsteps,’ she said delicately. 'I've charmed a couple of candles to hover over the table in the shape of the number 17, and I thought we could dip the pieces of cake in the chocolate fountain instead of using icing. But when I made the fountain, I made it from my wand, so the wand is in the middle. I need you to cast the refilling Charm on it please. And Emma, let's keep this a secret.'

Emma laughed. It was so like her mother to become so animated that she didn't think things through. But as she flicked her wand over the fountain, she noticed the bags under Natalie's eyes.

'Did you drink the Pepper-up, Mum?’ she asked.

'Yes, but I think it isn't working as well as it should. Or maybe I'm working too much in my old age. In either case, I think I might take another one after breakfast.' She saw Emma's face. 'Not to worry dear, I'm sure I'll be fine.'

When Sirius walked down the stairs, he didn't understand what was happening at first. 'What's all this? Celebrating seventeen Christmases at Godric's Hollow? Bit early, isn't it?'

'No you dingbat,' James pushed him towards his seat - the one piled high with presents. 'Happy belated birthday! We're your family now! Though technically you're an adult now.'

'But my birthday was two months ago,' Sirius said, bewildered.

'But we missed it!' Charles cried. 'Now open your presents!'

'My… You shouldn't have!'

'We wanted to,' Natalie said warmly.

'You've already had mine!' James nudged him. Sirius's new motorbike was currently residing in the garage.

Sirius opened the first package, which was of course a gold watch, as was custom. He grinned and thanked the Potters profusely, fastening it on his wrist, though they all knew he already had one upstairs.

'It's always good to have a backup,' Charles explained.

The second package was a basket filled with little things: new robes, since he had grown too much; a box of sugar quills; some peppermint humbugs that suddenly reminded Emma that Regulus and Sirius were more alike than they thought; a Broomstick Servicing Kit, because he had run out of polish and several other useful items. Sirius opened the last parcel to reveal a miniature black motorcycle, which roared back and forth on his palm. He looked up at the Potter parents, clearly unsure of what to say.

'It's a variant on a Sneakerscope,' Lou said shyly. 'I didn't know how to use magic on one, so I just charmed a Muggle figurine to detect any hidden things. It'll light up and run over to the thing that's hidden. For example: James?'

James put the Invisibility Cloak on. The motorcycle changed to silver and rolled over towards James.

'I thought it'd be useful if you didn't want to be detected by using magic,’ she explained.
'I hope you didn't do all of this at home young lady,' Charles said sternly. 'You're still under-age.'

'Of course not!' Lou replied. 'I got some help from…friends at school.'

'I think it's great,' Sirius grinned widely. He went to kiss her on the cheek, but seemed to think better of it, so they awkwardly hugged.

'Where's your present, Emma?' Charles asked.

'Oh she didn't have to,' Sirius was cut off by Emma.

'I didn't get him one,' she said flatly.

She knew it would cause trouble, but she couldn't help it, seized with the same wild recklessness that had taken hold of her when announcing she was in Slytherin. Somehow, she didn't think this one would go down as well.

'Emma!' Natalie was shocked. 'Sirius is part of the family now.'

'Really it's okay,' Sirius blushed.

'It most certainly is not!' Charles thundered. 'It's his seventeenth! How could you be so mean?'

'Sorry dad, but I wasn't going to give birthday presents to a person who tried to hex me in school,' Emma replied.

'I'm sure it was only a bit of fun…'

'No, he attacked me dad. I know that this might be a bit hard to believe but…'

'Is this true?' Natalie asked Sirius.

'Well…' he shifted uncomfortably.

'Sirius!' the reprimand came to the seventeen-year-old. 'Why did you do that?'

'Because I…'

Sirius realised that the Potters wouldn't understand why he had tried to hex their daughter if he talked about his fears for Regulus. They were both looking at him worriedly, they had been so kind in taking him in…He didn't want to disappoint them. So he said something he wasn't proud of.

'She said that I was stealing her family away from her. I was just so upset, that I kind of just reacted. I'm sorry,' the apology was heartfelt. He felt bad for twisting Emma's words, especially when he knew how much they would hurt.

'Emma, is this true?' Natalie repeated her words. 'Did you really say such an awful thing to Sirius?'

'Well, yes but it wasn't…'

'That's it! I've had it with you Emma,' Charles scolded. 'I've forgiven you time and time again, but to be so selfish…'

'Dad it's not like that! He tried to hex me because…' she realised that she would never be allowed to see Regulus, or most likely any of her friends, again if she told them the truth.
'Because what? Did you or did you not say those words to Sirius?'

'I did,' Emma said angrily. 'But only because -'

'Yes, but, yes, but,' her father repeated. 'I'm tired of your excuses.'

'But if you just let me speak!'

'You speaking is what got you into this mess. Go to your rooms, all of you. Emma your mother and I will deal with you later.'

'Ems,' James started, as they were going up the stairs.

'You can't fix this, James,' she muttered, fighting back tears.

Back in Emma's room, she told Lou the whole story. She left out what Regulus had said to his brother about their father. That was private. Lou was a good audience: oohing and aahing in all of the right places, but when the tale was over, she was quiet for a while.

'I agree that he shouldn't have used that against you, especially since he threw it at you first,' she said slowly. 'But I mean, you've got to see Sirius's point of view here. He's been kicked out of his home, and the only people he could turn to were James and your parents. It's natural instinct, self preservation.'

'I don't have to do anything,' Emma replied, mouth set into a line. *Even she's turned against me now,* she thought mournfully. 'What about my point of view?'

'Come on Ems, your parents love you. This'll blow over in a couple of days, you'll see,' Lou replied confidently.

Emma wasn't so sure.

The next day, Sirius found Emma outside, throwing snowballs at the wall of the house with a petulant expression. She had been grounded and "punished as seen fit" until the end of the holidays.

'Hi,' he said.

She glanced over, then rolled up another snowball. It sailed across the garden and hit the wall with a satisfying splat.

'Look, James said I should probably apologise,' he scratched the back of his head. 'It's easy to forget that you're...'

Emma turned to look at him darkly. 'That I'm what.'

'It's not easy for you either. I just keep assuming you're the same as James.'

'Well I'm not,' she said flatly. This time the snowball hit the Wiggen tree growing next to the house. Emma dodged as the Bowtruckle threw it back. 'Is that all you had to say?'

'What did I do wrong this time?' Sirius asked heatedly.

'James is the one that made you say sorry, which by the way you haven't actually done,' Emma replied, attacking the Bowtruckle again. It had gotten used to being roped into the twins' mischief, so never did any damage.
'You're impossible,' Sirius sighed, as a stray snowball missed him by a hair's breadth. 'I know you helped Lou with my birthday present, so why even start the argument?'

'I only told her the spells,' Emma argued. 'Besides, it's your fault I'm grounded. Don't try to shift the blame.'

Just then James's head popped out of the window. 'Ems! Can you come in here for a sec?'

As she walked past Sirius, she dropped the snowball in his hand.

'Have fun with the Bowtruckle.'

The next snowball hit Sirius in the face.  

***

'What's up?' Emma asked her brother.

'This was delivered with you,' James handed her a letter and parcel. 'You're lucky that I saw the owl before dad.'

'Thanks' Emma said, unrolling the parchment.

Dear Emma,

Merry Christmas! I told Wronski to stay until you wrote back, that way I would be sure that you received it this time. I've included your Christmas present, don't open it until the day! I'll know if you didn't! I hope you're having a great holiday, mine is oddly calm now that Sirius is gone. It's almost like a proper family - well, with Dad and Kreacher in any case. I'm hoping to surprise him with a new den; he never cleans out the old one even though he keeps the house spotless. That's part of the problem actually, but seeing as he's making Christmas dinner, I've gathered together all of the things and stuffed them under my bed (I know, not very inventive) and I'll sort it out on the day. 

Rabastan is having a New Year Eve party at his house - there'll be Bellatrix, but who cares? Maybe she'll be in a good mood. Who am I kidding? - but he wants to know, and I want to know if you'll be able to come. Everyone's going to be there, but it wouldn't be the same without you. My parents say hello, they've really taken to you, though you hardly saw them at Easter. Maybe it's just because you're everything my failure of a brother was not. Wish James a happy Christmas from me too.

Write soon,

Regulus

'Who's it from?' James asked, peering over her shoulder. 'Bit sentimental for Black isn't it? Tell him I say Merry Christmas too, anyway.'

'James!' Emma reprimanded. 'Didn't your mother tell you it was rude to read other people's letters? And I wish you would stop calling him by his surname, it's weird. I call Sirius, Sirius, don't I?'

'Sorry, it's a nasty habit I picked up from my sister,' he grinned. 'Sirius is different, he's like your second brother!'

'Trust me when I say I'd prefer Regulus,' she muttered. Sirius was a topic of conversation that James
just didn't understand.

'Oooh,' James leered, immediately twisted her words. 'Maybe I should come to this party, tell him you fancy him.'

'Shit up James,' Emma pushed his face away. 'You know it's not like that.'

'Who do you fancy then?' James slumped on the sofa. 'Hope it's not that Wilkes, I made it pretty clear you weren't into him.'

'You what?' Emma asked, laughing. 'But no, definitely not Wilkes.'

'Okay, but there must be someone! I told you all about Lilyflower,' James pouted.

'That's true,' Emma conceded, neglecting to mention that he told everyone about Lilyflower. She tucked the parcel into her jacket. 'Okay if I tell you, you can't mention it to anyone! Not even Sirius - especially not Sirius!'

She motioned her twin forwards, and whispered in his ear. 'It's Severus.'

'Snivellus!' James withdrew with a look of horror. 'Why would anyone like Snivellus?'

'His long locks of greasy hair,' Sirius swooned as he came through the doorway.

'His handsomely hooked nose,' Emma rejoined. If he was going to stay, then she might as well try to not ignore him. Especially since she didn't like seeing her brother so worried.

'His sparkling personality.'

'His razor-sharp wit.'

'Everything about the ugly git,' Sirius finished with an uncertain smile at Emma.

Her own face gave nothing away. Her whole mind was screaming to get into another argument, but she knew that it wasn't worth the disappointed look on James's face.

'Fine, fine, I get it,' James threw his hands up in the air. 'But there must be someone you find attractive. Come on Ems, we're sixteen and you've never once mentioned a single boy to me.'

'Oh yes, I did mention one Bertram Aubrey to you in fourth year,' Emma corrected him, pursing her mouth at the memory. 'And as luck would have it, he came down with a case of balloon-headedness right before we were supposed to go to Hogsmeade!'

'Classic,' Sirius high-fived James.

'I always did think he was big-headed for thinking he was good enough for my sister,' James joked.

'What did he say to you? Don't worry, you go on a-head?' Sirius roared with laughter.

'Was the date too great for him to face?'

'What are you three on about?' Natalie Potter appeared in the doorway.

'Oh just talking about Bertram Aubrey's inflated ego,' James sniggered.

Their mother shook her head, but was secretly pleased. From what she had seen, Sirius was fast
'Wake up Ems! Wake up!' James was jumping on her bed. 'It's Christmas!'

'What?' Emma yawned. 'It's seven o'clock, James!' 

'But it's Christmas!' James reminded her, as if she was missing the point. 'Mum and Dad said we can't do presents until everyone's dressed and downstairs!'

Emma groaned. She had been planning on getting Charles in a good mood so he would agree to let her go to the New Year's party. Getting up this early was definitely not what she had in mind.

An hour and a half later, they were nursing cups of tea in the living room, a fire crackling merrily in the hearth. Emma privately thought that it was worth getting up so early just to see Sirius's perfect hair look as mussed up as the twins. She wondered if there was a way to discreetly take a photo to blackmail him. They had silently declared an uneasy truce again, at least at home. It was mostly thanks to Lou, who had told them both that they were being selfish, ruining Christmas, and that she would leave if they didn't sort it out.

Sirius and James had both given each other keys for new motorcycles (joint birthday and Christmas presents), which their parents weren't too happy about, but conceded once the boys promised to take Muggle driving classes. Emma had given Sirius some rock-fudge that would literally break your teeth if you tried to eat it without heating it up first, but she got James a broom compass, since he broke his old one. She had bought her parents - at their request - a large duffel bag filled with Honeydukes sweets, and they had great fun playing chocolate charades: each chocolate had a different effect on you. From James she had also received a broom compass, sometimes it was scary how alike they thought. Her parents had gotten her a new cauldron and she got some non-stick-fudge from Sirius that wasn't quite as hard as his own. She refused to feel guilty.

Suddenly she remembered Regulus's gift and made an excuse to go upstairs. Wronski was still sitting next to her unfinished letter. She fed the owl a piece of Sirius's fudge - just to make sure it wasn't cursed - and dug around in her jacket pocket for the little parcel. It was purple - her favourite colour - tied with a green ribbon. She carefully undid it, so as to keep the wrapping paper, and a little round object rolled out. A Snitch?

She turned it around in her hand. There was a little note attached.

You may be wondering why on earth I'm giving you a Snitch when you're a Chaser. The truth is, I stole it after the match. It's the first Snitch I caught for you, and every captain should remember their first win! (Though technically we lost that first match...) Actually if I'm honest, it's also an incentive for you to come to the party: if you do, bring this and you'll get the second part of the present. R.A.B.

Dear Regulus, she wrote back.

Merry Christmas!

When I got your letter, I was having a perfectly nice holiday... Until your idiot of a brother ruined it. I don't want to get into it, suffice it to say that I am now on "house-elf duty" in order to teach me about compassion. Basically, whenever anyone needs something done, I'm the one to do it. Without magic of course. Needless to say, I am currently grounded so my chances of appearing at
the party are slim. Unless…Does Rabastan know how to Apparate? His birthday was in September, so technically he could, but we haven't even started the Apparition courses yet! If he does, tell him to arrive at exactly 10 o'clock on the 31st in Godric's Hollow. There should be photos on any map. After that, he can just ask around: our house is easy to find!

Other than that, thanks for the cryptic present (note the sarcasm). I'll give you yours at the party, or at Hogwarts. I think my dad has continued the "interception of Emma's mail". James caught yours before he did (ps. he says Merry Christmas back), and your owl has been nibbling my finger every time I feed him. I think he misses you (poor bird). Glad to hear that things have calmed down in the House of Black!

See you soon

Emma
'Have fun guys!' Natalie Potter yelled down the stairs.

James, Sirius and Lou were going to Marlene McKinnon’s New Year’s party, and Emma was stuck doing the dishes.

‘Bye Cinderella,’ Sirius grinned on their way out.

‘Who the hell is Cinderella?’ Emma asked crossly. Sirius’s guilt seemed to have dissipated over the holidays, much to Emma's disgust. And I was all prepared to forgive him after that snowball fight...Well, pretend to forgive him at least.

‘Muggle fairy tale: Cinderella gets stuck cleaning the house while her stepsisters go to the ball,’ Sirius explained. ‘She’s called Cinderella because of the ash and soot that gets stuck all over her.’

‘Don’t worry Ems, she has a fairy godmother that helps her get to the ball in the end,’ Lou called. ‘Stop it, Sirius.’

‘Don’t forget to clean the fireplace Cindy,’ Sirius smirked, waving his wand and knocking over the fireplace. ‘Oops.’

‘Now would be a good time for that fairy godmother to kick Sirius’s smug ass,’ Emma muttered as James side-along Apparated with Lou.

‘You called?’ Avery appeared at the kitchen window minutes later.

Emma grinned. The ex-Slytherin was a sight for sore eyes. She rose a finger to her lips, and snuck out of the back door, wiping her soapy hands on her way out.

‘What are you doing here? I thought Rabastan was coming.’

Avery wasn’t exactly what she had pegged for a party type and he didn’t have Rabastan's humour that could lift anyone's spirit, but right now any non-Sirius who could get her out of the house was an angel in Emma's eyes.

‘Just can’t seem to keep away from you,’ he said cockily. He seemed to be in good spirits. ‘Besides, Rabastan can’t Apparate, he failed the test. Nice house, by the way. Why the need for Apparation and not Floo then?’

‘I didn’t get Sirius a birthday present, so they locked me up,’ she said in a deadpan voice.

‘Nice,’ he smirked, then went serious. ‘Wait, why are they punishing you? He’s a blood traitor. Besides, aren’t they your family, not his?’

‘Good question,’ Emma said. ‘I’ll be right back.’

‘What?’ he asked, but she had already disappeared inside.

She surveyed the mess Sirius had made, the table that still needed wiping, the mound of unwashed
pots and pans that wouldn't have space on the drying rack anyway.

‘Screw it,’ she mumbled, taking out her wand and waving the dishes and fireplace clean. Then she ran up the stairs to her parents’ room, where they were reading.

‘I’ve done the last of my chores,’ she said breathlessly.

Her mother lay down her magazine and looked up. ‘Oh?’

‘I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to for the past week and a half. Can I pleeease go out to the New Year’s party now?’ she asked.

‘Well you have been very good,’ her father smiled. ‘But I thought you weren’t even friends with Marlene? You’ve never mentioned her before.’

‘No, I’m talking about Rabastan’s.’

‘Rabastan…The Lestrange boy?’ Charles’s expression darkened. ‘I’ve heard a lot about that kid, and none of it good.’

‘And I bet you’ve heard it all from Sirius,’ she rejoined. ‘What did he say?’

‘That the Lestranges have a dark sense of humour. Learning Dark Magic, using hexes on poor students in the corridors -’

‘Oh please Dad,’ Emma said heatedly. ‘James and Sirius do that all the time, and you never say a word.’

‘But that’s different,’ Natalie said reasonably. ‘James and Sirius are just playing.’

‘How is it different? How is Rabastan hexing someone different from Sirius doing it?’

‘Because Sirius is a Gryffin-‘ her father stopped as he realised what he was saying.

‘So it’s back to this is it?’ Emma shook her head. ‘I can’t believe it. Sirius is a Gryffindor, so he must be good. Rabastan is a Slytherin so he must be evil.’ A sudden realisation dawned on her. ‘Is that why you punished me and not Sirius this holiday? I’m a Slytherin so I must be a liar?’

‘Emma, we’ve been through this already. You provoked him,’ her mother sighed.

‘He said the same thing to me before!’

‘Don’t be childish now, Emma,’ Charles warned. ‘Listen to me -

‘No you listen, Dad! Sirius hexed me because he thought I was pushing his brother to become a Death Eater. Happy now?’ she was shouting now.

‘Sirius wouldn’t do that,’ her father immediately said. There was a second of silence. ‘Was it true?’

‘The fact that you would even ask!’ Emma yelled indignantly, not caring that her sentence didn't make sense. ‘Besides, isn’t what I said true? Don’t you wish that you had Sirius as a son, and not me as a daughter? Answer honestly, Dad.’

There was another silence. ‘Of course not,’ Charles repeated, but he looked away.

‘That’s all I needed to know,’ Emma choked out, but not what I was expecting. ‘Tell me when I'm
worthy of this family again.'

She ran into her room and slammed the door, taking deep breaths as she looked around her room. She heard raised voices as she quickly threw off her jeans and socks, replacing them with party clothes. After a moment’s thought, she put her old clothes in her trunk, shoving a couple of books in too. Everything else was at Hogwarts, except…She grabbed the photo of James and herself, laughing at the camera in their school robes and broomsticks.

For a second, she sat down, staring at the photo. It was of them after they had made the tryouts. Her hair had been shoulder-length and her brother had also been trying out long hair, after Lily Evans complimenting Sirius on his hair. She traced their smiles with her finger. Everything had been much easier then. There had been no war, no factions, no sides to choose. Just her and James against the world and their parents encouraging them from the background. Even Charles hadn't seemed to mind her green robes that day, though Emma noticed that she was clutching her locket as James bounced up and down. She touched the same locket, heavy around her neck, maybe they've just forgotten for a bit. Maybe they need to be reminded of life without me.

She was just about to climb out of the window when there was a pitiful meowing. Fluffy! She had brought her cat back for the holidays.

'Don't worry Fluffs,' she stroked the cat until she purred. 'James'll bring you back to me soon. I won't leave you. This isn't goodbye.'

At least I hope not.

***

Outside, Avery was waiting impatiently, tapping a foot against the patio tiles.

‘About time!’ he noticed the trunk. ‘What the hell?’

“They…uh…they…” Emma realised that Avery was a Death Eater, and that her parents had shown that they were less than receptive to the Dark Lord’s methods. ‘Oh shit.’

‘They’re not going to help the cause are they?’ he asked in a low voice. He cast his eyes around, obviously thinking. ‘Right, any good at Occlumency?’

‘Not especially, why?’

‘I told you before that my family’s arse is on the line if yours turns out to be full of blood traitors. For now, they’re neutral, and a respectable pure-blood family. You need to keep it that way,’ he explained quickly. ‘If the Dark Lord was to find out…’

‘Right,’ Emma said, transfiguring the trunk so it would fit in her purse. No party goer would notice unless they were rootling around in there. ‘No going to the Carrows' then. Shit,’ she repeated.

‘You can’t come and stay with me either, our house is the meeting place for…you know,’ he glanced around, but no one was there. Even the house behind them was silent. ‘Is there anyone you know whose family aren’t Death Eaters, and who knows Occlumency?’

‘There’s one,’ she replied, thanking Merlin that his family would be the polar opposite of her own.

‘Emma!’ a shout came from indoors. 'Where are you?'
‘Better go!’

He pulled her next to him before she could protest, and suddenly Emma felt like she was being squeezed from all sides, unable to breathe. Everything swirled black, and when she could see again, everything was different. A wave of nausea overcame her, but she held herself very still, willing the feeling to go away. When she let go of her breath, she saw Avery giving her a calculated look.

‘Most people vomit their first time Apparating.’

‘Yeah well, I’m not most people,’ she replied slightly breathlessly, looking up at the large Victorian country house in front of her.

Now she knew why Rabastan was hosting the party: she didn’t think there was a neighbour for miles. The grounds were perfectly well-kept, but no flowers graced the grass like at the Malfoys and it lacked the homeliness of her parents’ vegetable plot and huge pond filled with water plants. Instead there were a couple of sleek black cars parked to the side, probably from the Ministry. *Maybe there’s a garden out back,* she thought, staring at the huge wrought-iron double gates and surrounding fence. There were spikes on the top, maybe to deter intruders.

‘After you,’ Avery opened a side gate she hadn’t spotted before with a short bow. Suddenly, she noticed that he was dressed very smartly. Obviously Rabastan’s party was not only for Hogwarts students.

‘Stop looking up my skirt!’ Emma said crossly.

‘Well it is very short,’ he winked, but Emma was too busy taking a closer look at where her friend lived.

The Malfoy Manor might have been white and airy, but this seemed anything but. The balconies were what drew the eye at first. They seemed to exist for every room in the house. She wondered which was Rabastan’s, whether it was in one of the turret-like sides, or one of the shuttered rooms under the chimney.

The path they walked on crunched with flint gravel under the moonlight. She imagined that was supposed to look dark and imposing, especially at night, but she found that it suited her present mood perfectly. It was easier to get angry than the alternative, but now she found herself laced with barely suppressed energy. It felt like it was taking all she had not to float adrift and besides, her parents had already proved that her best behaviour was in vain.

‘Ems! You made it!’ Rabastan yelled, coming out onto the path and shaking the frown she hadn’t realised was forming on her face. When he saw her properly, he whistled. ‘Went full out for the party did you? Hey, Reg! You gotta see this.’

He grabbed Emma’s hand and pulled her inside. She tried to pull back, but his grip was too tight. The party was in full swing, empty cups and butterbeer bottles lay everywhere, there was confetti on the floor and the stereo was on full blast. Emma glanced back towards Avery, who blew her a kiss and put his finger to his lips. *As if I needed reminding,* she thought, as Rabastan weaved his way through the mass of dancing people until he found Regulus listening to Rodolphus Lestrange.

‘Reg! Emma’s here!’ Rabastan yelled to make himself heard.

The two boys turned around. Rodolphus looked Emma up and down with a lecherous grin on the side of his face, whereas Regulus just stared at Emma and Rabastan’s intertwined hands. Emma quickly pulled away self-consciously, rubbing at her palm.
'Want to dance?' Rodolphus asked.

'I think she’ll want a drink before dancing with you,’ Regulus said coolly, motioning Emma towards the drinks table.

'What?’ Rodolphus cupped a hand around his ear, but Regulus ignored him, expertly weaving his way through the crowd to the other side of the room.

'Thanks Regulus,’ Emma said, pouring a cup of firewhisky. ‘I want to get drunk,’ she announced, downing the cup.

'I can see that,’ he said, eyebrows raised, but he didn’t ask her anything. The advantage of a friend who valued privacy. ‘James let you out dressed like that?’ He waved to her clothes.

She had a low-cut, short-skirted red dress on that hugged her figure. She had chosen it just to spite her father - though she knew he wouldn't see it, it gave her great pleasure to think he wouldn't approve.

'lt has sleeves,’ she pointed out coyly.

Regulus didn’t reply, or at least didn’t have the time to, because Alecto appeared a minute later.

‘Ems! You’re here! You’ll never guess what I have to tell you,’ she gushed. ‘Mind if I steal her Regulus? Thanks,’ she steered Emma towards the stairway, the latter grabbing the bottle of firewhisky on their way out. ‘So I have to tell you about Evan…’

Sitting on the winding stairwell, Emma listened to her friend gossip about her boyfriend, occasionally adding a comment or taking a swig of firewhisky here or there, until Rodolphus appeared again.

‘Care to dance?’ he asked Emma.

‘Why not,’ Emma said, even though he was at least six years her elder and had a wife.

She got up slightly unsteadily and followed him into the ballroom, vaguely impressed that the Lestranges had a ballroom in their house, though the manner of dancing was far from ball-like. She frowned slightly as he put his hands on her back. She took them off her. Obviously being drunk didn't remove her qualms about what Bellatrix Lestrange would think if she learnt about this.

'Don’t you have a wife?’ she asked.

'She’s not here,’ he replied, hands falling even lower.

'But her cousin is,’ Regulus said, appearing out of nowhere as usual and pulling Emma away. ‘Come on Ems.’

Emma registered the use of a nickname instead of her full name, and deduced that Regulus must be drunk too. He led her into the kitchen, where the music wasn’t as loud.

‘There’s something I have to tell you,’ she remembered, sliding onto the kitchen countertop. Maybe she should ask Regulus if she could crash at his house instead of just appearing.

‘There’s something I need to tell you too,’ Regulus said nervously. Is Regulus - Regulus Black nervous? she asked herself. Merlin, I must be more drunk than I thought. ‘But you go first.’

‘I had a fight with my parents,’ she began, absently taking out her locket and fiddling with it.
Regulus just looked at her, waiting.

‘I don’t want to get into it, but basically they said that all Slytherins are basically Death Eaters (which for them is not a good thing) and they’d rather have Sirius as their child instead of me…So…I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind…if it’s okay with your parents…well, I’m not exactly welcome back there…’

‘Emma!’ Regulus said, putting a hand on her wrist. She flinched and stopped fiddling with her locket. *Last year, when somebody held my wrist...* Shooting her a concerned look, he gently untwisted the locket’s chain, making sure he didn't touch her skin. ‘Of course you can stay. My parents love you. And,’ he took a deep breath. ‘I think I -'

‘There you are!’ Rabastan burst through the door. ‘Come on, we’re playing "never have I ever", it’ll be fun! Who knows what freaky things people get up to. And everyone’s drunk, so they won’t even lie!’

Regulus glanced at Emma before backing out of the room. ‘Sure.’

‘Seriously dude, maybe we’ll get more info out of you than a couple of sentences.’

‘Maybe,’ he smirked, and they went into the living room. *Yet another room in this endless house.*

‘But not likely.’

***

‘Whew, some game huh?’ Alecto grinned up at Emma. She could barely hold herself steady as Emma held her hair for her in one of the house's six bathrooms. *Impressive, Rab,* Emma had thought upon hearing that.

‘Come on, let’s get you some fresh air,’ she replied, casting *Scourgify* on her best friend. She had drunk for almost every question.

‘Yeah!’ Alecto punched a first in the air, and opened the toilet door.

‘Sorry,’ Emma told the girl who had been waiting for the past ten minutes. She rushed past pulling a boy into the loo after her and locked it. ‘*Number 53: Never have I ever had sex in a toilet: check,*’ she added sarcastically, but they didn't hear.

‘The stars are so pretty!’ Alecto said once they got outside. She span around, her dress flying up around her.

Emma opened her mouth to say something, but decided against it. Wasn’t she supposed to get drunk tonight? Somehow it seemed that she had sobered up. She sat on the patio steps where there were a couple of unfinished firewhisky bottles. *Why not?* She took a swig. It was quiet outside. Though there was a table outside, everyone seemed to be enjoying the music. It had started to give her a headache. She breathed in the fresh night air and tried to look at the stars Alecto was so happy about. They seemed cold and distant to her, though.

‘Hey Potter,’ Avery sat down next to her. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Babysitting,’ Emma replied flatly, motioning towards the dancing Alecto.

‘Want to be doing something more interesting?’
‘Go on,’ she said, anything to stop feeling so bored. What was the worst Alecto could do to herself, eat grass?

He got up, and proffered a hand. She took it, since her high heels were starting to ache, and they walked around to the side of the house. She was more drunk than she thought, the world started spinning as she got up. She blinked several times and wished for the high she had earlier in the evening.

‘So -’ she started before his hand appeared on her cheek. She ground her teeth, *I should take that off.* She still couldn't stand physical contact from anyone but James. Alecto understood, but she was still off mumbling to herself.

‘You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do this,’ he said, and kissed her, sliding the other hand behind her back, pulling him towards him.

*Why not?* she thought, though it initially repulsed her and deepened the kiss against her body’s wishes. Avery was the epitome of everything her parents hated. He was the stereotype of a Slytherin that she had fought so hard to be rid of. *But what's the point? May as well live up to their expectations.* It wasn't so bad, later, and they had been snogging for a couple of minutes when somebody cleared their throat.

‘Rabastan’s got the champagne out,’ Regulus said, his expression cold. Emma wondered if he still disliked Avery from the whole Malfoy Manor escapade, though it wasn't the older boy’s fault. In fact, he had helped Emma, just as he was doing now. *I need to explain things to him,* she thought, but Regulus continued. ‘It’s almost midnight.’

‘Okay cool,’ Emma said, disentangling herself from Avery. *Maybe later.* ‘Oi, Alecto!’ she called, and her friend came skipping back. ‘Feel better?’

‘Oh yeah, thanks,’ Alecto smiled, looking less dizzy.

Inside, Rabastan and Rodolphus had popped the corks, champagne spraying out all over the room. They made their way around the room, filling goblets everywhere.

*‘Sonorus!’* Rodolphus yelled, getting on top of a table. ‘Let’s start the countdown!’ Everyone cheered.

‘10...9...8...’ Emma looked around for Regulus. It was tradition for them to wish each other Happy New Year first, ever since that first year in the tent, when James had held out two red straws and two blue, saying that matching straws should kiss. Both pairs of siblings had ended up pulling the same straws, and the whole business was quietly forgotten.

‘7...6...5...’ She spotted him, locking lips with Lucinda Rosier. *Good for her,* she thought, but felt a twinge of jealousy at her stealing her best friend. They could hook up after midnight, couldn’t they?

‘4...3...2...’ ‘Got no one to kiss, Ems?’ Rabastan asked, and since she couldn’t spot Avery, Emma shrugged. He told her she was too pretty tonight to be stood up, and told her he’d be glad to do the honours. She laughed, but permitted him to draw nearer, closing her eyes.

‘1…’ Suddenly Rabastan was pushed aside. ‘Happy New Year,’ Regulus said, and without thinking Emma threw her arms around him and kissed him. For a second, he returned it, but then gently drew back.

‘You’re drunk Ems,’ Regulus said softly.
‘Happy New Year! I’m not drunk. Well maybe a little. And besides, you’re just as drunk as I am. But don’t worry, it was a thank you kiss,’ she smiled at him a bit wildly, wanting to tell him just how much she owed him for taking her in. ‘For being the best friend. Like James. Just like James.’ She frowned, thinking of her brother. *What would he think of me now?* The thought was sobering, and she remembered their kitchen conversation from earlier that night. ‘What did you want to tell me, before?’

‘Oh, nothing;’ he brushed her off. Emma opened her mouth to insist, but Lucinda appeared next to him.

‘Regulus,’ she said in a meaningful tone.

‘Make sure she doesn’t do anything she’ll regret, or James will kill me,’ Regulus told Rabastan, who saluted.

Regulus followed Lucinda up the stairs with Emma and Rabastan staring at them until they were out of sight. He had never been so... *blatant*... before.

‘Well,’ Rabastan said. ‘I don’t really fancy being impaled on the train-ride back, so I’ll just go and talk to Lucy Vane. She’s making those eyes at me, know what I mean?’ Emma laughed. *Trust Rabastan to be Rabastan.*

‘Oi, Ems!’ Alecto yelled. She looked around and the red-head patted the sofa, and Emma flopped down next to her, shaking thoughts of boys out of her mind. ‘What a night, hey? Want to start drinking and dancing all over again? What time do you have to get back?’

‘Oh you know,’ Emma replied, taking her locket out. ‘No time soon.’
So to Maddie LB: thanks for pointing that out! Turns out chapter 22 decided it was just a draft, so when I posted chapter 23 it added 22 on as n’ 24.... And so when I deleted it, it deleted your comment. I hope it all works now!

‘Emma! Emma!’

‘What?’ she asked blearily, shielding her eyes from the light.

‘We should get going,’ Regulus's face slowly came into view. ‘I told Mother I’d be back by lunch, and if you’re coming too, well…Let’s not tempt fate, okay?’

‘Oh Merlin, my head,’ Emma groaned as she sat up.

Saying that the room was a mess would be an understatement. Bottles and cups were lying around, spills were everywhere, and Emma could have sworn that there was vomit on the wall. Several people were comatose on the floor, Alecto was still lying on the sofa, an arm casually wrapped around Emma. She pushed it off gently, picking her way towards the hall. Meanwhile, Regulus looked as presentable as ever, dressed casually but smartly in a shirt and jeans. She tried to picture him with bed hair or odd socks and failed, giggling slightly as she thought of Sirius on Christmas morning and then feeling guilty about it. Then she looked in the mirror.

‘Merlin, I’m a mess,’ she lifted her eyes to the ceiling upon seeing the black smears around her eyes and cheeks.

Thankfully she hadn’t put any lipstick on, but her hair looked more like James’s than ever, i.e. a bird’s nest. She quickly checked for both earrings and her locket: all there. Her eyes were red and puffy, probably from her rude awakening, and her dress was slightly askew. As she rightened it, she realised that her feet were bare, she must have kicked off her shoes whilst dancing, but they were slightly muddy, and she had no explanation for that.

‘I think you still look beautiful,’ Regulus smiled at Emma, pulling a leaf out of her hair.

‘Is that a requirement to say to a girl with a hangover?’ she teased, and he smirked, an almost guilty look on his face. ‘There’s no way your parents are going to see me like this.’

‘Rabastan probably wouldn’t mind if you borrowed a towel,’ he suggested. ‘And there must be Pepper-up Potions somewhere.’

‘Somewhere?’ Emma snorted. ‘I know you were drunk too, there’s no way you’d be able to look so put-together if you hadn’t had one.’

‘Fine, I’ll stick some in some tea, and you can drink it on the way back,’ he said. ‘We’re getting the
train. My parents disconnected the Floo in case Sirius tried to come back and steal something.’ He shook his head in disbelief.

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After her shower, Emma felt much better. She wiped off the smudged makeup, and found a ribbon to tie her hair with, though whose she couldn't say. She rootled through her purse, but couldn’t remember how to transfigure her trunk back with her throbbing head. The only spells she could think of were *Lumos* and the Jelly-Legs Jinx. *Good going, Ems.*

‘Um, Regulus?’ she tried to quietly call down the stairs, wrapping a towel around herself. Unsurprisingly, there was no reply.

She didn’t really want to go back into the kitchen, but the bathroom was on the second floor, and she didn’t think he would hear. She sighed, and began quietly making her way down the stairs, thanking Merlin that no one would be up at 9am.

‘Well hello, Miss Potter,’ Avery smirked, opening the front door as she was on the third to last step. She cursed the fact that the Lestranges' staircase was in the hallway. ‘Not every day you get greeted by a girl in a towel.’

‘Hi,’ she said, though her heart was pounding. He looked scarier in the daylight, or maybe it was just the nakedness talking. Or the lack of drunkenness. ‘What are you doing here? I thought you left early...’

‘I have business with Rodolphus,’ he said, the smirk not leaving his face as he drew closer, stepping up onto the stair next to her. He fingered the ribbon tying her hair. Too close. ‘Cute...Very schoolgirl of you.’

‘Oh,’ she stammered intelligibly , trying to ignore their proximity. *What on earth was I thinking last night?*

‘You know, I’ve given it some thought,’ he seemed to read her mind. *Oh shit, does he know Legilimency as well as Occlumency? Impossible...* ‘I think I deserve something for keeping quiet about your….situation with your family. In their old age, who knows what would happen if they found themselves on the wrong side when the war’s over?’

‘You’re bluffing,’ she said more confidently than she felt, as he took another step nearer. *Why did I leave my wand in the bathroom? What kind of witch am I?* ‘Yours would go down too. And they haven’t done anything...’

‘Am I?’

She felt trapped, though all she needed to do was to walk down the stairs. They were surrounded by people and Regulus was fully awake only down the hall. If he tried something, she could scream, but she seemed to lose her voice as he put a hand on her arm.

‘Emma?’ Regulus's disembodied voice asked. Her eyes flickered to the kitchen door opening and he walked towards the stairs. ‘Do you want milk or - what the hell are you wearing?’ he asked, voice fading and eyes drawn downwards.

Emma’s hands flew to her chest, though the towel was doing a better job of covering her up. She would have laughed at her ability to shock her friend if Avery wasn’t standing less than a foot in
Regulus seemed to notice him for the first time. A single glance to the girl's face was all it took to make his school-mask - as Emma had dubbed it - appear on his face.

‘I should probably tell you that my cousin Bellatrix has taken a liking to Emma,’ he said coldly to the older boy.

‘I should probably tell you that I have also taken a liking to her,’ Avery smirked. This was the action of the rigorous Quidditch captain and sadistic man that they had known in his last school year. Emma wondered why he had been so different the night before. Or maybe it was me who was different. ‘And judging from last night, Potter seems to have taken a liking to me.’

But he carried on up the stairs anyway. Emma let out a shaky breath when he disappeared from view. Her breath came out in short bursts, but she tried not to let Regulus see. How was it that they managed to keep their cool? She felt distinctly un-Slytherin-like in that moment. Resourcefulness, cunning... maybe my parents were right to be disappointed in me. I'm a disgrace to my House.

‘What were you thinking?’ he asked.

‘I - I need your help with my clothes,’ she said, banishing her thoughts and blushing at how the phrasing sounded. He raised his eyebrows, but followed her up the stairs in silence, glad of the change of topic.

‘So,’ Regulus said, eyes flickering down before he made an effort to look at her face. His cheeks reddened slightly.

Emma didn’t think she’d ever seen him so embarrassed.

‘I transfigured my trunk into my purse, but I don’t think I feel up to doing any spells yet,’ she explained, as he seemed extremely interested in the purse.

‘Right,’ he drew his wand and reversed the spell. ‘I’ll just, you know, wait outside, if you need me.’

He all but fled, shutting the door behind him. Emma giggled to herself as she dressed more parent-appropriately. She already felt better clothed. Less vulnerable and more like her. More prepared. She made sure to put her most conservative jumper on, in case Avery came back down.

‘I'm decent again,’ she said, emerging from the bathroom.

‘Right,’ Regulus said, appearing to gather his wits. ‘Tea.’

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‘Flowers?’ Regulus asked, as Emma got into the taxi.

She had made him stop the taxi as they drove near a park: partly because she felt carsick, but there was another reason too. She had carefully selected a bouquet of fresh orchids for Mrs Black, since she hadn't brought a gift. Her parents' lesson on being polite, at least, hadn't fallen on deaf ears.

‘Yeah, I thought your mum would like them,’ she replied, buckling her seat belt on.

‘Grimmauld Place, please,’ Regulus told the driver, who nodded in return.

When they pulled up, Regulus pulled out some Muggle money and handed it to the driver, whose eyes widened. ‘Will you be wanting change for that?’
‘Nah, keep it,’ Regulus said distractedly, as though the Muggle was a bothersome fly.

‘How much was it?’ Emma asked interestedly.

‘No idea,’ Regulus replied, shrugging. ‘I just got it for a Galleon in Knockturn Alley.’

‘Fair enough,’ Emma squinted at the appearing house. ‘What if they don’t want me?’

‘Guess we’ll just have to wait and see. Come on.’

Emma ran her fingers through her hair one last time, making sure it was tidy, and took a deep breath. *You’ve got this,* she told herself. *If there’s one thing you’re good at, it’s talking to people. Just don’t be nervous.* But the voice in the back of her head whispered that she hadn’t managed to talk herself out of that supply closet. *It’s not like the Yule Ball.* But there could have been a repeat of the Yule Ball if Regulus hadn’t walked into the corridor...

‘Emma, what a lovely surprise!’ Orion Black said, shaking her hand in the entrance. ‘Let Kreacher get your coat for you.’

‘Thanks,’ she said shyly, giving her coat to the house-elf, who beamed at her in return.

‘Manners, Kreacher!’ Orion warned.

Kreacher bowed. ‘So good to see Mistress Emma again, so good indeed, such noble blood and such a good friend of Master Regulus. Master Regulus even says that -’

‘Here’s my coat Kreacher,’ Regulus said louder than usual, and Kreacher vanished with a crack. ‘House-elves.’

‘Walburga? Walburga dear, Emma Potter’s here,’ Orion called up the stairs.

‘Oh really?’ Regulus’s beautiful mother came gliding down the stairs. ‘Oh hello, Emma, it really is delightful to see you again.’ She embraced her and Emma’s eyes watered from the perfume. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I -’ Emma started, but Regulus surprised her by interrupting.

‘She couldn’t stand living with Sirius, Mother,’ he said quickly. ‘You know how that is...’

‘I thought I said that name was forbidden in this house,’ Orion said sharply with a glance towards his wife. ‘You know how upset your mother gets.’

‘It’s quite alright Orion,’ Walburga waved him away, before taking Emma’s hands in her own. ‘You come with me dear, you can sleep in one of the guest bedrooms on the second floor. Kreacher?’

‘How can I serve Mistress?’ Kreacher bowed until his nose scraped the floor.

‘Make up the bed in the Tulip guest bedroom would you? And take Emma’s trunk up,’ she ordered, turning to Emma. ‘Oh you poor dear, don’t worry, the Tulip room is quite airy, and it has a view of the garden, which is quite nice, isn’t it dear?’

‘Oh yes,’ Regulus said, shooting an amused look at Emma. ‘Tulip room?’ she mouthed back. He started to laugh, but smoothed his features when his mother turned around.

‘Why didn’t you tell us that Sirius was at the Potters’?’
‘I forgot,’ he said, averting his eyes.

It seemed like Regulus hadn’t given up on his brother after all. Or maybe it marked the last shred of loyalty he had towards the person he grew up with. In any case Emma sensed that this was dangerous territory. She cast around for a distraction.

‘Would you mind showing me around? I seem to have forgotten which room is which.’

‘Of course,’ Regulus jumped at the excuse and held out an arm to escort her upstairs. Emma was strongly reminded of his tale of etiquette lessons during the boat ride on their first day of school. ‘If you would.’

Upstairs, they burst into smothered giggles. The room itself was perfectly fine: a normal guest room, but true to Mrs Black the surfaces held vases of Ever-blooming tulips. The curtains were also decorated with the flowers and there was a small plaque on the door that read the room name in curled handwriting.

‘Tulip room,’ Emma sighed, wiping tears from her eyes. ‘I love your mother.’

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‘Are you ready?’ Regulus asked.

His parents were out for the evening and she had told him about her predicament with her parents and Avery. They were in the drawing room - the quietest room in the house, but also the emptiest. It was used only for Orion’s guests from the Ministry and the walls had been soundproofed for the utmost discretion. Of course, Regulus’s father locked it as a precaution, but true to his Slytherin nature the boy had found a way to circumvent this problem. The sitting room balcony wasn't too far from the drawing room's one. They couldn't have been outside for more than five minutes but Emma's cheeks had flushed pink from the cold. The drawing room was unusually warm, however, and she had flung her scarf over a piece of furniture upon entering. They now stood just far apart enough that if they stretched their arms, their fingers wouldn't quite touch. The distance was, apparently, a necessary requirement in learning Occlumency. It was also supposed to be easier standing.

‘I think so,’ Emma said, taking a slow breath and concentrating on, well, nothing. ‘Wait. How can you do Legilimency?’

‘Trick from cousin Bella,’ he smiled. ‘She’s not as mad now she has something to concentrate on. I’m not too good at it though, so if you manage it, it might still not be enough. I can teach you enough that we can get Bella to do the rest though.’

‘Okay, I’m ready.’

‘Legilimens,’ he said.

Images of her first year welled up: her father’s face falling when he realised she was in Slytherin, her mother not knowing what to say for the first time that Emma could remember, realising that when her parents said it didn’t matter it really did...

‘Stop, stop.’ she gasped, clutching her locket.

‘You need to stop that habit,’ Regulus told her. ‘It’ll show that it means something to you: which
could be seen as a weakness or a secret. I would vote for both, because usually you keep your vulnerabilities secret.’

Emma looked at him, surprised. She had never heard him speak so curtly before, but it made her realise just how analytical he could be. What else have you noticed during those silences of yours? she asked him in her head.

‘That’s the way you need to be,’ Regulus said, his tone softening. Perhaps her face had given away more than she expected. But Regulus had seen her as a first year, crying because she hadn’t gotten into the right house. It was hard to come back from that. ‘You just need to stop…caring. I’m trying to teach you.’

_I can do that_, she thought to herself. _Come on._

‘Again.’

They continued for about an hour before Regulus stopped.

‘I still haven’t managed it though!’ Emma said.

‘You’re getting frustrated, and I’m getting embarrassed about your memories of James,’ Regulus said matter-of-factly, slumping into the small settee in front of the fire, head resting in his hands.

‘Oh come on, he’s my brother,’ Emma said. ‘It’s perfectly normal for him to wander around in boxers sometimes.’

‘It’s not perfectly normal for me to have the image of you stealing his towel from him at age twelve burned into my mind.’

‘I’m going to get a sandwich,’ she said, stomping down towards the kitchen. ‘Hi Kreacher.’

Kreacher emerged from his newly made den. Den was the only word to describe it. Many colourful blankets were hung up from various hooks beneath the kitchen sink, and what looked like a basket was filled with newly-fluffed pillows - probably a Christmas present from Regulus. Strewn around it were little keepsakes and photographs, but Kreacher had closed the cupboard door before she had the chance to see what of. A spike of guilt ran through her. She never really thought of Kreacher as a person. Just as... a pet. Like Fluffy. But Kreacher was obviously much more than that. She brushed the idea away, resolving to treat Kreacher more like a person in the future.

‘Do you want a sandwich? I hope you’ve been keeping your bed clean. You know how Regulus gets about that. Kreacher?’ Kreacher had fallen to the floor.

‘Make Kreacher a sandwich? That is much below Mistress Emma’s station, Mistress would never allow it,’ he stammered.

‘You know what Kreacher? Mistress isn’t here. Hope you like peanut butter,’ and Emma shoved the sandwich into his hand. ‘Am I allowed to bring this plate upstairs?’

‘Of course Mistress Emma,’ Kreacher giggled. ‘Mistress isn’t here, and Kreacher will clean up crumbs.’

‘Thanks Kreacher.’

She proffered the food to Regulus and they sat eating in silence for a while until Emma suddenly jumped up with a muffled noise. Regulus watched her warily as she ran from the room - unlocked
from the inside - and reappeared a few minutes later with a present in her hand.

‘Here. At New Year’s I just forgot, what with everything else going on...’

‘Thanks,’ he replied, taking the object with curiosity. He opened it very carefully: peeling the Spellotape off so that it wouldn’t tear the wrapping paper. ‘Hey, isn’t this my wrapping paper?’

Emma nodded, beaming.

‘Impressive. You usually tear through it,’ a small pouch the size of his pocket fell into his lap. ‘Is this -’

‘A Mokeskin pouch,’ Emma grinned. ‘I found it in the attic one day, but I thought it suited you better. You’re so good at hiding things and keeping them close to your chest that I thought you could do it literally too.’

‘Thanks Ems,’ he leant over and hugged her with one arm. ‘This is really cool.’

‘Open it,’ she urged.

A small snake fell out and broke into five pieces. The metal looked dull and grey for the time being, but Emma knew better.

‘You can store a spell in any of the five slots and it’ll glow green,’ she explained. ‘If there are two or more -’

‘They can fit together like a jigsaw puzzle,’ Regulus finished. ‘Have you got my Snitch?’

Emma produced it from a pocket. Regulus took it from her and it separated into two in his hands to reveal the same snake. ‘Snap.’

She was too busy marvelling at the fact that the Snitch had just broken in two to say anything about the snake at first. ‘How...?’

‘Snitches have a hollow centre,’ Regulus explained. ‘I found out in second year when I stole my first Snitch and thought I had broken it when I was examining it in my dorms later that evening. I looked it up afterwards, and found out that not only do Snitches remember their first touch, but are often used to store things people don’t want found. I still can’t believe we thought of the exact same present though.’

‘I thought it’d be useful for, you know,’ she replied.

‘Fighting in the war,’ he continued. ‘Creepy.’

‘Well we’re friends for a reason, aren’t we?’ Emma nudge him.

‘Right, and one of those reasons is making sure that your non-believer family is presumed to be neutral,’ Regulus reminded her, dusting off any last crumbs and getting to his feet.

‘Yeah,’ she replied, very unenthusiastically. ‘Great.’

Empty your mind, she told herself, concentrating hard on the wall opposite.

‘Legilimens.’

She was back at the Yule Ball, she couldn’t breathe in the small closet. This is payback for them... I
can’t wait to see James’s face when his precious little sister turns up battered in the Hospital Wing. And suddenly she was trapped and he was holding her face and...

‘Protego!’

She had physically recoiled from the memory and bashed her knee against the chair she had previously pulled out. The physical pain was enough for her to regain some sense of self, but before she could even register her counter-curse she was sucked into memories again, except this time they weren’t hers:

*Regulus and Sirius playing with their broomsticks outside, Sirius making friends with a Muggle on their road, Walburga shouting at Sirius, reminding him of the filthiness of the “Mudbloods” and the importance of keeping their blood pure. “Toujours pur”! she would say. Do you know what that means? Repeat after me, toujours pur! Don’t let the House of Black down.*

Bellatrix was showing a Muggle her powers: she could already hurt people on command. The Muggle didn’t know what was happening, but knew it was the little girl doing it. Sirius screaming and screaming until their mother arrived and cast a memory charm with Regulus watching, always watching, as she took them back inside and beat Sirius until he ran to his room sobbing. Go away Regulus! but Regulus wouldn’t go away, and hugged his brother until the crying stopped.

Sirius coming back, proud to prove his difference in Gryffindor. The shouting lasting the entire night, and breakfast was as if nothing had happened. Congratulations on getting into Slytherin Regulus, his mother said, she was always calmer when they did things to make them proud, couldn’t Sirius see that?

*Are you a blood-traitor,* asked Bellatrix, and Regulus was shaking his head, no he wasn’t, he was anything but that. He had to be the perfect Slytherin, it would calm his mother down. Mudblood, he used the word for the first time in second year, but it felt like he was the dirty one as the boy ran crying to the toilets.

*Are you my brother or not?* asked Sirius angrily. *Are you going to stick up for me? She’s mental, you know it, just like our cousin. You can’t fix her. But Sirius, Regulus pleaded, if only you would agree with her, do what you like but in secret. In secret? Sirius asked in contempt. Just like we’re secret brothers? You’ll only talk to me when no one’s around, you’ll only come into my room after the damage is done, you’re so scared of what people will think. We’re not secret brothers, we’re not brothers at all.* It was third year, and Regulus spent an entire night skipping stones at the lake, not doing anything just skipping stones, and he hid his feelings more than ever because they weren’t helping, they weren’t helping anyone and it just HURT so much.

*Kreacher was always there though: Regulus didn’t have to explain to Kreacher because Kreacher already knew. He was the only one who knew Regulus, the real Regulus and not the list of achievements he presented to his family. Master Sirius is just such a handful, Kreacher would say, there’s no time, no time for Master Regulus but they were all proud, very proud, but Regulus hated that word so much.*

Fifth year in the summer and the fighting was worse than ever. Regulus was talking about the Dark Lord and what he knew of it, and his parents were proud, so proud, and Walburga didn’t even care about the Muggle posters that Sirius had on his walls, but Sirius had to ruin it by defending the Mudbloods and it just went so far, too far, and suddenly Sirius was upstairs, packing his things and
Regulus was watching, pleading him not to go and leave him by himself. Sirius just looked at him and said what he had in their third year: we’re not brothers. A brother would help me, defend me, you’ve never been my brother. Regulus wanted to scream, didn’t Sirius see? He was doing it all for Sirius, the good marks, the prefect badge, it deflected attention. At first he didn’t even believe in the Dark Lord’s policies, just wanted to make their parents happy enough to leave Sirius alone with his love of Muggles and his freedom and Regulus was so careful, so controlled for him, but now he was so used to it that he just stared in silence.

Sirius was out of the door and never coming back, and Walburga was shouting, screaming so loudly that Regulus was scared that the neighbours would hear and the Ministry would come and find out, but she calmed down and called him into the drawing room to see her blast his brother’s name off of the family tapestry No! he answered back for the first time. He’s not my son, do you hear me? He’s not your brother, I have only one son. For the first time, Orion spoke against her and went out searching for his son, his favourite son, Regulus secretly thought, but he was too scared to say it out loud. Scared that it was true.

Two days later Kreacher brought him banoffee pie and vanilla ice-cream and they spent the day by the creek at the bottom of the garden, and Kreacher was the only one who remembered his birthday, even though he was sixteen and his brother wasn’t there anymore, but his brother was there more than ever, and he made the house so stuffy that Regulus sometimes felt like he couldn’t breathe...

‘Get away from me!’ Regulus shouted, bringing Emma back to the present.

She stumbled back, shocked. Regulus had dropped to his knees, but immediately turned around, his back to her. His entire body seemed to shiver and Emma was scared that he was going to be sick.

‘Don’t look at me,’ he said eventually in a shaky voice, breath coming in shuddering gasps.

‘Alright, alright, I won’t,’ Emma said calmly, shutting her eyes.

She shuffled forwards, groping blindly in front of her. When her hand touched cloth, she immediately pulled Regulus into a hug, soothing his hair the way James would if it were her, and... the way Regulus would for Sirius. Every inch of her was screaming at her to get away, but she ignored it. This is Regulus, she told herself. And he needs me. Her hands trembled slightly, but she didn't stop.

‘I don’t want you to see me like this,’ Regulus tried to push her away, adding in a quiet voice. ‘It’s embarrassing. Let me just...’

He got up and she opened her eyes. He was avoiding her gaze, shuffling out of the room as fast as he could, but the memories seemed to have winded him. She should probably give him some privacy, let him pull himself together and find a way to suppress the rest of the memories. But Emma thought he had had enough privacy in his life.

‘Kreacher?’ she asked, noticing the house-elf cowering in a corner.

‘Y-yes Mistress Emma?’ Kreacher croaked in a small voice.

He was huddling up as far as he could in his pillowcase, but she could see the big frightened blue eyes peering out. Her heart went out to him, never being able to do anything except watch his family tear itself apart.
'It’ll be okay,’ she patted his head.

‘But Master said -’

‘I know what he said,’ she replied, scanning the room.

Her scarf lay on one of the chairs and she grabbed it, tying it around her eyes, feeling the heavy cloth obstructing all light and almost all of her nose. She adjusted it as she uncomfortably breathed stale air. The scarf was covering her ears slightly, and it felt eerie to hear the rush of blood and muted sound. Her balance was off, but that wouldn’t be important right now.

‘There, Kreacher,’ she said. ‘Will you help me find Regulus now?’

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‘Regulus?’ she asked uncertainly. She thought she was in his room. Kreacher had led her up three flights of stairs and turned right to the end of the corridor. That was where his room had been before, in any case. ‘I can’t see you anymore.’

‘You’ve already seen more than I would ever want you to,’ he said tonelessly, but there was a catch at the end of his sentence.

There was a tug on her dress, and Kreacher whispered. ‘He’s sitting on his bed.’

He disappeared with a large crack, fearing that he had already overstepped his boundaries. Emma tried to make her way to the middle of the room, but it was a lot harder with the scarf muffling her senses.

‘Oof,’ she said as she toppled over Regulus’s bed, narrowly missing falling off it altogether.

He let out what could pass for a strangled laugh.

‘It’s okay for it to be about you for once in a while Reg,’ she said, trying not to let the worry seep into her voice. The truth was that she had never seen him this way before.

He snorted in disdain, and she shuffled closer, searching for his hand with her own.

‘It’s not only Sirius who has been hurt,’ she continued. ‘You can stop feeling guilty.’

‘Stop it,’ he said, and his voice was shaking. He tried to get it under control, to no avail. ‘I - Don’t do that.’

‘What?’

‘Read me like a book. It’s disconcerting.’

‘Well at least it’s the other way around for a change,’ Emma laughed, then felt a lump in her throat. ‘Regulus, I’m so sorry.’

‘Not like you did anything,’ he muttered.

‘I didn’t forget about you,’ she said simply, and wanted to smack herself. You’re reminding him that his family did. He doesn’t want to talk about it Ems, he just wants to pretend it didn’t happen. All of it.
‘You know,’ she said idly. ‘Whenever James and I got into a fight when I was little, my mother would put us to bed and read a story from Beedle the Bard. It would put us to sleep, and in the morning we would have already forgotten what we were upset about.’

‘Well, you were lucky,’ came the reply, and he pulled his hand out of her grasp.

‘Maybe you just need a fairytale,’ she said. ‘Go on, humour me,’ and bullied him into letting her sit next to him. She realised that he was shivering, and wrapped an arm around him.

‘Can’t read if you can’t see,’ he huffed, but allowed the contact. ‘Besides, we don’t have the book.’

‘I’ll tell it from memory.’

‘Go on then,’ and Emma thought she could hear a slight smile in his voice.

‘High on a hill in an enchanted garden, enclosed by tall walls and protected by strong magic flowed the Fountain of Fair Fortune. Once a year, between the hours of sunrise and sunset on the longest day, a single unfortunate was given the chance to fight their way to the Fountain, bathe in its waters and receive Fair Fortune for evermore....’

It was late by the time she finished the tale, and Regulus was silent for such a long while that she was sure that he was asleep. Sure enough, when she took her scarf off his eyes were closed. She decided to let him sleep in peace and had just disentangled herself when she felt a hand on her arm.

‘Stay,’ he half-mumbled, and Emma was sure that he wasn’t talking to her.
‘Regulus darling, have you finished packing? Just because we live in London doesn’t mean that there might not be traffic on the way to the Platform! Regulus…Oh my!’ Walburga Black’s hand flew to her mouth.

Emma’s eyes fluttered open in an unfamiliar place. Did I oversleep? Where am - her thoughts trailed off as she saw Regulus’s mother in the doorway. Then she realised that she was curled up next to her son. On his bed. In his room.

She immediately sat up, pushing the boy away from her. At least she was still fully dressed, but the damage had probably been done.

‘It’s not what it looks like Mrs Black -’ she started.

‘Oh, call me Walburga, dear,’ she said, breaking into a stunning smile that lit up her face. ‘After all, you’ll be part of the family soon!’

‘I will?’ Emma asked uncertainly, frowning a little. This was not the kind of reaction she was expecting.

Regulus rolled over and yawned, rubbing his eyes. He slowly seemed to become aware of the situation, but didn’t seemed too bothered. In fact, he seemed almost too relaxed for Emma’s taste. Before he could open his mouth, his mother noticed he was awake and started exclaiming, a faraway look in her eyes.

‘Oh Regulus, you’ve gone about this all wrong, but I forgive you. What a match! The Potters’ blood is almost as pure as the Malfoys’. Oh I just can’t wait to start planning the wedding!’ she clasped her hands together in excitement.

‘The wedding?’ Emma repeated stupidly, her brain trying to work in overtime.

‘It all makes sense now, bringing you home to live with us “for a while”, blaming it on that boy…’

‘Relax Mum, we were just up late studying,’ Regulus cut through his mother’s speech in a bored tone. ‘We must have fallen asleep whilst practicing Transfiguration. You’re supposed to change your partner’s eyebrow colour.’

Emma looked at him. No one would think that he was lying from the casual way he picked his Transfiguration book off of the floor. Sometimes he outdid even himself. He must have only just noticed it. He raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

‘Yeah, we’re not very good at it,’ she said, realising that she needed to add some kind of contribution.

‘Oh,’ Walburga looked put out, before putting on a bright smile. ‘Well in that case Emma would you mind giving my son and I a little privacy? Kreacher has made fried eggs and bacon.’

Emma was grateful for the excuse, but couldn’t help a shudder when out of sight. It was uncanny
how Walburga could seem like such a normal person when Emma had seen how she acted when no one was around. How could someone treat their own children that way? Walburga had never seemed mean to her - in fact, she had never even seen her raise her temper other than that one time at the dinner table. But even then, it seemed more like the outburst of a brewing argument... She resolved not to let her dislike show though, for Regulus’s sake as well as her own. Besides, who was she to judge?

*She took me in when my own parents didn’t want me. How can I ever repay that?*

***

At the station she saw James and Sirius first, and quickly steered Regulus in the opposite direction. Walburga had dropped them off at the station before going off to do…whatever the Black mother did. She was grateful Regulus's parents weren’t present actually. It would be much easier to play off the “oh, I just spent a couple of days at his house”. Though she was beginning to suspect that keeping secrets ran in the family. No wonder Regulus kept his mouth shut so often.

The back of her neck prickled, as if she was being watched, jerking her from her thoughts. Sure enough, when she turned around she saw Avery’s eyes boring into her. *What's he doing here?* He didn't have any younger siblings that she knew of. He jerked his head in a “come here” movement. She slightly frowned and moved forwards, blocking his view with Regulus’s body. *As if I'd be stupid enough to do that.*

‘I can’t believe my mother,’ Regulus was saying. ‘It’s only quarter to eleven.’

Emma nodded sympathetically and peeked over his shoulder. His own thoughts must have been full, because he didn’t notice her inattention. Avery was still staring, but with an exasperated expression. He rolled his eyes at her, looking at her with a look reserved for terrified first years. It pricked her curiosity as well as shaming her for showing her fear.

‘Wait here for a sec,’ she said to Regulus.

Without waiting for a response, she walked over to the older boy, now hiding in a pillar’s shadow.

‘What do you want?’ she asked, glancing around, crossing her arms over her chest.

‘Relax Potter, strictly business today. Black’s too conspicuous to talk to,’ he replied, staring to where a group of giggling girls were talking animatedly, their eyes trained on the Slytherin. Regulus appeared not to notice. ‘But this information is for the both of you. Next Hogsmeade weekend. The Dark Lord wants to test you.’

Without further ado, he turned on the spot and vanished. Emma was left staring at the brick wall behind him, a thousand "test" ideas running through her mind. Before she could really think about it, she heard a voice calling her name.

‘Hey Ems!’ Rabastan was waving out of the corner of her eye. ‘We’ve got a spare compartment! Come on in!’

Spotting her parents entering the station with James, she high-tailed it to the train, literally jumping into the compartment after Rabastan and slamming the compartment door shut, effectively cutting off any conversation going on inside,

‘So…What should we do?’ Rabastan asked after an awkward silence.
The three of them were in a compartment with Evan and Lucinda Rosier. Emma didn’t even know why Evan was there since he was a seventh year. Her guess was boredom and hoping to see Alecto before having to go to the Prefect’s carriage. *Fat chance of that*, she thought. Alecto was always on the train with seconds to spare.

“How about thinking of ways to murder my brother?” Regulus said lightly, looking out of the window.

Emma leaned over, hoping to see James, maybe catch his eye without her parents noticing. She missed him already and if she was really honest with herself, she wanted to know how her parents had reacted to her departure. She felt a stab of sadness, *they didn’t even bother to send me a letter to ask where I was, or if I was okay*. Immediately, she chided herself. Why should she care? They obviously didn’t. But she was sure that James did.

She craned her head around a little more. Regulus made a face and pushed her hair out of his face, but she ignored him, scanning the crowds for the tell-tale mop of unruly black hair. She supposed that he had already spotted Lily Evans somewhere. There was a sudden cough. She looked around to see Lucinda glaring at her. Emma raised her eyebrows, *what?*

“I hate you sometimes, Emma!” she burst out, running from the compartment.

Rabastan just shrugged at her. Evan didn’t look like he cared in the slightest. Emma sighed and slid the door open. Lucinda had always been emotional, but she had seemed fine three days ago at the party.

“James!” she exclaimed joyfully as she searched the compartments. As usual he was with his group of three other Gryffindors. Lou was probably off with her Ravenclaw buddies.

*He raised a hand in greeting and she flew over to hug him.*

“Can’t…breathe…Ems,” he gasped, but Emma just hugged him tighter. Remus laughed, and James put his arms around his sister. “It hasn’t even been a week you know,” he chided gently.

Or that’s what he would have said, if she dared hug him in front of his friends. Instead she just stood there awkwardly in the doorway, willing James to come out into the corridor. The three Gryffindors stared at her - she had obviously interrupted something.

“I’m sorry, is this a bad time?” said a familiar voice.

“Um.” James said, torn between his sister and the girl he loved.

“Not at all Lily,” Emma smiled brightly, choosing for him. Something seemed to squeeze her heart, and she suppressed all of her questions. She would find her brother later. “He’s all yours.”

“But I don’t want him to be -‘ Lily stuttered as James turned crimson.

“What James, no declaration of undying love?” Sirius teased.

“I think he likes you,” Emma whispered as she left Lily in the doorway.

She found Lucinda in the loo. Well, it was lucky she did, since she cast *Alohamora* on the lock. Who knew what could have been lurking behind that door?

“How did you know it was me?” the blonde girl sniffled.
‘Well the crying’s kind of a giveaway…’

‘It’s not funny!’ Lucinda cried, looking like she was going to burst into tears again.

Emma sighed and pulled the toilet door closed, locking them in. She perched on the sink opposite and motioned the toilet seat. ‘What’s this about?’

‘Stop doing that,’ the other girl complained, but sat down all the same.

‘Doing what?’

‘Just…Merlin, do you have to be so put-together? At least give us other girls a chance.’

Lucinda pouted, but it seemed like she had gotten what she wanted off her chest.

‘So let me get this straight,’ Emma said slowly. ‘You want me to have a breakdown so…Actually no, I don’t get it.’

There was a pause in which Emma thought about all the times she had cried in front of Regulus or James, precisely to keep up her "tough" act. Appearance was everything, as she had learned in that fifth-year closet. It was better to hide any vulnerabilities, even with Lucinda and Alecto: her best friends.

‘I wish I was like you,’ Lucinda sighed. ‘Everyone respects you, and the younger Slytherins look up to you.’

_I worked hard for that image_, Emma thought with an inward smile. _Now I know it's working._ Maybe she would be able to influence the younger Slytherins into joining their cause. However, she had never thought that Lucinda would be bothered.

‘But everyone likes you,’ Emma pointed out, not sure where this was going. ‘And you’re always the life of the party.’

Lucinda's parents worked in exports and imports with Honeydukes and the Bertie Bott's Beans industry, and Emma had always privately thought that Lucinda's bubbly persona came from eating too many sweets when she was young. She was easily one of the most popular girls at school, with a mostly carefree attitude and a knack for fun ideas. Even the teachers smiled when she breezed into the classroom, with the notable exception of Professor McGonagall, who never thought the Slytherin put enough effort into her classes. One of the reasons why Lucinda decided to drop it.

‘But I’ll never be good enough for him,’ Lucinda said sadly, as if it were the end of the world.

‘For who? Sirius? Let me tell you, you are worth eight times that slime ball -’ Emma started ranting.

‘Merlin, no! I’m talking about Regulus!’ Lucinda burst out.

‘Regulus?’ Emma asked. _Does she think that he looks up to me of all people? Oh man, if only she knew…Regulus's respect for me is probably at 0% right now. Besides, he can't even look at me after last night. That was a serious invasion of privacy..._

‘Isn’t he just wonderful?’ Lucinda had a dreamy look to her.

‘You could say that,’ Emma replied, but the other girl carried on.

‘You know, I always knew he was good-looking. But it’s the way he is, so calm, so sure of himself. Nothing can touch him, you know? That night we spent together... I just lay in his arms thinking that
this was the safest I could ever be. Then he’s a pure-blood, and oh so intelligent…’

‘Wait, you…’ Emma trailed off.

‘Oh, I’m not supposed to say!’ Lucinda giggled. ‘But you’ll keep it a secret, won’t you? He says that it’s more special if it’s between just the two of us. The secret makes it all the sweeter.’

‘I bet he did,’ Emma said, thinking of the girls she had seen sneaking out of the Prefect’s bathroom once in a while. At least he kept it out of the broom cupboards.

‘And then I woke up and they said he went home with you!’ Lucinda gave her a long look, and Emma realised that it was no accident that she had told her about New Year’s. She bit back a smile. This was safer territory. This was the gossipy side of Lucinda that tried to find out what happened between who and tried to find a way to use the information.

‘I thought it was just a joke, but then this morning you were all over him and -’

‘Excuse me?’ Emma frowned. This morning he was so cold I could have poured water onto his head and broken icicles off of his nose.

‘Oh come on, “leaning over to look out of the window”? That’s the oldest trick in the book!’ Lucinda tossed her hair back.

At least she’s feeling better, Emma thought sardonically.

‘What I just want to know is how do you do it?’ Lucinda asked. She had wiped away her tearstains and was looking slightly defiant

‘Do what?’ Emma was getting frustrated. What is the point of all this?

‘Get his attention,’ she said impatiently. ‘You say you’re friends and you’re always together, but most of the time you just sit there in silence. Whenever you’re not there, he asks about you.’

‘Like you said, we’re friends,’ Emma said.

‘I don’t believe you,’ Lucinda said immediately, and then sighed dejectedly. ‘You act as if you can do anything, and people just let you. It’s not fair, playing around with people’s feelings.’

‘Life’s a game Lucinda. You just need to learn the rules.’

‘Do you make it a hobby to be so cryptic all the time?’

Emma smiled and smoothed her friend’s curly locks.

‘Look, despite you saying such horrible things today, I like you Lucinda,’ she said. ‘That’s why I’ll give you a clue. If you show your hand to everybody, then you’ll lose no matter what the cards are.’
Emma walked out of Arithmancy class two weeks later, deep in thought. Though she didn't even like to admit it to herself, she was upset. A letter had arrived from her parents, with only two lines of her mother's hurried handwriting: *Dear Emma, James has told us you are still in Hogwarts. Thank goodness. Your father didn't mean what he said. Love Mum.*

Something was wrong - she just knew it. But a niggling thought deep in the back of her mind told her that she was just hoping something was wrong, hoping that her family was still her family. She hadn't spoken to Regulus about his house. Somehow it felt... intrusive. His voice breaking to the point of tears... It was obvious that *he* loved his family, had family issues too. But instead of going on about it, he had dealt with it in silence. That or - more alarming - he didn't know that it was different. She remembered first year, the times Sirius and Regulus came over, the time when the brothers were still on speaking terms.

*But that's different,* she told herself. Regulus's mother might have a temper, but she had always been sweet to Emma. She and Orion had more than welcomed Emma into their arms. Orion might not be a frequent presence, but it was obvious that he loved his sons. She remembered what Regulus had said when the Polyjuice Potion was still in effect. Orion had been punished for trying to help Sirius, and the latter didn't even bother to contact him. It was Sirius who had picked his family apart from the seams, just as it was Sirius who was destroying the relationship she had with her own parents. Something told her it wasn't fair, but she clung to the idea. She wasn't quite prepared for anything else.

The sound of running footsteps alerted her to the fact that she was no longer alone in the hallway.

‘Hey Emma, I think you forgot your book,’ a familiar voice said, accompanied by a friendly smile.

Amos Diggory, Hufflepuff. He was quite popular, if the amount of people clamouring to sit next to him were any judge, and fairly good looking, in a book-smart sort of way. As far as Emma knew, he hadn't spoken to her other than about an assignment in class before now.

‘Err…thanks,’ she replied, taking the book from his hand, unsure as to how to proceed.

‘So, Arithmancy NEWTs look pretty hard huh?’ he said conversationally, falling into step with her.

‘I guess,’ she waited for him to continue. *What does he want?*

‘Boy, you're not making this easy for me. Are you always this talkative?’ he rubbed the back of his neck.

‘Sometimes,’ she half-smiled, then with an effort pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind. ‘Though you must be used to making girls speechless,’ she winked.

‘Hah,’ he laughed, relaxing. ‘I was wondering…are you doing anything this weekend?’

‘Quidditch,’ she replied immediately. ‘But then, you knew that.’ She pointed to the badge on his chest. ‘Guess I should wish you luck then.’
‘But…Before that? On Saturday?’

She shrugged, looking at him.

‘I’m trying to ask you out,’ he said with one of those smiles that made girls swoon. *Admit it Emma, you’re swooning too.*

‘Isn’t that fraternising with the enemy?’ she joked. ‘I’ll have to be back by six.’

‘Do you have a curfew?’ he teased.

‘No, practice.’

***

On Saturday, students gathered in the Entrance Hall, several third-years running up with newly-signed letters from their parents. Amos Diggory was there, dressed to impress and catching several looks. Emma loitered in the staircase for a while, wondering if it was a good idea. *What's in this for him?* she asked herself suspiciously, scanning the halls for other Hufflepuff upperclassmen. Just last week, she had convinced one of them to lock some Muggleborns in Moaning Myrtle's toilet. *Did someone realise I put Effy Midgens up to it? That girl is too gullible by far, thinking that Myrtle would give them tips on their OWLs.*

A hand on her shoulder made her jump, but it was just Rabastan and Regulus. Rabastan made a show of hiding behind her, peering over her shoulder into the room beyond.

‘Hiding from Black too?’ he asked, steadying himself with a hand on the doorway. Emma moved out of the way, backing further behind her statue. ‘Smart move, I hear he and Potter are hexing people's makeup to turn ugly an hour later. Supposedly it's so that they can't fix it at Hogsmeade, but the fatal flaw in the plan is that they tried it on a Gryffindor at breakfast. Now she's telling girls to beware of any wand that looks like it's pointing to her face.’

‘I'm not scared of those idiots,’ Emma said scornfully.

‘Then why are you hiding behind a statue?’ he asked. Emma let go of the knight's arm.

‘I'm just... looking for potential candidates,’ she replied. If there was one thing Rabastan loved, it was terrorising first-years and Muggleborns. Plus, it was easier to prank when you had a wingman, or wingwoman.

‘Found any?’ he sounded interested.

‘A few,’ she said mysteriously. ‘You'll just have to keep your ears open for the next couple of weeks, won't you?’

Rabastan laughed, but Regulus - who hadn't spoken a word the entire time - gave her a *you don't fool me* look on his way out. Annoyed, Emma pushed past him, marching into the Great Hall with her head held up high and a smile on her lips. Diggory noticed her as she made a beeline for him.

‘Hi, sorry I'm late, I didn't see the time!’ she exclaimed, taking his arm. 'Shall we go?'

He beamed at her, but Emma turned around and looked at Regulus: *see!* He just shook his head at her and rolled his eyes. Diggory noticed and asked what it was about.
'Oh nothing,' she said. 'Just a joke between Slytherins. Anyway, where do you want to visit first?'
'I was thinking of going to Scrivenshaft's actually,' he replied. 'I need to stock up on my quills.'

***

They went to the Quill Shop: Tomes and Scrolls and Zonko's. For the most part they chatted and laughed, but that was before Madame Puddifoot's, a little tea shop in one of the back alleys. Diggory slowed their pace, until Emma could see the tables for two, each lit by a candle in a heart-shaped holder. She could almost smell the heavy incense from the window, which was adorned by lacy pink curtains.

'Let's go to the Three Broomsticks instead,' Emma pulled Diggory - Amos - away by the arm.

'But this looks much cosier,' Amos replied, drawing her nearer. 'And we are on a date,' he reminded her, an almost bothered expression on his face.

Emma felt a building panic in her stomach: Madame Puddifoot's Tea Shop looked a little too cosy for her liking. Another quick glance showed her that hardly anyone was there either. She knew exactly how that would end: trapped, claustrophobic, unable to breathe. Amos was looking at her expectantly. Time for an excuse.

'Fine, but I've just remembered that I need more Potions supplies,' she suggested, mastering the tone of her voice with a supreme effort of will. 'Let's go there first, and that way we won't have to worry about the time when we're drinking tea. Or butterbeer. Whichever you prefer.'

That seemed to satisfy him, because they carried down the alley to the ingredients shop in silence for a little while. Amos had kept her arm in his, which was slightly uncomfortable, but she didn't mind. Inside the shop however, she was grateful for the excuse to let go of him. He trailed after her as she selected ingredients.

'So I realise that we've been out for three hours and I still don't know much about you,' he said conversationally.

'I like Quidditch,' she said, taking the newt eyes off the shelf.

'Everyone likes Quidditch,' he laughed. 'What do you like most about it? What are your favourite formations?'

So this date is to collect information, she nodded to herself, pleased that it made sense. She relaxed a little more. She had told Lucinda that she had to play her cards right. How do you play if you don't know the rules of the game?

'Do you really think I'd tell you just before the big match?' she teased.

'Come on, you're acting like I set this up just to find out stuff about your team. I'm a Hufflepuff, we play fair,' he said proudly.

'Then what's the point of this date?'

Amos looked at her a little oddly, so she added a "just kidding" and moved on to the whetstones: her knife was pretty blunt. Sometimes it paid off to be quiet instead. It was easier to avoid mistakes.
'So come on. What's your favourite colour?' he said when they walked out of the shop.

'I think I'm obligated to say green or silver here,' she replied, holding her scarf up to her face. 'House pride, you know, that kind of thing.'

'I think that just made me like you even more,' Amos grinned, though he knew she had avoided the question. It didn't seem to bother him that much. In fact, it looked like he was enjoying himself. 'But really. Let's start off easy. What's your family like?'

'Repeat that first sentence again?' Emma asked with her most seductive voice. Thank you Alecto, for your numerous flirtation attempts to prevent your brother from prying into your private love life.

Amos really was attractive, but did he have to pry so much? It felt like an invasion of privacy. Emma didn't want her first date since the start of the year to end in catastrophe, so she stopped and turned to him. Before he could talk again, she pressed her mouth to his, pulling him closer. Really, I should have figured out the use of this a long time ago, she thought. Some part of her filed it away as a means to an end. After all, that's all kissing appeared to be, judging from past experience. Somebody wolf-whistled.

'Wonder who's snogging in dark alleyways, Prongs? Better make sure it isn't your Lily-poo!'

Emma rolled her eyes as they broke apart. Did James and his friends make it a point to visit the least-frequented alleyways every weekend, or just the ones where she was?

'Wait a minute,' James said as he drew nearer. 'Emma? What are you doing here?'

'I was on a date before you so rudely interrupted,' she retorted.

She hadn't known how to approach him after New Year's, not even knowing if he knew about the fight with their parents. He certainly hadn't really bothered with anything other than pleasantries, though that was how it often was between them. But now Sirius had taken her time at home, and it felt like her twin was slipping away from her. She reminded herself to calm down, and might have added something if James hadn't beaten her to it.

'You're not old enough to date are you?'

So that's what he cares about.

'James! I'm the same age as you! We just so happen to be a little thing called twins? Or had you forgotten?' Have you forgotten?

'Right, right, sorry Ems,' James apologised, before turning to Amos. 'What I meant was, is this guy good enough for you to date?'

'James, please don't do the brother thing,' Emma sighed.

'Oh, there's no way he's not doing the brother thing,' Sirius grinned, seeming a little too pleased by the scene. Even looking at him irritated her.

'Was I talking to you?' she raised her eyebrows at Sirius, wishing that she could throttle him instead.

'Ooh Prongs, your sister's got more temper issues than Moony here.'

That stopped Emma in her tracks. From what she had seen of Remus he was the quietest and nicest of James's friends. She couldn't imagine him other than laid-back. On their rounds he actually
avoided people that were breaking curfew so as not to create conflict. Luckily James took advantage of the lull to grill Amos. It shouldn't have surprised her. James had always been protective, even when they were little. And if truth be told, it had been easier to leave all the "brave" things for him to do.

'So, Amos Diggory, Captain of Hufflepuff Quidditch team, seventh year, particularly adept at Care of Magical Creatures,' James ticked off his fingers.

'How do you know all of this?' Amos asked, surprised.

'I have my ways. But you'll do,' James nodded at him, seemingly in approval. 'Though you should have asked for my permission, but I'll forgive that. Just remember: any wrong move and you'll wish you had graduated early by the time I'm finished with you. And you and I, dear sister, need to have a little chat.'

'You don't own me, James!' Emma said frustratedly.

'It's fine, Emma,' Amos said, trying to reduce the tension between the siblings. 'I'll see you in Arithmancy next week?'

He went to kiss her on the cheek, but for James's benefit she turned her head so it landed on her mouth. When Amos left, James steered Emma towards Honeydukes.

'You're my twin, of course I own you,' James said arrogantly, keeping his arm around her shoulder. 'You're my responsibility!'

'Says who?' Emma asked, frustrated that she was relieved at his words. She needed to stop relying on her twin all the time. He's not always going to be around. No, he hasn't always been around, she corrected herself.

'Mum and Dad, when they found out you left,' he replied, effectively cutting off all argument that Emma had prepared. So that answers that question.

'Yeah right,' she mumbled, looking down at her feet.

'They're worried about you Ems,' he told her.

'If they really cared, then they wouldn't have let me leave,' she replied petulantly, for some reason close to tears. She hastily commanded them to go away.

'James,' Remus warned, and for once James fell silent, though he still kept Emma in tow as they arrived at the sweet shop, where a frantic Rabastan was checking the crowds.

'There you are!' he said as he spotted Emma, making his way towards them. 'I've been looking everywhere for you, Emma! You're going to be late!'

'Late for what exactly, Lestrange?' James asked pointedly.

Rabastan seemed to notice her brother for the first time. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Suddenly, Emma remembered that they were supposed to meet the Dark Lord again that day. How could she have forgotten? She shot a look towards James. Rabastan wouldn't say anything, would he? She needed time to talk to her brother. Privately, she wasn't sure he would see things her way, with Sirius influencing his thoughts. And James was too passionate to stay neutral with a war coming. His need to protect didn't solely extend to her.
'For our date, of course,' Rabastan said, with a look that dared them to question him.

Emma blinked, but hid her surprise. Rabastan hadn't really known about Amos Diggory. Besides, Sophie Parkinson had already been on two dates in one day - Emma had heard her talking to Helen in the common room about it. If she thought about it, it would make sense to date Rabastan. They both had the same interests, similar backgrounds (purebloods with a brother and a father in the Ministry) and they shared a sense of humour. It wouldn't seem that odd at all.

'Two in one day? Bit promiscuous of you isn't it?' Sirius asked.

'Promiscuous is a big word for you Sirius,' Emma shot back. 'Has Remus been teaching you how to pretend to be smart? No offence Remus,' she said quickly to the shy brunette. 'You, I know to actually be smart.'

'I'll take that as a compliment then,' he replied pleasantly.

'Who said you could date my sister?' James insisted for the second time that day. Boy, he must be really annoyed that Lily didn't come today.

'One: I spend more time with her than you do, so even if you didn't want me to, I could still see her in the common room; two: I'm one of the only people that isn't scared of your hexes, and you don't want to see your sister grow up an old maid, do you?' Rabastan asked smoothly. 'What was the plan, marry her yourself?'

James spluttered indignantly.

'Let it go, James,' Remus said wisely. 'He has a point.'

Emma thought that she rather liked Remus. She wondered why they had never been on Prefect patrols together before. She had seen that his name was next to hers on the roster, but it had been changed the next day. She always thought that he hated her because he was friends with Sirius. Now she thought that she had misjudged him. Looking at him now, he looked kind, ready to stand up to his friends if they were being idiots. He was a little pale though. Suddenly it hit her.

Are my patrols near the full moon?

He looked at her a little strangely and she realised she had been staring. He said nothing though, led James into the pub, the rat-faced Gryffindor following behind. Sirius still stood there, eyes narrowed. Emma raised her eyebrows at him, but he was looking at Rabastan.

'I don't believe you, you slimy snake. You're covering for something evil, I know you are.'

'Why do you even care?' Emma asked him.

'If there's a chance for you, there's a chance for my brother,' he said genuinely, surprising them. 'Besides, there's no way the Potters would let me stay if they knew I hadn't done everything in my power to keep their daughter away from the Dark Arts.'

I knew it was too good to be true, Emma thought. For a minute, it seemed like he actually cared. Still, since he's apparently reporting my every move to Mum and Dad... Maybe I can salvage this relationship. They'll need to be shown that the Dark Lord isn't just about destruction. But that needs time, and it might be too late, unless...

She grabbed Rabastan's face, hoping against hope that he would go for it for her sake. In fact, he kissed her passionately back, hands looping around her waist. When they broke apart, Rabastan shot a smug look at Sirius's disgusted face.
'Satisfied now?' he asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he cupped Emma's hand in his and strolled off in the direction of the Hog's Head, muttering for her to resist turning to look back. She could feel the older Black brother's stare heating her back. As soon as they turned the corner, Emma let go, shoving her hand back into her pocket, suddenly embarrassed.

'Thanks for that,' she said. 'I owe you one.'

'Well it wasn't exactly torturous,' Rabastan laughed. He seemed to laugh at everything. 'Good thing Regulus wasn't there though.'

'Yeah, I don't think he can stand talking to Sirius for more than thirty seconds flat now,' Emma agreed, before adding. 'Not that Sirius ever does.'

'Let's just not mention it then,' Rabastan was quick to suggest and Emma was quick to agree.

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Outside the Hog's Head were a couple of wizards Emma recognised from Narcissa's engagement party, Alecto and Regulus. She was surprised there were so few of them, but then she supposed there weren't many students at Hogwarts. Not every Slytherin would be a Death Eater, and there might be others from other Houses, but they didn't trust the rival Houses to keep a secret. After all, Death Eater status put a bounty on your head. For now, Emma thought, as they approached. The redhead was shifting her weight from one foot to the other impatiently before spotting them. She rolled her eyes, as if to berate Emma for forgetting. Emma ignored the silent reproval.

'No Lucinda?' she asked her friend instead, as they were led to the outskirts of the village. It reminded her of the hovel where William lived, but Alecto didn't react as they passed similar habitats.

'Please Emma,' Alecto scoffed, tossing her mane of red hair back. 'The girl couldn't create a Hiccupping Solution to save her life, let alone be useful in the times to come. Besides, Evan's already joined.'

'Shh...' the older Death Eater hushed her. 'The Order has spies everywhere.'

'The Order?' Emma asked in a low voice. She looked around, but no one was in sight. Maybe the adults were just paranoid.

'The Order of the Phoenix, that's what they're calling themselves. It's a group of wizards determined to stop the Dark Lord from usurping the order of things,' Alecto whispered back as they arrived in front of a broken down shack. 'My brother says that he interviews people one by one, but we're not allowed to talk about it afterwards.'

Emma felt a little nervous and a little excited when it was her turn to be led into the hut. It felt a little like taking the O.W.L.s again, and she bit back an inappropriate giggle. She forced herself to remain calm... professional. She glanced around the room. There he was, the Dark Lord, looking much the same as last Easter. He still had his magnetic aura and cold red eyes, the feeling of dangerous power mixed with greatness. He somehow managed to adapt the surroundings to his persona: instead of looking like a run-down shack, the crumbling walls seemed to whisper of ancient history, the stone floor stripped down to a level of honesty. There was no furniture, but neither was there mould. It was utilitarian, just like the soldiers the Dark Lord needed for his war.
'So Emma Potter, we meet again,' he said. 'I presume you know why you are here?'

'For my dazzling academic career?' Emma managed to get out, though her heart was in her throat.

'Not quite,' he allowed her a small smile, and it felt like her heart was lifted. 'You have the chance to serve one of the greatest wizards of all time, the one who will change forevermore the course of history. And I shall give you the chance to prove yourself worthy of my inner circle.'

She waited, unsure of what she was supposed to say. She seemed to be trapped within that red gaze and for some reason she couldn't stop thinking about the fight with her parents and what they would say if they saw her here. Her father would probably disown her there and then. Her mother... Who knew what Diane Potter really believed? Emma was sure that she understood her daughter, at least in part. But her father seemed like such a huge presence in comparison, especially because her mother had been ill over the holidays. She wondered if she felt better and made a mental note to ask James. Too late, she realised what was happening, frantically trying to build up the walls that Regulus had told her about. _Blank, my mind needs to be blank_, she told herself.

The Dark Lord laughed, and it was a high, mocking laugh. 'Do not fear, my dear, for my family has also disappointed me. I have more important things on my mind than pure-bloods who do not understand the need for radicalism in order to change. But it is your mind that interests me, or rather your tongue.'

_My tongue?_ Emma thought, her anxiety back. _Is he going to cut it out? Is that the test?!_

'To be clear, it is your gift with words that I need,' he explained. 'I am sadly lacking in diplomatic friends, though they more than make up for it in... persuasiveness. You see, I find myself in need of allies. The Ministry has proved more resilient than I expected, though it may be more to do with others' incompetence than the enemy's skill.

'The giants in particular have suffered at the hands of the Ministry. They are classed as a dangerous breed. So they shall be receptive to whatever you have to say. I trust you will not fail me in this?'

'No,' Emma breathed, though she had no idea how she could attempt such a feat. She didn't have the faintest idea where giants lived, and was sure that they'd rather eat her alive than parley with her. But she wanted to _do something, prove_ something, that she could make a difference in the war before it was too late.
Quidditch

‘Did you just get back from a date?’ Lucinda squealed at the sight of Emma dressed up.

After getting back from Hogsmeade she had gone in search of Amos Diggory to apologise for her brother's behaviour, and they had arranged to see each other in the library the following Tuesday, though Emma was uncertain about whether she even wanted to. Well I have nothing better to do, do I? Somehow that didn't really seem enough. But she was curious to see how it would turn out, and it would be a welcome distraction from the N.E.W.T homework piling up. She was damned if she was going to say all of this to Lucinda in the Quidditch changing rooms though.

‘What's it to you?’

‘I'm your friend! Come on, details!’

Lucinda was too excited about this, in Emma's opinion. Then she remembered that she supposedly fancied Regulus. Another reason to see Amos then, she thought. She was just about to comply when she noticed the conversations around them quieten down. Usually she had to yell for everyone to listen to the plan for the day. She rolled her eyes inwardly, why is everyone so curious? Besides, if Lucinda was right, then she had a fearsome reputation to uphold. One that didn't include gossiping about seventh year Hufflepuffs.

‘I'll tell you after practice but I warn you, it involves James,’ Emma eventually replied with a grimace. ‘For now, I’m your Captain. In fact, I won’t tell you at all unless you perfect the Dionysus Dive.’

‘I thought we weren’t doing that after the try-outs accident,’ Cassandra Greengrass frowned.

‘I’ve thought of a way we can use it,’ Emma took out the demonstration paper. Regulus smirked at her, having done most of the drawing. Rabastan looked from one to the other, wondering what was so funny and if he could tease someone about it. She ignored both of them.

‘So,’ she tapped her wand on one of the Chasers. ‘La di da, flying along with the Quaffle, opposing Chasers close in, sure of a victory because this person’s alone.’

‘Where are the other Chasers?’ Barty asked, leaning on his broomstick.

‘Don’t do that Barty, you’ll ruin your flying angle,’ Emma said sharply. ‘But good question. Our other Chasers will make sudden dives, distracting the Keeper, who needs to be on the lookout. Meanwhile, the lead Chaser - usually in this case, me - will jump from her broomstick and punch the Quaffle into the least defended goal. The other team will be expecting dives, swerves, anything to avoid the other Chasers.’

The other players contemplated the board in silence for a while, staring at the stick-men act out the play over and over again.

‘What happens to our brooms?’ Cassie asked interestedly. ‘That’s the problem.’

‘The broom will distract the Chasers, who will try to avoid it. I need one of our Chasers to catch the broom, another one to keep trying to score, and that’s where the Beaters will come in.

‘So we leap forwards, with no regard to where our broom is, score, and then…what? Fall to the floor and break something?’ Lucinda looked worried.
'That’s the best part. Beaters have strong arms, everyone knows that. So what if we used them for something other than whacking Bludgers? Not that you guys aren’t great at that,’ she hastily added. ‘But I think you’ll have fun with this, and it’ll be a good workout.’

They trouped out onto the field and Emma made Rabastan and Anthony Nott hover near the ground - as a precaution. She told Cassie to practice jumping from her broom for them to catch her, and instructed Regulus to keep a close eye on them: if it looked like a Beater would miss, then he would have to perform "Arresto Momentum" on the falling girl and hope that it worked. Technically it was a second-year level charm, but the heavier/faster the object, the harder it would be to cast.

Satisfied that her Chaser was in minimal danger, she took the Quaffle out and took Lucinda and Barty to the goalposts. They practiced jumping from their brooms and shooting the Quaffle in, something they had been learning for the past two years from Avery. Neither of the girls jumped very far, and made sure the other’s broomstick was always there to catch her.

After about half an hour, Cassie and Lucinda swapped, and another half hour later Emma called them all back to the ground.

‘So are you ready?’

Cassie nodded eagerly, but Lucinda still looked a little scared: her face was white and her hands were slightly shaking.

‘Don’t worry, Regulus will be here to catch you with a spell if something goes wrong,’ Emma encouraged her, mercilessly using the other girl’s affections. Lucinda gulped and nodded.

The first attempt was awful. Cassie fell face forwards as her foot tangled with the broom, not even making the jump. Emma flew off to fetch it as Rabastan caught her. The next was better, and the one after that, until both Chasers could get in one out of five goals - though Emma suspected that Barty was going easy on them. It was amazing how fast that boy's reflexes were. He had only improved over the past six months: adding skill to his pure talent. Now he knew most of the Chaser tricks, as well as the Keeper’s. They're going to have to watch out for him, she mused, thinking of the Captaincy that would be free after her seventh year.

‘Right, let’s make this a little harder,’ she said. Rabastan rubbed his hands together in glee, but was the only one to seem excited. Good old Rabastan.

‘No, no Bludgers Bast, I think it’s a little too early. No, I’m going to pretend to be the other Chaser.’

Emma flew towards Lucinda at a steady pace. The latter panicked and jumped a little too soon: Emma knew that the goal would go wide when she saw the blonde’s body fall sideways instead of forwards. She had little time to think of anything else though, as the broomstick collided with her face. She went flying backwards, barely clinging to her broom as she blinked, her eyes watering from the impact. She was vaguely aware of a cheer that went up behind her.

‘That was perfect Ems!’ Cassie swooped down to meet her, grinning. ‘I caught the Quaffle and sent it through the hoop before Barty realised what was going on!’ She whooped again.

‘Did de Beaters catch Lucinda?’ Emma asked thickly.

‘Why are you speaking weirdly?’ Cassie flew closer to inspect her captain. ‘Merlin’s underpants, you’re bleeding!’

‘Boomstick too fast,’ Emma wiped her nose with her sleeve and flew messily to the ground. Luckily she was able to land without much difficulty. ‘D’you catch her?’ she asked again, worried for her
friend's safety.

‘Yeah, that was so cool! I want to do that again!’ Rabastan punched the air. ‘Oh um…do we need to do something about that?’

‘Episkey,’ Barty tapped his wand on Emma’s nose.

Lucinda flew down on Anthony Nott’s broomstick. She was still trembling, but there was a huge grin plastered to her face.

‘That was some adrenaline rush,’ she breathed, her eyes glassy with the memory of her achievement.

Emma took that as a good sign: each time would be easier, and the rush of doing something dangerous would become addictive. This was the real reason they played.

‘Thanks Barty,’ she said, unceremoniously wiping her nose again. ‘Right, sorry about your broomstick Luce, but I think in an hour or so we’ll get the hang of it.’

‘You know, you lose a lot of your credibility when your face is all dirty,’ Rabastan commented. ‘Maybe you should work on that.’

Regulus snorted. Emma turned on him with an exasperated look. ‘What, it was funny!’

‘Congratulations, you’re in charge of fetching broomsticks now,’ Emma smirked at him, efficiently wiping off the grin on her friend’s face. He pouted.

‘Rabastan started it,’ he pointed out.

‘Rabastan is being useful in the plays,’ she retorted.

He narrowed his eyes, but traipsed off to find the broom, flying this way and that. *Easier than trying to find the Snitch*, Emma thought, watching him looping through the stadium with practiced ease for a second. Sometimes she wondered if he didn't belong on a broomstick instead of on the ground. He was certainly most open and happy when they played Quidditch, though that might have just been the endorphins from the sport.

‘Way to regain your authority, Ems,’ Lucinda teased, looking slightly put out.

‘I just felt like making him do some work,’ Emma replied, before an idea occurred to her. ‘But I probably need to practice catching the Quaffle as quickly as possible. Would you mind Regulus flying at you from now on?’

Lucinda’s face brightened, but she quelled the smile. ‘I think that would be okay,’ she said carefully.

‘Good, because we’ve got another couple of hours ahead of us.’

‘What?’ Rabastan complained. ‘But tomorrow’s the game!’

‘Practicing in the dark!’ Emma explained. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll be back in time for dinner.’

‘Better be,’ he muttered darkly.

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Several hours - and a few broken noses and split lips - later, Emma watched the team troop tiredly back to the castle as she buckled the Quaffle back into the box. She would probably never admit it, but she liked this part of practice. It was soothing, the slight smell of sweat mixed with leather, the chill starting to set in at night, the different touch of every ball - even the Snitch. It was amazing how something so small, so fragile-looking could be the most dangerous in the game. After all, it was often the deciding factor for the winning side, and made the Seeker the most injured player on the field. Even Regulus, who was as agile as any player she knew, often got hit and would have been incapacitated five minutes into the match if the Beaters weren’t there to protect him.

_Hopefully this training was enough_, she thought as she started walking. Gryffindor had massacred them in the first match, but she hoped that that was because of the new players on her team and her new tactics as captain. This time would be different. As she shut the shed door, she jumped.

‘Merlin, Regulus, don’t do that!’

Regulus was lounging, cool as a cucumber, on the side of the shed. Obviously he had gone to get changed with the others, since he was in his school robes, his hair freshly wet from his shower. It made Emma realise just how muddy she was.

‘So I noticed that you haven’t been practicing the dive,’ he said conversationally.

‘I’ve been using cushioning charms on the grass in my spare time,’ she said, walking back to the changing rooms.

_Did he honestly think I wouldn’t have trained just as hard?_ No. This was Regulus: ultimate observer - the reason why he had been chosen as Seeker in only his second year. There had to be something more to it.

‘Uh-uh,’ he stared at her.

‘You know I can do that dive with my eyes shut,’ she tried again, taking her Quidditch robes and guards off. There was a sinking pit in her stomach, a dread of where this conversation might be going.

He still stared at her. _This is starting to get uncomfortable. Give him a good excuse. A believable one. Close to the truth._

‘Fine, I don’t like having to rely on other people to get back into the game.’

‘Do you not trust your team?’ he asked.

‘Of course I do! I just don’t...’

‘Like feeling out of control,’ he finished for her.

Her face darkened and she turned her back on him, making sure her Nimbus was in pristine condition for the following day. Why did Regulus have to press her? Weren’t they friends _because_ they didn’t force each other to share things that were too personal? Didn’t he have the decency to respect her privacy?

‘Sorry,’ he sat on the bench next to her. She could almost sense his hesitation, but he continued anyway. ‘I knew, you know.’

‘Knew what,’ she snapped.
'You always get angry when you’re unsure,’ he said. ‘I think I’m the only one who’s realised, because you seem to get angry a lot.’

‘Is there a point to this conversation?’

‘I already knew about the Mudblood at the Yule Ball before the Occlumency,’ he admitted. ‘You don’t need to hide it from me. You're allowed to be scared once in a while.’

‘I’m not scared!’ she said a bit too loudly, a bit too quickly. ‘Besides, it’s just a stupid reaction.’

The sinking pit in her stomach had spread to her throat. One of her worst fears realised. She felt her heart beating as though it was trying to escape her ribcage. *Don't panic,* she told herself, growing angry, though she didn't know whom with.

‘Like the way you jump every time somebody catches you by surprise? Like the way you made Diggory wait half an hour before going on your date?’ Regulus insisted.

‘What the hell Regulus?’ Emma stood up, half-drawing her wand. *How dare he talk to me like that?*

‘What I didn't understand was how you didn't mind kissing people when the slightest touch on your arm has you jumping back,’ he continued, unperturbed, as though this was just another puzzle to solve. *This is why he never gets close to people: he acts as though they're mysteries to unravel.* 'I thought that maybe you had forgotten it, even after Avery...' he trailed off.

‘That kind of thing is hard to forget,’ Emma hissed through clenched teeth, but she tried to force herself to calm down. Regulus would *not* see this vulnerable, affected side of her. Obviously, he didn't think her so weak that she would still be terrified whenever someone unknown came too close. *I can do this.* She took a hold of her feelings, forcing them to disappear. Apathy came over her, replaced only by a contempt for her friend's prying. ‘But to answer your question, kissing is... Well, it's an exchange, isn't it? It's useful. I can put my feelings aside to be useful to the team.’

‘Very Slytherin of you,’ he remarked. ‘While that kind of thinking might help you in Occlumency, how do you think the team’s going to react when they realise that you’re not doing any of the plays you’re making them do? You can't rationalise your instincts.’

‘Well, Mr Know-it-all, what do you suggest?’ she asked coldly.

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‘Come on Emma, you just need to fall,’ Regulus encouraged. Her broom was twenty feet up in the air and he was waiting ten feet below. ‘Easy.’

‘Easy,’ Emma muttered.

She carefully stood up on her broom, arms splayed out for balance. It was going to be a cold night, her broomstick was already slippery with frost. But there was no way to back down now. Maybe there was more Gryffindor in her than expected, though she knew that she was mostly doing this to prove a point. She hated the fact that she felt like she needed to prove herself to Regulus, but who else was worthy of trying to impress?

It was impossible to summon up her anger now, however. She was giddy with the adrenaline and for a moment it felt like she was floating, weightless. Then she moved a foot, and suddenly her balance was lost and she was hurtling towards the ground at an alarming rate. With no broomstick to guide
her. *Dear Merlin,* she prayed, shutting her eyes tightly. Her heart was in her throat now, the rest of her insides tied in knots so tightly that she felt like she was becoming detached from her body, but that couldn't be true because she was trapped inside, unable to move. He wasn't going to be there. She was completely at his mercy and now she was going to fall, alone and...

She landed in Regulus’s outstretched arms with a soft thump, the extra weight forcing the broom down another couple of feet before he managed to right it. He reflexively tightened his grip, lest she slip outwards and fall the rest of the distance.

‘There, was that so hard?’ he asked.

He flew up to where her Nimbus was waiting, but Emma made no move to get onto it. It was then that he realised just how tightly she was gripping his shirt and that her whole body was trembling. He manoeuvred them back to the ground, not even bothering to try to get off and flying straight into the changing rooms where he put her broomstick on the bench. He then sat down on the bench next to it, unable to loosen the vice-like grip she had on him.

‘Emma,’ he said. ‘Emma, you need to let go.’

'Don't make me,' she shook her head tearfully, clutching even tighter, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

She couldn't breathe. No matter how much oxygen she inhaled, it felt like it was never enough for her lungs. Her head was spinning, so she kept her eyes tightly shut, focussing on the shirt intertwined in her fingers.

'You need to calm down,' he sighed and unzipped his jacket, forcing her to let go. She immediately put her feet on the bench and curled her arms around her knee. She was no longer shaking, but shivered from the cold, so as an afterthought he put the jacket on her. After that though, he didn't know what to do. He just waited as she slowly stopped rocking and her shivering transformed itself into one last shuddering breath. Regulus wondered if he should say something. Luckily, that was the moment the black-haired girl chose to speak.

‘Thanks,’ she said dully. After a moment she continued. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘No worries,’ he said lightly, inwardly sighing with relief. ‘I know girls always threaten to never let go, but you’re the first one to physically attempt it.’

She shot him a black look with eyes were still slightly wild. He quietened.

'I'm sorry,' he said, though whether it was for the joke, or forcing her into something that induced a panic attack, she didn't know.

*So that's what happens when I let myself go. I'll never lose control again,* she vowed. She had thought that her freezing up in front of Avery had been a one-time thing, but apparently not. She supposed that this kind of thing had never happened in fifth year because they were all too concentrated on the O.W.Ls to party after Christmas. But that thought, meant to be comforting, only served to remind her that Regulus had known that a Gryffindor Muggleborn had come so close to...

A shiver went up her spine and her cheeks flushed with the shame of it. How could she bear to look at him again? If the Inter-House ball hadn't been enough, surely this deserved his disdain.

‘We should probably go to the Great Hall, eat before it’s too late,’ she said eventually, trying to brush it off. ‘Can’t have a starving Seeker on the field tomorrow.’

She stretched, and Regulus saw that her eyes were red-rimmed. She noticed the look of worry before
he had time to compose his features. *It's already started.*

‘Sorry for biting your head off... It's just it,’ she hesitated, ‘makes me feel like a Muggle.’

‘Trust me, Emma Potter,’ Regulus said on their way up to the castle. ‘No one would ever mistake you for a Muggle.’
Slytherin-Hufflepuff

In the Great Hall, Emma slid into the seat between Lucinda and Alecto, quickly wiping her eyes with her sleeve. She had refrained from doing so during the hurried and awkward walk up to the castle. It was enough that Regulus knew, he didn't need to see her crying on top of all of that. He had always told her that he thought crying was useless. Besides, he's endured way worse than I have. Get a grip, Emma.

'Merlin Emma, are you alright? You look like you've been in a fight,' Alecto exclaimed, shocked.

Emma belatedly realised that she hadn't taken a shower, and there was blood all over her face. The Quidditch practice seemed like days ago now. She pointed her wand at herself. 'Tergeo.'

'Better,' the redhead said. 'But everyone will have noticed by now. Isn't that Regulus's jacket?'

'Uh, yeah...' Emma replied, her cheeks tingeing with pink.

Pull yourself together. You can still take control of the situation. Just think of a plausible excuse. Or better yet, just pretend it's inconsequential. She ran her rules of life in a bad situation through her mind before discreetly taking a few calming breaths and plastering a look of smug indifference on her face.

'What?' Lucinda asked. 'Is that why you're so late? But you said you were on a date earlier...'

'Yeah, with Amos Diggory.'

'With who?' Alecto almost choked on her food. 'But he's a half-blood!'

'And pretty handsome,' Emma said, smiling at the Hufflepuff table.

'I told you Ems, he doesn't have to be a Slytherin, but geez find a pure-blood!' Alecto admonished. 'The others are just asking for trouble. Besides, are you really going to put yourself down just for that? Think of your reputation. Think of...' her voice trailed off.

Emma knew exactly what she was going to say. They had been assured that if they could accomplish their individual tasks, then they would be able to join the elusive ranks of the Death Eaters. Alecto was sure that if word got around that Emma was dating a half-blood then it would ruin her chances. Emma ignored her: at least they had magical parents. Even Muggleborns were fine for her, though she thought they needed special education before Hogwarts. No, Emma's disdain was reserved for Muggles, and her pity for Squibs. She was sure that the Dark Lord would understand that. Besides, the tasks were near-impossible, or at least hers was.

'Amos Diggory, did you say?' Lucinda asked, a smile playing upon her lips.

Emma handed Regulus his jumper back the next morning at breakfast, without a word. He accepted it equally silently, though she thought he was on the verge of saying something. The rest of the team was already up, as well as the Hufflepuff team and a few early risers. She wandered down the table, encouraging Anthony to eat some toast. In their first match, he had taken a Bludger to the head within the first five minutes and had woken up days before term ended. Emma was trying to boost his confidence when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

'Hey Captain,' Amos Diggory said, holding out a hand. 'Good luck for the game.'
'Yeah you too,' she replied, shaking it. 'You know we can do this on the field?'

'I know, but I wanted to tell you in person…I'm sorry about yesterday, it was a mistake.'

'What?' she asked, not believing her ears. This really wasn't her weekend.

'Even I'm not foolish to go up against Regulus Black,' he grimaced. 'Didn't you just hand him his jumper?'

'Yeah but we're not together or anything…'

'Oh yeah, she told me that you broke up, but… Your brother pranking me, I thought I could deal with, though that's what probably scares most guys off. Regulus Black is a whole different story. I'm sorry. Maybe you should try dating Gryffindors,' he offered her a smile.

She just looked at him coolly until he went back to his table, then glared at Lucinda as she took her seat. The latter gave her a one-sided smirk: the one she reserved for special occasions of getting what she wanted.

'Didn't you tell me to start playing the game, Ems?' she asked sweetly.

'You're lucky you're a good Chaser,' she muttered darkly. 'If you play exactly like that on the field, I just might not hex you.'

The score was 160-60 to Hufflepuff, it was snowing, and they were down a Keeper. Barty had been knocked off his broom by a double Bludger, resulting in Emma calling a time out in order to swear profusely at Anthony and Rabastan, who at least had the decency to feel ashamed. At least Anthony did. she never knew if Rabastan had just mastered the art of looking contrite so she would shut up. After a reminder from Cassie that their time was coming to an end, she moved onto tactics.

'Right, time to put our play into action,' she said. 'This is our third game, and in order to stay in the running we need to win by one hundred points. Regulus, that means you need to find the Snitch, and fast. We'll get a head start, but once they get the Quaffle back, there's no telling which way it'll swing.'

'What do you think I've been doing for the past hour and a half?' Regulus complained, but promised to try harder.

'Rabastan, I don't want to take any chances. Hit Bludgers if they come your way, but I want you flying under the Chasers at all times.'

The Beater nodded, face scrunched up in concentration. Emma turned to Lucinda and Cassie.

'I'll try to keep them trained on me so neither of you have to jump, but it may have to come down to that,' she said.

'Don't worry Ems, we'll cream 'em,' Lucinda said, and Cassie nodded furiously. Both wanted to win just as much as their captain did.

'Right, back into the air then.'

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the game restarted. Anthony got a good shot at Diggory in the Keeper position, but his body guard took the brunt of it, and he was none the worse for wear. The Hufflepuffs got in two more goals before Emma wrestled the Quaffle away from one and scored, putting all of her frustration at the wet Keeper into the throw. 180-70.
Cassie caught the ball and passed it down to Lucinda, who scored again.

Fifty points to go, Emma thought, craning her head to look at Regulus. A body rammed into her, pushing her into the stands and there was some booing from the crowd. Lucinda took the penalty as Emma found her way out again and scored. They flew together as a unit: they needed to keep scoring. Doing the traditional loop of the field, they passed the ball faster and faster and suddenly Cassie flew up, Lucinda flew down, and Emma scored. Apparently Diggory wasn't doing too well: Anthony had decided to pelt only him with Bludgers. She threw the ball to Cassie, but Diggory blocked the Quaffle with the butt of his broomstick and the ball dropped.

There was a Chaser in front of Emma, but a Bludger came soaring past her, knocking the Hufflepuff off-course. This kid really has talent, she thought, amazed as she caught the red ball. Even if we do lose, I couldn't be prouder of this team. She flew up, followed by the two Chasers, but she had her back to the goal and there was no way to turn around in time to score.

'Emma!' Lucinda called, appearing in front of her. Emma quickly threw the ball to her and carried on for a while, hoping to throw the Hufflepuffs off-course. It worked, but as she turned around she saw the two Beaters looming in front of the Slytherin. The Chasers were blocking Emma's path, and Cassie was too far away. Lucinda met Emma's eyes, and leapt.

The same way she leapt the first try. But Emma realised that this time it had been calculated: the broomstick collided with the two Beaters, and the Chasers flew in the direction of the goal, the place Lucinda should have been aiming for.

Emma caught the ball, hoping that Cassie would collect the broom, and scored a goal on the other side of the Keeper. She followed it, looping around the side and scoring again, praying to Merlin that it had given her two Chasers enough time. There! Cassie was waiting behind the goal.

Cassie caught the ball, and the three Chasers blocked the way between Cassie and Emma. What they hadn't expected was Lucinda to be hovering above them. They sat there in surprise as Cassie seemingly chucked the Quaffle towards them, and Lucinda swooped around in a loop, scoring not once, but twice.

Emma could hear the thunderous roar of the Slytherins and the excited shouting of the commentator. She took a quick look at the scoreboard: 180-140. The Hufflepuffs had recovered from their shock, but it was too late. Emma nearly fell off-balance as Regulus rushed past her and by the time she had righted herself he had caught the Snitch.

That evening even the first years stayed up late eating smuggled cakes and drinking Butterbeer. Rabastan had procured some Firewhisky, but Emma refused. She was already drunk on excitement. So, apparently, was her best friend, who was giving her a play-by-play of the event.

'Did you see the Hufflepuff Seeker?' Alecto shouted in her ear. 'He was watching you play and didn't even see the Snitch go past him! I heard Diggory spent an hour shouting at him after the match.'

Emma grinned and clinked her butterbeer against her friend's before getting atop a table.

'Excuse me everyone! Can I have your attention? Slytherin rules!'
'Give it up for our Seeker, Regulus Black!' 

The crowd applauded and clapped Regulus on the back. He said nothing, but smirked in pride in his corner. Suddenly, Emma was doubly grateful for the Quidditch win: it put something between now and last night. This was the opportunity to prevent things becoming awkward. My luck has turned, she thought, wanting to share that luck with her friends. After all, it wasn't only Regulus who won us that match. 

'And! And,' she shouted as it quietened. 'Regulus won us the match, but we're only still in the running thanks to our star Chaser, Lucinda Rosier and her superb dive!' 

Lucinda reddened as she was hoisted onto someone's shoulders and the chanting resumed, only this time it had a LU-CIN-DA added to it every few chants. Confetti burst from several seventh-years' wands and one did a superbly complex piece of magic that made birds fly around Lucinda's head in a halo. 

Fifteen minutes later, Lucinda found Emma by the window. 

'Thanks for that,' she said, still flushed - though Emma was certain that it was from the alcohol. 'Firewhisky?'

'No problem,' Emma replied, setting down her empty butterbeer and suddenly feeling a wave of fatigue. 'I'm off to bed, so no thanks. Good luck with that one,' she nodded towards Regulus, who was watching Rabastan down a whole bottle of Firewhisky in one go. 

'Thanks. And... I'm sorry about Diggory,' Lucinda apologised. 

'Nah, you did me a favour,' Emma waved her off. 

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After taking a well-deserved shower in the dormitory, she threw herself down on her bed, feeling pleased with herself. There was a crinkling noise, and with a frown she withdrew the parchment that had miraculously survived her back pocket. The back was sealed with a skull, a snake protruding from its mouth. She snickered at the Slytherin reference and had to remind herself that they hadn't won the cup yet. She broke the seal and read. 

McNair will be staying for the next fortnight in the Hog's Head. He will provide you with the necessary equipment and directions. Fail to turn up, and face my displeasure. 

The Dark Lord 

She tossed and turned all night. Though she was exhausted from the Quidditch game, thoughts of the Dark Lord's request kept her mind churning until the sound of Alecto's soft snores drove her to her feet. She slipped on her shoes and a warm jumper, and tiptoed up into the common room. Unsurprisingly, Regulus was already sitting by the fire, staring into the flames as if he could extinguish them with a look. 

'You read yours,' she said. It wasn't a question. 

He held out the scrap of parchment for her to read. It was crumpled, as if he had read it and put it back into his pocket, then taken it out over and over again.
'Aren't you scared I'll steal your glory?' she teased. The Death Eaters had made sure to tell them to keep their tasks secret.

Regulus gave her a tired look. She hid the surprise that she felt. She hadn't really talked to him during their day-long celebration, but now she saw the bags under his eyes. He hadn't looked that bad when she saw him with Rabastan, had he? She unrolled it.

'Who are these people?' she asked, scanning the short list of names. She recognised one, maybe two out of five.

'The most outspoken Mudbloods against the Dark Lord,' Regulus's eyes never moved from the flames. 'Some are Aurors.'

'So they're wizards,' she said.

'Wizards that don't agree with us,' he said. Emma noticed the "us". 'It's a war, Emma. Bad things happen during wars. But it'll be worth it in the end. Think about not having to hide your magic. So far, the Dark Lord is the only one to act on the principles of equal rights for magical creatures. What are a few Muggleborns compared to the amount of house-elves murdered out of neglect?'

'I think you've muddled your arguments,' she said, sitting next to him and immediately regretting her words. Was it possible that Regulus was trying to convince himself that this was the right thing? Was this a hit list?

'So what? I'm not good with words like you. But I do know what kind of world I want my children to grow up in, and it's not one ravaged by war. Everything will fall into place, you'll see. We have to have faith that the Dark Lord knows what he's doing.'

'Then why the ridiculously hard tasks?' she asked.

'Don't you see? He wants us to get used to failure,' Regulus turned to her, and his eyes were shining. 'But I won't fail, and neither will you. We'll show him we're worthy.'

Emma suspected his parents' speech was mixed within his words, but she couldn't deny her hatred of failure. Let her prove to Lord Voldemort that she could do this. Let her temper Bellatrix and Avery's penchant for violent destruction, and show the world that Dark magic wasn't so bad. It was Dark because it was dangerous. But Light magic could be just as harmful. They needed an unprejudiced world and maybe she could convince her father and Bellatrix to see it her way. The Dark Lord's way - he had told her that he had envisioned a better world, where everyone would be helped or treated according to blood. But to do that, she needed to think up the best plan she could.

'I'll help you with your talk if you help me with mine,' she said.

'Won't that be cheating?'

'It's not cheating if there are no rules,' she said, remembering Voldemort's words.
The Ruse

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Just a quick thanks to everyone who has given kudos/taken the time to read up to here. Enjoy!

'Lucky I stole some Polyjuice Potion at the start of the year,' Emma said, staring at the mixture Regulus was pouring into vials.

They were huddled in a corner of the Slytherin dormitories. Emma had pretended to oversleep when Alecto announced that she was going down to breakfast - hardly a feat, considering Lucinda and Sophie had massive hangovers. Helen hadn't even made it back to their dorm the previous night. Barty's classmates had already all gone down. Most people didn't want to get on McGonagall's bad side, especially when your O. were the next year. She would be handing out tips to students who she thought were trying their best. Apparently, Barty didn't need them, since he was unperturbed at the idea of missing Transfiguration. The same couldn't be said for the plan.

He eyed her dubiously and then the potion. 'What do I get out of this again?'

'Direct recommendation, and Quidditch Captaincy when I leave Hogwarts,' she replied. 'Well, I'll put in a good word for you and make sure your talent is adequately displayed.'

'Why me?' he asked, but the sixth-years could tell that he was getting excited. It wasn't often that upperclassmen invited younger years into their scheming. And there was definitely an incentive to want to help.

'You're the best impersonator we know, and someone we can trust,' Emma said, looking him directly in the eye. Maybe that would make him believe it was true. But Barty seemed devoted to Regulus... and their cause. 'Besides, don't you want the Dark Lord to succeed?'

'Of course I do,' Barty breathed. 'Let's start.'

Regulus gathered Emma's hair and evenly trimmed an inch off the bottom.

'You could have just cut a chunk off,' Emma said as Regulus compared the two ends.

'I like things to be neat,' he replied. 'Is this enough Barty?'

'Should be fine,' he replied, putting each dosage in a separate vial. The liquid turned blood-red. 'One in the morning, one in the evening, for a whole week.'

'So I'm off visiting my parents,' Regulus said, going over their plan. 'My grandfather isn't feeling well, and he doesn't have long to live.'

'And what's my alibi?'

'You're recovering at home from your Quidditch injuries,' Emma improvised. 'Will it be checked with your parents?'
'Please,' Barty replied. 'My father hardly knows I exist, he's so wrapped up in catching Dark wizards. He's such a hypocrite, did you know that he agrees entirely with their point of view?'

Regulus and Emma glanced at each other, clearly they had touched a sore spot. The younger boy badly hid a pained expression. Talented he might be, but when he wasn't imitating someone, he was an open book. Emma had vaguely heard of Barty Crouch Senior, but couldn't place the name until she remembered something her father had said. "Crouch wants to legalise using Unforgivable Curses on Death Eaters". No wonder Barty hated him. The Unforgivable Curses were unforgivable for a reason - especially the Killing Curse. They had been invented as a last resort, but were instead the cause of thousands of murders. Luckily, as Emma had found out for herself, you needed to really mean it for an Unforgivable Curse to work. She wondered why they didn't teach about them in Defence Against the Dark Arts class. It would be useful to learn about them, if only to be prepared for the world out there. As it stood, she had no idea what the Killing Curse looked like, nor how the Imperius Curse worked. The only thing she knew of the Cruciatus Curse was that it hurt. A lot. And that objects could deflect it. She realised that she was staring intently at the Polyjuice Potion, when she should be going over the plan. Vaguely, she wondered why her vial was so red, but quickly shunted the thought to the back of her mind.

'I'm off to talk to Dumbledore,' Regulus was saying. 'There shouldn't be too much worry, I can forge my father's handwriting perfectly. Emma, I'll meet you in the common room at two.'

He dusted off any remaining hairs from his robes and left. Barty and Emma were left with the collection of potions. Barty idly picked up a vial and swirled it around a little, obviously wondering if it was safe to drink it yet. Suddenly he stopped, squeezing the object in his hand, eyes snapping back to Emma's face.

'Wait, how are you going to get out of Hogwarts?' he asked.

'Barty, what I am about to tell you remains strictly between you and I,' Emma replied in a low voice. If he was going to imitate her, there were a couple of things he needed to know. Then she explained about the Invisibility Cloak - in case James asked him about it - and about the basics of her relationship with Sirius Black and her cousin Lou. Those weren't too hard. She was about to continue on the case of her parents, but was interrupted.

'I've got this one,' he said and arranged her features into a scowl. 'I don't like to talk about them.'

'Um okay...' Emma said, disconcerted. 'So with Alecto and Lucinda...'

'I've got that down too, from Quidditch and watching you with Alecto,' he replied. 'How should I act when people tell me about Regulus?'

'What about him?' Emma raised an eyebrow.

'You know,' he said, and Emma swore she saw his lips twitch for a second. 'His grandfather's ill and he'll be away for a week. Do I act all sad, because you're often together; annoyed, that he didn't bother to tell me about it; or like I just don't care?'

'Well...I'll leave that up to you, Barty. Just don't do anything I wouldn't, okay?' she finished lamely, disconcerted.

'Got it.'
'James,' hissed a voice from right behind his ear.

He jumped and turned around: there was only the portrait of some medieval witch. She was cackling at him, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up uncomfortably. *It's only a stupid witch,* he thought. Though her face was eerily familiar… He glanced about, but before he could do anything else he was yanked through the fake portrait by his collar.

'Jeez Emma, be a normal person will you?' he massaged his neck.

'No can do, with a brother like you,' she half-smiled.

He scrutinized his twin. He had barely seen her since Christmas, and those dates didn't count. Come to think of it, how was his sister, his Emma, even on two dates in a single day? He knew her better than anyone. No one else had seen the shy girl he had grown up with, coaxed out of her shell when needed. She needed him, that was the way it was. And he was always there to take care of her. That was the way it was. That was the way it would always be.

Something was off.

He was just about to say as much when he noticed her flushed cheeks, her feverish eyes darting around. She looked pale, as if she hadn't slept well in days. He almost smiled as understanding hit him. *That's it!* he thought with relief. *She's ill, and those boys were taking advantage of her. She always does crazy things when she gets the Firebug Flu.*

The Firebug Flu was notorious for the restlessness and agitation it caused. Though physically the patients only showed flu-like symptoms, the "Firebug" part was the addling of a wizard's brain: making the victim act on crazy impulses due to the constant adrenaline rush: creating a fight-or-flight situation that lasted for hours on end. Most of the time it was impossible for them to sleep, so after a couple of days, the wizard would feel completely drained and exhausted: in need of medical attention.

'Do you have the Invisibility Cloak?' Emma asked urgently.

'Why would you need that?' James asked, leading her up the secret staircase. 'Come on, I'll take you to the hospital wing.'

He had originally planned on talking to her about their parents, but there was no sense in inflaming the Firebug Flu with further agitation. The more stressed the patient, the worse the aftermath was.

'I'm not sick, I just really need the Invisibility Cloak,' his twin insisted.

'Again, I ask why?' He steered her across the corridor: she didn't seem to notice.

'I... It doesn't matter does it? Do I need your permission now? Are you going to interrogate me like Mum and Dad?' she jumped from one subject to the other.

James felt a lump in his throat. Sirius was finally free of his parents, he had managed to speak to Lily civilly - she had even allowed him to show her to the kitchens where the House-elves made her a cake for her birthday - everything was going well…Why did their Dad have to act the way he did with Emma? Why couldn't it go back to before, when the four of them were happy and never wanted for anything?

When he had gotten back from their New Year's party, he had found his mum almost in tears and his
dad transformed into a silent man that kept his jaw clenched shut. He had managed to wheedle the story out of his mother, but it was too late. Natalie already blamed herself for letting Emma leave without a word, thinking that she could go and talk to her after calming her husband down. But when she got to her daughter's room, there were clothes strewn everywhere, and her Hogwarts trunk was missing. Charles had wanted to call the Ministry, but James convinced him not to. School started on the third of January anyway, and James had promised to owl them if he saw Emma there.

Then there was the incident on the train... It had torn his heart apart to let Emma go when there was something so obviously wrong, but he hadn't known what to say. How could he comfort her, knowing that his father had wanted to call the Aurors and his mother had to go for a check-up at St Mungo's? Nothing would have made her feel better, and like a coward he had avoided the conversation. It was distinctly un-Gryffindor of him, and even Lily had noticed his lack of will in pranking. Admittedly, she was happy about it. But still... there was no point in talking to Emma now: he needed to calm her down. She almost looked like she was ready to run, though Merlin knew where. Minnie will understand if I don't have time to do my essay, he decided.

'Here it is,' he said, pulling it out of his schoolbag. 'But you have to go to the Hospital Wing in return. I think you have the Firebug Flu; you should see Madam Pomfrey.'

She lunged towards the cloak, but he held it back, tutting. 'Only after we get to the infirmary.'

She sighed, and seemed to fall into a sulk, but her shoulders sagged in defeat. She knew when he was right. That's the Emma I know, James thought with relief.

He accompanied her all the way to door before handing her the cloak, promising to look in on her at the end of the day. He didn't want to, but he had lessons and had planned a Quidditch practice after the stunt she had pulled the day before. I can't believe she's not in Gryffindor, he thought, before thinking that what could be seen as bravery could also be seen as resourcefulness: a trait he had come to associate with the green and silver House. The lines between our Houses aren't as defined as people think. He wished that there wasn't this war dividing the Houses along their rivalry lines. Nowadays you would never catch a Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw together, let alone Gryffindor and Slytherin. And from the rumours he had heard... many of his twin's housemates were on the wrong side. But he kept these thoughts to himself, filing them away in a box to be opened at a later date. It was what made people think he was so carefree all the time.

'If you're not there when I come back, I'll drag you back myself,' he warned aloud.

Emma realised that she couldn't have planned it better if she wanted to.

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'Do you have it?' Regulus whispered anxiously, several hours later.

'Of course I do. Were you seen?'

He and Barty had snuck into the Hospital Wing whilst Madam Pomfrey ate in her office. If she saw them visiting Emma, it might seem suspicious - especially seeing as technically Barty had already left - and besides, they wouldn't be able to make the swap. Barty had stolen the key earlier that morning and duplicated it, before checking out in the afternoon.

'Of course not. May I ask what you were doing all afternoon?'

'James thinks I have the Firebug Flu,' she explained. 'He came to visit and now believes that I really
Both boys looked impressed, so Emma didn't add the fact that it hadn't been her idea in the first place. She pulled some spare robes out of her school bag.

'Here,' she thrust them on Barty and pointed to the drawn curtains. 'Drink the potion and get changed.'

'Yes boss,' he saluted sarcastically, hobbling to the bed and downing one of the vials as though it were a shot. He grimaced for a second. 'You taste spicy, by the way, oh and -'

His fellow Slytherins shared a sudden look of realisation and Regulus thrust a nearby plant pot under his nose just in time to catch the vomit.

'Maybe not spicy then,' Barty said feebly as he threw up.

'Gross,' Emma wrinkled her nose. 'We'll leave you to it then. Make sure you get those red eyes right.'

'I think he won't have any trouble looking ill for today at least,' Regulus joked as Emma threw the Invisibility Cloak around them on the way out.

'I just hope that James doesn't look too closely at the Map...' she said worriedly.

Regulus looked at her oddly, but she didn't elaborate. He had to hunch slightly for the cloak to cover his feet, so was too occupied looking where he was going to press the matter. They scuttled through the corridors until they reached the infamous One-Eyed-Witch passage that she and James had discovered in their second year. Emma stood watch while Regulus scrambled through the opening, nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other. This was the most visible part of their plan to get out of Hogwarts. After one last glance around the corridor, she bundled up the cloak and followed suit.

'Oof.'

The wind was knocked out of her as she landed on top of her friend, toppling him back into the dust.

'You were supposed to move,' she reprimanded him, picking herself up and proffering him a hand.

He looked at her incredulously for a second, before taking it and inspecting the passageway with interest, taking note of the crumbling stone walls and slightly damp soil covered with dirt and dust.

'How many other secrets are you keeping from me?' he asked, mildly surprised.

'Oh, a ton,' she teased, lighting her wand and brushing the dirt off the cloak. 'This leads to Hogsmeade.'

'I feel like I've just discovered another person,' he complained.

'Come on, Reg, you're just annoyed that there are some things that go on that you're not aware of,' Emma replied as they walked.

He pouted, but said nothing until they reached the outskirts of the village.

'I think it's this one,' he said, pointing to a dishevelled hut.

It was a one-roomed hovel really, but a quick search revealed a large box with the symbol of a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth. The two sixteen-year olds shot each other a quick glance.
Emma's heart had started pounding, though with excitement or fear she didn't know. She placed a hand on each side and undid the catch. There was a piece of parchment, detailing what each of the gifts did along with a map of the giants' location in the Scottish highlands. Underneath that was a scythe, supposedly enchanted to act like a Dementor's kiss. A pair of small boots were tucked away in the corner: apparently they changed size to fit the wearer and allowed them to move twice as quickly. Specifically mentioned to be used as a last resort was a large vial of unicorn blood. Emma almost gagged at the thought of the amount of unicorns it would take to provide that dosage. She passed each thing wordlessly to Regulus, who put them in his Mokeskin Pouch. *I guess it turned out to be useful after all,* she thought.

'Did you get any instructions or help?' she asked him.

He shook his head. 'Only the full names, job description and addresses.'

She offered him a grimace. Impossible seemed like an understatement when it came to describing these tasks.
Sorry for my HUGE absence! No internet :/
Here are another 3 chapters (all at once, yes!) to make up for it.

'I can't quite believe that we're doing this,' Emma shook her head in disbelief.

They were in a pub not unlike the Leaky Cauldron in Inverness, discussing their plan. They had managed to scrounge another map of the area off of the innkeeper, which was currently spread across Emma's bed in their little room, the Dark Lord's one just next to it. Regulus had dragged his across slightly and was sprawled along the side of his, whereas Emma was sitting up, resting their notes on her legs as she jotted down useful information. Books cluttered the area around them - apparently Regulus's Sunday afternoon had been spent stealing books on Giants from the library. According to one of them, the highlands populated by giants were about a day due west: a spot now circled in red ink. Luckily, he had also thought of the Four-Point spell before they left, and they were pretty certain they'd be able to get there easily enough.

'You'd better start,' he replied grimly. 'Any idea on what you're going to say?'

'Dunno,' she replied. 'I thought I would wing it.'

This time it was Regulus who shook his head in disbelief. He pulled out one of the books he had been making her revise - about the Gurgs and tribes of Scotland. Sometimes Emma forgot that his favourite class was History of Magic. How he didn't get teased more often for that was beyond her, but she couldn't deny its usefulness.

'Who's the current Gurg of the Fachen tribe?'

'Hurrok,' Emma replied, hitting her head against the headboard of her bed. They had been over this a thousand times already.

'And he came to power...?'

'By not only killing the old Gurg, but also his wife and children.'

'And in his spare time he enjoys...?'

'Grabbing Muggle climbers off the side of the mountain and eating them,' Emma suppressed a shudder. 'He's one of the only Giants to eat humans.'

'And your plan is to wing it.'

He stared at her, unimpressed. Emma puffed up her cheeks and let out a long sigh. She felt like her brain was going numb. She also knew that she was better at assessing situations as they arose, rather than Regulus's meticulous planning. It was even taking a toll on the boy, she could see his eyes starting to close in tiredness.

'Come on, take my mind off it,' she stated. 'Tell me a story.'
'What, like the Beedle the Bard?' he snorted.

'No,' she rolled her eyes. 'Like the one about the Bloody Baron. Something you've found out from listening to Binns - you're probably the only person in the history of Hogwarts to continue that class in NEWTs.'

'That's because you can't concentrate for more than five consecutive minutes,' he gave her his best Black smirk, but obliged her, turning the light off.

Emma grinned into the darkness and snuggled down in her bed, shoving all of the books onto the floor with a clang. She could almost see his disapproving glare, but it made her want to laugh all the more.

'The Dementor's kiss is one of the worst punishments known to the wizarding world. Dying gives you a choice: to go on to what can be found after death, or to return as a ghost, forever living a half-life in the mortal realm. The Dementors can take that choice away from you, sucking your soul as you still live and breathe, leaving nothing but an empty shell in its wake. Once, a criminal wizard escaped as he was being sentenced to the kiss. This man was so dangerous that a whole horde of Dementors was sent after him. In a desperate attempt to escape, he stole a rowing boat and rowed as fast as he could to an island far out to sea. Maybe he thought the Dementors would give up, maybe he thought they couldn't cross the sea. Either way, he was horribly wrong, for as you know: Dementors are nothing if not relentless.'

'They caught up with him the minute his foot touched the beach, but the story did not end there. There was a colony of goblins, unbeknownst to man, living peacefully on the island. Goblins are not allowed wands, and were forced to see loved ones submitted to the kiss whilst watching helplessly from the sidelines. With the coming of midday, the Dementors retreated to the shadows, biding their time. Ragnok the Silver-handed was known for his ability to combine magic and steel together into a unique purpose. He set all of the villagers to work in order to speed up the process. Eventually a sickle was made, later known as the Sickle of Darkness. It could slice through anything, but Ragnok knew it would not be enough.'

'First, he took a three drops of blood from his left arm, to symbolise the giving of his body. Next, he gathered every piece of gold he had - and you know how much goblins love their gold - and ordered the villagers to melt it. When the blade was gilded with his fortune, he took each memory of his wife and daughter from his mind and imbued them into the sickle, his love given to the creation of the weapon. Finally, with tears in his eyes, he committed the worst crime a person can, slashing his wife's throat and ripping apart his soul. This sin bound his soul to the blade, but his guilt was too much to bear. He turned the sickle to himself and gave up any hope of redeeming himself of his crime, forcing him to remain between worlds, unable to do anything but replay his crime over and over again.'

'However when the Dementors returned, they were drawn to his daughter's pain. Mourning over the loss of her two parents, she picked up the first thing to hand to try and ward them off: the sickle. Much to her surprise, the weapon made contact and the Dementor burst in a shower of light. She wielded it against the rest and soon made short work of them. In order to enable the sickle to cut apart a soulless creature, Ragnok had to give his very soul to the weapon. Or so the legend goes.'

His voice faded into the night and he was almost certain his friend had fallen asleep before she spoke.

'How is it that someone so silent and secretive could keep such wondrous stories memorized in his head? I hardly ever hear you speak two consecutive sentences, and yet you have all of this locked away. Why do you keep everything so hidden away?' Emma finally let out the question that had
been eating at her since they met.

‘I collect stories,’ he replied, as if it were obvious. ‘I don’t give them away.’

‘Then why tell me?’

‘Because you asked.’

***

The next day saw them up at the crack of dawn, trekking up the Mòruisg mountain towards the giant encampment. They had been exiled to the mount when wizards had magically enchanted the top of it: making Muggles believe that it was smaller than it actually was. To a Muggle, it would appear easy to climb, getting turned around when they reached the half-way mark. This made sure that they were never exposed to the giants’ ruthlessness and Hurrok’s greed. However, the climb would not be so easy for a wizard. Emma thanked Merlin for her rigorous Quidditch training, but she was still struggling when Regulus called for a break near midday.

As he passed her a bottle of water, she realised that she was exhausted and sweaty: not the way she wanted to look in front of Regulus, and certainly not the way she wanted to present herself to the Gurg. She needed to look as though the trip was effortless. If there was one thing the Dark Lord had taught her, it was that there was power in appearance. She needed to give out waves of confidence, as though the thought that the giants wouldn’t join hadn’t even occurred to her. Plus, she wouldn’t be able to think straight by the time they reached the caves near the top.

‘Reg,’ she said, still panting slightly. ‘What would happen if I tried to Summon something from the castle?’

To his credit he gave her no incredulous look, simply frowning slightly as he thought. ‘Well some wizards say that it’s harder to summon things the further away they are. But most say that you just need to picture the object clearly in your mind. Why, did you forget someth-’

‘Accio Nimbus 1001s,’ Emma said deliberately, picturing their racing brooms, imagining the grain of the wood beneath her fingers. Unconsciously, she flexed them, as though she were going to take up her broom there and then.

Regulus raised his eyebrows at her, but whatever he was going to say was cut off by two brooms zooming towards them. Emma’s face lit up like a child’s in a candy store. Regulus’s jaw dropped.

‘How did they even get here so fast?’ he asked wonderingly. ‘Wait, this isn't mine! I nicked mine on the stands once when I fell.’ He showed her the smooth surface near the tail-brush.

‘Maybe Inverness is starting their own Quidditch team,’ Emma grinned, tying her hair out of her face. ‘Now this should go a lot faster.’

Before he could utter a protest, she swung a leg over the broomstick and flew in the direction of the mountains. *Why didn’t I think of this sooner?* she asked herself, enjoying the cool breeze. Nothing beat flying. In less than an hour they had spotted shapes moving down below. Regulus made a downwards motion with his hand, the wind being too strong to hear. She pulled her scarf tighter around her face. *That's right, Giants are supposed to be afraid of sudden displays of magic. Well… Here it goes.*

They alighted on the hill overlooking the valley’s encampment, stashed everything but the boots in a
small cave and walked down to the centre of the camp. *Even the smallest of these Giants could crush me like a bug,* Emma thought, looking at them curiously, though she made sure not to stare. She had never seen one up close before. Most of them stood at over twenty feet tall. She had thought that they would be like over-sized humans, but most of them had rounded, bulbous features and pot bellies. However, that didn't fool her. Their arms and legs, thick as tree trunks, were large and sinewy, their feet calloused from walking barefoot on the harsh mountain terrain. A couple of goats were roasting on spits above log fires. She couldn't help but glance at her travelling companion; he seemed as unperturbed as if he were walking through a spring meadow. *Right, confidence. That's the key.* Soon they arrived at a sort of clearing: an enormous bonfire surrounded by tree stumps and large logs and stones. She supposed that it was a meeting-place of sorts.

'I wish to speak to the Gurg,' she said loudly, sounding better than she felt. 'Does anyone speak English here? It's important.'

There was a bit of scuffling in the pack that had started to follow them and an enormous twenty-five-foot tall giant with tusks instead of canines. Something that the descriptions in the books failed to mention: he only had one leg. Emma tried not to stare, concentrating on staring him in the face in what she hoped was an assured manner.

'I have come on the behalf of the Dark Lord Voldemort,' she said, clearly enunciating every word. 'He wishes to bring a gift, for the might of Hurrok is legend in the wizarding world.'

It was not false: everyone had heard of the people-eating giant in the mountains. Flattery seemed like the right way to go though, because the Gurg had made no move to kill her yet. She would even go as far as to think he was smiling, though it was hard to see with the tusks. She drew out the boots, thankful that Regulus had thought of enlarging them on the way down.

'These boots will fit themselves to only a worthy wearer,' she invented wildly, taking cue from Regulus's tales. She saw him shoot her an alarmed look, but continued. 'They will double his strength and speed by half of his original power. The more powerful the wearer, the more powerful the boots. Only one so mighty as the Gurg of the Fachens could manage such a feat.'

She placed the boots on the ground with a bow, backing away. *And now we wait,* she thought. But the Gurg seemed to have different plans, for he grunted to one of the towering beings, not even moving towards the present. The other giant moved forwards and made a slow shooing movement with large palms.

'The Gurg say you go now,' he said in broken English. 'Come back next day, Gurg see you then.'

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That night saw them at the back of their small cave, huddled around Bluebell flames, though even their magic and the mountain's stones couldn't keep the chill out of the Scottish highland air, nor prevent the wind from suddenly gusting in. On top of that, neither knew if Emma's ploy had worked, though both agreed that not having lost their heads was a good sign. All the same, the two teenagers couldn't sleep well into the night. Emma found herself wishing that they had learned the Hot-Air Charm earlier in the year - Flitwick had announced it to be taught in February if they managed to keep up with the curriculum.

*That would have been useful right about now,* she thought, staring at the dancing shadows on the roof of their cave. Strangely, it was smooth and seamless, with none of the cracks and uneven stone common to natural caves. She wondered if they had been created by giants or humans, deciding that
the latter was more probable. *Maybe they felt guilty about driving the giants away and this is their attempt at making it up to them.* She was saved further thought on the matter when Regulus broke the silence.

'Um... Emma... I- I'm sorry about Saturday,' he stammered out, as though unsure of whether he should speak or not. He was staring into the flames, avoiding eye contact, the faintest hint of a blush on his usually pale cheeks. 'I didn't want you to think... I'm not unsympathetic.'

'You're not unsympathetic,' Emma repeated. *What on earth is he going on about?*

'I kind of forced you to... What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry,' he concluded. 'I'm sorry it happened to you and that I got there too late, and I'm sorry I didn't mention that on Saturday. I just didn't know what I could do other than help you with the flying.'

His words hovered in the air for a moment, as though the cave kept them sitting between them, letting them sink in for a second. Emma thought back to that Sorting ceremony so long ago and how it seemed to define their relationship forever onwards: understanding, but not talking, resolving the issue by flying. Hadn't she vowed never to speak to Regulus of the night she accidentally invaded his memories? Every time she discovered some hurt of his, he had actively avoided her so as to not talk about it. Should she mention it now? How could she tell him that she was sorry too?

'I... Thanks,' she ended up saying. 'I'm not unsympathetic either.'

Silence fell again, blanketing each in their own thoughts, but Emma felt that she had to add something, that she needed to convey something to her friend who seemed to always keep everything bottled up.

'I made a Bowtruckle hit Sirius in the face with a snowball,' she remembered.

Regulus's peal of laughter echoing through the cave was a good enough reply.

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Miraculously, they had managed to grab two or three hours of sleep. The following morning saw the two sixteen year olds warily make their way back into the giant fold. By the time they approached the Gurg's encampment, a plan had formed in Emma's mind. It was risky, but Regulus agreed that he thought it might work, through muttered replies. Just in case, they had infused their snake-puzzles with hexes and get-away spells over breakfast. Emma held hers tightly in her left hand, slightly hidden by her scarf.

This time Hurrok was waiting for them at the centre of a group of giants. He patted the huge stone next to him and Emma found herself hoisted up onto it. If she stood, then they were of an equal height, but she would have to be careful. Any sudden movement could see her breaking a leg or worse. *Lucky I'm not afraid of heights,* she thought. She couldn't help but notice that he was wearing the boots.

'The Gurg has hear of Lord Voldemort. Good things,' the translator said from behind her. 'What does Lord Voldemort want of the Gurg?'

'The Dark Lord believes that all magical creatu... beings have a right to the world as much as the Muggles. Why should we hide away, just because they're weak?' She knew from Regulus's lessons that Giants were very big on strength. 'This Ministry has failed us. They look at Giants with hatred, they think you are stupid and need to be controlled and monitored. They have spoken of destroying
Giants altogether.'

At this the Gurg roared and stood, taking a step in her direction. Instinctively she stumbled back and was saved from falling off the ledge by Regulus shoving her back forwards. She shot him a thank you glance and noticed that he was gripping his wand beneath his sleeve. She hadn't even noticed him being lifted up next to her.

'Lord Voldemort doesn't want that!' she had to yell to make herself heard. Her heart was pounding and she knew that she was taking a risk. She had spoken of her plan to Regulus, who had an Apparition plan ready just in case. However that would mean failure worse than not trying; it would mean incompetence. 'He wants to get rid of the Ministry and all of their doctrines. He wants a strong, magical leadership. He wants Giants to go wherever they want, not stay confined to caves in the mountains.'

Hurrok shoved his head next to hers, his breath so strong that she had to brace herself from the wind... and the smell.

'That's why he hopes that Hurrok, Gurg of the Fachens, will use this Sickle of Darkness by the Dark Lord's side when he takes control of the country.'

She unwrapped the sickle from its trappings. Again, Regulus cast a surreptitious engorgement charm for it to fit the hand of a Giant. Emma found herself barely able to lift it, until Regulus muttered "Wingardium Leviosa" next to her. At first Hurrok looked impressed at her "strength", before his eyebrows met dangerously in the middle and he growled something intelligible.

'The Gurg ask why he use "Sickle" when he has weapons and hands of own. Do wizards think Giants need help fighting?' the interpreter asked menacingly.

'Try it out: it can slay even a Dementor,' Emma managed to squeak out. 'That's something bare hands can't.'

The other giant spoke and the Gurg looked at her for a long while. She waited with baited breath, the tension raising the hairs on the back of her neck. She was reaching into her pocket for the head-part of her snake puzzle, maybe it was time to Apparate out of here, when suddenly a hand lurched forwards to grab the Sickle. In one fluid motion, the Gurg beheaded one of his attendants. Emma blinked and felt her heart start to beat in her throat, backing into Regulus and grabbing his arm.

'On the count of three, think of the Three Broomsticks,' he whispered. 'One...Two...' The Gurg roared with laughter, his tusks rubbing against his top lip in an alarming way. Blood trickled down his chin, but he didn't seem to mind. Soon many Giants joined in, and the interpreter leaned forwards to explain, grinning with his square, yellow teeth the size of Emma's hands.

'The Gurg say that giant stole his food. He say: if Sickle cut Giant steel like soft flesh, Gurg finally cut seat the way he want it.'

Emma and Regulus shared a confused look, but just then Hurrok swept the sickle along the stone he was sitting on, making it completely flat. He then made a show of sitting down, swinging the Sickle onto his shoulder. Several attendants jerked their heads back in alarm, for fear of being beheaded. Emma took a deep breath to calm herself before attempting to speak.

'So the Gurg likes the gift?' she asked hopefully. The giant translated.

Hurrok's big head swung forwards once more, until Emma found herself face to face with beady yellow eyes.
'Gurg like de gift,' he grunted, jutting his blood-red fangs out in content.

'I'm not going back there tomorrow,' Regulus said, shaking his head.

They had respectfully walked out of the encampment with their heads held high, as though it had been nothing more than they had expected. Once out of sight, they had hightailed it back to their secluded cave, gasping for breath and wondering how they had made it out alive.

'I'm not asking you to,' Emma shuddered, dousing out the fire. 'Let the Gurg play with his new toy for a while: I'm sure the Dark Lord will hear of it.'

_Surely the Dark Lord doesn't expect a sixteen-year old to bring back the giants as proof,_ she thought. _I don't even know where he keeps his army, when he isn't assaulting the Ministry._

'Let's get out of here.'

'Couldn't agree with you more,' Emma said. 'Good thing we signed up for those apparition classes!'

She pictured Hogsmeade clearly in her head and started to turn on the spot.

'Wait!' Regulus grabbed her arm. 'Don’t you think it would be a little suspicious for the Ministry to detect underage magic near the mountains? We created the Bluebell flames in the inn, and there's so much magic hiding the encampment that they wouldn't have noticed anything, but here...'

'Oh right,' Emma's face fell as she lowered her wand. 'Back to brooms and trains?'

'I'm afraid so.'
'I think I see him,' Emma squinted at the dark silhouette of a man disappearing down the alleyway.

'Let me check,' Regulus took the binoculars from her and zoomed in. 'It's no use, we're going to have to get closer.'

They were in Surrey and after the fourth person on Regulus's list of five. After regrouping at the Leaky Cauldron - Hogsmeade was too suspicious - they realised that they had exactly three days before the Polyjuice Potion ran out, and Barty's absence would become suspicious - if he hadn't been found out already. They needed to act quickly. Luckily, each inn had a wizarding directory that could cross-reference the Dark Lord's details on the wizards. After that, they had been to Flourish and Blotts. It had been impossible to find anything in the wizarding bloodline books, since they were all Muggleborns, but since most worked for the Ministry, they had been able to scrounge some more information up.

The first wizard had been easy. They had managed to scare him into hiding; pretending that they were from the Order of the Phoenix and that Lord Voldemort was after him. Since he never actually defied the Dark Lord, only gave information on people he had found out to be Death Eaters, it was easy to convince him to pack up and move to America, where the world was safer. In a lucky twist of events, the second had been killed off before they could get to her: actually belonging to the Order of the Phoenix, she had been caught up in a surprise raid and fallen from her broom in the ensuing fight.

The third was a Ministry Official who agreed to help pass Anti-Muggle laws so long as the Dark Lord overlooked her Mudblood heritage. Regulus and Emma had looked at each other and immediately agreed. In their opinion the Muggleborns weren't supposed to be harmed anyway - just given special treatment because of their lack of knowledge of the wizarding world. Once they were fully integrated, then the blood status would no longer be an issue.

Unfortunately for the meantime, Muggleborns were seen as lesser, so they understood her want for secrecy. They also took pity on her and her brother, Regulus in particular shuddered when she tearfully recounted the story of how her parents had died, leaving her alone with a Squib for a brother. Dolores Umbridge was not much older than they, so Emma suggested she pretend ancestry with the Selwyne - Alecto had told her that Amycus was always going on about how Selwyn disappointed the Dark Lord. In one swipe, the Dark Lord would gain a follower from the Ministry and a humiliating if harmless punishment for the Death Eater. Little did they know that Dolores had already twisted the truth in order to make them help her.

Fourth on their hit list, Neil Abbot was an Auror of note, having helped Mad-Eye Moody capture several Death Eaters - and not always sending them to Azkaban. It was obvious that he would not be persuaded or tricked into giving up, so they had been watching his home town all day. This was their first sighting of the man, and it seemed like he was as easy to lose as he was hard to find. They snuck down the alleyway as best as they could with the Invisibility Cloak thrown over their shoulders. At one point the Auror turned and cast a spell which was obviously supposed to reveal them, but the Cloak seemed to have protection spells woven into it, because nothing happened. *This is our chance,* thought Emma. She looked towards Regulus and he nodded.

'*Expelliarmus,*' Regulus cried just as Emma cast the Muffling Spell on the whole alleyway.

Abbot's wand went clattering into the shadows and he raised his hands to signal his surrender. Regulus advanced on him, wand still pointing at his chest, but no words came out of his mouth. His
hand quivered slightly.

'Don't move,' he growled eventually.

'Your master told you to kill me, didn't he?' the Auror guessed. 'Not so easy taking a life, is it? How old are you?'

Regulus pulled his hood further over his face; he couldn't be recognised. Emma stood watch, looking from one exit to the next, hoping that no one would pass by. This was the Auror's hometown, his wife might be worried if he was late home from work and try to go looking for him.

'You deserve it,' Regulus replied.

Abbot might have been an Auror, but he took so much pleasure in his work that he kept on getting passed over for promotion. Oddly, he was rather like Bartemius Crouch Sr. with his "duel-first-ask-later" policy. But this person didn't seem like a sadistic killer. On the other hand, Emma supposed that no one did. In any case, he was awfully put-together for someone who had a wand pointed at his face.

'Go on then,' he said calmly, spreading his arms wide. 'Get it over with.'

Regulus took a deep breath. 'Avada...' his voice trailed off.

Emma could almost hear his frustration. He was always talking about Narcissa's advice: to get them quickly, so that he didn't have time to over think it. Just then, the Auror seized his chance, punching the sixteen year old in the mouth like a common Muggle brawler and diving in the direction of his wand. Before Regulus could get up, the man was back, pointing his wand at the boy's throat. A vicious smile appeared on his face, and Emma recognised him from the Daily Prophet headlines a couple of weeks ago. He had been facing enquiries at work for abuse of his station, and only Barty Crouch's intervention had saved him. It was scary how people could change within seconds. When Regulus still had his wand, he had looked just like any old family man hurrying to get home from a hard day at work.

'Should have taken the chance to run while you could kid,' the man said, and started a spell, swishing the wood in a complicated manner.

'Diffindo!' The word blurted out of Emma's mouth before she even registered it and the Auror's arm snapped like a twig.

He gave a howl of pain and Regulus took advantage of the confusion to cast the Reductor curse.

'Come on,' he said, tugging at her arm, but Emma stood rooted to the spot.

He pulled harder, but only succeeded in knocking Emma's hood down. She took no notice, transfixed in horror at the sight that lay before her. Abbot had fallen to his knees, clutching at what appeared to be a pile of dust on the floor. His mouth gaped open in a silent scream, his eyes bulging in horror. It might have seemed comical, a man groping at the dusty pavement, but Emma knew better.

'His arm...' she whispered. The man's eyes snapped towards her, and she couldn't tell whether he was pleading for mercy or demanding retribution. A faint spark emitted from the dust, and his left hand went scrabbling for his wand.

'We need to go!'
Emma tore her eyes away from the…probably now ex-Auror and raced through the streets after Regulus, not stopping until they found their brooms safely hidden in a Muggle shed.

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Once they were a safe distance away, they found a village to spend the night in. It felt like they had done more flying in this past week than in the entire six years they had been at Hogwarts. On top of that, they only flew at night, to reduce the amount of Muggles that might see them. *Thank Merlin brooms don't emit a magical signal*, Emma thought, spiralling down towards a field.

'So,' Regulus said resolutely, alighting on the ground and running a hand through his hair - a sure sign that he was troubled. 'I've failed. Well, thanks for your help so far.'

'What do you mean?' Emma asked, following suit. 'We still have two days 'til the end of the week to find the last guy.'

'Yeah, but Abbot's going to be on his guard now,' he replied in an exasperated tone. 'We're dead meat if we get within three feet of him.'

'Why would we want to? You did what was needed, Regulus,' Emma was nonplussed. Then realisation dawned on her. 'Wait…You don't…'

'I don't what?' Regulus prompted.

Emma was silent for a few seconds, choosing her words with caution.

'When you cast the Reductor curse… Regulus, it disintegrated his wand arm. We won't be seeing him capture any more of the Dark Lord's followers for a long time.'

Even under the pale moonlight, she could see his face whiten, his lips tighten in horror.

'You did what had to be done,' she said soothingly.

'No I didn't,' he replied. 'I couldn't…I- All I could think was that when we were watching him...' he took a deep breath. 'He has a wife, Emma. A family, just like any ordinary person. I know our cover might be blown now and it's my fault, but I couldn't cast the curse, I just couldn't.'

Emma knew which curse he was referring to.

'Hey, it's okay,' she put a hand on her friend's arm. 'Look at me. Listen to me when I say that you did a good job. No one's asking you to kill him. We just...we just thought that was our best shot. But the Dark Lord specifically said you were to incapacitate them, take them out of the running and that's exactly what you did with Abbot. We didn't kill any of the others, did we? We'll just have to find a way to make sure he doesn't find out who we are...'

'You're right,' Regulus visibly took a deep breath, letting it out slowly with eyes closed.

When he opened them, he almost looked like himself again. Emma wanted to reassure him some more, but he was back to business, ignoring - as usual - his internal turmoil. He frowned, thinking things over as they made their way to the hotel. Suddenly, Emma noticed that it was a Muggle village. They didn't have any Muggle money on them, having just scooped up what wizarding gold they had on them the day they left. She was just about to point this fact out to Regulus when he spoke again, a thoughtful look on his face.
'Maybe we could implicate the last Muggleborn on here in Abbot's attack…We just need to find out how…The Imperius curse is the obvious choice, but I doubt I could cast it, how about you?'

Emma shook her head. 'I don't think so, we haven't even studied the theory of it. You know that the Unforgivables need an excessive amount of willpower to hold. Maybe we could cast it for five minutes, but there's no way that could ever be enough...' she trailed off, before an idea occurred to her. 'However... I am rather good at Memory Charms...'

Regulus grinned.
"Suspected involvement of Ministry official Christopher Dean in murder attempt on prominent Auror Neil Abbot. Abbot was in his home town of Surrey when the fight happened, escaping with his life but not in one piece. Rumour has it that he will be placed on office duty, after the tragic event of his disintegrated arm. Abbot himself is unavailable for comment, placed in Spell Damage in St Mungo's Hospital for the time being, but "We will be seeking justice," Mrs Abbot told our reporter. "We cannot allow attacks to continue, even if it was a Ministry official."

Christopher Dean, in an unexpected turn of events, turned up at the Auror's office this morning in the Ministry, confessing his guilt and blaming his actions on passion. He admitted to Abbot catching Dean and Mrs Abbot in an affair. "I never thought it would go this far," he confided to the Daily Prophet. "It just happened so fast." Mrs Abbot has so far been unavailable for comment on this subject.

Alecto laid the newspaper down on the bedside table and proffered a glass of orange juice to Emma. 'Honestly, there won't be any reason to join up at this rate. Aurors are falling like flies.' She lowered her voice. 'I heard Avery almost got the Prewetts, but they escaped by the skin of their teeth. Next time, those blood-traitors won't be so lucky. According to Amycus, they've been at the frontlines on the defence against our troops. Isn't it weird to call them our troops? But I guess that would be the term for them, if this is a war. What are you smiling at?'

'Nothing,' Emma shook her head.

She had flooed to Hogsmeade late the previous night, startling Rosmerta, who had been quickly shushed to secrecy when Emma had invented a wild tale of romance and forbidden love. Regulus had agreed to stay at his parents until the end of the week - he wanted to tell his father about his success. Apparently the man had become morose of late, and maybe this news would cheer was under no illusion about what was making Mr Black "morose". Sirius was loudly telling anyone who would listen that he was proud to be a blood-traitor and Muggle-lover. There was no way for Orion to get his son back.

She also suspected that Regulus was trying to make up for his brother's mistakes. They had never actually made it to the Muggle hotel, preferring to immediately go in search of the last Muggleborn before the news got out. It had taken them the better part of the next day to perfect the Memory Charm and make sure it would hold - Bellatrix's Legilimency classes had come in useful after all. In a moment of exhaustion, Regulus had admitted that Orion wished the Dark Lord could forgive Sirius on account of his pure blood, so his younger son wanted to raise his hopes of getting into the Dark Lord's graces. His story would stay vague though, so as not to worry the Blacks.

Emma had barely made it back through the secret passageways undetected, thanking her lucky stars that the Invisibility Cloak was with her every five minutes. By the time she had reached the Hospital Wing, she was ready to collapse into the bed. Luckily, Barty was allergic to the potions Madame Pomfrey had been giving him, so it had been easy - though not pretty - to pretend to be really ill. He had gratefully stumbled off to the Slytherin dungeons to sleep it off after filling Emma in on life at Hogwarts, but only in return for a full account of their exploits the next day.

Alecto looked at her suspiciously, but didn't press the matter. 'You're looking better today, in any case. I'll tell Rabastan to stop by, he's been sulking since you stopped laughing at his jokes.'

'They probably weren't that funny anyway,' Emma offered.
'No, I'm sure they weren't,' Alecto raised an eyebrow. 'But you two usually seem to have the same humour.'

'Come on Alecto!' Emma whined. 'Even you laughed at McGonagall finding a bunch of Hufflepuffs terrorised by Moaning Myrtle because they had never seen a ghost!'

'I simply found their ignorance ridiculous,' Alecto pretended to turn her nose up, but smiled anyway. 'I never thought I'd be the one to say this, but tone down the anti-Muggle act around here. We wouldn't want to attract suspicion.'

'Look at you,' Emma teased. 'I'm away one week, and Helen's already corrupted you with her "safety first" view.'

'Well excuse me if I don't want to be made into a martyr!' Alecto exclaimed. 'Anyway, I overheard Dumbledore saying Regulus was coming back this evening, looks like you'll be out of the Wing just in time for him not to worry. You know Reg, he'd go crazy if he thought your Quidditch team wasn't in top form just before the final Gryffindor-Slytherin match.'

Emma closed her eyes and inwardly groaned, the Gryffindor-Slytherin match. I had forgotten all about it... The qualifying matches had all ended, but one, though everyone knew that Hufflepuff would slaughter Ravenclaw. However, that wouldn't be enough to get to Gryffindor and Slytherin's level, so there would be one last match between Gryffindor and Slytherin to determine the first and second places, and one between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff to decide who would be third and who would be last. Trust Alecto to worry about her when there was still two months before the finals. Though it was true that Emma would be planning their attack far in advance if she was in a normal mood. Alecto frowned at the lack of enthusiasm.

'What? I thought you'd be glad to see Reg again. You've been going on about him not visiting ever since you got in,' Alecto was saying.

'Oh really?' This time it was Emma's turn to raise an eyebrow, seems Barty is in need of a stern talking to, sneaky little bastard. 'Don't worry, I'm just worried about the match.'

'I'm sure you've been planning the plays the whole week you've been cooped up in here... Are you sure you're alright?' Alecto frowned and placed a cool hand on Emma's forehead. 'I think I'm going to get Madame Pomfrey just in case.'

'What would I do without you Alecto?' Emma asked.

The red-head turned around, taken aback. She blinked. 'Nothing, of course.'

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'Emma, you're finally out!' Lou cried, running across the Great Hall to sweep her cousin into her arms. 'I was getting worried.'

Madame Pomfrey had turned on her mother hen mode and shooed Alecto out of the room that morning, giving Emma an extra potion to drink that made her fall into a dreamless sleep until evening. The sun had set by the time she awoke, but the nurse had finally decided that the fever had gone and that she was fit to go, warning her to drink plenty of fluids. Emma left ravenously, forcing herself to walk to the Great Hall instead of hurrying towards the food, as her stomach was urging her to.
'Don't worry, it was just the Firebug flu,' Emma comforted, slightly taken aback at the display of affection. She returned the hug gratefully though, she had missed the simple comfort of it.

'But it took so long for you to recover! I can't believe Madame Pomfrey didn't realise you were allergic to the healing potions.'

'Well, to be fair it wasn't on my medical records,' Emma admitted, privately adding, *because it's not me who's allergic to them.*

'In any case, you should owl your parents. They've been sick with worry!' the French girl said, widening her eyes to emphasize her point.

'So sick with worry that they didn't bother to write?' Emma challenged her cousin.

'But they... Tante Natalie sent your favourite Chocolate Frogs with a letter attached.'

'And my father?' Emma asked in a low voice.

'He didn't know what to say,' James cut in from nowhere, giving her a hug. 'Come on Ems, you know Dad. He's not good at apologies. He misses you, they both do. I took the liberty of eating one of those Frogs they sent you, I saw Mum's note.'

*Please come home soon.*

Those four letters threatened to break Emma's heart, but she had held on resolutely. As Alecto had pointed out, if she went home these holidays or wrote back, it wouldn't prove anything. She'd been at Hogwarts for most of the time since she left, so they wouldn't have seen her anyway. Nothing would change. They seemed perfectly happy without her anyway. All the same, she tightened her grip on James, burying her face in his familiar smelling shirt. The thing she loved about her twin was that he still just knew things. He let her stay there for a while, giving her a look filled with compassion and guilt when she drew away. She knew that somehow he felt it was his fault, for being sorted into Gryffindor. *I should tell him he's the best brother in the world*, she thought, her mind wandering to Sirius and Regulus. *Why is he friends with him? He's nothing like James or Remus at all...*

'Wait, you're still mad about Christmas?' Lou asked, having missed the sibling exchange. *Maybe I'll tell him later then.* 'I don't understand: the argument wouldn't have even happened in the first place if you weren't too proud to admit you helped with Sirius's present.'

'It's not that,' Emma protested. 'How would you like it if your parents told you they preferred someone they met less than five years ago to you?'

'I wouldn't know,' Lou replied in a choked voice. 'My parents are dead.'

'Lou,' Emma started, a lump in her throat, but the Ravenclaw had already hurried out of the room.

James gave her a meaningful look. She could almost hear his thoughts, *even I have more tact than that*, he seemed to reproach. The glow she had felt in her stomach seemed to shrivel and die. But he said nothing, only saying he was happy she was better. Suddenly, Emma had lost her appetite. She turned straight around, to the direction of the Owlsery. Lou was right, she only had one mother. *No need to punish her because Dad's so prejudiced,* she thought.

But once the quill was in her hand, she didn't know what to write. She put it off by first starting a letter to Narcissa. They hadn't spoken in a while, and there were some things that only the older girl knew the response to.
Dear Narcissa,

I'm sorry I haven't replied in a while, caught up with Quidditch and the likes. By the way, we won against Hufflepuff, so we're in the finals! I hope you're proud of me. Lucius may have told you that we had a pretty special Hogsmeade visit last week. I can't say much here, but suffice it to say that Regulus and I have given work our best shot. Something scared me though. In a practice duel, when my opponent was about to use an unknown spell, I used a curse on him instead of a Defence spell. I could have used Expellarmus or a Protection charm, but I retaliated with the offensive. It sounds more like "Dark Arts" than 'Defence Against the Dark Arts', doesn't it? Maybe Pierre is right, and Curse-Breaker is the job for me. At least you don't get judged in a survivalist situation.

My mother sent me a letter, but I haven't replied. How do you speak to someone you love, but you're not sure if they love you back? At least not enough... I know she understands me, but she never says anything in front of my father the way she used to. Maybe she's still ill? I feel torn: On one hand I want her to be ill, so there's a reason for her to abandon me. Is that bad? How do you feel about Andromeda? Regulus told me she's been blasted off the tree. I suppose you were never that close to Sirius in the first place.

Enough about that, how are the wedding preparations going? Not interfering too much with your nursing course, are they? I suppose you have a whole horde of Blacks to help you! Are you having it at Malfoy Manor? Speaking of which, how are the Malfoys? (Aside from Lucius).

Missing you,

Emma

She sealed the letter with a blob of wax from the writing desk and watched the owl slowly grow smaller and smaller until it was nothing but a speck in the distance. Sighing, she drew out another sheet of parchment. Her quill hovered near the top and dripped with a slight splat. She watched the blob of ink grow larger and larger on the parchment as if in a trance. Ten minutes later, a shadow fell over the page.

'How's the letter-writing going?' asked Regulus.

Emma glanced up questioningly, quickly wiping the nib of her quill and turning the parchment around.

'Your brother told me you'd be up here,' he explained.

'It's harder than it looks,' she said defensively.

'Trust me, I'm an expert when it comes to family estrangement,' Regulus said with a wry grin. 'It seems like names are dropping off the tapestry like flies nowadays.'

He moved her bag and sat next to her on the windowsill, peering at her parchment.

'So you've been slowly freezing to death up here only to…what? Write a letter in morse code?'

Emma smiled despite herself and conjured some bluebell flames. 'Better?'
'Much,' he replied. 'So I would suggest by starting off with a normal sentence like "Dear Mum and Dad", or "Dear Mother and Father", or in Sirius's case "Hello Mother".'

'Sirius wrote to your parents?' Emma asked incredulously.

'Yeah, but only to ask them to send him the rest of his stuff. Of course, Mother went and burnt the lot. She's mad because she can't get rid of the Gryffindor banners and Muggle posters though. He must have put a Permanent Sticking Charm on them.'

Emma rolled her eyes, typical Sirius. Though the thought did bring a smile to her face. Say what you will, but never say that boy doesn't have nerve, she thought admiringly. Then she realised what she had thought and quickly turned her mind back to the task at hand.

**Dear Mum**, she wrote, **thank you for the Chocolate Frogs (though James ate most of them).**

'A good start,' Regulus said after a while.

'But I don't know what to write next,' Emma explained, heaving a sigh. She looked out of the window towards the frosted grounds. The moon was shining on the lake, accentuating every ripple. 'I wish I could just stay at Hogwarts, you know? Forget about everything else.'

'Says the girl who skived off a week of class to go chasing after giants and Aurors,' Regulus teased. 'But I know what you mean. Still, you have to at least write to your parents, or you'll end up like Sirius.'

Emma's ears pricked up at the tone of bitterness in this last sentence.

'I'm not like Sirius,' she said hurriedly justified herself. 'I didn't abandon my family, I still love them, it's just that they don't even want to understand! I could never explain the amazing things we did this week like you can.'

As if to prove her point she hurriedly scribbled the rest of the letter.

*I'm feeling much better: Madame Pomfrey just needed to find the right healing potions. How are you? James said you had a check up at the Healer's at the start of the month, but we haven't heard from you since. I probably won't be back for the Easter holidays: I have a lot of revision to catch up on. James is staying too. How are things at home?*

*I miss you,*

**Emma**

'Relax,' Regulus said as she tied the parchment to an owl. 'I didn't say you were Sirius. You don't pretend that James is a stranger you barely know, do you? Besides, I actually like you.'

'Thanks,' she smiled at him. 'For what it's worth, I think your brother still loves you, deep down.'

'So deep down it'll never see the light of day,' Regulus said quietly, with a sad smile. He seemed to shake himself. 'Why are we moping about, anyway? We did the Dark Lord's impossible tasks, didn't we? I think that calls for a celebration. Do you still have your Invisibility Cloak?'

'Regulus Arcturus Black, I do believe I've rubbed off on you,' Emma exclaimed jokingly.

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'I'm going to bed,' Emma said, making a show of stretching and yawning. 'See you tomorrow.'

A chorus of "night"s and one "but we haven't even started Transfiguration!" from Alecto followed her up the stairs. Unfortunately, Barty had had to catch up on his own schoolwork in the Hospital Wing, so she was a full week behind on everything. She heard Regulus make up an excuse about being tired from the Floo journey just before closing the door. She quickly bundled up a jumper and some jeans into a bag and stuffed it under her bed for later. By the time Lucinda had closed the door, she was in her pyjamas and brushing her teeth.

'I can't believe Rabastan,' Helen said. 'As soon as Regulus stops forcing him to work, he does nothing but joke around.'

'What's this?' Emma asked, walking out of the bathroom.

'We decided to call it a night,' Helen replied. 'I was paired with Rabastan on our Bowtruckle assignment, but he's being impossible.'

'Besides, it's hard to concentrate on homework on a Sunday night,' Lucinda added, before locking herself in the bathroom.

'You can thank me later,' Alecto said to Emma, her voice barely audible over the sound of running water.

'Why?'

'Because, Potter, it was me who decided to go to bed - and without Regulus, you, or me, the others don't stand half a chance at revising,' the red-head replied smugly. 'And now you get to do whatever you two have planned.'

'We don't...' Emma trailed off as she was given a look. 'It's just so he can tell me how it went with his parents.'

'Uh-huh,' Alecto smirked.

'Gah,' Emma rolled her eyes, but Helen was looking at them oddly so she dropped the subject and climbed into her four poster bed.

An hour later, the only sounds in the room were regular breathing and the laps of the lake against the windows. Emma grabbed her bag and hastily changed, stuffing the Invisibility Cloak along with her scarf into her coat's pockets. After a quick look to see if the common room was empty, she snuck down, hopping over the stair that creaked. Regulus seemed to be having a staring contest with the fire, occasionally glancing around to see if anyone was there. When he saw her, his raised a finger to his lips and crossed the room to swing the passageway open. Only when they were outside did they dare speak.

'So, what was your plan?' Emma asked.

'There's something in Hogsmeade I wanted to show you,' he replied enigmatically.

'Oh really? At midnight on a Sunday night?'

'You'll see,' he said. 'So…To the passage on the third floor?"
'To the passage on the third floor!' she replied, as if they were embarking upon some sort of epic quest.

They moved as quickly as they could through the Hogwarts halls and stairwells, until suddenly Regulus held out an arm. 'I think I heard someone.'

'We're Prefects,' Emma hissed back.

'Prefects that aren't supposed to be on patrol,' he reminded her. 'Have you got your Cloak?'

'Sure,' Emma fumbled with her coat for a minute. 'Oh no…I lost it.'

'You what?' he asked incredulously. 'Are you sure?'

She patted down every pocket, but only came up with her scarf. She grimaced in apology. 'We're going to have to go back.'

Regulus rolled his eyes, but suddenly turned his head back towards the corridor. Emma followed his gaze, trying to see what captured his attention in the dim lighting. There didn't seem to be anyone there...

'Miaow.'

Mrs Norris had found them.
'Quick, run!' Emma grabbed Regulus's arm and sprinted back the way they came. 'There it is,' Regulus pointed at a shimmering spot on the stairs. 'We're going to have to lose the cat though.'

They rushed onto the staircase just as it started to move, turning around to see Mrs Norris sitting on the landing, head cocked and mewing pitifully. Emma stuck her tongue out before searching for the lost Invisibility Cloak. 'Phew,' she said, picking it up. 'That was close. I don't know what I would have done if I had lost it.'

Regulus just stared at her. 'How do you lose a bloody Invisibility Cloak?'

'Um...' Emma was saved from having to answer by spotting Filch on the platform the staircase was attaching itself to. 'Let's go up.'

They raced back up the staircase and around the corner, zigzagging across the halls until they were sure no one was following them. However, this meant that they had no idea where they were.

'So, we need to get to the third floor right?' Regulus panted, hands on his knees.

'Ending, it's right,' Emma said, shaking the dust out of the cloak. 'It's the one-eyed witch just next to the Defence Against the Dark Arts statue.'

The irony of the location made them both smile. There was a lull in which Regulus was obviously trying to figure out how the passageway worked and Emma was untangling the cloak. There was a high risk of getting caught near the third floor, since that was where the teachers traded shifts. It was also the one with the most secret rooms behind portraits or tapestries - one of which Emma had dragged James through barely a week ago.

'Do you use Alohamora? I didn't think so, but I can't remember. It seems such a useful thing to know and yet I forgot all about our escape from Hogwarts,' he mused aloud.

"'Our escape for Hogwarts'," Emma laughed. 'You make it sound like we're criminals. Anyway, for future reference, the spell is Dissendium. If you're nice I just might let you- aah!' she screamed.

Regulus had stood back up straight just as she threw the cloak over their heads. She had put an arm out for balance, but her hand never met solid wall. For the second time in a week, they found themselves tangled in a heap on the dusty ground.

'Sorry,' Regulus breathed, turning his head to face her once their coughing had abated.

A strange expression flashed across his face, but disappeared too fast for her to catch it. Suddenly, Emma became painfully aware of their proximity. She broke eye contact, her gaze flickering past the boy to see a sort of doorway with several steps leading to it.

'It wasn't your fault,' she replied. 'I think we just found another passage.'

After several minutes of trying to extract themselves, they were examining the new doorway. Emma drew back as a seventh-year Prefect walked by, but she seemed to look right through them. Strangely, she patted her hair, rearranging it as she went by.
'I think it's a mirror,' Regulus said slowly. He lifted a hand to touch it, but it was as if it were smoke. 'A one-way mirror.'

He quickly withdrew his hand before anyone wondered what fingertips were doing floating halfway through the mirror. *They'd probably think it was one of the ghosts pranking them,* thought Emma.

'Well, we may as well try to see where this leads,' Regulus said, gesturing towards the passageway.

'*Lumos Maxima,*' Emma said, lighting her wand. Dust particles floated in the light, making the corridor look oddly holy, or at least ethereal. 'It looks like it hasn't been used in years. Merlin, look at these cobwebs!'

They made their way down the passageway which, although quite wide, was filthy, with rats running around through cracks in the walls and across the floor. They left footsteps an inch deep in the dust. The wide steps were spaced every few feet and the air slowly became cool and humid, mould starting to appear near the top of the walls and ceiling in black and green patches. *Are we going under the Great Lake?* she wondered. After a while, there was a gentle incline, leading up instead of down, and before they knew it they were climbing a very small and narrow staircase, avoiding cobwebs that looked like they had taken decades to create. Regulus had to stoop, and was relieved when they found themselves in a large and empty room.

'It was rectangular in shape, with a small hole in the floor at the back with a banister leading to what Emma supposed was another staircase. Four windows lined the walls lengthwise, with only three inserted into the other two. They were arched at the top, narrow but very tall, letting the starlight light up the room. The ceiling was high, and would have reminded Emma of a ballroom if it wasn't the only room in the top of the building. Instead it was oddly exposed, with a view of the snowy outdoors everywhere she turned.

'I wonder where this is?' Emma voiced both Slytherins' thoughts. 'It looks abandoned.'

Regulus crossed over to one of the windows. 'I don't believe it,' he breathed. 'We're above Hogsmeade Station.'

'Well that would have been a pretty helpful piece of information about a week ago,' Emma said half-jokingly, before joining him at the window. 'It looks cold outside. I'm glad I brought a coat.'

'This is perfect,' Regulus murmured. Emma looked at him questioningly, but he merely shook his head and led the way down.

'It was snowing, but barely, tiny flakes drifting in the wind. The compact snow on the ground crunched like gravel under their feet. Everything looked surreal: shades of black, white and grey. Not a colour was to be seen, save their green and silver scarves and Emma's brown boots. Regulus seemed to know where he was going, but he headed away from Hogsmeade, not towards it. Emma followed, wrapping her scarf more securely around her neck so as not to catch a cold before their big game. She forced it out of her head - she would deal with that another day. They stepped off of the path and into the forest; she couldn't decide whether it was eerie or not. The aspen trees stretched as far as the eye could see, looking bare without their green canopy usually seen in the three other seasons. Though they might have appeared dead, it wasn't the case, with their white barks looking creamy under the snow. The night created a sense of mystery that was lacking come dawn, and yet it seemed to bring a sense of innocence to the forest.

'Here we are,' Regulus said, emerging from the trees.

There was a small jetty that Emma vaguely recognised it from her first year. *We must have gotten the
boats from here, she realised. It had seemed so much larger when she was small. Or maybe it was just that it was so crowded. Along the side sat a couple of benches, probably for the teachers who had to guide the students to the castle. Emma wondered if the inhabitants of Hogsmeade ever came to picnic here. Maybe the kids learnt to swim and dive, jumping off the jetty into the water below.

Because the real beauty was the Great Lake itself. At school on a sunny day, it would be glassy and mirror-like, but as soon as the sky turned grey, the lake would seem like a bottomless pit - impossible to discern a hint of colour in its depths - hence the nickname "Black Lake". However, here, away from the magical lights of Hogwarts, it seemed like the water was giving up her secrets to the moon. A smooth expanse of pure silver seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see, save for the occasional glint of ripples here or there. It had stopped snowing, but there was still a slight breeze, causing the trees to seem to create dancing shadows on the surface of the water that teased each other in the moonlight, breaking away with a small wave only to return to their original places.

After watching the scene over and over again for a while, Emma looked at Regulus, about to say something about the place, but no words fitting enough to describe the scene in front of her would do it justice. He seemed to understand though, because he gave her one of his rare happy smiles, the one that barely turned the corner of his mouth. He might love secrets, but she suspected that he was even happier to share them. The lake was his discovery, and he was enjoying her reaction to it just as much as the actual scenery.

She suddenly realised that his eyes were so mirror-like that they reflected the lake. His usual grey hadn't changed, but there were nuances, a tiny world within the orbs. The moonlight made it hard to see his pupils, covered by the sheen of the water. It was oddly fitting: the lake seemed to describe him better than she could have anyway. Though it seemed like his reflective mask had been slipping recently. She wondered if it was because of that fateful Occlumency lesson; why hide something she'd already seen? Maybe it would be reinforced now they were back at school.

Regulus broke eye contact and looked back towards the lake, shifting his weight from one foot to another. 'I thought this place was fitting for our situation. Real, but as if you were in a dream.'

She wondered how he had found out about the peacefulness of it. He would have needed to walk - or fly - across the entire lake. Or maybe he had found it between the train and carriage times. That would explain why he's always first out of the train, but reappears in time to take our carriage. Still, she didn't think that it was that: she couldn't imagine Regulus standing here with a bunch of first-years.

Saving the question for later, she murmured her agreement. 'I know, it feels like I could wake up any minute. All this time I've been wanting to make a change, and now that the opportunity's upon us…I can hardly believe it.'

'I believed that man's arm disintegrated,' Regulus said in a quiet voice. The jetty seemed somewhat sacred, like a church. Raising their voices would almost be like committing a crime. As it was, the wind seemed to pick his words up and mute them, blending them into their surroundings. 'I... It won't grow back, even with skele-gro. I saw it in a book of curses earlier this afternoon. They need the arm to do that, and by now the dust will have blown away. I ruined a man's life for this.'

'A man who enjoys killing without giving his victims a fair trial,' she reminded him, thinking how scary it would be if they started thinking that way. 'Regulus, that was a good thing you did there. Who knows what he would have done?'

'I should have killed him. It would have been quick and painless. Now there are going to be questions. What if he saw us? Worse, what if he recognised us? Your hood fell down. If you were expelled or put in Azkaban for my mistake, I would never forgive myself.'
'I won't.'

'How do you know that? The only thing I know for sure is that next time, I won't hesitate. Next time, I won't put anyone else in danger,' Regulus vowed, his face set hard.
Five days later, Emma found herself practicing Shrinking Solutions with Lily Evans in Potions class. Ever since the incident with the Polyjuice Potion, they had struck up some sort of acquaintanceship - not quite friends, not quite not. There wasn't really much to do at the stage they were at, so they chatted amiably: Emma checked the time whilst Lily checked the heat. They mostly talked about schoolwork, carefully avoiding topics to do with Severus's broken friendship, James, or even the outside world. If she was honest with herself, Emma was uneasy around the Muggleborn. She was the polar opposite to the Dark Lord's beliefs and the statistics Regulus had found. Emma told herself that Lily was naturally talented, an exception to the rule, but she couldn't go deeper than that.

The reason they were working together was because most of their patrols coincided, and they figured that they needed to be able to work together. That, and Slughorn had decided that everyone switch partners at regular intervals. Merlin knew how James and Rabastan prevented their potion from blowing up; both were torn between pranking other students and sending each other death glares.

'Um... excuse me?' a third-year Ravenclaw knocked on the door timidly.

'You're gonna have to be louder than that if you want ole Sluggy to hear you,' Sirius cupped his hands and yelled.

"Ole Sluggy" was currently napping at his teacher's desk. He had thrown another of his little parties the night before, but things went horribly wrong when Peeves arrived and wrecked everything. The teacher had probably been up all night trying to set his office aright. The pigtailed girl pitter-pattered over to Slughorn's desk and cleared her throat.

'Excuse me, sir.'

'She's so cute!' Lily squealed in an undertone to Emma, who chuckled then gasped.

'Oh watch out! The potion needs three stirs counter-clockwise: it's started bubbling.' Lily quickly scooped up the spoon and stirred, adding a sliced caterpillar.

'Wait a minute, it doesn't have anything about that on here,' Emma frowned, looking at her book.

'Just a little something I figured out,' Lily winked as the potion turned pink.

'Nice,' the Slytherin was impressed. Normally it should have taken an extra fifteen to twenty minutes to finish.

'Miss Potter,' Slughorn called.

Both girls turned around.

'It seems that you are required in the Headmaster's office. Ah, Miss Evans, I see that your potion is
finished: as Prefect please escort Miss Potter. You are exempt from the remainder of the class.'

'Oooh look who's getting caught now, Padfoot!' James teased.

'She was in the Hospital Wing for a week, what can you possibly think she's done?' Lily hissed to him on her way to deposit their potion.

James looked as surprised as Emma felt, instantly shutting his mouth.

'Thanks,' she said to the Gryffindor girl on their way out.

'Oh, no problem,' Lily smiled. 'Any chance to tell that arrogant…ahem, your brother off. Do you know what Professor Dumbledore wants with you?'

'No idea,' Emma replied honestly.

_Not quite honestly_, said a niggling thought in the back of her mind, sending a spike of adrenaline to her heart. She squashed it like a bug, stowing the remains in the furthest recesses of her mind.

_It can't be that_, she thought. _There's no way he could have recognised me. Besides, they would have said something sooner…_

'Well, we're here,' Lily announced. 'I can wait outside if you want...?' she offered tentatively.

'It's fine, Lily,' the Potter girl smiled at her. 'I'm sure you have better things to do and besides, who knows how long it'll take?'

But once Lily had gone, she had to pause, taking a few deep breaths and compartmentalising her feelings. The Occlumency training had been surprisingly useful when it came to this sort of problem, though she and Regulus hadn't tried the practical side of things since that fateful night.

'I can do this,' she said to herself. 'This is no different from getting James and I out of trouble when we were kids.'

But it was different. Before she panicked and gave herself away, she rushed headlong into the office.

'Ahh, Miss Potter, there you are,' the Headmaster looked up from the smart man sitting in front of him. 'Please, take a seat. There's no need to be nervous.'

Emma obliged wordlessly, her eyes on the man next to her. He had short black hair, combed so neatly that even Regulus's looked messy by comparison. However, contrary to the Black boy, it was parted rather severely straight through the middle, as if someone had taken a ruler to it. His narrow, toothbrush moustache had undergone a similar treatment and he sat so straight and still that Emma made an attempt to righten her own posture, though she was by no means slouching. She was sure that she had never seen him before, and yet he looked oddly familiar. She was trying to place him when Dumbledore spoke.

'Miss Potter, this is Mr Crouch, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.'

Emma nearly gasped. So this was the man she had heard so much about - both from her family and Barty. No wonder the boy felt starved of affection. Bartemius Crouch Sr. did not look to be the kind of person to play a game of rough-and-tumble Quidditch in the backyard. Instead, she forced herself to smile politely, before giving them both a confused look. An idea popped into her mind.

'Is this about my chosen job profession? Professor McGonagall said that we would be meeting
somebody from the area in which we want to work. Though, with all due respect, I think you may have confused my application with my brother, James Potter's. He's the one who wants to be an Auror... sir,' she added that last word as a generality, not sure if she was coming across as rude.

'What is this, Dumbledore? Some kind of practical joke?' Crouch asked sharply. 'I don't have time for -'

With a look from the headmaster, his sentence died in his throat. Dumbledore turned towards Emma, a kind look in his eye, resting his clasped hands on his desk and leaning forwards.

'No, Miss Potter, this is about something far worse. It has come to the knowledge of the Law Department,' he nodded towards Mr Crouch, 'that there is a discrepancy between the statement of a victim and that of the self-confessed criminal. I realise that I am not making myself clear. Do you know of the attack on the Auror Neil Abbot?'

'Umm...' Emma managed to stammer out. 'Come on Emma, if you can handle talking to Voldemort, you can handle Barty's dad. Get some perspective. She frowned, pretending to think. 'I think I remember reading about it in the paper a couple of days ago. Is he the one with the Vanished arm?'

'It was disintegrated, as you well know,' Crouch's tone was almost accusatory. 'Mr Abbot gave a very distinct description of a sixteen-to-seventeen-year old girl with an English accent, long black hair and blue eyes. In fact, one of our investigators did a remarkable job on your portrait.' He shoved a picture of herself in front of her nose.

'But I -' Emma was temporarily at a loss for words. The aggressiveness of Barty Crouch Sr. had surprised her, though she shouldn't have been surprised considering his son's intensity. Luckily for her, Crouch wasn't done.

'He also mentioned an accomplice. Now, if you are being blackmailed or threatened, we need to know about it, but Hogwarts students can't just be whisked away from school, it is my guess that you came along willingly. Do you know what the punishment for such a heinous crime is?'

It was an intimidation technique straight out of the books, but it was successfully working on Emma. As she cast about for her alibis, the door burst open.

'It wasn't her, Professor! It was Sirius and me who did it, I swear! Emma's been in the Hospital Wing all week, just ask anyone! You can't punish her for - oh.' James went quiet as his eyes darted from Barty Crouch Sr. to the Headmaster to his sister. His earnest expression slowly turned into one of confusion.

'Relax, Mr Potter,' Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling. 'Nobody is accusing Miss Potter of the pranks you played this week, though I'm sure your Head of House would like to hear your confession.'

'Oh,' the Gryffindor repeated, unsure as to what to do. 'Well, I guess I'll just...let you get back to it, I suppose.'

And just like that, he slouched sheepishly out of the room, though Emma had no doubt that he was attempting to listen behind the door. Thank you James, she thought, breathing a sigh of relief. For once he was getting her out of trouble, instead of the opposite. He would have no idea what he had just done for her. The initial pounding of her heart had slowed, and she was able to resume her role as an innocent Hogwarts student with confidence, taking cue from her brother's behaviour.

'I'm sorry, Mr Crouch,' she said earnestly. 'But as my brother said, I was ill with the Firebug Flu all week. Your Auror must have been mistaken.'
'He has never been mistaken before.'

'There's a first time for everything, Mr Crouch,' Dumbledore said mildly. 'But don't you think that I would have noticed if one of my students went missing? Or her Head of House? There aren't that many students at Hogwarts, you know, and our entrance is well-guarded. Perhaps you have the wrong girl?' he suggested.

'Perhaps,' Bartemius Crouch conceded unhappily. 'My apologies for my brusqueness, Emma Potter, but in a war, there's no time to be lost. Perhaps my Auror was Confunded, though why the criminal would hide his tracks if he was to confess is beyond me.'

After a few more words to clear the mess up, Crouch swept up his documents and Flooed out of the fireplace, leaving as briskly as he appeared to have come. Emma turned to go, but Dumbledore called her back in. She slunk back towards the desk reluctantly and waited for what would come next.

'Miss Potter, before you go... Is there something you wish to tell me? Anything at all?' And he gave her a look that seemed to see into her very soul.

'Nothing, sir. Nothing at all,' she replied, perhaps a little too quickly. In any case, she had the distinct feeling that he knew. Don't be silly, a voice in her mind said. If he knew, then you wouldn't be standing here right now.

'Very well. Off you go then,' he said, turning around. As an afterthought, he turned and said with a wink. 'And tell your brother he needn't fear me so long as he doesn't turn up late for our meeting.'

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As Emma had suspected, James was lounging on the staircase leading down to the gargoyle. As soon as he saw her come out, he pounced.

'What did Dumbledore want? Why was the head of the Magical Law Enforcement department there? What did he want with you? What was it about? Did you do something?' He jumped down the stairs backwards as she carried on walking.

'James!' Emma shouted, and her hyperactive brother calmed down. 'First of all, how did you know what Barty Crouch looks like?'

'I read the paper, duh,' James said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. 'You, reading the paper?' Emma raised an eyebrow skeptically. James always announced that he had better things to do when their parents tried to get him interested in political affairs.

'Yeah, ever since that night when Dad came home talking about...' he looked around the corridor and dropped his voice, 'You-Know-Who...I decided it was time to get interested. I mean, aren't the people who stand by and do nothing just as bad as those who instigate the violence?' Emma fidgeted uncomfortably, but her brother continued. 'Anyway, that's when I decided I wanted to be an Auror - that you know - and well, I wanted to get to know the kind of profile that people looked for.'

Emma was impressed. She had been so wrapped up in her own affairs that she hadn't noticed her twin shift from the pranking jokester to champion of the people. Not that it surprised her; James had always been quick to defend his friends, and quicker to defend the helpless from a prank gone wrong. One of the reasons he got into trouble so much was that he always announced that it was him
if an innocent bystander took the blame (something his Head of House had cottoned onto pretty quickly). Not to mention his almost aggressive protectiveness of her, his twin.

'Mr Crouch is looking for any leads on the case of the assault on an Auror,' she replied, knowing it would get out somehow anyway. 'Apparently someone who might know something looks like me.'

'But you were in the Hospital Wing!' James pointed out.

'Exactly,' Emma nodded. 'And here I was, thinking that the only person who looked like me in the whole of Britain was you.'

'Don't flatter yourself Ems,' James preened his hair. 'Everyone knows I'm the handsome one.'

She shook her head, laughing - partly out of relief. *I can't believe that just happened.* They continued on their way, the conversation veering from one subject to another, but steering clear of family matters. They parted as Emma turned left to Charms class and James right to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

It was only later that she realised she hadn't asked her brother why he had a meeting with Albus Dumbledore.
Emma yawned and stretched, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. Though she hadn't really had any trouble picking up where they had left off, the backlog of homework and essays had her studying in the library until late. Luckily, she had managed to get an extension. Regulus had managed to pull all-nighters the week before, but she had been too caught up in thought about Barty Crouch and how he had almost caught her, though she hadn't mentioned a word to Regulus. He thought that Dumbledore had called her in about the Prefect duties, and whether she was well enough to start up again. She was surprised at how easily he had bought her excuse. Then again, he probably had a lot on his mind. She knew she did. They weren't as invincible as they thought, though there had been no proof to back up Crouch's claim. She was doubly glad of their Memory Charm, as it shielded her from any further probing.

She also made a mental note to make it up to Barty somehow, without him finding out how close they came to being caught, of course. He was young and eager, but still unsure as to how far he would go for their cause. Emma had no such doubts. Of course, Bellatrix could be extreme, but Narcissa had spoken of a whole other side of her sister. And Emma wouldn't forget that it was Bella who had helped her all those years ago with the bullying Gryffindors. The Dark Lord knew that Regulus's cousin was enthusiastic and had reigned her in thus far. It was only now that it was an all-out war that Bellatrix was able to unleash her fighting side. Emma had to keep reminding herself that all this violence was temporary.

The Dark Lord wanted the same things she did, she had seen it in his eyes when they had met. Though he had needed the prejudiced pure-bloods on his side, he was only willing to help the Muggleborns and Muggles. If it meant being called prejudiced by the Daily Prophet, because he wanted laws about who was Muggleborn and who was not, then so be it. The Muggleborns needed extra help, that much was clear from Regulus's research in the library. Statistically, they weren't as good at spells, since the world was so different from the one they were brought up in. It wasn't their fault, but it was true. Plus, the Dark Lord was the one to try and give rights to the trolls, werewolves and giants. What had the Ministry done? Nothing but ostracise them.

It was true that he hadn't spoken of house-elves yet, but Emma thought it was because they were already living in wizarding society. One look at Kreacher was all anyone needed to tell them that if they were freed then it would do them more harm than good. Mrs Black aside, Kreacher loved his home and family. He wouldn't want to be presented clothes for all the world. But the Prophet mentioned none of this, instead focusing on over-the-top Death Eater "attacks". Emma had asked Narcissa if it was true, worried that people like Amycus were taking the war to extreme measures. Her friend had asked her fiancé about it, who had reassured them that the Prophet was telling tall tales to scare the population.

Speaking of the newspaper, she had read it cover to cover in the evenings - making sure that Regulus was nowhere near when she did - searching for mentions of the Auror attack. It wouldn't do to have him think it was his fault. She knew that deep down, he thought Sirius had left because of him. Or that he could have done something more to help. She wished that Sirius would realise what his brother had been doing for him for all those years. She hated the selfish prick, especially since he seemed to just breeze through life. Secretly though, she knew that it was just a facade. Even Sirius Black couldn't have left a household like that unscathed. She was torn between being glad he had someone like James to get him through it, and thinking that he didn't deserve her brother's friendship.

Finishing the newspaper, satisfied that there was no further speculation on the topic of Abbot's attacker - people were now delving into Christopher Dean's past, digging up what information they
could and bringing the bad parts to light - she turned back to her Potions essay on antidotes.

Golpalott's Third Law dictates that the antidote for a blended poison will be equal to more than the sum of the antidotes for each of the separate components. In other words, a blended poison is not only a combination of each individual poison, but something much more deadly. As such, the antidote must be more powerful than each separate cure, finding out what the combination of poisons has added to the effect.

Finding this ingredient isn't easy. Often a blended antidote must be made in a hurry, upon finding the person having ingested the poison. There would not be enough time to identify each poison, even if the symptoms were clear, unless the potioneer had a clear view of the actual poisoning.

Instead, one solution would be to identify the symptoms and their causes, treating the potion as if it were an original concoction. This is dangerous, yes, but will abate the poison until the potioneer discovers exactly what the real antidote needs.

Failing that, a stone taken from the stomach of a goat will save you from most poisons, as it absorbs the unknown chemicals within the body. This object is more commonly known as a Bezoar. Thus, each potioneer and indeed, each household should keep a Bezoar at the ready, just in case the trip to St Mungo's would take too long.

She thrust her quill into the ink bottle with a sigh of frustration. She was straying off topic, but it would have to do, even though it didn't nearly cover her usual essay length. Maybe Slughorn would mark her nicely if she brewed an excellent potion. Speaking of which, her partner had been unexpectedly thoughtful in passing Emma all of her notes for the week. Though James was always going on about Lily Evans' kindness, she hadn't quite believed it, upon seeing their interactions together. Alecto had - of course - disapproved, but Emma thought that being friends with one Muggleborn wouldn't change the world. Especially when she was one of the best students in class - the exception to the Muggleborn rule. Plus, Severus Snape was still in love with her, as seen by his moping around. Lily had yet again rebuffed his attempts at being friends, earning him a P in Potions for inattention and the mockery of Mulciber, one of his closest friends.

Now he skulked around the library, supposedly inventing Dark spells in order to prove his worth. James had spoken of him using unknown spells in their daily duels, but Emma had been giving the Slytherin a wide berth. He wasn't exactly known for playing fair, and she didn't think she'd be in his good books after having obtained the Mark he was so desperate to get. At least she thought she’d get the Dark Mark after completing her mission. She couldn't think of anything else to prove her loyalty - so far it seemed as though everyone had given theirs up as a lost cause. Even Alecto had let out a heartfelt sigh upon reading her paper, though said nothing when pressed for information.

Briefly, Emma wondered what it was like in Gryffindor. It was hard for the Dark Lord to know who was trustworthy or not in their rival House, as he himself had been a Slytherin when in Hogwarts, though rumour had it that there were a couple who wanted to join. She doubted that it was a common topic of conversation though, as many Gryffindors were family members of those opposed to the Dark Lord. They were just so stubborn, why not hear him out? She was sure that James would agree with her, though she didn't dare talk about it after their father's reaction. Sirius had probably been poisoning James's mind. Better never to mention it at all.

As if on cue, James appeared and plonked himself down in the chair next to her. 'Whatcha doin'?'

'Homework,' Emma groaned, secretly glad that her brother was there to take her mind off things.

'Homework?' he asked incredulously. 'Well, I've been up to much more interesting things, like pranking dear Snivellus. Tomorrow morning he will wake up to something he's needed in a long
time - you'll see what I mean.'

His eyes strayed to the Daily Prophet, which bore the marks of having been thoroughly read. He opened his mouth, probably to say something about last Monday's incident, but then closed it again. His brow was furrowed, the way it always was when he was keeping a secret from her and was wondering whether to tell her or not. A thought occurred to Emma.

'What did Dumbledore want with you?'

'Aha,' James tapped his nose knowingly. 'Top secret stuff, you're too young to know yet.'

'We're the same age!' Emma protested for what seemed to be the millionth time in her life.

'Tell you what, I'll tell you about it soon enough. Let's just say he's asked me to help with some sort of... side project. Come to think of it, I'll ask him if you can come too, he wants people from all of the Houses to show that it's a united effort,' her twin tried to explain, but only seemed more enigmatic than before.

'What's a united effort?' she pressed for details. She had never heard of Dumbledore creating side projects before, though if they were secret she supposed that that was normal.

James only gave her a frustrating, knowing look. She was slightly hurt that her brother wasn't sharing with her, then guiltily remembered the ton of secrets that she was keeping from him. Let James keep his mostly carefree attitude for now, she thought. Maybe she would talk to him this summer, when they were alone. James had mentioned that now Sirius was seventeen, he wanted to get his own flat in Diagon Alley. Her brother got up to leave, apparently spotting his friends by the doorway, but stopped in his tracks.

'Oh, I almost forgot. For some reason I got the letters addressed to you this morning. Apparently, the Hogwarts owls you chose can't tell the difference between "Emma" and "James",' he rolled his eyes. 'Next time, you should probably borrow one of your friends', or at least make sure it isn't the oldest owl in Hogwarts history.'

He tossed a couple of envelopes onto her essay and bounded off, probably to make more mischief, knowing him. Emma quickly rolled up her essay (after sprinkling it with sand to make sure it was dry) and shoved it into her bag. One of the letters was written in Narcissa's elegant script, the other she would have recognised from a mile away. Her name was printed in the bold letters of none other than Charles Potter.

At first, she wasn't sure what to do. She was just getting herself back together, actually doing something, catching up on homework. Sometime in first year, her parents were okay with her being in Slytherin, and if they were once, they could be again. She tried not to think about last Christmas. How do you get past your own parents not wanting you? They had said themselves that they would prefer Sirius as a son...No, a voice in her head said, Dad said that. Then another, smaller and snider one whispered, but Mum didn't refuse it. And that makes all the difference.

Sirius's parents were cold and demanding. That's why he left. But when your warm and loving parents love somebody else rather than you, the knife cuts deeper. Thinking that nothing her father could say would make her feel worse anyway she ripped it open, her heart started beating wildly in her chest. Curse James for not making a big deal out of it, she thought, remembering his nonchalant attitude and brief, guilty look.

Emma,
Your mother is unable to reply, as she has been taken ill. Nothing too serious, we hope, but St Mungo's is running tests. Perhaps I was too harsh with you over the holidays. She misses you very much. I am glad to hear that you are feeling better.

Love from,

Your father.

She didn't know whether to sigh with relief or get angry at the way he had just brushed their fight aside. Then again, her father had always been like James, slightly too blunt, easy to misunderstand. Merlin knew that her brother was useless at explaining himself to Lily Evans. She re-read the short letter, and her chest constricted with worry. Even a Firebug Flu, such as the one she supposedly got, would affect her aging mother a lot more than it would herself. James must have already had the news and not known how to talk to her about it. After all, her relationship with their parents was much more complicated than his. In fact, there wasn't much to say until they knew more about her mother's illness, apart from hope from the best and pray that St Mungo's Healers were as competent as they said.

She set the letter gingerly aside, as if it would crumble to pieces if it wasn't handled delicately, and broke open the seal on Narcissa's, unrolling an unusually long length of parchment.

My dear Emma, she read,

*I'm glad to hear that you're continuing Slytherin excellence in Quidditch. I hope that with you as captain this year, you'll be able to win us the cup, though it will require playing directly against your brother. Lucius is well, thank you, and he sends his congratulations. We manage to see each other several times a week, though my nursing schedule is demanding. I wonder if I shall give it up after a few years, the number of patients is exhausting! Lucius also thinks it will reflect badly on him if his wife works. I can't wait until July, it seems like an eternity to wait! Though the wedding preparations are barely under way, so I suppose it's all for the best.

On the subject of your success, news has trickled down through the grapevine and - dare I say it - I do believe the Dark Lord is impressed. But your encounter has opened my eyes to just how dangerous this business is. If Lucius and I were to have children - which I hope we do, though not for a few years at least - I hope that the Dark Lord would be content with all that my family has given him so far. But surely, this is a silly worry. The war will be over long before any children of mine are old enough to join it.

I'm sorry, I've been rambling and you're still troubled by your experience. I think that what you did in that duel was a different kind of defence. If you had cast the disarming charm, who knows what might have happened? The Auror in question (I have read about the attack in the newspaper and think I know who was involved in this) is very dangerous and trained in Muggle combat in the event of a Silencing Charm or loss of his wand. I know this from the spies we have managed to place in the Ministry, so please do not mention this fact to anyone else. By taking out the advantage of his strong arm, you severely weakened your opponent and managed to take him out from the fight without further bloodshed - something I know you, like me, secretly abhor. Unfortunately, in times like these, it is sometimes necessary.

You must remember that there is something much larger at stake here, though I know you do not agree with my specific view on blood purity. In my mind, those that are pure of blood are born into the Wizarding World. The Muggleborns are outcasts. They will never fit in. There is always a
risk of them infringing upon the law, and speaking of the Wizarding World to their Muggle friends. Already the fact that their parents know sends a chill down my spine. We do not know what Muggles are capable of, and there are many more of them than us. For this reason, I think the most prominent positions should be sent to the ones best equipped to handle them.

I am worried that Lucius and Bellatrix are more extreme though. To hear them, one would think they wanted to eradicate the Muddbloods, more so than Muggles themselves! But my sister has always been hot-headed, and events that happened during or youth have been severely impregnated in her mind. That and our family motto: Toujours Pur! However, she has a tendency towards violence that even I cannot control anymore. Fortunately, I think she is besotted with our Dark Lord, and he will control her anger. It does not help that a member of our own family has turned out to be a blood-traitor. I can only imagine the shame that Regulus had to go through.

Speaking of which, I will not be a Black for much longer. I hope that you will be able to join me at the Black family country house. It will be my home for only two weeks after your school year ends, and I have not had the opportunity to show you around before I leave for good. Bellatrix has agreed to stay and help the preparations for the marriage, but she has also agreed to take up the Dark Lord's promise to you about learning how to duel (though it seems as though you no longer need it!).

Please take care of yourself, and watch that your brother does not mix with the wrong sort of people. There are rumours of my treacherous cousin joining the Order created solely to oppose us, and I fear for his life (though I would not admit it to anyone but you). Your brother may very well be in the same sort of position, so keep your eyes open.

Your dear friend,

Narcissa Black.

Emma’s head was reeling by the time she finished the letter, but on the whole she was relieved. Though Narcissa believed that it was Emma who had cursed the Auror’s arm off, the fact that she still supported her friend meant that it must have been alright. Narcissa was one of the gentlest people she knew. Even Bellatrix calmed down with her. But she was worried about Lucius’s obvious influence on the Black girl. In Hogwarts, the only thing on her mind apart from romance was her Healer career, and now she seemed ready to give it all up. Of course, Narcissa may have just written the letter on a particularly bad day. Emma ignored the part about Muggleborns being lesser. That kind of talk just gave her a headache. She knew that the Malfoys thought the other magical beings little more than animals, and though it was true that the giants were extremely crude, she couldn't help but think of Kreacher and his big wide eyes, so easy to please and so easily hurt.

She would learn more of the truth of Narcissa’s situation if she did indeed come to her house before the wedding, which she gathered would take place at the Black household. Plus, she was supposed to be one of the bridesmaids, which involved helping. Pulling out a sheet of parchment, she dipped her quill in the ink and began to write a reply.
'Nervous?' Alecto asked.

The two girls were sitting in their dorm room. Sophie, for once, didn't want to go to Hogsmeade, though it was the first visit in spring. She was taking her studies seriously, she said, with a glance towards Regulus at breakfast that morning. He gave her an encouraging smile, but seemed to miss the point. She was wondering if anyone might help her with her Transfiguration. Another meaningful look. Regulus suggested a few reference books. She wanted to know if Regulus would be going to the library, as he was vying for Head Boy. At this statement, Rabastan and Regulus exchanged a raised eyebrow. Rabastan quickly said that they had already made plans. Regulus just gave her an infuriating smirk with that condescending look in his eye. Well, infuriating to Emma. Sophie had made it perfectly clear that she thought it was a secret smile reserved especially for her. In a way she's right. It's becoming more and more reserved for her, Emma thought darkly, before dragging her mind to the present situation.

She gave the red-head a weighted look in reply, not daring to say anything, even though there was no way Lucinda would hear them in the shower. Alecto understood though. It isn't something you can put into words, anyway, Emma reflected, as she tugged at her emerald green jumper and smoothed her ivory-white skirt. Both girls had agreed to wear Slytherin colours, though both inwardly thought themselves foolish for trying to dress up for such an occasion. They couldn't help themselves though. This was the moment Lord Voldemort decided he was impressed, or you were shunted to the side: a lackey in his crusade for the greater good. A nobody, forgotten and misplaced, useless. Emma shuddered. She couldn't think of anything worse. Besides, it was said that Lord Voldemort was a proud descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself!

Alecto arranged and re-arranged her thick ginger hair, whilst Emma nervously twisted her locket around her neck, a lump in her throat. When this is all over, Mum and Dad will understand, she thought. After all, it had to get worse before it could get better. They might not approve of violence, but what could they expect, when both of their children were Quidditch players?

'Ohmygosh,' Lucinda practically shrieked upon entering the room, startling both girls. Dressed in nothing but a towel, she crossed the room - to Emma's shock - to sit on the black-haired girl's bed. Though they had shared a room for the past six years, Lucinda refused to even get into her pyjamas in front of the other girls. 'Is that what I think it is?' she asked breathlessly, pointing to the necklace in her hands.

'Umm,' Emma said, rather taken aback. 'My locket?'

She looked down at it. It was nothing new, and nothing special to the others, as far as she knew. Only Alecto could have guessed at the true meaning it held to her, and she was clever enough never to mention it. Even Regulus knew nothing, apart from the fact that it was one of her treasured possessions.

'It's much more than just a locket, Emma,' Lucinda breathed, before jumping up, freshly curled hair bouncing around. 'Come on, there's something I have to show you!'

'You do realise you're dressed in a towel?' Alecto asked sardonically. 'Or is that your new tactic to woo dates?'

Lucinda blushed, but only for a second. 'Hang on.'
She quickly dressed in the outfit she had previously laid on her bed. She had gotten over her crush on Regulus and was now interested in a seventh-year Hufflepuff. She hadn't resisted the fact that he was Amos Diggory's best friend, and at first used him to tease Emma. She had realised that James scared away most potential boyfriends, and whilst she didn't mock her overtly - something no Slytherin would do to a fellow housemate - she still seemed to harbour some rivalry with the raven-haired girl. It had actually become a bit of a game to them, and though each would say that it annoyed them, they were secretly having fun with their little competitions.

However, Lucinda had discovered a new reason to keep dating the Hufflepuff. "He's just so exciting," she had said when probed. "I don't understand him at all, he's such a mystery!" Emma privately thought that the mystery was primarily due to the fact that the Hufflepuff was a complete optimist. Lucinda's favourite game was to unnerve him with back stories on people - often slightly exaggerated - and have him find their good side.

She was broken from her thoughts by the blonde grabbing her arm and rushing up the stairs, nearly colliding with the password wall in her haste to get out. Alecto hurried behind them, shrugging her shoulders when Emma shot her a questioning look. They came to a skidding stop in the dungeon anti-chamber. Lucinda pointed triumphantly at a portrait of Salazar Slytherin.

'All this, to show us a shortcut we were taught in our first year?' Alecto snorted. 'Everyone knows you can easily get to the Entrance Hall from here.'

'No,' Lucinda said impatiently. 'Look.' And she pointed again, jabbing her finger towards the middle of the portrait. The man inside didn't look too impressed at her lack of manners, though he said nothing.

Emma leaned closer, squinting her eyes at the picture. Salazar Slytherin, the Founder of their House, had his usual enigmatic expression, though he had currently added a smirk to it. She stared him in the eye: He said nothing, though his eyes seemed to suggest that he knew something that she did not. Her gaze swept over the portrait, taking in the balding head, long flowing beard, the locket Slytherin so prized…The locket! She took a closer look, then lifted her own above her head to compare them. They were nearly identical.

'See!' Lucinda seemed too overcome to say anything else. 'Do you know what this means?'

'It means that there might be some hope for me after all,' Emma murmured, too softly for her classmates to hear.

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'My dear friends,' Lord Voldemort spread his arms out in invitation, his silky voice as enticing as ever. 'Welcome back.'

They were standing in a semi-circle behind the Dark Lord. The Death Eaters, that was to say. The sixth-and-seventh-year students stood huddled in a group on the other side of the abandoned house - ostracised, but not rejected. It was a step up from the hut used to give them their tasks, but still somewhere remote: an abandoned farmhouse some way down a dirt track. It seemed out of place with the elegance of the group standing before them. The Dark Lord's eyes seemed to shine with a vision that would guide them to a better world, though his slitted pupils said that he would be prepared to stoop to any level to get to this ideal world. Each time Emma thought about it, she was amazed at the support he had managed to garner in so little time, but then when she saw him it seemed like the obvious choice. How could someone so powerful, so self-assured ever lose? How
did he even meet any resistance? Surely if he met the Minister for Magic and spoke with him then the war could be avoided. Maybe it was the Minister's fault, for not even giving them a chance. Emma wished she was in the inner ranks, so that her knowledge wouldn't be so second hand.

'One month ago today, I entrusted each of you with a specific task, to prove your worth to the cause. Most of you disappointed me. Two of you did not.'

There was an outbreak of mutterings from behind him. Emma supposed that this was not a regular occurrence. She fought to keep the grin from her face, keeping her eyes trained on the wooden floorboards beneath her feet. It wouldn't do to seem too smug now. It would be more impressive if she just pretended as though she had expected it all along. Even so, her heart started pounding at such a rate that she had to concentrate to breathe normally. She wondered if they had surprised him, then asked herself what he must have been like at sixteen. A force to be reckoned with, she concluded.

'Silence!' He had not raised his voice, but the word cut through the hum of conversation like a knife. 'Failure is unacceptable. But I am a merciful Lord. You will have your chance, sooner or later, to redeem yourselves. Until then, leave, with the knowledge that you have failed me.'

With the cold and sneering gaze of the Death Eaters upon them, the students made to troop out, heads hung in humiliation. Perhaps all the more so because they had expected everyone to fail. It would not have been so bad, if they had taken their tasks to be impossible. Most hadn't even tried, shaking their heads in defeat, or being comforted by family members that had gone through the same gruelling process. At least that's what it seemed like, when Emma saw a hooded figure look pityingly at Rabastan. She wondered if it was his brother or his father. All had failed, except Regulus and Emma. In a rare display of emotion, Emma caught Regulus's excited look. Moments later, he had rearranged his features into a slightly satisfied smirk, but his eyes betrayed him still. Emma's excitement only grew.

'I do confess,' the Dark Lord said with a slight hint of wonder, 'that your actions surprised me. Of course, neither were tasks that I would entrust to underage wizards alone, but McNair,' he nodded towards one of the masked faces, 'informed me of the Giants' renewed vigour in the fight, whereas Wilkes...has been dealt with.'

The heavy silence emanating from the Death Eaters told Emma what that last sentence meant. She supposed that Wilkes had been tasked with getting rid of the Muggleborn Ministry officials. She wondered how the Wilkes her age was taking it. It was true that he hadn't been here today. She felt slightly bad for his father; to be fair, they had had the advantage of surprise and their faces couldn't be recognised, but she couldn't help but feel a certain pride in her and Regulus's actions. But Wilkes probably still had an opportunity to redeem himself. The Dark Lord was not so harsh as to not give his loyal followers a second chance, though he punished failure.

'I cannot abide sloppy labour. If a sixteen-year-old can achieve in a week what an adult wizard cannot... Well, let us say that even my patience has some limits,' the Dark Lord's mouth twisted into a mocking sneer. 'But enough of disappointments. Today, we welcome two new friends into our fold. Today is a day for family, for celebration. Bellatrix, would you do the honours?'

Emma's heart was beating furiously in her chest. This was it. This was all she had ever dreamed of. Her life would become meaningful. All those fights with her father seemed lessened, because she was loyal to a worthy cause. Although the fighting scared her, she couldn't wait for it to be over, to create a new society, one where there would be restrictions on Muggles, or maybe ways to prevent them from shaming Muggleborn children. She thought that she might burst out singing, but tried to keep her features calm. Still, it was with trembling fingers that she accepted the velvety black cloth.
Bellatrix beamed at her, obviously proud at having been bestowed such a meaningful task. There were tears in her eyes when she gave Regulus his robes, as though her cousin had grown up into something far better than she could have ever hoped for.

Putting her arms through the robes, Emma thought they were at once familiar and strange. How could a set of simple black robes be so different from anything else? At first, she was surprised at their weight. They were as heavy as her winter set at Hogwarts, and yet smooth and soft to the touch, leaving her a freedom of movement that Madam Malkins would have approved of. But at the same time, they did not feel warm. If anything, she felt a slight chill - though that may have been to do with the shiver of excitement that ran through her body.

*The robes are like their master,* she reflected. *The Dark Lord emanates power and belonging, and I know that our cause is the right one only…whenever I am in his presence, I feel a thrill of fear. Something’s not quite right...* She glanced towards Regulus, who was wearing a satisfied smirk on his face. *Of course, Regulus has looked at this from all of the angles. Maybe I'm just paranoid, scared of getting in too deep when the fight is only beginning. I need to trust in this. It's normal to feel misgivings. Being a Death Eater is for life.*

'Hold out your left arm,' the Dark Lord spoke softly to her, bringing her out of her thoughts. Her eyes met the snake-like pupils, and every doubt vanished. He was trusting her, her, to do what was needed. She felt a tendril probing her mind, and remembered Regulus’s lessons. Occlumency seemed so easy when she felt so confident, and she nearly laughed at the check through her mind, making sure that she was not a spy. No misgivings or doubts were to be found among her memories - her own mind had already banished them with her resolution. She stepped forwards, rolling her new sleeve up to expose the smooth expanse of skin below. The Dark Lord bestowed one of his rare, brilliant smiles upon her. She felt as though she had stepped into the light. If only she could become so sure of herself the entire time.

'Morsmordre,' the incantation came out almost like a hiss, and Emma felt a burning sensation on her arm. She gritted her teeth against the pain, but didn't flinch, watching with dream-like fascination at the smoky substance flowing out of the tip of the wand, tracing the head of a snake in vivid red before travelling up her arm to form a skull near her elbow, grinning up at her with sightless eyes. Two tendrils broke formation, twisting to the side to form the rest of the intricate tattoo, before merging back into the snake. The end result was a snake protruding from the mouth of the skull, twisting to form a loose figure eight knot before travelling half-way down her forearm to bare its fangs.
'You lucky bitch!' Lucinda yelled out, attracting more than a few looks and head-shakes.

It was the day after their trip to Hogsmeade, and this was the first time that Alecto, Lucinda and Emma had been alone enough for her to tell them about the end of her visit to Hogsmeade. Though Lucinda hadn't been there, her brother Evan had, so the girls agreed that she would find out about it sooner or later. Not to mention that her father was part of the Dark Lord's inner circle. At first, Emma thought Alecto might say something snarky, but true to her best friend, she had merely said that she'd get her mark next year. "Or maybe in May for my birthday!" she had joked.

Lucinda wasn't bothered with the whole war thing going on, leaving familial duty to her older brother. "Who cares about blood if he's hot?" she had joked, though the "uphold the family honour" had been safely drilled into her brain from a young age. The Rosiers were more lenient than some, allowing their children to choose to marry half-bloods if they wanted, as long as the said half-blood had talent. They were more pragmatic than the Black family, who - as Regulus admitted - had some cases of insanity due to the amount of incest. At Emma's surprised look, he had hastily assured her that his parents were no closer than third cousins, something that was common amongst the wizarding world.

Alecto laughed at the blonde's antics, but shushed her, looking around the common room. Emma rolled her sleeve back down, noting Regulus's look as he shook his head. She could almost imagine him now: "it's supposed to be a secret!". It was true that the Dark Lord had told them to trust no one, but Alecto already (sort-of) knew, and Lucinda wouldn't say anything. She knew that this piece of information wasn't to be used in the competitions they had when they were bored.

'Come on, I'm starving,' Emma said, though her snail still had antennae and part of its shell and parchment was strewn across the table.

She had been jittery all day, and it didn't help that the tattoo felt like her skin was on fire. After the Dark Lord was done, her forearm had been pleasantly numb, but during the night the pain had come back in full force, enough to make sweat bead on her forehead. She hadn't slept much, but she was still so filled with energy after the excitement of the day before that she hadn't minded. Still, she had mentioned it to Regulus and he had admitted to the same kind of problems, so at least she knew she wasn't having an allergic reaction or something. However, it wasn't the kind of pain she could take to Madame Pomfrey, so she had to settle with a numbing spell that didn't actually do much good. She wished they learned more about Healing in their class. Maybe Narcissa will be able to advise me, she thought.

Alecto raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, sweeping the lot of schoolwork into her bag (though not before Vanishing the remainder of the snail). 'Come on then, birthday girl. It's not every day you're seventeen.'

'Regulus, Rabastan!' Lucinda got onto her chair, waving her arms. 'We're off to eat.'

Alecto groaned and pulled the over-excited girl back down, rolling her eyes.

'You're making a fool out of yourself,' she said not too kindly, but years of sharing the same dorm meant that Lucinda took it well.

She stepped down quickly and shot Alecto a meaningful look, but quietened. Emma rolled her eyes at her two friends, wondering what they had in store for her at the Great Hall. Last year, Rabastan
had enchanted the cakes at dessert to sing happy birthday every time she touched them. Mortified, Emma had retaliated for his seventeenth, asking James to enchant everything he touched to turn Gryffindor gold and red. Her brother had been more than willing to comply, even managing to make the Slytherin's potion roar at him every time he stirred it. Remembering all this, Emma looked warily at Rabastan, who held out five splayed fingers to signal that he was finishing up, casually going back to his game of Exploding Snap with Evan Rosier.

'How are you not as excited as I am?' Lucinda asked Emma on the way to the Great Hall.

'You have enough excitement for us both,' Emma grinned, but secretly she was elated.

The high from getting her Dark Mark was still coursing through her veins, and not even their improvised Quidditch match against James and his friends had managed to dampen her energy, though none of them had really played fair. She wasn't sure if the two teams were actually having fun or if they were just trying to crush the other House into the dust. Being an optimist, she opted for the former option. After all, no one had ended up in the infirmary. Besides, she had actually spent some time with James without Sirius getting in the way. He had been too busy trying to shoot Bludgers at his brother to care about Emma.

'Oh, I forgot something,' Alecto said, turning around and heading back towards the dungeon.

'What?' Emma asked, frowning stopping in her tracks. It wasn't like Alecto to be careless.

'This,' she replied, flicking her wand.

Everything went dark. Inwardly, Emma panicked for a second, her heart rate quadrupling in a matter of moments, but upon raising her hands to her eyes, she realised that Alecto had just charmed a scarf to act as a blindfold and relaxed. 'I should have expected this from you guys.'

'Emmaaaa,' Lucinda whined. 'You're no fun. I thought you would freak out at least a little bit.'

Emma couldn't help the self-satisfied grin on her face. She knew how to wind her friends up. The Slytherins took pride in getting a rise out of each other, since many weren't easily riled up.

'She'll freak out when she realises where we're going,' Emma could almost hear Alecto's malicious grin.

'Oh no...' 

'That's more like it!' 

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'We're here!' Alecto announced, taking the blindfold off with a flourish.

Emma stood blinking for a couple of seconds, getting used to the light. She was in a room not unlike the Slytherin common room, though it seemed smaller and there were no staircases leading down from the sides. There were no windows, no lake, but bluebell flame candles sent blue shadows flickering across the green carpet. All along the sides of the room and grouped around the fireplace were black leather sofas and armchairs. Several long tables filled with food and drink stood against the walls. Silver letters curled across the green banners draped on the walls, spelling "Happy 17th Birthday". After taking a second to drink it all in, she realised that she was almost speechless. She turned to Alecto and Lucinda, a surprised smile forming on her lips. Her two friends burst into grins
in return and they hugged.

'This is amazing guys, thanks,' the seventeen-year old said. 'How did you...?'

'We're on the seventh floor,' Lucinda explained.

'We told the room we required a party,' Alecto smirked. 'I take it you like it then?'

Emma shook her head in astonishment, moving to take a closer look. 'How did you get the food? The Room wouldn't have been able to conjure any.'

'Well, you'll have to thank...'

'Courtesy of Kreacher.'

Emma turned around to see Rabastan and Regulus smirking in the doorway, looking rather pleased with themselves and smarter than usual. Well, Rabastan was in any case. Regulus always took great care to separate his image from that of his brother, which included the way they wore their uniforms.

'He's quite taken with you,' Regulus continued. 'He has a few cousins working in the Hogwarts kitchens who owe him favours.'

'You make it sound like he's part of the mafia,' Lucinda giggled, but didn't fawn as she once would have.

'Thank Merlin that crush went away,' Alecto said in an undertone to Emma. 'I feel like the real Lucy's come back to us. It was her idea, by the way.'

Emma felt a rush of gratitude towards her blond friend, but before she could say anything, the door opened once more.

'So I heard there was a party,' Helen said conversationally, dragging Barty Crouch behind her. 'This one almost didn't want to come.'

Barty scratched the back of his head sheepishly. 'I didn't think I'd be wanted, as a fourth year...'

'Don't be silly,' Emma planted a kiss on his cheek and whispered. 'I haven't forgotten everything I owe you.'

The younger boy flushed a bright pink, though from the kiss or the compliment Emma couldn't say. Of course, this ended up with him getting teased mercilessly by Rabastan. A glance towards Regulus's faintly amused face told him that there would be no help forthcoming from that direction. Luckily, he was saved from Helen gushing "isn't he so cute!" by another arrival.

'I was told there was a party in the making?' Sophie Parkinson was dressed to impress, party clothes and all. Flinging her robe onto one of the chairs that lined the wall, she marched in, closely followed by Evan Rosier, Cassandra Greengrass and a couple of other sixth-and-seventh year students including - much to Emma's distaste - Wilkes and Mulciber. Somehow, James's snide comments about Wilkes had gotten to her, and she couldn't help but snort at the sight of him.

'Do you mind if I bring Gabriel?' Lucinda asked, drawing Emma's attention away from the group.

'Not at all,' Emma smiled, before putting a hand on Lucinda's arm and looking her in the eye. 'Thank you, by the way. This is the best present you could have got me.'

'Good, because I already invited him. Anyway, you're welcome Captain,' the Chaser grinned. 'Enjoy
the food, or had you forgotten why we brought you up so early in the first place?"

A short while later the party was in full swing and Emma had surreptitiously eaten most of the Cornish pasties. Someone had hooked a Wizarding Wireless to some speakers thoughtfully provided by the room, and the Butterbeer flowed freely. Most of the students had followed Sophie's lead, and there was now a mishmash of robes to the right of the door. *I wonder how we're going to separate all of those*, Emma thought, glad that she had left hers next to the afore-mentioned Cornish pasties.

'Having fun?' Wilkies asked just as Emma had taken a particularly large bite.

She nodded her head, not trusting herself to speak. *How did he appear here?* Emma thought. She could have sworn that she had placed most of the student body between the two of them.

'Want to dance?'

She was saved from having to reply by Alecto casting the *Sonorus* charm on herself and climbing onto a table near them. As the redhead tapped a fork against a goblet and called for attention, Emma took advantage of the distraction to swallow her mouthful.

'It's not every day that our dear Quidditch captain turns seventeen,' she started. 'Happy birthday Emma!'

Her words echoed through the crowd slightly embarrassingly and Emma hoped that she had wiped all of the crumbs off of her face, as every single person in the room turned to look at her. *Apparently yes*, she thought, catching her reflection in Helen's glasses. When Wilkes turned to wish her a happy birthday, she was able to give him a smirk. He might have said more, but was cut off by Alecto's resounding voice.

'Now some of you may have noticed the various potions on this small table,' she gestured. Everyone looked with interest at the multicoloured vials of different sizes. 'This is a little game often played when a wizard or witch turns seventeen. Do I need to explain the rules?'

*Knowing Alecto, there's a twist to this*, Emma thought, but a grin began to form on her face all the same. There was a chorus of "no"s and several "what is it?"s from the students.

'As most of you know, it's customary to fill vials with different drinks and play a guessing game. The players are separated into teams and the team with the most correct answers wins a prize. Well, Lucinda and I have decided to spice it up a little.'

*I knew it*, Emma's smirk grew wider.

'With the help of Sophie and Rabastan, we created many famous potions. You'll be placed in teams of three and must correctly guess the potion used. The first team to finish. For obvious reasons, Sophie, Rabastan and I are exempt from this challenge - having poured the potions into the vials. But we'll keep score, and make sure no one cheats. We'll tell you about the catch as we come around.'

'So, Emma...'

She was gone before Wilkes managed to finish his sentence.

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'Please, Lucinda save me,' she burst out upon finding her friend.
Lucinda giggled. 'Sorry Ems, but I have inter-house power on my side. Slytherin, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw - what could go wrong?'

'Raven...' Emma's voice trailed off as she saw Lou there. She cast in her mind for the words she had prepared for when she would see her cousin, but they were no longer there. Luckily, the blue-robed girl didn't need an apology and swept her cousin into her arms.

'Joyeux anniversaire, cousine,' she said in her native language. 'Everyone deserves to be happy on their seventeenth.'

Perhaps she is thinking of my help in making Sirius's present, Emma thought, but immediately banished it. Her cousin was here, and that was all that mattered. All that's missing is James. It's a shame, but sorry.

Joyeux anniversaire, cousine,' she said in her native language. 'Everyone deserves to be happy on their seventeenth.'

'So, cousin,' Emma teased. 'Dropping me for these guys are you? And in my hour of greatest need...'

'What is your greatest need?' Lou inquired, shaking her head at the other girl's drama before training her eyes on a spot behind Emma. 'Does it happen to involve a certain blond-haired seventh-year Slytherin?'

'That's the one,' Emma replied, before disappearing once more into the crowd. Lou merely laughed, honestly, her humour is a lot like James's sometimes.

'Hey Emma! Over here!' Helen waved an arm. The other seemed to be stopping a certain fourth-year Slytherin from escaping.

Help me, Barty's eyes pleaded. Emma smirked at him; once Helen had her prey in sight, there was no stopping her. Emma's kiss on the cheek had amused her so much that she planned to flirt with him all evening. Plus, it was rather funny to see the mostly level-headed fourth-year so embarrassed. Emma wasn't exactly friends with Helen, but she conceded and weaved her way through the people to join them, wanting to get to know her roommate a little better. This is going to be fun.

'Great, we're sure to win now!' Helen said brightly. Though she wasn't in NEWT level Potions, she did understand the theory better than most. It was the practical exam she had failed. Plus, she was great at Herbology, which was always useful when it came to identifying ingredients. 'Barty here's a boy-genius. How many O.W.L.s are you taking next year again?'

'Twelve,' Barty muttered, flushing pink once more. Helen had leaned into him - probably intoxicating him with her perfume. Emma snorted.

'Don't you think that's impressive?' Helen looked almost hurt.

Emma hastened to explain. 'Oh, that's not why I was -'

'Emma,' Wilkes - now slightly out of breath - had caught up with her. 'Do you want to... Oh, are you lot already in a group?'

'Yeah,' Emma gave him an apologetic smile. 'It's a shame, but sorry,'

'No worries,' he brushed her off. 'I'll just find Severus or Regulus.'

'Is the whole of Slytherin here?' Emma asked once he was a safe distance away.

Helen gave her a small grimace and lifted her shoulders in a shrug.
'Well that wasn't very nice.' Rabastan Lestrange had sauntered over with a bag of potions. Emma had almost forgotten why they were supposed to team up. 'You're going to have to turn him down one day or another, you know.'

'I don't want to hurt his feelings,' Emma protested.

'More like you don't want to get on Avery's bad side,' he snorted. 'Everyone knows that those two are thick as thieves.'

'Please,' Emma smirked. 'As if Avery could scare me. Besides, Wilkes hangs out with Snape, and we all know what happens to Snape if he tries to cross me.'

'Using your brother as a shield,' Rabastan tutted. 'A girl after my own heart.'

'So, how did you get so many vials?' Emma nodded towards the potions he was setting up.

'Gemimo. Gotta hand it to Alecto, she knows her charms. But don't worry, I would have bought up the store for you otherwise,' he winked.

Emma rolled her eyes. 'Yeah right.'

'That's what happens when your family is filthy rich,' Rabastan joked. 'I would have even done it for you, Helen, if your birthday hadn't been during our exam week in December.'

Helen looked torn between flattered, annoyed and amused. 'Stop being a flirt.'

'Never bothered you before,' Rabastan replied cheekily.

His eyes settled on Barty, who was watching the exchange with interest. He had never seen Emma and Rabastan bantering together, having only really seen them at Quidditch practice and at the breakfast table. He seemed relieved at the break from Helen's flirting though - something that Rabastan had noticed. Before he could tease the kid, Emma intervened.

'So, don't you have to give us a piece of paper or something?'

'Oh yeah, almost forgot,' Rabastan rummaged in his bag. 'Here!' He held up a Sugar Quill and a scrap piece of parchment.

'Seriously, a sugar quill?' Helen asked sceptically.

'We thought it was more fun than using a timer. You know, write the answers before it melts kind of thing,' he grinned, before moving onto the next trio.

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'Ready, Set, Go!' Alecto yelled and Lucinda shot sparks out of her wand.

*She had always been good at party magic,* Emma thought. If Lucinda concentrated on her lessons as much as she did on her social life, her grades would be rocketing up. Lucinda chatted with Alecto for a bit, before she seemed to realise that she was also actually playing and scuttled off to her colourful group. After watching her two best friends goofing off for a moment, Emma turned to the vials.

'So, who's first?'
'I'll go,' Barty volunteered. Helen shot him an admiring look - which he promptly ignored. He unstoppered the cork before recoiling in disgust. 'Polyjuice Potion. I'd bet my life on it.'

Emma had to stop herself from sniggering. Poor Barty did have a bad history with that potion after all. She had just about succeeded in keeping her smile in check, when Helen went and ruined it.

'Wow, you really know your way around. That's a NEWT-level potion,' Helen stroked Barty's arm. He reddened. Emma hastily coughed and grabbed the parchment.

'Purple with cork top: Polyjuice Potion,' she noted hurriedly.

'Are you sure?' Helen asked. 'Just in case.'

'I trust Barty on this one,' Emma said, sharing a look with the younger boy.

She picked out a fat, red container. It had no immediate smell, even when passed around, so they decided to pour a little on the parchment. At least they had the sense not to drink it.

'Swelling Solution,' they said in unison, watching the words get fatter and slightly distorted, something quickly rectified with a spell from Emma.

And so it went on, until there was only one left.

'Who gets this one?' Barty asked nervously.

After all, the one they had left until last was the one labelled "Drink Me". Alecto had warned them that if someone didn't drink it, then they would be disqualified. This was the "spice" in the game. They all stared at the little bottle for a few silent seconds.

'Who has the shortest wand?' Helen asked eventually. It was a fair way to decide.

They all placed their wands butt-first onto the table and compared heights. Helen paled. 'I probably shouldn't have said that.'

'Relax,' Emma reasoned. 'Alecto wouldn't have poisoned it or anything...' Her eyes flickered to meet Barty's, both thinking the exact same thing: I'm glad it wasn't me.

'I hadn't even thought of that,' Helen looked horror-struck. Oops.

The potion was in a small black case - barely enough for a mouthful. Helen downed it like a shot and shut her eyes tightly. Barty and Emma leaned forwards, eager to see the effects. Nothing seemed to happen. Her hair didn't fall out, she didn't shrink or grow in size, her teeth were in place, she wasn't sleeping…

'How do you feel?' Emma asked cautiously.

'Fine,' she replied. 'Maybe it was a dud.'

She cautiously opened her eyes. And smiled. A great blissful smile of the kind that Argus Filch reserved for his kitten, or one that belonged to the faces of the Marauder fan club. Her eyes clouded over dreamily and she heaved a great sigh. Barty and Emma shared an alarmed look, but Helen wasn't finished.

'Barty,' she said breathlessly, locking eyes with him. 'I never realised how muscular you were.'

'Umm…okay, but what about the potion?' the boy asked nervously as she ran a hand up and down
his arm.

If she was flirting with him before, at least it was just to tease him. Even Barty knew that it was to get a reaction out of the innocent little fourth year, but that hadn't stopped him from blushing. It was a little game of hers. But now Helen had turned on the full charm, her eyes wide and blinking like a doe's beneath her cat-eye glasses. She ran a hand through her hair, fluffing it out until it fell like a wave around her face.

'Forget about the potion,' she sighed, pushing her chair back. 'How have I not noticed you before today?'

'Just last year you called me a scrawny tadpole,' he reminded her, affronted.

'That was before Quidditch. And now you've opened up my eyes.'

Barty squirmed, looking like a deer caught in headlights as Helen planted a kiss on his cheek. Since he was too shocked to move, she followed up with a trail of kisses down his neck. Emma chuckled.

'What are you laughing at?' he asked grumpily, still unsure as to whether he wanted to piss off a sixth year that most likely knew more hexes than he did.

'Amortentia,' Emma replied, writing the name of the last potion with a flourish.

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'You poisoned her!' Barty accused, pointing a finger towards the doubled up Alecto.

'Relax, Barty,' Sophie Parkinson said when it was obvious that she wasn't going to get any help. Rabastan was currently enjoying the fruits of their labour by watching Evan Rosier trying to get with Mulciber. Now that was something you didn't see every day. 'It's a very mild dosage. Plus, it's not a proper Amortentia potion: the drinker falls in love with the first person they see. It'll go away once she's eaten something - a bit like alcohol, if you want.'

'And after all that, we didn't even win,' the fourth-year grumbled to Emma as they made their way to the rapidly emptying tables.

'Do you know who did?' she asked, plying a plate as high as she could whilst trying to keep Helen off the boy.

'That would be me,' Regulus picked a slice of pizza off of the stack with a self-satisfied smirk.

'Figures,' Emma muttered darkly.

'So, Barty,' he continued as though he hadn't heard her. 'Bad luck mate - it was more potent with Helen, since she was already trying to get lucky tonight.'

'Get…get…' Barty gulped.

'I'm sure you'll be able to manage her just fine,' Regulus slapped him on the back, before steering Emma towards the fire. She was too shocked at his Rabastan-like behaviour to comment, that boy's a bad influence at parties. 'Hello birthday girl.'

'You saw me earlier,' she pointed out.
'Ah but that was before my prize,' his smirk grew wider. *Is it possible that he's drunk? It's probably not even 11 o'clock!* 'Want to know what it is?'

'I have a feeling you're about to tell me,' she replied dubiously.

He showed her a piece of parchment. "Free pass for the week" was scrawled along the top in Alecto's handwriting. In smaller print was Lucinda's much neater "whatever detention you think you have, whatever homework you can't handle, Emma Potter will do for you!"

'Very funny,' she said flatly, handing it back. 'They can't make me do that.'

'Actually, they said that it'd be better for you if you did. You know Alecto.'

Emma pursed her lips, about to tell him just what she thought of this, when he laughed.

'Relax! I'm not that mean,' he ripped the paper in four. 'And Mulciber has his hands full. I think it might just slip my mind to tell him what the rewards was.' He winked.

'You're oddly cheery,' Emma looked at him a little suspiciously. She wasn't going to thank him until she found out if there was an extra piece of paper.

'Okay so I may or may not have lost a bet with Rabastan, and he may or may not have put a Cheering Charm on me,' he grinned guiltily.

'You guys,' Emma shook her head. She slumped into an armchair facing the warmth of the fire and sighed in contentment. 'But seriously, this is a pretty sweet birthday party. Thanks.'

'Hey,' Regulus sat on the arm and leaned forwards, still grinning like a maniac. 'Dark five.'

He held up his forearm for her to touch, but at the last minute Emma thought better of it. Who knew what happened when two Dark Marks touched each other? Instead she pulled his sleeve down and bumped arms together, giggling from the sheer stupidity of it. *This day is one of the best in my life,* she thought, committing it to memory. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Barty trying to force feed pizza slices to Helen, who lapped it up adoringly. Clearly, he had taken Sophie's instructions to heart, judging from the pile of food on his plate. She spun around to look at Alecto, who was now sitting in a chair with tears in her eyes. There was nothing like Amortentia to get a party going.

Suddenly the music died, the festive atmosphere gone. Regulus and Emma both twisted around - just in time to see Rabastan and Sirius with their wands at each other's throats.
Regulus followed at a more stately pace, in a manner that could only be described as *stalking*, eyes narrowed like a cat spotting its prey. Obviously, the Cheering Charm was no match for the hatred of his brother. Behind Sirius was a crowd of Gryffindors, a couple of Ravenclaws and a couple of Hufflepuffs, all trying to peer through the doorway. No Slytherins. Emma spotted her brother looking slightly sheepish off to the side. Suddenly, she realised what was going on and broke out into a peel of surprised laughter, forgetting about why Sirius and Rabastan were about to duel in the first place. James must have felt her gaze on him, because he raised his head to meet her eyes. The corner of his mouth twitched. Then he grinned. Soon the two siblings were laughing like mad, though whether out of nerves or the funniness of the situation, neither could tell.

'Would somebody please tell me just what is so funny?' Sirius asked, eyes never leaving Rabastan's wand.

Emma didn't even bother glancing at him. James attempted to talk, but started laughing once more. Rabastan had also started smiling, though Emma thought it was probably for a different reason altogether. He had wanted to practice his duelling skills ever since the Dark Mark was refused him the first time around.

'If I may,' Remus Lupin spoke up timidly, even raising a hand as though he needed permission to talk. 'I think that the Slytherins had exactly the same idea as us.'

Sirius looked up at the banners on the walls, seemingly taking in the state of the room only then. His eyes narrowed: clearly he was not amused. Luckily for him, James's laughter was infectious, and pretty soon the atmosphere had relaxed. It helped that a couple of the students inside the room had noticed their friends in the crowd standing outside. There were a couple of titters and some grins, but it was Rabastan's moment of insight which defused the situation.

'Happy birthday Potter,' he said, nonchalantly tucking his wand back into his pocket as though duelling had just been a passing fancy of his. 'Want some Firewhiskey?'

And just like that, the four Houses mingled as though they were colour-blind. From what Emma could understand, the Gryffindors had partied in the Tower until McGonagall had come storming in, telling them they were keeping the entire castle awake. That was when his weedy little friend - Petterfew? Pettigrew? Definitely Peter something - had the bright idea to use the Room of Requirement. As the result of this bizarre coincidence, here they were.

Not everybody was enjoying themselves though, the two Blacks stood at opposite sides of the room - Regulus leaning against the wall, watching his brother like a hawk, whilst Sirius's eyes darted over now and then as he laughed a little too loudly at jokes, shifting his weight from one foot to another. Emma noticed that none of their friends were standing too close - Rabastan had gone off to the next new interesting thing, whereas Remus Lupin was quietly chatting with a pretty Ravenclaw. She had yet to see her brother or Petti-something since the mingling, and cast her eyes around the room.

She finally met James's eyes and as if on cue they made their way over to one another, ignoring their two friends. Briefly, Emma thought back to the days when they could have entire conversations just by interpreting the other's body language, when Regulus and Sirius had sibling spats that were never more serious than their own. Now they had to guess at each other's thoughts. But James wasn't interested in family feuds.
'You're too young to be drinking,' he tutted, putting her goblet back on the table - even though it was only Butterbeer and she was the same age as him. He had just assumed it was alcohol. 'So this is your crowd, huh? Sirius told me you were close with Lestrange, but I didn't really believe it until now. Sure you hang out, but isn't that because there aren't many students in a House? I know you won't listen to me, but that guy's trouble. I'm worried that -'

'Can you just drop this subject for one night?' Emma sighed, not waiting for a reply. James could get bossy when he was drunk. Actually, James was pretty bossy most of the time. 'It's our birthday and besides, Rabastan isn't that bad.'

'I still find it weird that you're on first name terms with him,' James quirked an eyebrow, looking at the person in question suspiciously.

Emma followed his gaze, wondering what Rabastan had done to merit such wariness - after all, James had accepted that Firewhisky - but the Slytherin had just thrust a handful of what looked like Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans in his mouth. Judging from the cheering crowd around him exchanging money, it was presumably a dare.

'Would you prefer me to hang around with Snape and Mulciber?' she asked, citing James's two least favourite Slytherins, who were skulking in the corner, probably muttering about the new spells they had come up with. Even Emma had to admit that they were impressive. She was sure that they would be accepted into the Dark Lord's service before long. Prying her thoughts away from such matters, she concentrated on her brother. 'Scratch that, have you even talked to Rabastan?'

Her brother opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish, but he still wore a petulant expression. Clearly he saw her point, but didn't want to give her the satisfaction of being right.

'Come on,' she said, taking advantage of his temporary loss of words to lead him towards the group of people and adding slyly. 'Anyway, don't you think Lily would be impressed to hear you've overcome House prejudices?'

That settled it. James marched over to the Slytherin like a soldier preparing for war - shoulders set back, lips set into a tight line, eyes staring determinedly straight ahead. Emma stifled a giggle and followed behind, eager to see the fruits of her labour.

'Lestrange,' he started, before falling silent.

Emma could almost hear him thinking about what to say next. Luckily for the Gryffindor, Rabastan was a social person whose drunken state had currently lowered his inhibitions.

'How was the Firewhisky? We're trying out the new Bertie Bott's - Lucinda managed to smuggle in the new testing batch, her parents are major shareholders in the firm. Basically they turn you into an animal for a couple of seconds, and we're trying to guess which ones are which.'

'Didn't you just shove a load in your mouth?' Emma asked curiously.

'Yup!' He beamed as though this was some kind of feat. Before she could ask more there was a small pop and he turned into an elephant, a dog, a rabbit and a flamingo in quick succession. This happened several times, each animal vying for the first place before the boy reappeared, spitting out a few feathers.

'Cough up!' he tapped Lucinda gleefully on the shoulder after the last feather was out of his mouth. She reluctantly dropped a couple of Galleons into his outstretched palm.

'Wicked!' James exclaimed, forgetting for a moment who he was talking to. 'You could belong in
Gryffindor with those guts! You might have got stuck as a half-elephant, half-dog for all you knew.'

'Yeah, but then my school robes wouldn't match my eyes.' Rabastan joked, fluttering his eyelashes.

The others looked at James cautiously, wondering what a Gryffindor was doing in their midst. Lucinda forgave James for practically every prank played on her, simply because he was "so freaking cool", but not every Slytherin shared that sentiment.

With a glance towards his sister, who nodded encouragingly, James pointed to the colourful sweets. 'Mind if I try, Les… Rabastan?'

But just as Rabastan held out the bag, Sirius stormed over with an expression of outrage, placing himself between the two boys. Obviously, he had been watching their efforts at reconciliation.

'Prongs! What do you think you're doing, mate? You're fraternising with the enemy! He's probably trying to poison you!' he shot the Slytherins a contemptuous look. The tentative peace shrivelled up on the spot.

'As if I have nothing better to do than bringing poisoned food to Em's birthday,' Rabastan scoffed, but his green eyes were glinting angrily.

'Come on Padfoot,' James muttered, obviously in discomfort. 'It's fine.'

'That's what he wants you to think!' Sirius hissed, not taking his eyes off Rabastan.

'Yes, because I obviously keep these on my person at all times on the off-chance that a bunch of knuckle-headed lions would gate-crash a party,' the Slytherin replied sarcastically, mouth set in a sneer.

By now Lucinda was staring daggers at Sirius and Helen had broken off her attempts at flirting with Barty in order to follow the argument. Out of the corner of her eye, Emma noticed Remus and Regulus halt whatever conversation they were having in order to intervene. It was true that both were quiet achievers, but somehow the two of them looked so odd together. Maybe it was because they represented such different parts of Sirius's life. Or maybe it was because Emma had never imagined Regulus getting along with anyone who wasn't a Slytherin. He had confessed in their second year that his parents didn't want him getting friendly with any other Houses, reminding him that they were rivals. He hadn't minded, he wasn't one too seek out social contact anyway. But now the two prefects arrived with the same look of concern etched on their faces: How will this fight escalate if I don't try to stop it? they seemed to be thinking.

'You never know with you snakes,' Sirius rejoined contemptuously, and Emma turned her gaze back to the older Black brother, ironically looking for all the world like his cousin Bellatrix with his haughty expression and long black curls.

'Sirius,' Remus warned, though it was a half-hearted reproach that Emma wasn't even sure that Sirius had heard.

James put a hand on his angry friend's arm, clearly not knowing which side to take. Sirius shook it off. 'Bet you're itching to run along to tell your master what a good little Death Eater you've been, getting rid of the blood-traitors.'

There were several gasps at the use of language and Emma's eyes briefly flickered to Regulus. She couldn't help it, the tasks that they had been set had remained as fresh in her mind as though it had happened only last week. In a way it had - she had woken up in cold sweat after a nightmare about a one-armed man chasing her down dark alleyways. Regulus, of course, remained impassive.
'As far as I can tell, you're the only blood-traitor in here,' Rabastan spat, drawing his wand. He was one of the few who knew about the true nature of Sirius's leaving home. 'How you even bear to look at yourself, I'll never know.'

'He's a sight for sore eyes compared to you, Lestrange!' a voice piped up from behind Sirius, his wand pointed shakily over the latter's shoulder. Sirius also levelled his at the Slytherin's face, shifting a little bit so the small boy could be seen past his broad shoulders.

Great, Emma thought. Now James's freaky friend Pettigrew has joined the party. And we're back to square one.

'Oh look,' Lucinda sneered, looking down her nose at the Gryffindors. 'Seems like not all lions care about a fair fight. You look more like scaredy cats to me. Though I guess the weedy one doesn't really count, does it Rab?'

'Watch what you're saying about Peter!' James protested, finding himself on sure footing once more. Defending his friends was something he was good at.

All of a sudden it seemed like the whole room had their wands out. One by one, everyone seemed to yell out an insult to someone who hadn't yet joined the fight, until only Remus, Regulus, Emma and a couple of Hufflepuffs didn't have a wand drawn. She saw the yellow-robed students leave out of the corner of her eye.

'James,' she pleaded, turning to her brother, willing him to see reason. She glared at Sirius, why does he always have to ruin everything?

'Stay out of this Ems,' her brother didn't even bother to look at her, dismissing her completely. 'I told you that you should have listened to me.'

Emma's face hardened, angry spells leaping into her mind of their own accord. Right, that's it. Time to -

And then Regulus walked casually into the line of fire, one hand forcing Rabastan's wand arm down. He looked at Sirius as though he was the bane of all existence and said in his coldest voice. 'This git's not worth it.'

Although the sentence only served to inflame Sirius's anger, Rabastan agreed, deflating a little. Maybe his sudden changes in mood weren't always a bad thing. 'True. Tell you what: you Griffs leave and we won't hex you into the Hospital Wing.'

'It's James's birthday too!' Pettigrew whined in a squeaky voice.

Lucinda's mouth curled into a mocking grin, but Emma beat her to it, eager to avoid any more of the night. The party had left a bitter taste in her mouth anyway. 'Pettigrew's right. Besides, this party's over anyway.'

The blond girl looked at her incredulously, but Emma just shrugged. Although her brother could be a complete nimbus when he wanted to, he deserved to have some time to celebrate his seventeenth with his friends too. Besides, she didn't want to see the outcome of this duel splattered on the walls. She would get her revenge on Sirius when Slytherin stamped Gryffindor into the dust in two weeks time.

'Wait, Ems,' James said almost demandingly. 'I want you to stay.'

She hated how sometimes he thought that she was a part of him. Of course that was true, but it
worked both ways. She was not a doll he could set on the shelf and expect to be waiting when he got back. She was not an extension of himself. She gave him a cool glare and walked towards the exit, grabbing an oblivious Alecto away from her boyfriend on the way out. But before she crossed the threshold, she couldn't help but look back.

"I'm sorry," James mouthed, confusion etched onto his face. "I love you."

I know you do, Emma thought, suddenly regretting her harsh actions, because really, it wasn't his fault. He had partly become that way because she depended on him so much when they were young. Now, they lived in completely different worlds and upon that realisation tears suddenly pricked her eyes. She gave him a small smile and motioned towards him - an old gesture they had used back in their first year. "I love you too."

And for a moment, James understood.
Lucinda groaned as Mafalda Hopkirk went on to describe the necessary requirements to obtain the three Ds. Emma was long past listening and was instead observing her classmates. Though they had been practicing for nigh on six months, most still hadn't managed to Apparate successfully. Obviously this happened every year, because gym mattresses lay strewn around the Great Hall - courtesy of Professor Albus Dumbledore. Regulus - of course - had mastered the technique, having practiced "Determination" in Occlumency and seemingly having been born with "Deliberation". Not to mention his hasty practicing just before they decided to go on their "work experience" as Emma called it in her mind. If things had gone awry with the Giants, they would have needed a swift exit plan. Emma wondered how she ever thought she could have pulled it off.

Needless to say, Emma managed it - eventually. She had only successfully Apparated for the first time a couple of weeks ago. James however, who couldn't concentrate on one thing to save his life, was busy splinching his eyebrows all over the room. Eventually even the kind-natured instructor told him to take a break, having been rushed over five times to collect James's various body parts. Rabastan was having similar problems, but from lack of effort more than anything else. *No wonder he failed his first test*, Emma thought to herself. Being Rabastan, he just figured he'd get it before the year was out, and knowing Rabastan and his luck, Emma was sure he would.

Alecto had skived off this lesson, claiming to need sleep "this one Saturday at least". Lily Evans hadn't been to lessons in months, having succeeded in passing her own test, since she turned seventeen in January. Another surprise was Peter Pettigrew, who succeeded on the fourth try. The whole year group had been gobsmacked at that one. Even McGonagall had been rendered temporarily speechless when given with the news, and for once no Slytherin contested the points awarded to Gryffindor.

'Maybe you should try picturing Lily in the circle,' Sirius Black was lazing against a wall, not even attempting to Apparate.

Emma wondered why she had picked a spot so close to her brother's annoying friends. Oh wait, she hadn't picked the spot. James had dragged her over so as to keep an eye on her. Apparently, she was his responsibility. He couldn't even be responsible for himself. But he had looked so heartbroken when she had tried to shake him off that she had just forced Lucinda to come along too. The latter still found Sirius easy on the eyes, though she wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole.

She had also wisely stopped talking about James that way, to Emma at least. In fifth year, she was eyeing him up as a potential match to meet her parents: good marks, charismatic, arrogant... In some ways, James was a more perfect pure-blood in her parents eyes than most of their own arranged matches. Emma had had a hard time grinding that idea into the dust. Of course, just as Lucinda gave up on James, she had started on Regulus. *Oh well, at least she's come to her senses now*, Emma smiled fondly at her friend.

'That might work,' James agreed, and before anyone could stop him he turned on the spot.

'I don't believe it,' Emma breathed, her attention snapping back to the lesson.

Her brother was standing - whole - in the little red circle drawn by Hopkirk.

Lucinda's eyebrows shot so far up that her fringe hid them from view. Sirius almost toppled off of the
foot he was balancing on. Remus Lupin just shook his head, as though nothing James did could faze him anymore. James cried out in delight and before anyone could stop him, he was zipping around the Great Hall, stealing various things from students and putting them on others.

'James Potter! Stop that this instant!' But Hopkirk's warning came a little too late.

James had just Apparated straight onto Professor Kettleburn's head.

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'So sorry Professor!' James gasped, trying to steady the poor man, but instead he grabbed at the armless sleeve.

They both toppled down to the floor. Kettleburn wrenched the sleeve of his robes back with his remaining arm with a growl at the seventeen-year old. 'Pull yourself together lad. You could have hurt someone.'

James looked suitably meek. He loved Care For Magical Creatures, mostly because he and Sirius got to have fun with Kettleburn's potentially dangerous magical beasts. Honestly, that boy's going to get himself killed someday, Emma thought, and dragged her brother backwards so that he was no longer standing on the teacher's robes.

'Ah, Miss Potter you are also here. This will make my job much easier.'

Emma looked at the professor in puzzlement. She had dropped the subject faster than you could say "creature" when picking her subjects for their fifth year. Care For Magical Creatures still involved plants and everyone knew that if Frank Longbottom was a green thumb, then Emma was an orange thumb, because everything she touched wilted, died, or exploded.

'You are both wanted in the Headmaster's office. Follow me.'

Kettleburn didn't wait for a response, instead turning and expecting the others to keep pace. The twins hesitated long enough to glance at each other and shrug in unison before running after the teacher. Emma wondered what Professor Dumbledore could want with them. It had been at least a month since their birthday, which had successfully passed under the staff's radar - or they simply ignored it - and if it was for one of James's pranks then Sirius would be in her shoes right then.

It was true that Narcissa had hinted of a bigger role to play in the war once they were let off from school, but neither she nor Regulus had done anything yet, being stuck at Hogwarts. Rabastan had continued to terrorise the younger Muggleborns, but Emma had been keeping a low profile this year, mostly because she was so obsessed with Quidditch that it was impossible to do Prefect rounds, homework and get enough sleep as it was. She was at a complete loss as to why their presence was required. She was still lost in thought when they arrived at the gargoyle, barely noticing the spiralling staircase slide open.

'Mr Potter, Miss Potter, please take a seat,' Dumbledore said once they entered his study.

They sat down warily, taking note of the fact that both of their Heads of Houses were present. McGonagall's face gave nothing away, but Slughorn was looking down on them with a pitying expression. Immediately Emma began to worry. Slughorn worries about crystallised fruit, she reminded herself, trying to stay calm.

'It has come to our attention that your mother has been afflicted with Dragon Pox. I assume you both
know what that is?' James and Emma stared at him, eyes glazing over. 'Well, just to be sure,' he took out a roll of parchment stamped with the insignia of St Mungo's. 'A Mrs Natalie Potter was admitted last week with a case of severe Dragon Pox. She exhibits all the signs: a green and purple rash on her arms and legs and sparks coming out of her nose when she sneezes. Mr Charles Potter has been admitted under quarantine to make certain that he does not carry the disease. As you know, this is severely contagious, so we must verify that you two aren't infected.'

'But…Even if we are, it could have affected the whole school by now,' Emma said, thinking of all the people she and James had come into contact with since Christmas. Four months wasn't nothing.

'You are only contagious once you start exhibiting the symptoms, my dear,' Professor Dumbledore looked at her kindly though his glasses.

'But we haven't -' James was interrupted by the Headmaster.

'You may carry the virus without any signs, Mr Potter,' he replied.

'Oh,' James fell back into his chair. 'So what do we do?'

'You will be confined to the Hospital Wing for the remainder of the day under the care of Madame Pomfrey. Once she has performed a number of tests, she will determine whether you will be let out. Minerva, if you would,' Dumbledore nodded to the Head of Gryffindor.

'Certainly,' she nodded, but James wasn't finished.

'Professor…Sirius Black lives at our house. He was there over winter break, shouldn't he…?'

'Quite right Mr Potter, excellent thinking,' Dumbledore said. 'Horace, if you don't mind?'

Slughorn nodded a little too eagerly. Emma supposed that he was looking forward to the one-on-one time to try and convince Sirius to join the "Slug Club". Then the realisation hit her and she closed her eyes in dismay: she was going to have to spend an indeterminate amount of time with Sirius and James, with only Madame Pomfrey to keep her company. Her heart sank even further.

Even Bellatrix couldn't think of a worse punishment.

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'Come along dears, yes even you Mr Black,' the school nurse ushered a bewildered looking Sirius into the Hospital Wing.

The three sixth-years trooped after her, passing the beds filled with various sick patients into her study. Emma had always expected it to be a sterile white, like the Hospital Wing, only homier. She couldn't have been farther from the truth. Madame Pomfrey's private room was dark, the blinds having been pulled shut. There were three wooden chairs in front of the desk and one larger chair in front. The room had the bare minimum of furniture and no personal items: whether they be pictures, photos or even wallpaper. It looked barely lived in. Seeing their look of appraisal, Madame Pomfrey muttered that she just never got around to changing the room, opened the blinds and bustled out again, with strict instructions to not leave the room.

'What if I need the bathroom?' asked Sirius, but the nurse had already left.

'So...' James said awkwardly, as the three of them hung around the room, not knowing what to do.
'Why are we here?' Sirius asked curiously. 'Not that I need any incentive to miss out on Apparition lessons, but you know...' 

James opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He looked oddly like a fish, gaping as if he was clutching at oxygen, but never inhaling any oxygen. Sirius's smile immediately fell from his face and he turned questioningly towards Emma, all quarrels put aside. 

'We're being tested for Dragon Pox,' Emma's mouth moved, but it seemed like Emma herself was strangely disconnected from it all. She was just... numb. Saying it somehow sucked all the feeling out of her body. She didn't even mind that it was Sirius who she was talking to. 

Dragon Pox could mean anything from a harmless case similar to the measles, to a dangerous illness resulting in the death of the patient, even though some sort of cure was available. Maybe "cure" wasn't the right word. Treatment was more like it, though rumour had it that Dumbledore was working on a cure of his own. When asked why, he would say that it was for curiosity's sake, though the Wizarding World was never wholly satisfied with the response. All this was told to them by Professor Slughorn as the twins were led down to the Hospital Wing, but the seventeen-year-olds were too shocked to reply. He didn't seem to mind... or notice, for that matter. 

'Why?' Sirius looked nonplussed, but that was all the conversation he was going to get out of the two, who had almost simultaneously sat in the wooden chairs, staring off into space. 

'It can't be Dragon Pox, Emma thought, it just can't. Mum's always been... well, Mum. She's always there to bring us back to reality after Quidditch, be the voice of reason when our plans get far-fetched, the mediator whenever Dad or I have crossed the line. Who will make Sunday roast and enchant the chicken to speak to us depending on what we put on our plate? Who will force James to eat his Brussel sprouts? Now it's us who have to take care of her, or more like we have to wish Dad the best, because we're not allowed to visit the contagious ward... 

A timid knock on the door broke her inward melt-down. She glanced towards James, who seemed to have been hypnotised by the wall, and Sirius, who was busy looking through medical files in the cabinet. Neither seemed to have heard, so she opened it to come face to face with her cousin. Before Emma could register this turn of events, though she should have suspected it since Lou had spent most of Christmas with them, Madame Pomfrey had bustled in once more. 

'Now, you all know why you're here,' the matron said briskly. 

'Uh,' Sirius put his hand up. 'I don't. Why would we have Dragon Pox?' 

Madame Pomfrey took in the sight before her - James still sitting, staring at the same spot on the wall, Emma staring at her somewhat vacantly, as though waking up from a long dream - and her face softened. 'Mrs Potter has been taken ill at St Mungo's with Dragon Pox. Since you four came into contact with her last, I'm afraid I'm going to have to run some tests. They'll probably take up the whole day, and I'm also going to have you forego lunch. Some tests require no eating for eight hours.' 

Sirius went white and Lou let out a horrified exclamation, quickly muffled by her hands. Emma found it odd that these two should react so suddenly, whilst she and James hadn't even processed the information yet. 

'But not to worry,' Madame Pomfrey quickly added. 'There are several ways to cure Dragon Pox now, and it only properly touches the elderly. Really, anyone under the age of sixty should be fine.'
'I think I might be sick,' Emma said, sitting down on the floor with her knees drawn up to her stomach.

Madame Pomfrey seemed like she might cry. She was only trying to be helpful after all, and how could she have known that the Potters were elderly compared to the average age of Hogwarts parents? Emma felt the odd urge to comfort the medi-witch, quickly followed by a surge of anger. What did Madame Pomfrey know of her mother? She was nothing but the Hogwarts nurse.

Her contempt must have shown on her face. Lou had moved towards her to comfort her, but was instead hanging some distance away. *It must be worse for her*, Emma thought. *She lost her parents, and now she's losing the remaining adults in the family. So she carefully shut what she was feeling in a little box in the back of her head, as the Occlumency had trained her to do. After all, it's not as if Mum's dying. We don't know if the cure will work or not. Just... get to that point if necessary.* With a huge effort of will, she got back up and walked - if a little zombie-like - towards her brother.

'Hey James,' she said softly. Madame Pomfrey had tactfully elected to start with Lou and Sirius for the general check-up.

James turned his clouded eyes towards her. They were usually his most defining feature, almost golden brown with flecks of amber and green. Though she would never admit it - it would be too weird - Emma loved her brother's expressive eyes. But now... Now it almost seemed like there was a film over them. He couldn't focus them, and they were no longer sparkling with mischief. This was *not* James behaviour. An overwhelming sense of urgency overpowered Emma, so much so that for a second she was unable to speak. She settled for putting her hands on his shoulders, forcing him to look her in the eyes. A little of the cloudiness disappeared.

'James. Mum has gone to St Mungo's, yes. But she's gone to the best Healers in the country, ones who have all manners of cures. Sitting around here moping about it won't do her any good.'

The harsh words seemed to have had some effect, because at last he turned his deadened eyes towards her. He blinked. She waited.

'I guess you don't mind as much because you're used to missing them,' he said, almost slurring the words.

'What?' Emma almost squeaked, more than slightly hurt.

'James!' Lou admonished.

Madame Pomfrey left the room with a couple of vials, seeming to not have heard what was going on. That, or her tactfulness had reached new highs.

'I'm sorry, I'm not myself,' James lowered his head, a defeated look on his face.

Emma had never seen her brother, her hyperactive, confident-bordering-on-arrogance, happy-go-lucky brother, look this way in her entire life. He had always been straight-forward and honest, but... She was so overwhelmed that she did the first thing that came to mind. She slapped him.

'What did you do that for?' Sirius rushed over to protect his friend.

He held James's face and examined the red welt that was now appearing on his cheek. In a few minutes, he had remembered the necessary healing spell and her brother's face was good as new. Emma was impressed, and once again reminded of the other side of Sirius, the side she had seen in her first year.
'Sorry James,' she immediately apologised. 'I just needed to get you out of that state, and I didn't know...' she trailed off.

'It's okay Ems,' her twin replied, though his voice was quieter than usual. 'I deserved it for what I said. I wasn't thinking.'

'Hang on a second,' Sirius said, looking from one Potter to the other. 'What you said was completely justified. Emma ran away from a perfect family, and now that one of them is terminally ill -'

'You don't know that Sirius,' Lou interjected.

'Now that one of them is in danger,' he continued doggedly, 'all of a sudden you act like you care. As if. You didn't want anything to do with them. No wonder this is affecting James way more than you. If you didn't look so similar, I would wonder if you were from the same family.'

'Are you serious?' Emma asked incredulously.

'Ha. Ha,' Sirius spat back.

'That wasn't a joke,' Emma replied, staring daggers. 'You of all people should understand what it's like to never live up to someone's expectations just because you were in the wrong House. I may have had some differences with my father in the past, but I've always been close with my mother. Something that you wouldn't understand, since you only decided to join us last year after giving up on your own family!'

'Except that you've chosen the wrong side! You've thrown away everyone who's good in your life to join the House notorious for possessing the most evil people in Britain! No wonder your father was ashamed of you!'

'How dare you say something like that! As if I knew that I would have a choice in the Sorting? Do you think there was never a Dark wizard or witch in Gryffindor? Besides, Merlin was in Slytherin, your own brother, for Merlin's sake, is in Slytherin and if you ever managed to get your head out of your prejudiced ass, you would see all the pain you've caused your family. In case you've forgotten, my family is not and will never be yours, Sirius, so leave my father out of this!'

Both were breathing heavily now, the argument having somehow escalated into a shouting match. Somewhere along the lines, Lou had cast a Muffling spell on the walls, because there was no sound from outside. She had wisely elected to let them shout it out before interfering. However, that didn't stop Madame Pomfrey from bustling in at that very moment.

'Right now, James, Emma, it's time to do your check-up,' she said amiably, noting their flushed faces, but not saying a word about them.

Emma was starting to think that she had been in this kind of situation more times than anyone would have wanted. Feeling guilty about her earlier anger towards the nurse, she obligingly climbed onto the stool that Madame Pomfrey had conjured up. Muttering a spell to light her wand, the medici-witch examined the girl's eyes, ears and mouth, telling her to open her jaws as widely as possible to see any trace of sparks. Satisfied that there were none, she then told Emma to hold out her arm. Luckily, Emma had enough wits about her to show her the right one. With a smooth slashing motion, Madame Pomfrey made a clean cut that filled two vials surprisingly quickly and closed the wound just as neatly. There wasn't a speck of blood or pain anywhere.

James's turn was next, so Emma stalked off to the window, watching her brother's examination whilst still being the farthest away from Sirius Black as possible. There were no symptoms there
either, so the matron finished quickly. Then to their surprise, she told Lou that she was free to go. Seeing the looks on their faces, the witch explained.

'When reading the history of Miss Antoinette's blood, I was surprised to note traces of Dragon Pox at a young age. Like the Muggle chicken pox, you cannot catch Dragon Pox twice, and the younger you are, the easier it is to overcome. Most likely, Miss Antionette has only one or two pocks that she formerly attributed to childhood accidents. In any case, there is no chance that she caught the virus from Mrs Potter, hence why she is free to go.'

Faced with this impeccable display of logic, their cousin gathered her things and left, lingering for a second in the doorway, her pale white face telling them just how worried she was, both about her Aunt, and the sanity of the remaining people in the room.
Several hours later, silence reigned supreme in the stuffy little room outside the infirmary. After the nurse had gone, they had fallen into an uncomfortable pause, but neither Sirius nor Emma continued the argument, and James didn't offer any extra words. Now, each was wrapped in their own thoughts in their own corner of the room. Emma mulled over Sirius's words, which had hit harder than she would have cared to admit. It was true that she hadn't really been communicating with her family recently, but she didn't think that James had been either - their writing had gotten sparser and sparser over the years. Spending so much time apart made their Hogwarts friends feel almost more like family than their actual parents, horrible as it might sound. She wished that Regulus was here so that she could talk to him. He would have an answer to everything. Being basically in the same position with his own family, he alone would be able to assuage the guilt she was feeling.

*I should have known,* she thought. *I should have picked up on it at Christmas, forced her to see a doctor sooner.* Then she thought about what her mother would have wanted. She could almost imagine her now, telling her that there was no point in worrying about something she had no control over. It wasn't as if she could have done something even if she knew, or was in the room with her mother. Natalie Potter was with the best of the Healers, that much was true.

But it was also true that Emma could have stopped focusing so much on who was right and who was wrong with her father and instead tried to find some way to peacefully resolve this. She could have lied to her parents and told them that she was going to the Gryffindor party at New Year's, saving them from another fight. She knew that that was what Regulus would have done. If he was fine being his father's second-favourite, then why couldn't she accept that Charles would have preferred her to be in Gryffindor? She resolved to mend their relationship as soon as she could, before it was too late. After all, as Lou had told her, she only had one mother, one father. If only it hadn't taken this to remind her of that fact.

However, that didn't mean that she was okay with her current situation, namely being within five feet of Sirius Black. She had no wish to talk to her brother if it meant that the idiot would butt in, and besides, James looked as though he needed the silence. She had never seen her twin in such a state. Though he was no longer in the state of shock that he had been in earlier, he still looked different. His brow was furrowed, half deep in thought and half upset. Emma sent him a mental apology. Though she would have taken the *Avada Kedavra* curse for him in a heartbeat, she didn't think she could handle making up with Sirius Black. Even if he was his best friend.

Besides, it wasn't as if Sirius was making things easier on her. At first, she thought that she could have forgiven him for acting the way he did around her, though she would never admit it to Regulus. At Christmas, she thought that she had seen a side of him that was strangely human, just a kid who was trying to find happiness and to do the right thing. He hadn't seen the side of her family that she had, the biased side. She thought that he had understood the problems she had with her father. But to throw it in her face like that, throwing salt on the wound.

James's words he had just dealt her… he was certainly vindictive. Whether it was intentional or not, Sirius would never be able to give up being a Black. He, Bellatrix and Walburga were too similar for that.

Madame Pomfrey cut through her musings by bustling back into the room.

'Thank Merlin, I thought I was going to go mad with boredom!' James exclaimed, stretching.

Somehow his words seemed hollow, unlike his usual self. But Emma and Sirius forced smiles onto
their faces too. If they acted like everything was normal, maybe normality would follow. Despite the gravity of the situation, when Emma got up she realised just how hungry she was. I guess time doesn't stand still for anyone, she thought, trying to reign in a stomach growl. Eager to leave the not-so-festive atmosphere behind her, she impatiently offered her arm up to the nurse, who muttered a spell that made her wand glow green. After passing it up and down over Emma's skin, she took out a stethoscope to listen to her heart, before casting Lumos.

'Open your mouth. Very wide now.'

She obliged and endured several minutes of poking and prodding before Madame Pomfrey declared her fit to go. Hardly believing her luck, Emma left the room as quickly as possible. She debated on whether to wait for James, see if he was okay, but she knew that he would want to talk with Sirius and - though it pained her to admit it - she didn't think that she could handle any more bad news right now.

So she scurried off into the castle, wondering what time it was, and if she should simply make her way to the kitchens instead of checking in on the Great Hall first. One thought about the plethora of questions that was probably waiting for her at the dinner table - gossip spread like wildfire in Hogwarts - made her choice for her. She sped down to the portrait of the pear, tickling it with unnecessary gusto. As a result, the pear had to be propped up by a couple of apples in order for it to turn into a handle. Yanking on it as soon as it appeared, she threw herself onto one of the benches. A House-elf soon bustled up and asked if she wanted anything.

'Shepherd's pie please, Minky,' she said, trying to smile for the elf.

They were always doubly pleased if they thought they had made you happy. But Emma's smile drooped as soon as the elf was gone, and when her food did arrive she ended up twirling it on her fork, suddenly unable to eat.

The tears were starting to well up in her eyes as she stared at her pie that was steadily growing colder. She couldn't see what was in front of her anymore; memories were rising unbidden and there was no one there to distract her from her thoughts. Maybe the Great Hall would have been the better option, she was thinking to herself, when the portrait opened.

Emma had never moved more quickly in her life. Her fork clanging to the floor, she hurdled the table and ran into the recesses of the kitchen, ignoring the bleeping complaints of the House-elves. They were at a loss as to what to do - defy a human, or keep their kitchen in order? Chaos steadily rose as they frantically tried to follow her and continue cooking at the same time. She barely registered the sound of crashing plates as she ducked to avoid self-cleaning pans. She might have stopped to help, had not the last voice she wanted to hear chosen to speak at that moment.

'What's going on here?'

She groaned. Of course! How stupid could I have been? She knew that James and Sirius liked to come down here as often as she did. Her panic turned to dread. They could not find her here. Not now, not like this. Muttering a quick apology, she sprinted through the kitchens until she found large window open to let out the steam. With only a quick hesitation to see how far down the ground was, she launched herself in a very undignified way out into the air, curling up into a ball as she did so.

She landed with an oof on the soft, wet soil, slightly amazed that she was still intact. The impact seemed to have knocked all the urgency out of her, so with a little more logic, she drew back into the shadows. The riot seemed to have died down though, so James and Sirius must have shrugged it off as usual House-elf nonsense. That, or James was so shaken up that he no longer had his old curiosity. Emma hoped it was the former.
Shakily getting to her feet, she looked around to get her bearings. Almost instinctively, her legs moved in the direction of the Black Lake. She shook her head at her own antics, trying to pull herself together. But when she had thought about it for a second, she continued on her route. The Black Lake had always made her feel calm and once she got to its misty shores, she knew that she had made the right choice. Somehow the massive expanse of water always made her feel insignificant, that she could do no wrong that couldn't be set right again. If the Lake could be so unchanging, then the world could too. Nothing would happen. Her mother would get better, and they would all laugh off the scare they had in the morning. Hopefully, James would come to the same conclusion. He had been the strong one out of the two of them for so long that she could hardly imagine how she could cheer him up. How does one cheer up the most optimistic person in the world?

After sitting for what seemed like hours under one of the trees, she had convinced herself that this illness was nothing but a blip on their radar, made to shock her into making up with her father. Lou would be proud. Her legs felt stiff when she unfolded them, suddenly reminding her that she was still human: cold and hungry. The thought of going back to the kitchens sent a chill down her spine though, so she decided to go back to the dormitory to sleep on it.

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'Where the hell have you been and why are you covered in filth?' Alecto angry-whispered as Emma tried to sneak back into their room.

Emma closed her eyes for half a second and inwardly groaned. She should have guessed that it was too good to be true. She had lost all track of time, but luckily no one noticed her enter the common room - it had mostly been filled with third years. That meant that either all the fourth to seventh years were still enjoying the time before their curfew, or that they had been so exhausted from their work that they had gone up for an early night. Unfortunately for Emma, it was the latter.

Helen snored softly from her bunk, whereas Sophie was out. Emma was hard-pressed to remember when Sophie had last slept in their dorm. She remembered her first year at Hogwarts: Sophie had been Sorted a week later in Dumbledore’s study, since she had been home with the flu. A bed had magically appeared in the dorm, but Emma was now secretly glad that Sophie had missed the drama of Emma's Sorting. The attention had been focused on Sirius by then. She hadn't been so lucky with Alecto and Lucinda though, who had been whispering between their bunks when she had entered. The chink of light had been all they needed to pounce on her with *Lumos*-tipped wands.

'Just out,' she shrugged in what she hoped was a nonchalant way.

'If you think that that is going to satisfy us, then you have become seriously delirious,' Lucinda added, eying the mucky bottom of the raven-haired girl's robes.

Emma was starting to wish that she had taken the time to clean up her appearance before coming up. She had just been so tired though…

Her friends were looking at her expectantly as she tried to figure out a valid excuse. When Alecto decided to wordlessly clean her robes though, she felt a rush of gratitude towards them. After all, they had always been there for her. Why try to lie about this? Lucinda had been clear with her feelings on the train ride in January. Maybe it was time that Emma returned the favour and started trusting them once in a while, letting them in on this small secret that was soon to become common knowledge.

'I found out that my Mum has Dragon Pox,' she admitted, slumping against the back of the door.
Immediately Alecto and Lucinda were on either side of her, each hugging one arm, warming her up more than she could ever have possibly tried herself. Something touched her turbulent heart, and she felt her eyes fill up with tears once more. *Turns out I didn't have my feelings under control after all,* she thought, angrily wiping them away.

'I know it's stupid to cry. It's not like she's dead or anything...'

'Nonsense,' Lucinda told her. 'You should feel upset. I know we're supposed to be adults and all, but I don't think I could handle my Mum even getting a cold! Nothing works around the house without her, you know.'

Emma nodded glumly, letting a couple of tears slip before she gathered her wits. They stayed like that for a few silent minutes in the semi-dark room, three girls huddled in the doorway. If Helen or Sophie had woken up at that very moment, they might have laughed at the sight of it. But Emma felt like she was cocooned in a bubble of comfort and support and she realised that this was what she had been missing for so long. Regulus might have been able to empathise with her and take her mind off it, but Alecto and Lucinda helped her in a simpler way that reminded her of how easy it had been to be comforted when she was a child.

'We're here for you Ems,' Alecto said comfortingly. 'But we should really get to bed.'

Lucinda gave her hand one final squeeze and went back to bed, pulling her curtains around her for privacy. Alecto lingered for a second, smoothing the sheets around Emma as she climbed into bed, as though she were her mother and Emma was a child again. 'Don't blame yourself,' she said quietly, almost inaudibly, touching her lightly on the shoulder before leaving Emma to her thoughts.

Those three words were something anyone could have said, just a passing pleasantry that Emma wouldn't have given a second thought to if it had been anyone but Alecto. But it had been Alecto and there had been an uncharacteristic weight to her words. They told Emma that she hadn't been so cunning, hadn't been so good at hiding her feelings than she had thought. They told her that Alecto knew about her turbulent relationship with her parents, something Emma had thought to be a well-kept secret between Regulus, Avery and herself. They told her that Alecto was the only person in the world who knew how much Emma's locket meant to her. They told her that she was not alone. And Emma wasn't sure whether to be afraid or relieved.
Emma blew her Captain's whistle, signalling the end of practice. Her team gratefully touched back down and miserably squelched their way into the changing rooms. The sun was nowhere to be seen, though it should have risen more than half an hour ago. Regulus stomped through puddles to give the Snitch back to Emma by hand - there was no way she could have caught it if he had tossed it to her in this weather. Likewise, Rabastan and Antony handed her the Bludgers they had caught, the former shooting her a filthy look before leaving the pitch.

Regulus tagged along on the way to the Quidditch hut, even opening the door for her as she placed the practice balls in their respective places. She took the opportunity to wring out her mane of black hair, creating a new puddle on the floor. She didn't feel guilty though, what with all the mud they had traipsed in. With a flick of his wand, Regulus cleaned the floor.

'Don't you think it's a bit dangerous to keep your wand in your Quidditch robes?' Emma asked, thinking of all the ways the rod of wood could break during the rough sport.

'It's better than leaving it somewhere anyone can pick it up,' he replied. 'Besides, I have a strap for it.'

He pulled up his sleeve, showing her what could only be described as a "wand sheath" strapped to the inside of his left arm.

'You might want to consider changing arms,' Emma grimaced, nodding towards his very visible tattoo.

'I never thought of that,' Regulus paled. 'I guess I'm going to have to learn how to draw a wand left-handed…'

'You can always swap it to the right hand once it's out,' Emma agreed, as they made their way to the castle, taking their chances with Filch. The Quidditch showers were practical, but cold.

'So are you going to tell me what you did to make the Feast vanish for a few seconds last Saturday?' Regulus asked.

The way he phrased his question made it seem like he had given the subject much thought, not wanting to approach it the wrong way.

'Why in the name of Merlin's left boot would you think that was me?' Emma replied with a question, astonished that he thought she had something to do with it.

She did, but he wasn't to know that. She didn't even know how he could have made the connection.

'You disappear with your brother and my…your cousin for a day,' he stuttered for a second, before continuing to tick off his fingers. 'You don't come to the Feast, which became chaotic for a few seconds. Then you make us practice nearly before dawn for three days straight. Your strange behaviour makes you my prime suspect.'

Emma rolled his eyes at his attempt at simple logic. 'You do know that coincidences exist, right?'

'Not when you're involved, they don't,' he argued. 'Besides, you still haven't told me what happened on Saturday with Professor Kettleburn.'

'Just family stuff,' she waved him off. There was no way he would believe anything else, when Lou,
James and Sirius had disappeared along with her. 'And as for the practice, our match against Gryffindor is in less than two weeks! Or had you forgotten?'

'Not likely,' he muttered. 'You know I want to crush them as much as anyone. But forcing us to practice on an empty stomach and a lack of sleep isn't helping anyone. Cassie looked like she was going to drop off her broom, she was so tired. She had patrol late last night, you know.'

Emma remembered guiltily that Cassandra was also a Prefect, with O.W.L.s coming up to boot. She made a mental note to apologise to the poor girl and go easy on her in the future. Still, she wasn't going to let Regulus admonish her that quickly. She was captain for a reason.

'We need to practice in every condition,' she defended. 'Who knows what kind of weather we'll have?'

'Whatever it is, I guarantee that it will be daytime,' he smirked at her.

She made a face at him and wiped her feet on the Entrance Hall doormat. After a moment's thought, she stole Regulus's wand and cast a drying spell on their clothes. Of course, it didn't work as well as it would have with hers, but the result was passable. At least they weren't dripping anymore. Merlin knew what would happen if Filch caught them again. The first time Slughorn had talked them out of a detention, but she doubted he would be able to save them twice.

'So?' he pressed, on the way down to the dungeons. Emma narrowed her eyes.

'You've never been so pushy until now. What makes it different this time?'

'Because you usually tell me anyway,' he replied. 'Or I can guess. Come on, I know Lucinda knows. She never complained once during your hour-long practices and she's usually the first to whine!'

'I bet there are things Rabastan knows about you that I don't,' she rejoined.

Regulus coloured, surprising her with his reaction. She wondered what the boys talked about amongst each other, then decided that she didn't want to know. If they were anything like James and Sirius, it would mostly be about girls. A brief vision of a girl slipping into the Prefect's bathroom with Regulus in tow appeared in her head. She brushed it away, unsure as to why she was so annoyed. Just because she had proximity issues didn't mean that the whole world had to too.

'If you must know,' she said, trying to clear her head. 'I was in the kitchens when Sirius and James arrived.'

The Slytherin boy's face immediately darkened, a frown appearing on his forehead.

'I didn't want to see them after being stuck in the same room as them all day, so I went out through the cooking side of the kitchens.'

'I didn't know there was another way in,' he mused.

'There isn't,' she replied, unable to stop her grin. 'There's another way out.'

And despite her former resolve, she told him all about her escapade. He chuckled all the way to the dungeon alcove before stopping and cocking his head to the side. Before he even asked, she knew what his question was going to be.

'So why were you stuck with your brother and his git friend in the same room all day?'
'Just the usual school health checks,' she replied hurriedly, shooting towards the girl's dormitories as soon as the wall opened. Regulus knew as well as she did that there were no school health checks. 

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After a soothing hot shower that unfortunately took up all of her breakfast time, she found herself once again paired with Lily Evans during Potions, trying to stop her stomach from growling and failing. The Gryffindor girl kept shooting her odd looks, giggling when Emma explained that she had skipped food for practice.

'Honestly, you're just like your brother,' the red-head giggled, before flushing as brightly as her roots. 'Not that I especially care about what your brother does...About that actually, do you know what's wrong with him? He hasn't asked me out in three days. In fact he's barely even talked to me...' she trailed off, before seeming to realise what she had just said. 'Not that I mind. I just want to know if he's up to something awful.'

But it was obvious from her expression that Lily was worried.

'He's just had some bad news,' Emma said dismissively.

If James hadn't talked about it, then it was because he didn't want to think about it. Secretly though, she was nervous about her brother. He had never looked so quiet, so withdrawn. Even now, he was peacefully brewing his potion, not disturbing anyone around him. Sirius was hovering around with a pained expression, but dutifully followed James's wishes. The two girls in front of them looked positively relieved at the break. The Wide-Awake potion was difficult to brew at the best of times.

'Could you pass me the crushed earwigs please?' Lily asked, flicking the page forwards and bending over the weighing scales. Everything had to be dosed just right.

'Of course,' Emma checked that the powder within the mortar was indeed a "light shade of grey", before handing it to her classmate.

Uncharacteristically, Lily fumbled with the weights as she tipped the powder in, dropping eight ounces onto Emma's left forearm. The Slytherin snatched her arm back quickly, letting the weights fall to the floor with a clang. Lily jumped in surprise - her eyes had been trained on the front of the class.

'Ow-fff...' Emma bit back a groan, tears springing to her eyes. The Dark Mark still hurt after all this time. She wondered if it would ever stop.

'Are you okay?' Green eyes looked at her, concerned. Lily picked up the weight in confusion. 'I'm sorry, I thought you had them. Did they really hurt you?'

'It's okay,' Emma brushed her off, noticing that Rabastan was looking at her oddly out of the corner of his eye.

'Let me see,' Lily started to lift Emma's sleeve.

'No,' Emma yelped, before calming down. 'I just bruised it badly this morning, that's all. Do you know anything that works better than the bruise paste?'

It wasn't a complete lie. The whole team was bruised and battered from Emma's gruelling practice. Rabastan in particular was only half sitting after a hard collision resulting in him slamming into the
ground. Lily seemed to buy the excuse wholeheartedly,

'Yeah, Murtlap essence is great for all kinds of pain,' the Gryffindor replied helpfully. 'Here, I'll make some in the other cauldron whilst we leave this to brew. I'm sure Slughorn won't mind and if he asks, we'll say it's practice for the N.E.W.T.s.'

'Thanks,' Emma's voice was filled with gratitude.

*There's no one quite as kind as Lily Evans,* she thought. The Gryffindor prefect was a paradox to the Slytherin. So many history books spoke of the difficulties Muggleborns faced in the Wizarding World, but Lily handled most of her classes with an ease that many pure-bloods would envy. She was the exception to the Dark Lord's rule, the piece that didn't quite fit into Emma's puzzle. It ruined her entire logic. If more Muggleborns were like Lily, then the war would be for nothing after all. Somehow, Emma felt ill just thinking of it. Then she remembered the way the Dark Lord explained the world to her, how much sense it all seemed to make. There were still the other magical races to consider. Maybe they could revise their view on Muggleborns.

After all, she was sure that all the Muggles needed was some help to teach them how to act around wizards, though the other Slytherins all seemed to think that they were all as bad as each other. After the war was over, Muggles wouldn't harass wizards anymore, and there would be no reason to distinguish Muggleborns and Pure-bloods. But maybe Lily was just an exception, nothing more. After all, there was no way Emma would forget those Gryffindor Muggleborns from her first few years at Hogwarts.

'Emma?' Lily was waving her hand in front of Emma's face.

'Sorry,' she realised that she had been staring into space, letting the cauldron bubble over.

'Maybe you should go to the Hospital Wing,' the other girl frowned worriedly.

'No, I'm fine,' Emma plastered a smile on her face. 'Just tired.'

The Dark Lord would have an explanation for everything.

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'Today we're going to go through our possible manoeuvres,' Emma said to her Quidditch team.

There was a collective groan.

'Would you prefer to be flying outside?' she asked.

As if on cue, there was a clap of thunder and the rain started falling harder. The lake outside was a mass of turbulent froth, mini bubble whirlpools everywhere. Every now and then, there was a faint *thunk* as a fish got pushed against the huge common room window. The players shook their heads in unison. Maybe it would be nice to sit by the warm, crackling fire, even if it did mean theory. So long as the Giant Squid didn't get smashed up against the window, they were safe inside.

Plus, even Emma didn't know if she could handle another two-hour practice. She needed all of her team in superb shape before the match, not bruised and tattered, desperately in need of a full night's sleep. Anthony was putting a brave face on, but he was falling asleep on the couch, to be jolted awake every so often by Barty. Emma pretended not to have noticed.
'So the Gryffindors know about our trick against Hufflepuff,' Emma started, pacing back and forth in front of the ring of couches. She had shooed everyone away and even the seventh-years had complied in their eagerness to see Gryffindor crushed. Besides, anyone who saw Emma's face knew that she meant business. 'And if I know anything about my brother, then he will have had his team up at all hours practicing both our play and the counter moves. Do you know what that means?'

A deadly silence hung across their corner of the room, until Antony timidly put his hand up.

'Yes, Antony?'

'We need to find new plays?'

'Ordinarily, yes,' she agreed enthusiastically, a mad gleam in her eye. 'But I have an idea for this match that just might work. I want to run it with you today and you'll vote on it. If you refuse, then we'll brainstorm up new ideas. That's why we're having practice in the common room tonight. There's no sense occupying the pitch in this weather just to sit around and discuss tactics. Though I did reserve the pitch just so that the Gryffindors can't use it.'

'Is that even allowed?' Cassandra gasped.

She was probably one of the sweetest girls in Slytherin, without a bad bone in her body. Sometimes, Emma thought she should be in Hufflepuff, she was so hard-working, but she was glad that the fifth-year had been put in Slytherin. She was an excellent Quidditch player and everyone agreed that in two years she would become Head Girl with no contest. Her mild manners coupled with an enormous amount of ambition meant that she was one of Slughorn's most prized Slug Club members. Not to mention that her family already did well in society. They had wisely chosen the course of neutrality in the brewing war, something that was acknowledged by both sides.

'If it isn't, then I'll say I forgot which date it was,' Emma gave her team a Machiavellian grin. 'Plus, they've reserved the pitch for most of this week's prime hours, so I don't feel bad about it at all.'

'So what's this grand plan?' Barty interrupted eagerly.

'Nothing,' Emma said simply.

She was met with a load of blank stares. Hiding her smirk and knowing that she had grabbed their attention, she went on.

'We've played every match so aggressively, with so many fouls and over-the-top tactics, that they'll be expecting anything out of the ordinary,' she explained, proud of her idea. 'James has probably warned them to expect anything. What they won't expect though, is a clean match using the simplest of tactics. They'll be on edge, expecting us to go left when the logical solution is to go right. They won't know what to do.'

There was a short silence, before Rabastan's face split into a wide grin. 'I get it now. Their reactions will be delayed, allowing them flexibility with any new notions, but plays that have become second nature to us will fly straight through their radar. Complicated manoeuvres take more time, so they'll counter them, but simple ones don't require any thought. Ems, this might be the most genius thought you've ever had!'

'Plus,' Barty joined in the enthusiasm, 'as time goes on, they'll become more and more anxious, waiting for the big play that'll throw them off their game. But there won't be one coming!'

The Quidditch team revelled in their imagined victory for a few seconds.
'So the rest of you,' Emma broke the silence. 'What do you think?'

'It's so crazy it just might work,' Lucinda agreed, giving her friend a supportive smile that wasn't just about Quidditch. Emma knew that Lucy had been worried about her dwelling on the situation with her mother.

'I'm in,' Cassie said simply, shrugging.

'Me too,' Antony nodded.

They all turned expectantly towards Regulus.

'Well I guess it's okay,' he said monotonously, earning himself a punch in the arm from Rabastan.

'Way to kill the mood, Black.'

Regulus smirked in reply and soon the whole team were discussing which moves could be termed as classic plays, and which unusual tactics were still commonplace within the Slytherin team. Half an hour later, their plans were set to go. As the team broke up and went off to their various other activities, Emma tapped Cassandra on the shoulder.

'Hey, I'm sorry for being so hard on you recently,' she apologised.

'It's okay,' Cassie brushed her off, but Emma wasn't finished.

'Seriously. I remember what it was like last year when Avery pushed us too hard. I fumbled with the Quaffle more times than I would care to say. And if you need any help with your O.W.L.s or less time patrolling, just give me a shout. I can't promise anything in the Herbology department, but I'm pretty good at Charms, and Regulus is the only person in the world who loves History of Magic.'

'Everyone knows that, but he never shares his notes from that class,' Cassie complained.

'I know,' Emma winked, then pulled out a sheaf of parchment. 'But I know where he keeps them.'

'How did you -' Cassandra asked wondrously, taking the notes in her arms as if they were her first born child.

'It doesn't matter,' the older girl replied. 'I just need these back after your exams. Merlin knows that he'll kill me if he doesn't have them for next year.'

'You're a life saver!' Cassie threw her arms around her captain.

Slightly taken aback, Emma gingerly patted the younger girl on the back, glad that for once she could do something right.
The Slytherin common room was in an uproar. They had won. Not only had they won, but they had won by a whopping two hundred points. They were fifty goals up when Regulus had caught the Snitch. The other Seeker had unfortunately tried to pull off a Wronski Feint, which might have worked had not the Snitch been hovering behind the point he had dived from. The sudden movement of the dive caught Regulus's attention and he had found himself staring at a glittering golden object whilst the Gryffindor shot towards the ground. Needless to say, the people in the crowd were beside themselves.

The victory seemed tainted to Emma though. She knew in her heart of hearts that they would probably have won anyway, but it seemed like James's heart wasn't in the game. Though he played with his usual fervour and his team was well-trained, he kept on getting distracted. He hadn't thrown the Quaffle with his usual sharpness of angle and their tactics seemed to disorient him more than they should have. Three guesses to what he was thinking about, she thought glumly. As for Emma herself, she had been concentrated in the moment, only thinking of the game. She wondered what that said about herself as a person.

'Shit,' she thought. Regulus was making a beeline for her - her face must have given her away. Curse him for always looking this way at the wrong moment. She knew from the expression on his face that he was going to continue his prying from a couple of weeks ago.

'Quick, Alecto,' she started, but her red-headed friend had already melted into the crowd.

Cursing, she turned around to find herself face to face with her Seeker. She braced herself for the ensuing interrogation. I should never have let him gang up on me that night after Quidditch, she thought. It seems like he wants to know my every thought and worry. But she knew that it was not only that. Ever since they had completed their tasks together and gotten their Mark together, their relationship had shifted. None of their other friends would ever share that experience and so no one would completely understand the mix of pride and terror of responsibility that they did. Not until they got Marks of their own, at least. It made them even more on the lookout for each other, even more protective of the other's safety.

However, Regulus surprised her by simply commenting on the match. 'Nice tactics Captain. Why don't we toast to the House Cup now? We should've knocked mostly everyone out of the running with this game.'

It was true that the Quidditch points added themselves as House points after every match. Emma had forgotten. Suddenly, the guilt seemed like it was going to eat her whole and the words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them. She was faintly aware of a voice in the back of her mind telling her that now would be a good time to shut up, but her body wasn't listening to her commands.

'My mother has Dragon Pox and the doctors think it's a severe case and James didn't play well today because he's so worried and I feel so guilty because I shouldn't have played well because I should have been thinking of her instead of the match and -'
She stopped for another breath, but before she could carry on her rant, Regulus grabbed onto her arm. She hissed in pain - though the Murtlap essence worked, she hadn't had time to use it that day. He immediately let go, apologising. Almost unconsciously, he rubbed at his own Dark Mark. She supposed that it itched as much as hers did. Something told her that the feeling would never go away.

'Come on, let's go somewhere quieter,' he suggested.

Emma agreed, running to the corner to rummage through her bag. The magical healing liquid found, they started to move towards the exit. "Go somewhere quieter" was their code for flying a couple of laps around the Quidditch pitch and then trooping down to the kitchens if they were still bothered about their worries.

'Ems, Regulus, my friends,' Rabastan threw an arm around their shoulders, steering them away from the corridor leading away from the common room. 'Not so fast. The party's barely begun and you're already sneaking off?' He wagged a finger. 'Bad manners, that is.'

Emma ducked her head, blushing. She hoped that Rabastan hadn't gotten the wrong idea about the two of them. The prankster seemed to notice this, because he added in her ear. 'Don't worry, I know you're a prude. Besides, Regulus doesn't sleep with his friends.'

Her face went even more scarlet - if that was possible. James would be laughing at her if he could see her now. She could lie her way out of any situation with a straight face, but one lewd joke made her blush like Lily Evans? She could already imagine the teasing. Unfortunately, her face wasn't cooperating, heating up right to the tip of her ears. Luckily, Rabastan had the sense to whisper this kind of thing so quietly that not even Regulus would have heard.

'I'm interested to know what you say to Emma to turn her this interesting colour, Bast,' Lucinda said, as Rabastan led them to a table with all of their friends. 'I've been trying to do this for years.'

'What can I say, I have a gift with the ladies,' Rabastan smirked arrogantly.

Alecto and Emma rolled their eyes in unison, whilst Lucinda scoffed. His face immediately looked chagrined. 'You wound me, fair damsels.'

'Shit up Rab,' Alecto said, playfully pushing him. 'You're just digging yourself deeper.'

He grinned in return and turned to the two prefects. 'So what were you really sneaking off to do?'

'Seeing just how far we were beating the lions in the House Cup championship,' Regulus replied swiftly.

Emma was impressed, until she remembered that he had already been thinking about that before her word vomit. She really needed to pull her act together. At least when they were in public. Anyone could have heard her, and what's more, she knew that if he could Severus would have used it against her brother. Inwardly cursing herself for her stupidity, she poured herself a Butterbeer. Only Rabastan could drink Firewhisky at five in the afternoon. Vaguely, the thought that they had too many parties this year occurred to her. Then she remembered that it was the year of the "seventeens".

'A toast to their inferiority!' she cried with as much gusto as possible, pushing her familial problems to the back of her mind.

'Let's all go down to the Entrance Hall!' Lucinda added joyfully. She hadn't forgotten about the Gryffindors ruining her expertly planned party on Emma's birthday.

They all clinked their glasses together voraciously, spilling Butterbeer everywhere, and trooped
down to look at the huge hourglasses. Once there, their jaws fell open in shock.

'Hufflepuff?' Rabastan squeaked pathetically.

'How did they manage that?' Even Regulus was looking slightly slack-jawed.

'It stands to reason,' Lucinda said sensibly. 'They're the most-hardworking and the fairest people in Hogwarts, so they get less points off for detention and more points for having done their reading before class. Plus, we only beat them into the finals by about ten points.'

No one could dispute that logic, so they stood there for a few more minutes. The Hufflepuff hourglass was more than three-quarters full, whereas the Slytherin one was a little over two-thirds, including the points from their last match. The Ravenclaw was next at half-full with the Gryffindor points hot on their heels. The Gryffindors lost a ton of points from the Marauders, so they usually made up for it in the matches. This time, however, they were two hundred less than they would have been any other year.

'Excuse me,' a Hufflepuff third year said, skipping down the stairs. She saw them staring at the House points and gave a little giggle and a wave as she ran off to class, presumably Care For Magical Creatures or Herbology.

'That cheeky little monkey!' Alecto exclaimed, but she looked rather impressed.

They had always seen the Hufflepuffs as their meek little friends. It was no secret that the Ravenclaws got on well with the Gryffindors, whereas the Hufflepuffs always found the company of the Slytherins more enjoyable. The Hufflepuffs were on the whole hard-working and appreciated the ambition of the Slytherins, though they frowned a little upon their tactics. In return, the Slytherins were impressed by the fact that Hufflepuffs would never rat anyone out from their own House, sticking to House loyalty, though they always thought of them as kind but a bit dim. Here they had been proved wrong. A body came into view, blocking their vision.

'Right,' the seventh-year Slytherin prefect, Elisabeth Fawley, said. 'Into the dormitories, now.'

The entire Slytherin House had been called into the common room, making the space there seem uncomfortably tight and warm. The whole room was buzzing with gossip, drowning out the sounds of still-fizzing Butterbeer and magical crackers. It hadn't taken too long, as most were still celebrating their victory against Gryffindor. The two seventh-year prefects - Elisabeth Fawley and Lucinda's brother Evan Rosier - stood between the sofas near the fire, though they were both tugging uncomfortably at their collars, looking like they already regretted their decision. Evan loosened his robes, but was quickly reprimanded by Elisabeth. Emma could almost imagine her hissing at him to remain dignified.

'Now, you probably all know by now why we've called you here,' Elisabeth said importantly. 'It has come to our attention that for the first time in a hundred years, we may not win the House Cup along with the Quidditch Cup. As you all know, the Quidditch Cup points get added to our emeralds in the Entrance Hall. So first of all, I'd like another round of applause to our team and Captain, Emma Potter.'

There was a dutiful chorus of cheers and clapping. Normally, Emma would have been bursting with pride, but that feeling of guilt and nausea returned to the pit of her stomach. Catching her friend's
eye, Alecto discreetly gave her arm a squeeze. Emma plastered on a smile.

‘However,’ Evan continued in his most authoritative voice. ‘That is not enough this time. Hufflepuff has worked its hardest, and as a result, they are two hundred and fifty points above us. This calls for drastic measures. We will not be known as the House who held the Quidditch Cup, but managed to lose enough House points for that not to cover an end of year win. Now, as a matter of Slytherin pride, I am going to ask you to gather every ounce of your strength and pour it into studying.

‘Yes, I know, it's the end of the year, and almost time for half-term break. Fifth and seventh years, I think you don’t need this lecture, but for the rest of you, I want you paying attention in every class. Yes, that includes Mr Binns'. Yes, cheating is allowed. I want every point taken from Ravenclaw when you raise your hands in class first. I want the Hufflepuffs to lose faith when we beat them at potting plants in the greenhouses. I want the Gryffindors to swallow their arrogance when it comes to Defence Against the Dark Arts. More than anything, I want you all to smarm up to Professor Slughorn in order to scrape some more points for his favourite House. Prefects, I expect you to turn a blind eye to house-mates breaking the rules. This is war people, and we're going to use every advantage we can get. You have three months.’

After this bizarre speech was concluded, people broke off into clusters to chat about how the prefects had gone mad. The sixth-years immediately crowded around their favourite table, the fireplace armchairs having been taken up by the older students. Rabastan's half-drunk Firewhisky was still there, which Regulus Vanished with an exasperated flick of his wand.

‘Well they're just a bundle of joy this spring, aren't they,’ Rabastan said drily, ignoring Regulus's pointed stare.

‘I don’t know why they're getting so worked up,’ Alecto added. ‘We haven’t got a vendetta against Hufflepuff or something. It's not as if it were Gryffindor. In fact the lions are right at the bottom at the moment.’

‘I think it's something to do with the rumours about who'll be appointed Head Boy and Girl next year,’ Helen offered, joining the little group. ‘This year there was a Slytherin girl and a Ravenclaw boy, but rumour has it that there'll be two of the same House next year because of the arguments they were having.’

‘So you think that they're trying to get Slytherin to look good in front of the teachers?’ Emma asked. ‘Why do they care, it's not as if they'll be here next year.’

Helen just shrugged, but Regulus interjected with his own opinion. ‘It's probably because of the House bets.’

‘What House bets?’ Lucinda inquired on behalf of the rest of the group. Regulus had an annoying habit of only offering up part of the information and enjoying the incomprehension of the rest of the group.

‘Well, the sixth-and-seventh year Gryffindors bet that Slytherin wouldn't win the Quidditch Cup, of course, but they had a second, bigger bet going on that because Emma’s family is mostly Gryffindor, there'll be a chance of her winning the Cup for us, but that we'll still manage to lose the House Cup.’

‘That's a rather elaborate bet,’ Alecto remarked doubtfully.

‘Yeah well, three guesses to who started the stupid thing,’ Regulus muttered angrily.

Comprehension dawned on the group that Sirius Black was the instigator of the uproar. Of course,
he had seen Emma's flying skills at home and knew that James wasn't exactly in superb condition before the end game. That also explained how Regulus knew. Most assumed that Sirius threw the bet in his brother's face as soon as he saw the rankings, but Emma had a sneaking suspicion that Regulus had been keeping tabs on his wild sibling. Especially since he now knew what had happened on Saturday.

'How much do you think Evan bet?' Emma asked Lucinda to break the tension.

'Too much, knowing him,' Lucinda shook her head, but didn't seem that bothered.

Money wasn't a problem for her family, but doubtlessly their parents would not be pleased if their son gambled away his allowance time and again. The first time, he had made up for it by working hard towards getting his Mark, rumoured to being bestowed on him as soon as he left Hogwarts. This time, they would not be so lenient. Lucinda looked like she couldn't care less though. She and her brother loved each other, but other than that they let each other live their lives in peace. Lucinda was too caught up in the whirlwind of social life that was Hogwarts, and Evan knew better than to lecture his butterfly sister. Even if he was dating one of her best friends.

Emma still wondered how that had all happened. Both her friends had brushed it off - Lucinda saying that it had just happened and Alecto admitting that she had initially intended it as a summer fling. Looking at the red-head now though, Alecto didn't seem that bothered that her boyfriend may or may not have racked up some serious debt. Emma wondered not for the first time if it had started off just because Evan was the polar opposite of William, the unmentionable Muggle. As if sensing her gaze, Alecto looked up questioningly and Emma tore her attention back to the conversation.

'Anyway,' Regulus was saying. 'Even if I do quit taking points, I'm not going to stop giving detention just because Evan asked me to.'

'You're such a Hufflepuff sometimes,' Rabastan shook his head. 'No fun at all.'

'Come on, as if you wouldn't enjoy giving a detention or two to Mulciber and Wilkes,' Emma defended Regulus, though she privately agreed with Rabastan.

'You're just saying that because you girls don't like them leering at you,' he teased back.

'Well, neither would you,' Lucinda pointed out.

And that's how their new plan to let off some steam was born.

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'I don't want to!' Rabastan squealed in his magically induced high-pitched voice as Alecto shoved him into some blue-lined robes. 'Whose robes are these.'

'My cousin's,' Emma said casually, keeping the tip of her wand pointed at the boy's face. 'Now hold still, Lou will kill me if these get torn.'

He groaned, but complied. The girls - for Regulus refused to take part in such a ridiculous scheme - had decided that it was time once and for all to give Rabastan a taste of his own medicine. He had been teasing the girls nearly non-stop all year, flirting with Cassie Greengrass until she had convinced herself that she was in love with him on the Quidditch pitch and always pushed them towards Mulciber and Wilkes. All in good fun, of course. However, Lucinda had decided that it was high time that Rabastan learned how annoying his “fun” could be when it was unwanted. Alecto had
of course agreed, since she was tired of Rabastan telling her to stop whining when a guy gave her a compliment. Emma...Well, Emma just wanted to get a kick out of seeing Rabastan's terrified face.

True to the prefects' instructions, they had been practicing various transfigurations and charms all week until they decided they were finally ready on Friday evening. They had cornered Rabastan with a Drowsing Draught, supplied by a red-cheeked Cassie via a chocolate muffin. Rabastan had made sure to give her a flirty wink as he devoured the sweet, swaying as soon as he swallowed the last mouthful. Emma skilfully carried him through the dungeon hallways with a little help from the featherweight spell.

They had rolled him down the stairs to the girls' dorms, making sure none of the seventh years saw them do so. A couple of face-transfigurations later, they had managed to erect a kind-of-girl-Rabastan. They had left his green eyes and long dark lashes, but lengthened his hair to his shoulder - well, actually to his feet, but then Lucinda had managed to chop it off. They had bribed Regulus with promises of minty treats into shrinking him down to Lou's height, since he was the only one who had completed the essay on Shrinking Solutions that week. Now, Lucinda was walking around him with a critical eye, occasionally issuing orders to Alecto or Emma, who lazily Vanished his stubble - barely leaving him a chin while they were at it - or scurried off to hand Lucinda her makeup bag or hair-straightener. Emma watched with admiration as Lucinda worked her contouring: making Rabastan's face look a lot more feminine than it actually was.

When Lucinda was satisfied, they Petrified Rabastan - not strictly necessary, but a spell they had agreed that Helen needed practicing - and marched out of the common room, carrying him under their arm. When they had arrived at a safe distance from the Slytherin dormitories, Alecto had scampered off to find her boyfriend and test their results. In the meantime, Helen removed the Petrificus Totalus curse.

'What the bloody hell?' were the first words out of Rabastan's mouth as soon as he could move. He made to jump up and run away, but his chest found resistance in the form of Emma's wand. He shook his head in incredulity, but the girls kept their faces dead serious. Rabastan wasn't often on the receiving end of a prank.

'Not so fast,' Emma replied. 'Do you really think you could remove all we just did by yourself?'

'I can bloody well try,' he retorted.

'We won't help you if you get something wrong. You know self-transformation is the most difficult,' she smirked, showing him a mirror.

'Regulus -' he started.

'Regulus has been otherwise occupied for the next two hours. It's your choice.'

Regulus was busy chatting about the history of House-elves with Minky - a passionate elf very knowledgeable on the subject - and bribed with another plate of refilling mint humbugs, just in case he strayed off topic.

Helen couldn't stop the grin from forming on her face as her eyes looked past them into the corridor. 'Better choose quickly, you don't want to confuse the poor prefect.'

'By the way, if you tell him anything, then we'll deny all knowledge and tell him it was one of your pranks gone wrong,' Lucinda murmured menacingly, stepping closer to the make-believe Ravenclaw. 'Do you really think he'll chose your side of the story when he'll be forced to hand us
'detention or dock points from all four of us?'

'I hate you,' Rabastan muttered, but his shoulders sagged in defeat. 'Maybe I'll manage to get some fun out of all of this.'

He didn't look like he believed his own words.

'Good luck,' Emma laughed, clapping him on the back. He looked like he had swallowed a frog.

As Alecto drew nearer, they could hear her chattering. 'So would you mind if she ate with us? She's the only one who can turn the goblets into molten silver without burning anything and change them back again.'

'Fine,' they heard Evan huff, probably annoyed at having to enter the Great Hall with a group of five younger girls.

Taking that as their cue, they started walking nonchalantly down the corridor, looking for all intents and purposes like they were a group of friends heading to dinner. Evan made no comment on the girl looking like Rabastan, nor gave any hint that it looked like she had been magically altered. Success! Emma thought.

'So what's your name?' Evan asked gruffly as they entered the dining room.

'Rab - ow!' Rabastan pulled his foot from where Lucinda had stamped on it.

'What was that?' Evan frowned.

'Rabbit,' Rabastan plastered a ditzy smile on his face. 'That's my nickname.'

'Rabbit,' the older boy said slowly, as though he couldn't believe how dim this person was. 'And you're the only one who can cast the liquefying charm?'

'That's me!' Rabastan squeaked. Obviously, he was having trouble getting used to his new voice.

' Hmm,' the prefect grunted, before squeezing in between two seventh-year Slytherins. 'Sorry, there isn't much space here. I guess I'll get to know you some other time.'

His tone of voice suggested otherwise.

'Mission accomplished,' Alecto whispered to Emma as they pushed Rabastan to sit next to Mulciber and opposite Wilkes.

Severus wasn't at dinner that day, but he had been disappearing for longer stretches at a time, so it wasn't too unusual. Emma supposed that he'd return with a new invention soon. Though she had to admit, that Muffliato charm was perfect. The boy had talent. Why are you thinking about Severus? she mentally slapped herself. There's something much more interesting going on now.

'I don't think I've seen you around before,' Mulciber had turned on the full charm for "Rabbit". 'Do you usually come to eat at the Slytherin table?'

'I just came to show my friends the liquefying charm,' Rabastan said, pulling his robes closed when Mulciber tried to get a peek at what was beneath them.

How Emma wished they had had the foresight to give him boobs. Then again, maybe that wouldn't have been such a good idea, she thought. The two sixth-years were completely ignoring the Slytherin girls, instead focusing on newer, maybe more naive prey.
'Oh, clever and pretty?' Wilkes gushed, giving "Rabbit" his best puppy dog eyes. Emma would know. 'Give us a demonstration then.'

Rabastan responded by turning his goblet into a puddle on the table, always eager to show off. 'The trick is the flick of the wand at the end, so that the liquid doesn't sink into the table.'

'Maybe you could come and help me flick my wand after dinner,' Mulciber smirked.

Rabastan looked affronted. Emma didn't think he had said anything like that in his whole life, let alone been talked to in that manner. Lucinda's pumpkin juice spurted all over the table.

'Are you alright, Lucy?' "Rabbit" looked at her with concern. 'Maybe we should get you to the Hospital Wing.

'No... I-I'm fine,' Lucinda choked out between wheezing coughs. It was true that her face had gone an unfortunate shade of purple as her body couldn't decide whether to laugh or cough.

'No, I insist,' Rabastan stared daggers at her and got up from the table, only to have Mulciber catch his sleeve perilously close to his hand.

'You know where to find us,' he winked.

Rabastan just stared at him as though his innocence had been violated in the most vile of manners.

'Yes,' he replied, snatching away his robes. 'Now if you'll just...'

Alecto nodded almost imperceptibly to Emma, their cue for enough is enough. The torture was over, but the fun had only just begun. Emma tried to imprint Rabastan's expression in her memory, willing it to never fade over the years.
'Today, we will be working on something that many of you have been waiting for since you first set
foot in this room,' Professor Archedis said, sweeping into the class clad in his usual deep purple
robes. 'There are only two months left of school and though the seventh-years have already covered
this last year, it is imperative to the N.E.W.T exams.'

The sixth-to-seventh year students of Arithmancy sat up a little straighter in their seats. Emma kept
her back firmly entrenched against the wall. She hadn't minded sitting next to Diggory before, but
now everything about him made her want to sneer. Weakling, her mind whispered. He had broken
off everything but minimum contact ever since Lucinda had let slip her "relationship" with Regulus.
She rolled her eyes at the memory. Unfortunately, she was stuck next to him in class. The teacher
chalked up a huge number seven on the blackboard.

'The magical property of different numbers,' he announced dramatically. 'All those who want to
work in Gringotts or in the Improper Use of Magic Office later, listen up. The souls of numbers are
the keys to understanding magical locks, analysing curses and tracing magic.'

Emma stopped doodling on her page, giving the class her full attention.

'Numbers don't have souls, professor,' one Ravenclaw said sceptically.

'Ah but that is where you are wrong, my dear,' Professor Archedis explained. 'They do not have
them in the strict sense of the term, but each number is imbued with a unique magical signature. Each
witch or wizard also has a magical signature formed with seven to thirteen numbers. The more
numbers there are, the stronger the caster. Now, identifying magical signatures is part of a different
class, since it involves a lot of practical study and there is no real theory to it. However, each
sensation is associated with a number, which allows the signature to be filed away in a more
permanent manner. As for locks and curses, the numbers used to identify them are often more to do
with the nature of what the lock or curse protects. This does not apply to curses cast on humans, only
inanimate objects.

'Today's lesson will begin by learning the properties of the two most magical numbers known to the
Wizarding World: three and seven. The seven is more representative of the essence of magic, the
power behind the manifestation of spells and the like, whereas the number three deals with magic
across time: past present and future. Time-turners, for example, have a magical signature of "7337"
to represent the projection of the caster across the past and the present. In order to use the future,
another three would have to be added to the magical signature, though the spell to attune the object to
this combination has not yet been found. Harmony is the key to any magical object: any wrong move
or imbalance will result in harmful consequences. As such, curses are generally created with a slight
imbalance, to make them all the more dangerous. Without fail, curses have a two in their sequence,
because it represents balance. Alas, that is a subject for another lesson. Turn your books to page 394.'

There was a flurry of movement and furrowed brows as the students realised that page 394 was just
the beginning of a ten page chapter on the number seven. Soon all noise had died down save for the
flick of a page or a scribble of a note here or there. When a knock came at the door twenty minutes
later, several students jumped at the sudden noise. Professor Archedis quickly moved to quietly
speak with the intruder in the hallway. Instead of going back to their reading, the students strained to
listen to the heated conversation carried out in whispers in the corridor. Professor Archedis was
known for his flamboyant personality and no-interruption rule in his classes. He maintained that it
was detrimental to learning such a difficult subject. Rumour had it that he had even forbidden the
headmaster from entering unless the situation was urgent. Unfortunately, the Professor had closed the
door, so they could only hear the murmur of hushed voices.

Presently, the door was opened again and a harried-looking Arithmancy teacher came back in, stopping to Emma's surprise in front of their desk. 'Miss Potter, it seems that your presence is required in the Headmaster's office. Collect your things and don't you worry about the homework for this week, my dear.'

Something about the way the usually passionate teacher brushed this important topic aside, or maybe the way his eyes softened pityingly alerted Emma to the gravity of the situation. Her heart seemed to plummet to the bottom of the stomach the way a stone would in the Black Lake and she gathered her things, not even bothering to bottle her ink before rushing out of the room. She had expected someone to be in the corridor, but the hallway was empty. Throwing the ink in a nearby bin, she shoved everything else in her schoolbag and sprinted down the corridor, keeping a running monologue in her head all the while, *it has to be something about mum, but maybe they just said it was something about the hospital. Maybe she's better now... What if Dad's got Dragon Pox too? Merlin, I don't think I could handle both of them being ill...*

She almost missed the gargoyle so wrapped up in her thoughts was she. As she burst into the office, she found the white-haired headmaster looking kindly down his nose at her. After several seconds of her panting to catch her breath and Dumbledore just standing there in silence examining her, she couldn't take it anymore.

'Well? Why am I here?'

She realised that she was being rude, but the headmaster was so infuriating, withholding any information, that she thought that she could just hex his calm expression right off of his face.

'I apologise, Miss Potter, but the Portkey left a five minutes before you arrived,' he replied calmly. 'Sherbet lemon?'

Emma looked at him incredulously. 'What has happened to my mother?' she demanded.

'Please sit,' he motioned towards the chair in front of his desk with an elegant sweep of his hand. 'I apologise for not saying this sooner. Your mother has woken up and the doctors say that she is well enough for them to safely say that the worst should be over.'

Emma's whole body seemed to deflate with relief and she welcomed the support of the chair. *Some good news at last,* she thought with a smile.

'Your brother and Mr Black are with her now. She is only allowed up to two visitors at a time,' Dumbledore offered by way of explanation.

Emma knew that she should be furious at the fact that Sirius Black got priority over her to see her own mother, but she was too relieved to summon the energy. Besides, he had probably insisted on accompanying James as they shared mostly every class together. Emma was happy that she only had to see the git in Potions and Muggle Studies.

'It has come to my understanding that Mr Black has taken up residence in the Potter house,' the headmaster seemed to insist on wanting to make small talk. She kept her mouth shut, letting him continue. 'How do you feel about this arrangement?'

'Excuse-me sir, but I don't see how this affects me going to visit my mother,' she replied politely, when it became clear that a response was necessary.

'I make it my business to care about the welfare of my students,' he said pleasantly.
It took all she had to hold in her snort of contempt. 'If you don’t mind me saying so, if you already know about Sirius coming to stay with us, then you probably also already know about my view on the situation... sir.'

'That much is true,' he agreed, his eyes twinkling as if they shared some private joke.

It immediately annoyed Emma - what happened over Christmas was certainly no joke to her. She stiffened and looked away, intent on ignoring Dumbledore for the next twenty minutes. However, he carried on.

'Pardon me if I have offended you, Miss Potter,' Emma immediately raised her Occlumency walls, 'but I feel very strongly about House unity, particularly in these trying times. I am pleased that you have accepted Sirius into your home and hope that you will continue to make him feel welcome there.'

Emma completely ignored this last sentence. She didn't know why James liked Dumbledore so much, but she was starting to agree with Narcissa and Lucius. Either he knew exactly what had transpired over those holidays and the ensuing months and was pressuring her to ignore everything that Sirius had done, or he really was just a bumbling fool. And he didn't look like the latter. One thing was certain, he definitely favoured Gryffindors. She wondered if he had been placed there himself.

Instead she observed the office with interest, looking at the many portraits of old headmasters. There were none of the Four Founders though. Maybe they would have put too much pressure on the current headmaster for them to be present here. The phoenix was resting in a corner of the room and she admired his colourful plumage until an old lamp reappeared on Dumbledore's desk. Her attention immediately snapped back to the headmaster.

'You may leave now, Miss Potter,' the old man motioned towards the Portkey.

'Where's James?' she asked. She had expected Sirius and her brother to reappear along with it.

'They have been sent through the Floo network to their Head of House's office,' Dumbledore explained. 'After your visit is over, you will also be transported to Professor Slughorn's study.'

Emma nodded in understanding, before a familiar tug at her navel sent the headmaster's office spinning into space.

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Her surroundings were replaced with the stark white walls of St Mungo's hospital. She gave an unsure glance around; it appeared that she was in the lobby. There was a waiting room just behind her and a series of lifts to the left. To the right there was a long, light corridor that she supposed led to the hospital's gardens. A receptionist's desk was directly opposite her, so she made her way to that.

'Um... I'm here to see Mrs Natalie Potter?' she asked timidly.

'Who are you?' the witch asked dully, not looking up from her papers.

'Her daughter,' she replied, fighting the urge to fidget.

'Huh, I was told she only had two children,' the witch replied, looking at her curiously.
'Yes, and I'm one of them. Emma Potter,' she added her name, rather helpfully.

'Strange, because two boys came up claiming to be her sons,' the receptionist said, still in that calm, curious tone of voice.

The witch was starting to get on her nerves now. How hard would it have been to check the hospital's records of every birth? On top of that, how dare Sirius take her place? If Emma wasn't allowed to see her sick mother because of that twit, then she didn't know what she would do. Kick up a fuss, maybe, but she doubted that it would get her in. She tried to wait patiently as the witch decided to send a few notes asking permission, but suddenly, she had enough. Since when did she need permission to visit family?

'Look here,' she started, about to tell the witch just what she thought of her and where she could shove a broom if she happened across one, but luckily the receptionist was saved by a Healer appearing.

'Ah, they told me you'd be here. Emma, is it?' the wizard asked in a brisk, but kindly manner.

Emma nodded, shooting a dark look at the receptionist. The latter didn't even bat an eyelash. In fact, Emma realised that she had been sucking on a gobstopper the whole time they had been talking. As if sensing tension, the middle-aged wizard motioned her down the corridor.

'Right, I'm Healer Crawley, your mother's assigned mediwizard. Mrs Potter is on the second floor in the Magical Bugs and Diseases ward. If you would just follow me.'

Emma followed the Healer so closely that she was almost tripping on his shoes in her impatience. The lift seemed to take an age, but soon they were out and hurrying along another white corridor.

'In here,' the Healer said, motioning towards a private room.

Emma burst through the door with a cry of "Mum!", startling her parents. Natalie Potter's wan face broke into a broad grin, whereas Charles jumped off of the side of the bed. She ran to the bedside to hug her mother, but a nurse she hadn't noticed before stopped her.

'I'm sorry, Miss Potter, but no contact with the patient is allowed until she's signed out of the hospital. It's hospital regulation for contagious diseases.'

The witch really did look very sorry and thoughtfully left the room. She had probably done this with James and Sirius too, since she told Natalie Potter to "just give a ring like last time" if something went amiss. So Emma went and sat on the stool next to her mother's bed, drinking in the sight of her. Natalie Potter's face was as bony as it had been filled out before Emma had left at Christmas and her eyes had sunk into their sockets. Her skin was tinged green and there were purple rashes along her forearms. She noticed her daughter's line of sight and pulled the sleeves of her hospital robes down. Her hands were pockmarked though, as if a thousand little circles had been pressed into her skin. But Emma's mother's eyes were just how she remembered them: blue like her own and bright and clear, lit up with that inner warmth that is always associated with mothers.

"Why weren't you here before?" Charles asked, bordering on accusatory.

Natalie shot him a look, but Emma was so relieved to see her mother alive and - almost - well that she didn't notice her father's tone. 'I was in the Arithmancy tower when the teacher came to get me. By the time I got to the headmaster's office, James and Sirius had already taken the Portkey. It was only made for two,' she added, with a slight hint of reproach. 'I had to wait until they had left the ward.'
'I guess I should have mentioned that Sirius was like family now,' her mother chuckled. 'I'm sorry dear, I didn't know that you would be denied a visit because there was an extra person.'

This was the time when Emma usually would have insisted on the fact that Sirius was more like family than she was, that they couldn't even be bothered to remember her, but she couldn't bring herself to argue right now. It seemed like her father felt the same way, because he didn't bring up the subject that Sirius had managed to get to the Portkey on time as he certainly would have six months ago.

'How are you feeling?' Emma asked the mandatory question.

'If I had a Knut for every time someone asked me that,' Natalie laughed again, but it soon turned into a cough. Emma looked alarmed, but her mother hushed her with a sign, taking a long drink from the water on her bedside table. 'I'm fine really, just a little tired. My throat aches from the sparks coming up from when I coughed - apparently Dragon Pox can burn the insides of your throat, making it itch. But there aren't any sparks any more, and I'm feeling much more awake than I have in a long time.'

'I guess that's good to know,' Emma said doubtfully. Burnt throats didn't sound "well" at all.

'It is good,' Charles said firmly. 'And it's good that you came to visit too. We were worried that you weren't going to come when your brother showed up.'

'The thought never crossed my mind,' Emma replied solemnly.

They were all quiet for a moment, until Natalie made an effort to brighten up the mood.

'So Emma,' she said. 'Tell us all about your Hogwarts life since Christmas.'

Emma gratefully launched into an explanation about her Quidditch matches and how she had managed to trick James enough to win the Quidditch Cup. She told them about the prefects' meeting on the House Cup, though neglected to mention the cheating part, electing laughter from both of her parents. She talked about her recent Arithmancy class to her mother, who had been waiting for the moment Emma would deal with locks and curses in order to be able to better discuss it.

To her father, she recounted their exploits in Potions and her new-found friendship with Lily Evans, the girl James was in love with. They theorised on whether James might actually get the girl and Lily's mellowing attitude towards the last Potter. She refrained from mentioning the fight at her birthday party and the tasks the Dark Lord had set for Regulus and herself, and in return Charles bit back harsh words whenever she talked about Rabastan and Lucinda. It was starting to feel like they might make up for the past six years, that Natalie's illness wasn't for nothing after all, when disaster struck.

It happened when the half an hour was almost up, when Emma got up to go and her mother was positively glowing at having her family back in one piece. Charles had reached into his cloak and told her that they had wanted to give James and her their birthday presents together, but also wanted them to have them before the N.E.W.T.s. James had been delighted with his, and so they had saved hers for the end in the same manner.

'Happy Birthday!' the parents chorused, and Emma opened the box to reveal the traditional wizarding watch.

Each was slightly different, unique to the family or parents who chose it. Hers was a delicate golden colour, with brooms as hands pointing towards tiny roman numerals on a white background. There was another, smaller hand, which Emma had inquired about.
'It measures magic,' her mother said breathlessly. It was obvious that Natalie had been bursting to tell her about this. 'It measures the magic in the air, its power and potential danger. It also measures its difficulty: red is for danger, whereas green is harmless. The size grows in accordance to the spell's power and width for its difficulty. We thought it would be perfect for when you want to be a Curse-breaker.'

'Thank you,' Emma felt a rush of gratitude and emotion.

Her parents hadn't forgotten her, they had been reading her letters when she thought that Charles couldn't care less, and they had poured so much thought into the gift that she felt a lump appear in her throat. Her father beamed as he took the watch out and asked to put it on her wrist. As was tradition, she held her left hand out. And that was when time seemed to stop.

Charles had pushed back Emma's sleeve so that it wouldn't get caught in the clasp. That was when he noticed the dark red tendrils creeping down her wrist. The tattoo had faded quite a lot since it had first been branded onto her, but it was still very noticeable. Too late, Emma remembered and tried to pull her hand away, but the damage had been done. Her father grabbed her wrist and roughly pulled her sleeve up to the elbow, exposing the Dark Mark in all of its skeletal glory. The skull seemed to be laughing, the twisting snake that Emma usually found so fascinating menacing in the glaring hospital lights. The colour left Charles's face and he let go as though he had been stung.

As if in slow motion, the watch went tumbling from his grip. The three Potters watched its descent through the air and saw it touch the ground a split second before they heard the sound of shattering glass. The gold should have been sturdy enough to survive the fall, logically the glass frame should have only been cracked, but the whole watch split into pieces. Every link of the chain was broken, and in that moment it seemed to sever every link that Charles and Emma had worked so hard to repair. Emma's heart felt like the glass, so fragile that anything could shatter it, and the silence was the only thing that kept it at bay.

In a gallant effort to save her family, Natalie Potter got out of bed without a word to gather each tiny piece of the watch. It was painful to watch - her arms and legs were skeletal and she had to lean on the bed from the effort that a simple crouch required. Charles stared at her, thunderstruck, whilst Emma seemed to come to her senses.

'Mum, you shouldn't be out of bed,' she said, moving to help her.


The two women stopped in their tracks. Emma felt an odd vibrating in her chest. Please don't do this, Dad, she tried to say with her eyes, but there was no trace of her father left in the man standing before her.

'Stay away from her,' he continued in the same menacing tone, now advancing towards her. Emma cowered despite herself. How could this man be the same loving father she remembered from her youth? 'How dare you, after all we've done for you. After all you've put us through, after all we've forgiven, it turns out that I was right. You're a good-for-nothing Slytherin and I should have disowned you from the day you were sorted. Who knows what kind of danger you'd bring to our doorstep? And now…That thing…That's the sign of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Tell me one thing, is it in admiration of him slaughtering innocents, or did you actually join his cause?'

'Dad, you don't understand,' Emma said quickly. 'If only you'd let me explain—'

'That response is all the explanation I need,' he cut through shortly.
'Mum,' Emma turned pleading to her mother, who made a move to reach out to her. But Charles took Natalie's hand in his own.

'Don't you dare take advantage of an ill woman, criminal. I don't even recognise the girl I raised.'

'I haven't done anything wrong! You didn't raise me anyway, Mum did! You just sat there, judging me and coming up short every time. Mum, please, you understand, don't you? You still believe in me, don't you?'

Natalie Potter looked from husband to daughter and took her hand out of Charles's. She opened her mouth to speak, but Charles pulled on her alarm bell before either of them could react.

'You have lost the right to call my wife your mother. From now on, neither will you have a father. You've clearly chosen where your loyalties lie. As far as I'm concerned, I never had a daughter.'

Emma was desperate. Out of all of their fights, this was the worst. She needed her mother to speak, to tell her father off as she had in first year and give Emma a chance to explain. But the nurse arrived too quickly for Natalie to interject, so instead she ran to her mother's side, to hold her hand at least one last time if her father was going to forbid them from seeing each other.

'The girl has gone quite mad,' her father said. 'She is upsetting my wife, whom she is not allowed to touch. Please remove her from our presence.'

'Come along dear,' the nurse said immediately, kindly, as if she was used to visiting relatives trying to break the rules.

She put a comforting hand on Emma's shoulder. Emma tried to fight back, grasping the doorway to reach out with her other arm and she could have sworn that her mother had stretched out her fingers too. They were half a centimetre apart, when the nurse finally had enough and took her by the waist, physically dragging her out of the room.

'It's for your own good,' the nurse said crossly, as if talking to a petulant child. 'Your mother may still be contagious.'

But as she was escorted out, Emma could have sworn that she heard a faint voice calling her name.
Be Careful What You Wish For

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!
Thanks for your comments; I don't exactly know when this will finish, but I think we're at least half-way there.

When she Flooed into Slughorn's office, she was shaking all over. She hadn't even managed to Floo properly, crashing through the grating in a heap of ash and smoke and startling Slughorn, who drew a line of ink across his whole parchment.

'My dear girl,' the teacher said in a shocked voice. 'Whatever is the matter with you?'

Emma was too busy coughing to be able to reply, so her Head of House helped her up by the arm, dusting off the embers clinging to her shoulder. She looked up at him, disorientated. She knew she recognised him, but somehow her mind wasn't properly linking notions together. School... teacher... she thought slowly. Am I supposed to be doing something? Immediately, his expression of frustration turned to one of worry.

'Not to worry, not to worry,' he said almost to himself, taking his wand out. 'Nothing a little spell can't fix. I daresay that seeing your mother's physical state after the Dragon Pox must have been quite a shock to your system. Hurry along now dear, it's almost time for lunch anyway. Some hot tea will do you some good before your next class. Honestly, why Dumbledore insists on pulling children out of class like this instead of waiting for a proper reunion at the weekend is beyond me. You're the fourth to come through my fireplace this month, though it must be said with the most spectacular entry.'

Slughorn's amiable chatter soothed Emma the whole way to the door, where he sent her on her way with another little pat on the shoulder. Obediently, she followed his instructions and made her way to the Great Hall. It seemed like she needed to remind herself even to keep blinking. Everything was so disjointed that each time she closed her eyes, she needed an extra half a second to open them. If she were to speak, she was sure that she would have slurred. She piled her plate full of bread and jam, simple foods that didn't need much attention. The bread was still warm from the oven, white fluffy rolls that would probably have been better suited to the breakfast table rather than lunch. She touched the inside of one, marvelling at the softness of it.

Presently, she was joined by the other sixth years. They chatted animatedly as they sat down, greeting her before going back to their conversation about their Herbology class. With an inward sigh of relief, she realised that none of them were in Arithmancy and so wouldn't know to expect that something was wrong. So she tried to listen in to the chatter, but somehow couldn't concentrate on the words. Her mind seemed to just float off blankly and when Alecto made the remark that she was even quieter than Regulus that day, she made her voice croak and mimed a sore throat. This earned her sympathetic looks and a mug of hot tea from Rabastan. She wasn't quite sure how tea had appeared at the lunch table either - though Slughorn had mentioned it, she had only ever seen water and pumpkin juice being served at midday.

She was so wrapped up in buttering her bread the right way that she hardly noticed the hall emptying. It was only after a tap from Alecto on her shoulder that she realised that it was time for
Charms. Thanking Merlin that the next subject on her list was her easiest and that the rest of the day was composed of free periods, Emma vowed to pay more attention to what was going on, inwardly trying to shake herself awake.

Fifteen minutes later, she was cursing Merlin for landing her in the Charms class that was practicing the Patronus charm. She had forgotten that Mondays were normal Charms classes, whereas Thursdays and Fridays were the Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms team up. Professor Flitwick was encouraging them to think up happy memories, but Emma couldn't think of a single one.

'As far as I'm concerned, I never had a daughter,' her father repeated in her head, whenever she tried to remember something. 'The girl has gone quite mad.'

'Emma,' Sophie hissed.

She blinked her glassy eyes, returning to her surroundings. Oddly, it felt a bit like vertigo. She turned her head slowly towards the other girl. 'What's wrong?'

It turned out that she spoke normally after all, though the words felt foreign on her tongue.

'You were saying strange things,' Sophie was looking at her dubiously. 'You kept repeating "the girl has gone quite mad" under your breath. It's disconcerting.'

'Sorry,' Emma replied, casting around in her mind for an explanation. The mental concentration took every ounce of energy she had. 'It's part of my homework for Arithmancy. "The girl has gone quite mad" is the cursed line in one of the books we're studying. We have to figure out how the curse was made.'

'Such a weird class,' Sophie replied, satisfied with the response. 'But we're in Charms now, okay? I know you're great at it and all, but some of us actually need to practice.'

Poor Sophie, Emma thought. She had worked as hard as she could during the Charms O.W.L.s, but somehow it had all trickled out during the summer, due to her faulty long-term memory. She had difficulty with most of the spells now, let alone the Patronus Charm. Emma was sure that Flitwick was going to gently tell her to give it up before her N.E.W.T.s, so that she could concentrate on the things she was better at. She had only chosen Charms because it was one of the core subjects and she didn't know what to do later in life.

So rather than let herself fall back into her trance-like state, Emma chose to help Sophie with her Patronus Charm. In theory of course, it was easy. She corrected the other girl's stance and tried to get her to think of a happy memory, which incidentally was of her family reunited for Christmas. Her sister had been studying in South America for the past three years and was finally back in England. A warm white glow began to radiate from Sophie's wand and she clapped her hands in excitement - promptly breaking the spell. Emma gave her a small smile despite herself. Somehow the Patronus had lifted some of the weight she hadn't realised was pressing in on her.

Flitwick appeared beside them, all three feet of him beaming. 'Ten points to Slytherin. Well done Miss Parkinson, well done!'

Alecto gave them a thumbs up from where she was practicing on the other side of the room with Regulus. Suddenly, Emma remembered the seventh-year prefects new "rule". It seemed so long ago
now and so meaningless. On the day, she remembered that she was bursting with the need to prove Slytherin was as good as they thought it was, but now all she could summon was apathy. *It's not as if you haven't had fights before*, she tried to cheer herself up. *Maybe it'll all blow over in a couple of days.*

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Three days later, the Sunday post arrived. Emma had somehow managed to get through the last two days without even Regulus suspecting something, the others having attributed her lack of energy to her "cold". She eagerly scanned the mail, searching for their parents' owl. *Mum has to have talked some sense into him*, she thought. *She always does. She's always there for me, even though I might not always see it. But it wasn't there.*

There was definitely an owl swooping towards her part of the table though, a great snow white one, and as it grew nearer she could make out its beady little eyes trained on her. It landed with an elegant flutter of its wings and whilst Lucinda and Helen cooed over its beautiful feathers, Emma had eyes only for the envelope and its flowing writing not unlike the bird itself.

*Miss Emma Potter*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

*Scotland*

She frowned. This was not the writing of her mother, nor that of her father. Though Narcissa's writing was elegant, it was not so curving. She did not recognise the script at all. She turned it around to see the name of the sender, only to be confronted with a seal that read: St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Even more bemused, she tore it open and began to read.

*Dear Miss Potter,*

*It brings us great sorrow to be the bearers of such unfortunate news. Mrs Natalie Potter, of room 34 of the Magical Bugs and Disease Ward, passed away last night after a severe relapse of Dragon Pox. Though her passing was kept as painless as possible, we believe that the relapse was caused by wanton stress and anxiety at a critical time of the healing procedure.*

*Please accept our deepest condolences,*

*St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*

Out of some kind of desperation, Emma checked the envelope for any other parchment. As luck would have it, there was another short letter, folded in half. She opened it eagerly, almost ripping it in the process.

*Dear Miss Potter,*

*It is with deepest regret that I must inform you of the situation at hand. Mr Charles Potter has been detained and put into quarantine after coming into contact with a victim of Dragon Pox. As there are no living relatives able to inform you of this, I have taken matters into my own hands,*

*Please accept my most heartfelt apology,*
Suddenly, Emma wished that there had not been a second letter. Her whole body felt as though it had been dipped in ice until the very marrow of her bones had frozen over. If she had ever experienced the effect of a Dementor, she would have compared it to that. Her brain - which had been working like treacle for the past few days - seemed to have shut down, and she found herself walking in the empty hallways of her thoughts. Her body took over, wanting to protect her from this danger, but not quite knowing how. Automatically, she folded both letters back into the envelope as if they had been nothing but greeting cards.

'Just a late birthday card from my Great Aunt Ursula,' she said casually, before eating the last of her cardboard toast, forcing it down with a gulp and strolling out of the Great Hall.

She kept up this pace the whole way through the castle, strolling through as if she were out for a walk around the corridors, until she found herself at the Astronomy Tower. There, she hugged her knees and rocked herself back and fro, unsure as what to do. Her whole body felt like it was in an unknown situation. She should be crying her eyes out, she should be throwing a tantrum, she should be doing anything but this. But she wasn't. And somehow, the automatic motion helped a bit. She tried to think if she saw James at the Great Hall. She couldn't remember. She wasn't sure if she wanted to remember. Somehow, she thought that she would know, that she would have sensed it if her mother, the woman who had carried her for nine months, had died. But she had no premonition. She had thought that her mother would get better. She had thought that her mother would have made everything better.

After a while, she was relaxed, though she still couldn't feel anything. She tried to force herself to grieve, but she wouldn't. All she could think was that somehow they had made a mistake and that another owl would be sent in the morning. There was no other option.

***

One week later, another owl hadn't arrived. Somehow, Slughorn had known, because he put Emma and James together for Potions that week. Emma wasn't surprised to see James as dejected as he had been when they had been called away from Apparition class, but she was surprised at how serious he had become. He added every ingredient by the book, didn't look around once, and when she peeked over his shoulder to see what he was writing, she saw the Potions class written word for word in his neatest handwriting. The sight of it sent a chill down her spine and made her feel sick to her stomach. She thought that she could have gotten through anything if only James was there too. But James wasn't there. Not the real James, anyway. This one was a robot James, going through the motions, but the personality inside seemed to have shrivelled up.

Just as she had twisted her stomach into knots tied upon knots, because it looked like James was going to leave without even acknowledging her presence, he gave her hand a quick squeeze. She couldn't remember the last time she had been so close to her twin, and instinctively she threw her arms around him and hugged him as hard as she could. She had never felt so grateful in her life that it was hard for James to even catch a cold. She couldn't imagine what would have happened if it had been he who was in quarantine.

But just as quickly as he had shown her some affection, he pushed away, muttering that he was going to be late for his next class. That, more than anything, hurt and Emma wondered for the first time if her father had mentioned their last fight to her brother. He hadn't even looked her in the eyes. She hadn't seen James since, in any case.
Now it was Saturday evening and Emma was nursing a Firewhisky, in honour of Alecto's birthday. It had been surprisingly easy to pretend everything was normal, when she felt so dead inside. She supposed that it was because there wasn't another emotion to conflict with. She felt a little guilty that she couldn't muster the happiness she would have for her best friend, and very guilty that she hadn't even thought of a creative present when Alecto had made so much effort for her seventeenth. Instead, Emma had gotten her friend a new book of Dark spells that she had been wanting to try out, a Quick Quotes Quill and a box of Honeydukes. Alecto had thanked her without a trace of sarcasm though, so she supposed it must have been alright.

She looked over at the redhead now. She was laughing and showing off her new wizard's watch, the one traditionally given by the parents on your seventeenth. Emma was suddenly overcome by a vision of a watch shattering to pieces on a pristine hospital floor. The chill she had felt one week ago in the Astronomy tower returned with such a force that she put her goblet down, for fear of breaking it. A familiar lump found its way to her throat. Quietly, she slipped away from the conversation into the dungeon corridor, swinging the alcove wall back into place.

She felt like a turtle that had been dropped from a great height by the bird that attacked it: At first she had shrunk into herself, pretending that so long as she stayed in her hollow shell, nothing would happen. But the whistling wind had grown louder and louder, and she had peeked out only to see the ground rushing towards her. The scary truth was staring at her in the face, so she let herself go, sliding to the floor pathetically as she gave great shuddering gasps.

Logically, she recognised it as a panic attack much like the time Regulus had made her jump off her broom, but deep down she knew that it was much more than that. She curled up with her head in her knees, trying to take breath after breath, but no matter how deeply she tried to breathe in, it felt like there was never enough oxygen to cover the gaping hole she had found in her heart. Ten minutes later, she still hadn't stopped and her heart was beating so wildly that she was afraid it was going to burst. She tried to concentrate on calming herself down, but only succeeded in making herself even more nervous. She felt like she wanted to run away, but there was nowhere to run to, because her shadow would always follow. She clenched her fists, getting angry. Why didn't she wait for me to say goodbye? Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't she do anything? Didn't she want to live? Did she even try to live?

Suddenly, she was enveloped in warmth. She huddled into it, realising when she breathed in the smell that it was Regulus and that he was holding her the way she had held him after their Occlumency lesson. The way she had told him her mother had held her. She cuddled closer, trying to infuse the warmth into her own icy body, but the cold was too deep to be thawed out. Then she tried to push him away, but he only held her tighter.

'You don't have a Great Aunt Ursula,' was the only explanation he offered.

'You should be at the party,' Emma reprimanded half-heartedly, not wanting to tell him what had happened. *If you say it, then it becomes real.* She hadn't hit the ground yet.

'No one will miss me,' he replied in a soft voice.

She doubted that. Regulus wasn't much of a talker, but she always knew when he wasn't there. It always felt like something was lacking slightly. Although it was nothing compared to how she felt now.

'I think Sophie might,' she added, a little too late. It seemed like everything she did was a little too late.

'I don't care about Parkinson,' he said simply.
They lapsed back into silence. Emma was turning her father's words around and around in her head. *As far as I'm concerned, I never had a daughter.* She wanted to know if her mother wanted to talk to her too, if she had said anything after calling her name, something that Emma would now never know. So she did the only thing she knew how to do when she was hurt - she pulled away again.

'I don't even know why you're here,' she said, regretting her actions even as she spoke. Her teeth were chattering.

'I haven't forgotten what you did for me when I needed someone,' he replied. 'You left the envelope on the table last Sunday.'

If Emma hadn't been so wrapped up in her grief, she would have been shocked at his confession. Then again, she wouldn't have let him fold her back into his arms either. Against her will, her shivers turned to shudders. Somehow, having someone know what had happened made the weight on her heart lift just the tiniest bit. But it also made it harder to keep it all locked away. She hadn't told anyone, both ashamed at having a family that didn't want her and it being too late to rectify it. *If I say it out loud, then it will become real.* Maybe someone would tell her that it was just a mix-up at the hospital, swooping down and saving her turtle-like shell from shattering on the rocks below, the way her watch had shattered her heart.

Slowly, she realised that this was real, whether she said it or not. Never again would her mother bake a fresh cake and forget her wand somewhere. Never again would Emma smell roast potatoes and know that they were going to sit down next to the crackling fire as a happy family again. Never again would her mother be able to make all of her sorrows disappear. Never again would she see Natalie Potter's bright blue eyes crinkle when she was deep in thought or when she was holding in her laughter.

'Why did she leave me?' Emma asked Regulus pitifully, looking up at him as reality finally started to sink in.

He shook his head in reply - there was no good answer for that. That was the moment when the truth hit her and the real tears came, pouring out like a fountain as she sobbed uncontrollably into his robes, crying even harder when he stroked her hair the way her mother never would again.
'Come on,' Regulus said gently, when her sobs had died down to a trickle. 'We can't stay out here all night.'

Emma nodded, her head spinning. She had a headache from crying, but it seemed that her tears had dried out for now. It seemed like it had been days since she had started. *My mother is dead,* she thought, acknowledging it for the first time in her mind with the proper terms. She knew that she wouldn't be able to say it out loud. Something had prevented the word from appearing in her mind, but now it seemed like it was stuck at the forefront. *My mother is dead. And she won't be coming back.* She was not so naive as to think that her mother would return as a ghost. Where would she go? Their house? No one was there for most of the time. Besides, what was there, really, to come back to? A dysfunctional family? Better that Natalie Potter go somewhere far from here to a much better world. After all, it was the harsh reality of this one that had killed her in the end. Emma was under no illusion as to what had caused the relapse. *My mother is dead. And it's my fault.*

Regulus was up already and holding out his hand to her. He acted the same way James had when a stray fox had entered their garden: patient and unwilling to make any sudden movements. She was grateful for it. She didn't think she could handle any more abruptness at the moment. She took it, and was surprised at its warmth. *This is the first time I've held Regulus's hand,* she thought. She kept a hold of it when he said the password and if he was surprised, then he didn't comment on it.

She concentrated on the contact with child-like intent. It was warm, as she had noticed earlier, though she thought that someone who kept their cool as much as Regulus did would have had cold hands too. It was calloused from their years of Quidditch and probably from their Potions class too. The thing that interested her the most though, was the fact that she didn't mind the contact. She had always hated people holding her hand, even more so since the incident at the Yule Ball. Before, it had been because no one would ever be on par with James.

Now, it felt cageing somehow, like she was stuck and wouldn't be able to break free. It usually sent a thrill of fear up her spine, a laughable reaction to such a small display of trust. Emma didn't quite know why, but now it seemed like Regulus was now her lifeline, the buoy in her sea of sadness. This time, she didn't want to break free. If she let go of him, then she would surely drown. She wasn't that good a swimmer anyway.

When they re-entered, the party was still in full swing. Upon noticing them, Alecto announced that it was time she opened her presents, having only seen Emma's that morning and Rabastan's at lunch - which was to hex everyone who didn't wish her a happy birthday to serenade her. Whilst Alecto loved this diabolical plan, even she got uncomfortable in the end, avoiding any and all Gryffindors. There was only so much bad singing a person could take.

When everyone was safely settled around the fire, Regulus led Emma to the door, urging her to go upstairs. When he let go of her hand, the cold air felt unpleasant. She turned around, ready to do as she was told. Her crying spree had drained her and she hadn't slept properly since before their Quidditch game. Her muscles still ached from misuse and her body was screaming for a break. But she realised that having missed so many moments with her mother and maybe her father made her never want to miss anything important of her friends'.

So she tried to wipe her face and walked back up the stairs towards the fire. Regulus and Rabastan were a little to the side behind the sofa, having what seemed like an argument. She drew nearer, wondering what was bothering the two that were usually thick as thieves. She felt the odd urge to hug them, tell them just how much they meant to her.
'tell her,' Rabastan was saying. 'That's all I'm saying.'

'It isn't the right time!' Regulus exclaimed in a low voice. 'Her mother just died.'

The words said out loud were shocking... cold, even. It seemed so blunt. Tears pricked Emma's eyes again, but she ignored them. They hadn't noticed her yet. Emma couldn't see Regulus's face, but Rabastan's looked serious for once, as though he earnestly thought he was doing the right thing.

'There isn't a better time, trust me,' he urged.

He might have added more, but his eyes fixed upon Emma. The emotion wiped itself off of his face to be replaced with... shiftiness? Regulus turned immediately and his eyes widened. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again.

'What should you tell me?' she asked.

They were saved from replying by Alecto's whoop of joy. As was her tradition for everyone's seventeenth, Lucinda had given her free tour tickets to the Bertie Bott's Factory.

'I've been waiting for this all year,' she confessed, slightly embarrassed about her outburst over sweets.

***

Later that evening, the five of them were grouped around the fire: Rabastan, Regulus, Alecto, Lucinda and Emma. Everyone else had gone up to bed, but they had decided to clean up then rather than in the morning. Rabastan had offered to go down to the kitchens to get some tea, earning him a slap from Alecto. They all knew that he was just trying to get out of doing some work. Alecto had gone herself, proclaiming that the birthday girl didn't need to clean up. Now, they were enjoying the hot drinks in a - relatively - clean common room. The crackle of the fire sounded odd with the swishing of the lake, but they were used to it by now and found it oddly relaxing.

They chatted quietly about meaningless things, anecdotes about all of their parties - except Regulus's of course - and about their future trip to Bertie Bott's factory. Lucinda had apologised to Alecto and handed Regulus his own gift there and then: The trip was scheduled for the end of July, so it would be useless to wait until his birthday. As Rabastan was teasing Alecto and her put-out face, Emma glanced towards Regulus, a slight frown creasing her forehead.

As if he had read her mind, he muttered in a low voice, 'Alecto and Rabastan already knew. Rabastan was the one to open the envelope and Alecto knew as soon as you walked out of the Great Hall.'

For some reason, it was a relief that Regulus hadn't just told Rabastan as soon as he could. Emma didn't know why, but it somehow felt like a breach of confidence. If she wanted anyone to know her mother died, then she would have told them so. Of course, there would be an obituary, but her mother was already old even by wizarding standards. It wouldn't make the front page and somehow, that was important to her. Her grief was private. As for the way her mother died, she would take that secret to her grave.

After a few more minutes, they all trooped off to bed. As Emma snuggled back into the sheets, she thought about how her friends had helped her without her even knowing it. They were her family away from home and in some ways were closer to her than her parents could ever be. Her brother and cousin were in different Houses, something that made spending time together harder. These four,
the four sitting around the fire, they knew her better than she thought. As Lucinda multiplied blankets for everyone to cure hangover shivers in the morning, she resolved to thank them, some way or another.

The next day at breakfast, Emma felt like the night before had been a dream. It had started out so badly, but in the end she had woken after a night of unbroken sleep - a rarity these days. Somehow, a switch had gone off, letting her feel more peaceful. Sad, but peaceful. The roiling energy that had occupied her nights seemed to have disappeared during her breakdown, though she still didn't feel like her normal self. Mostly, she just felt... tired. Worn out.

She was late to breakfast, having taken what could probably have qualified as the slowest shower of her life, but she couldn't bring herself to hurry. Everything was in slow-motion, worst of all her limbs. They felt like they were made out of lead. In the end, she decided to go straight to her Potions class. When she saw Rabastan and Regulus in the hall, it took her half an hour to remember their conversation from the night before.

'What was it that you should tell me, because my mother died?' she asked.

A shocked silence followed her words. Though she had spoken softly, both Rabastan and Regulus were speechless at the callousness of her words. In reality, she just hadn't been able to summon the energy to tiptoe around the subject. That hadn't stopped the words from feeling foreign in her mouth and forbidden, as though she had sworn in front of her parents.

'Regulus...' Rabastan started, before Regulus stepped firmly on his foot.

'Rabastan was saying that there are rumours Snape, Mulciber and Wilkies have their marks. I thought it wouldn't be the best time to tell you about this, since you have other things on your mind, but he begs to differ.'

Regulus gave the taller boy a meaningful look. Rabastan rubbed his neck a little sheepishly. His cheeks reddened, and he refused to look Emma in the eye.

'I thought you would prefer to be kept in the loop,' he said. 'If it turns out it's true, then I was worried you would think we were mollycoddling you.'

'Thanks,' Emma replied shortly. Realising that she sounded cold and sarcastic, she forced herself to add more. 'Who started these rumours?'

As Rabastan launched into an explanation about Snape's curses being discovered by Lucius Malfoy, Emma resigned herself to having to carry on her efforts of listening into conversations. Maybe she wasn't as better as she thought.

***

One month later, things still hadn't improved, though Emma had gotten used to the pain - and used to hiding it. Most of the school knew about Mrs Potter by now and even Professor McGonagall was stepping on eggshells around the twins. For the first time since she had come to Hogwarts, the strict Transfiguration teacher had allowed her to resit one of her final exams - the original mark had been a D for Dreadful.

There had been another short note from the Ministry informing James, Emma and Sirius that the Potter house was being fumigated and cleansed of all possible bacteria. In the meantime, it was up to them to find somewhere to stay for the summer. The letter had arrived at breakfast before they were
due to leave Hogwarts, though that hadn't made James any more talkative. However, it seemed as though he was avoiding everyone these days. Now they were in the train on the way back to London and Lucinda was still astounded at the simple formality of the letter.

'It's not fair,' she said. 'They should have at least provided you with some sort of accommodation or funding. I can't believe they're not even giving you any money to support yourselves after your father's been taken into quarantine and your mother is -'

'Shh! Lucinda!' Alecto quickly cut through, shocked.

Emma nearly smiled at Lucinda's outburst. She met Alecto's eyes for half a second, conveying her gratitude before she replied.

'Don't worry, it's fine. I'm going to Narcissa's for two weeks anyway, and the house is only unavailable for fifteen days. I'm sure Mrs Black won't mind me staying on a bit to help clean up the wedding mess.'

'If you say so,' Lucinda replied dubiously. 'If not you can always stay at mine.'

'Or mine!' Alecto said, not to be outdone.

'Or mine!' Rabastan quickly added, making them all laugh.

'What we're trying to say,' Lucinda went on. 'Is that you can always call us.'

'Thanks,' Emma smiled at them properly this time.

Lucinda settled back into her seat, satisfied that her point had been driven through. Emma turned her head back to watch the countryside. Her friends were so sweet to her, but they could be so stifling. She needed to take her mind off things, not wallow in them. That was the only way to even remotely get past this. If only they could act normally with her…But then she wasn't acting normally with them.

Feeling like someone was watching her, she looked back into the compartment to meet Regulus's eyes. 'I'm sure my Mum would love to have you too,' he said, smirking slightly. 'She's been asking if we can adopt you and I keep having to tell her that you've still got a father.'

It wasn't quite on par with Rabastan's jokes, but it still elected a round of laughter despite the touchy subject. Sometimes it seemed as though Regulus could read her thoughts. The tension was broken and soon the conversation turned to a different topic.

'My brother told me that we'll probably get our Marks this summer,' Alecto informed them. 'Rabastan and I, that is. It'll probably be at the same time as the others in our year - those rumours were false. Probably Mulciber trying to talk himself up again. Other than that, I think Lucinda's made it perfectly clear that she's not interested in getting into the field.'

'Right you are,' Lucinda replied simply. 'I'm not about to go gallivanting off into Auror territory only to have my head blown off. I'm very attached to it. Besides, it's much cosier and safer where I am. Somebody's got to carry on the family business, since Evan's time is already taken up. Mum's been telling me that she might let me handle some customer deals this summer, if only I can perfect a traditional pureblood meal.'

'I thought you had a house-elf?' Rabastan asked.

'We have two, actually: Tufty and Bauble. But I still have to organise them in tandem, and Bauble
keeps insisting on wearing a bell whenever she has to bring trays into the room. Plus, I need to think of the recipes to ask them to make, which have to be traditionally British, but nothing so bad as haggis,' Lucinda sighed.

'It's a hard life Lucy, isn't it?' Regulus grinned.

'You have no idea,' she pouted, ignoring the sarcasm.

Just then, the compartment door slid open to reveal a middle-aged witch's chirpy face, along with a vat of different coloured candies. 'Anything from the trolley, my dears?'

Lucinda made a face. 'Not for me, thank you, I see enough of sweets as it is.'

Emma shook her head in response. Ever since her mother…her father had fallen ill... she found that she had no appetite. She ate the food in front of her, but she had no will to go down to the kitchen for tasty treats as she once would have. Judging by the weight James seemed to have lost, it seemed like the sentiment was shared. An exclamation rose up, shaking her from her dark thoughts.

'I wanted the chocolate frogs!' Rabastan was protesting.

'Well, then you can't have the cockroach clusters,' Alecto's face was firm.

'Why do you want to eat so much anyway?' the boy asked. 'You usually only get three or four sweets.'

'Well, not today,' the redhead replied petulantly.

After several minutes of arguing, Emma gathered that both Rabastan and Alecto had wanted to buy out the trolley, and neither wanted to share. In the end, they tossed a coin to see who would get which sweets, and greedily grabbed the ones they wanted. The trolley lady was quite worn out by the end of it, muttering that she had to go back to the first cabin for a refill.

Of course, Emma knew why Alecto was eating so much. She had seen her stress-eat during her O.W.L.s and knew that the same thing was happening now for the Dark Mark. She wanted to offer some words of comfort, but couldn't think of any that didn't sound completely cliché. Plus, it seemed like too much effort and she didn't know how she was going to tell her anyway. So she returned to her previous preoccupation: staring out of the window. *Since when did time decide to pass so quickly?*
Healing

Chapter Notes

I apologise profusely for the huge wait! In my defense, it was Christmas. Happy New Year everyone, and I promise to update more regularly!

'My goodness, Emma, what happened to you?' Narcissa exclaimed on the platform. 'You look positively skeletal!'

She had come out to see her friend personally, rather than send the delegation of house-elves as they usually would. Of course, Dobby was there anyway, to carry Emma's trunk. Dobby would follow Narcissa to the ends of the earth, if need be. Probably because he was so glad that he hadn't sent to be part of Bellatrix's household. He was a particularly odd elf, according to Narcissa, but still very useful.

Emma belatedly realised that of all people, she hadn't informed Narcissa of what had happened these past few months. How could she? It was hard enough choking the words out in person, let alone put them into something as cold as writing. Luckily, she was saved by Narcissa slapping a hand to her forehead.

'Of course, how could I have been so unthoughtful! My poor dear, come to the car, tell me how you are,' her friend gushed, trying to make up for her mistake. 'How could it have slipped my mind, after what happened at the hospital...'

Suddenly, Emma remembered that Narcissa had trained at St Mungo's that year. Somehow, amidst all the chaos that had happened at the hospital, she hadn't thought to ask Narcissa for help. All at once she was bursting with questions, ones that Narcissa would probably not have a response to anyway. As they exited the station, she struggled to slow down her mind enough to let her mouth form the words.

'Did you ever see her?' she blurted out in the car. 'Did you meet them? Did they tell you what happened in the end? Did she talk about me? Have you seen Dad? Have you seen how he is? Has he mentioned me?'

The older girl placed a slim hand upon her arm. 'Relax, Emma. Take a deep breath. I'll try to reply as best as I can. I saw your mother briefly, since we were learning about diseases. Even though I never knew her, I heard enough about her from you to be sorry for your loss. She sounded like a wonderful woman. No one is allowed in the containment ward, so I couldn't say about your father. Emma... Emma, are you alright?'

The younger girl looked severely discomforted, but brushed the question aside. After a couple of seconds, she seemed to think again. 'Actually, would you mind opening the window? I get a little carsick.'

"A little carsick" wasn't how Narcissa would have described it. The colour had drained from her friend's face, leaving it a deathly white. The emotion seemed to have disappeared with it, save for blue eyes that had widened in shock. As Emma placed a hand upon the car door, Narcissa noticed that it was trembling. A lot. However, if her year at St Mungo's had taught her anything though, it
was that commenting on symptoms that the patient already knew about only infuriated them.

'Of course,' she replied instead, before tapping the driver on the shoulder. 'Alfred, would you mind opening the window? And also make sure that the bends are softer, I don't want my bridesmaid getting sick two weeks before the wedding. We still have a lot to do.'

'Yes, miss,' Alfred replied.

'It's not long now,' Narcissa said soothingly to Emma. This kind of situation was one of the reasons that made her hesitate about committing herself to life as a Healer. It was impossible to stay emotionally detached, no matter what the trainer tried to tell her. 'We only live a few miles out of London.'

The Slytherin nodded, breathing in the fresh air. Maybe she shouldn't have gotten so excited so quickly. She felt ill, but it wasn't from the moving vehicle. She was so nervous about what her mother might have said that she felt sick to the stomach. All of a sudden, she wasn't so sure that she wanted to know. What if Charles had made Natalie agree with his point of view? What if she hadn't mentioned Emma at all? Did Emma herself really want to know? As bad as their last parting was, her mother had still reached out for her, she had seen it with her own eyes. It was a memory she had clung to these past few weeks, and if it had been a photograph, it would have been worn and scratched from use.

All too soon, it seemed, they had arrived at the Black's summer residence. *This is where Regulus and Sirius spent their summers*, she thought absentmindedly, looking out at the polished lawn, the rows of neatly laid flowers swaying in the wind. It was at once like and unlike Grimmauld Place. She supposed that Orion and Walburga had been the elder Blacks to have inherited the townhouse. The countryside lacked the magnificence of the London house, instead looking a little more homey, a little more cosy. It was three or four stories tall, but it looked like the children would have had to cram together for Christmas. She thought she could glimpse the hint of a Quidditch Pitch out back, but wasn't sure. It wasn't as though Andromeda, Bellatrix or Narcissa had ever displayed any interest in the sport.

Following her gaze, Narcissa pointed at a circular little garden with a fountain in the middle, proudly announcing that it was her herb garden and that she had weeded it ever since she was a little girl - her one display of defiance to her parents' wishes. Fortunately for them, their elegant daughter hadn't developed an interest in Herbology beyond magical herbs. It wouldn't do to have to marry her off with cracked, calloused hands, since there was no longer any hope for their two other daughters.

As for Andromeda... Well, none of the Blacks really liked talking about that. Regulus had told Emma that she had married a Muggleborn she had met at Hogwarts, defying her parents' wishes. It had even earned her a black scorch mark on Walburga's tapestry. Emma had learnt from the rumours that she had run off with a Hufflepuff, which would have been easier to swallow than Gryffindor if there wasn't the matter of the "stain on her blood", as Mulciber liked to put it. Neither Narcissa nor
Bellatrix had ever mentioned her since.

'At last,' Narcissa said, stretching her legs out luxuriously as the driver opened the door. 'Home sweet home.' Her face took on a thoughtful look. 'I guess it won't be home for long, will it?'

'You can still come back whenever you want,' Emma pointed out.

'Yeah, but it will never be the same, will it?' Narcissa sighed wistfully. 'Come on in, I'll show you around.'

After hanging their coats up in the hall, Narcissa told Dobby to put Emma's trunk away, instructing Emma on where her room was. Then she gave her a quick tour of the conservatory, kitchen, dining room and lounge. It was obvious that Mr and Mrs Black weren't in yet. Emma vaguely remembered Walburga mentioning that Orion worked with her brother, but couldn't for the life of her remember what. Narcissa let her into the kitchen with a swish of her wand, putting the kettle on to boil.

'I've been learning a couple of things from Dobby,' she confided, taking two mugs out and opening the box of teabags. 'I want to surprise Lucius on our honeymoon. I thought it would be nice if it was just us two, with no house-elves. Even though we'll end up going to the restaurant every day, I still want to try to make a home-made meal or two. Of course, when we settle into our new home, we'll have staff. I'm so happy Mother managed to convince the rest of the family to gift the Malfoys Dobby as my dowry. I've become rather fond of the strange little elf, and I won't feel so homesick. I might have to tiptoe around Mrs Malfoy, but Dobby will still be a part of home that I can control, won't you?'

She reached down to scratch Dobby's ears, as though he were a pet. The house-elf looked strangely at his mistress, but bowed anyway. He already seemed very different from Kreacher. 'Dobby lives to serve the Mistress, Mistress Narcissa.'

Narcissa graced him with one of her airy smiles, before turning back to Emma. 'Milk?'

'Yes please,' Emma held the mug of steaming liquid between both palms. There was nothing quite like tea to make you feel better, no matter the circumstance.

'Anyway,' Narcissa said, setting herself on the stool opposite. 'We can talk about Dobby anytime. Before we launch into any wedding plans or anything, there's something I need to give you. Remember how I said the interns were allowed to see your mother?'

Emma nodded, unconsciously leaning forwards in her seat, tea suddenly lying forgotten on the table. She clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking. They seemed to have made a habit of that lately. Her father would have frowned - no Quidditch player would be useful with those kind of hands.

'Well, she talked to me as I checked her heartbeat. Her voice was so faint, I would have thought I was imagining it if she hadn't been staring at me so intently. She asked me to come back later, after hours. I don't even know how she recognised me,' Narcissa mused.

'She knew your mother, they were in Ravenclaw together,' Emma remembered. 'You must look a lot like her. Or maybe I talked about you a little too much,' she joked.

'Anyway,' Narcissa went on, accepting this piece of information with a nod of her head. 'That's beside the point. I came back a little later, and I'm sorry to say that she looked very weak. I don't think she could have spoken above a whisper if she tried. I had to wear the protective gear, so I couldn't hear very well anyway. But I definitely heard her speak your name, and I handed her a
paper and pencil to make things easier...’ She let the sentence drift off. Emma wasn't sure whether she was lost in thought or simply didn't know how to finish it.

'What I'm trying to say is, she told me to give you this,' she concluded, pulling a small box out of her pocket. 'I put it in here for safe keeping. I thought you might like to read her words, rather than hear them from me. Don't worry, I haven't looked. They're for your eyes only.'

Emma took the box as though she was handling a delicate eggshell. Her fingers trembled slightly. Did she really want to know what was inside? She looked up into Narcissa's reassuring grey eyes and took courage. The older girl wouldn't have told her about it if she thought it would only make things more painful. It wasn't in her nature. So Emma undid the small golden clasp on the little white box and peered at the context with more anticipation than she thought existed. Thinking back, she should have expected it. But as it was, she was completely overcome.

There, nestled between paper and fabric, were the remains of her wizarding watch. The pieces were exactly the same as they were in the memory etched on her mind, each individual chain unlocked. The glass had been cleared away, and Emma could imagine her fragile mother having to bandage her hands after having picked every sharp edge out of the mess. But it didn't look like a mess anymore, instead it looked like a puzzle, like the ones children had to solve by locking the pieces together. For though everything had fallen apart, not one of the small pieces was broken.

Gently, she tugged at the small slip of paper between her finger and thumb, careful not to pull any part of the watch out of the box. The script was faint and trembling, but clearly Natalie Potter's spidery hand. "Give Emma my love," it said. "Tell her to forgive me."

***

'Emma?' Narcissa asked, knocking on her door.

Emma had fled the room upon reading the note, hurriedly telling Narcissa that she needed to put the box somewhere safe as soon as possible. Truth be told, the emotions upon reading her note had overwhelmed her and she hadn't known what to do other than try to gather her thoughts alone. There had been something too private in reading her mother's last words for her to have stayed in the kitchen.

Instead, she had sunk onto the soft bed, tracing the paper with her finger as if the words had been written in Braille. Dirt and ink had rubbed onto her index, but she didn't mind. It seemed like some concrete proof of the existence of Narcissa's... her mother's... gift. How long she had stayed like that, lost in thought, she couldn't say, but Narcissa had brought her back to the present with that gentle tap.

Embarrassed at her rudeness, Emma flushed and muttered something about it being open. The older girl hastened to bring the armchair around next to the bed, dexterously balancing the two teacups in one hand. They weren't actually allowed drinks in the bedrooms, but she thought that she could make an exception, just this once. Making herself comfortable, she offered Emma her tea for the second time around, waiting for the other girl to take it before getting to the matter at hand.

'Do you want to tell me what's so important about that watch?' she asked in the voice she reserved for delicate patients.

Emma stared at her cup, feeling the heat travel through the mug and into her fingers. Narcissa must have put a warming charm on it. She took a sip, it was milky and slightly sweet. The liquid sent the
warmth down to her stomach, thawing the ice that seemed to have made her body its permanent residence.

'\textquote{My parents gave it to me for my birthday,' she said eventually. Narcissa didn't press her, just waited. She appreciated that, for some reason. "When my father found out about the Dark Mark, it fell. After that, he wouldn't even look at me. "The girl", he called me. As though we were strangers and I was peculiarly dressed.'

It didn't seem to matter so much, whether what her father thought of Lord Voldemort was kept secret or not. The Dark Lord already somewhat knew and made it perfectly clear that he didn't care, there had been rumours of problems at home and besides…What was anyone going to do to a man already doomed to a disease?

'\textquote{Does your father not agree with us then?'} Narcissa probed delicately. This was a subject that Emma had never brought up in her letters. 'I thought your parents had decided to remain neutral in the war.'

'\textquote{That's what I've been telling people,' Emma twisted her mouth to the side. 'I'm surprised Regulus's parents haven't told your family yet, actually... I guess it doesn't really matter anymore. My mother was the only one who always saw both sides of the issue.'

'\textquote{She was the one who understood you,' Narcissa nodded, taking a sip of her tea.

Emma moved so that her back was to the wall, propping her feet up onto the bed. They had taken their shoes off in the entrance hall. 'I guess you could say that. But she never really said anything. I was never sure as to what she thought, towards the end. The last day I saw her, she barely said a word. But now...'

'\textquote{Now?'}

'\textquote{Now it's as though she's telling me that she loved me after all. No matter what choices I made,' Emma touched one of the handles. 'She always talked about things as though they were puzzles that needed solving.'

'\textquote{So I guess you could say that this is your puzzle,' Narcissa motioned towards the watch. 'That she wanted you to know that nothing's beyond repair.'

'\textquote{I guess you could,' Emma replied softly, a faraway look in her eyes.

'\textquote{Right then,' Narcissa said, uncharacteristically brusque. 'That settles what we're going to do in our free time.'

The blonde downed the rest of her tea in one gulp and got up, smoothing the creases of her skirt. Emma turned wide eyes towards her. 'What?'

'\textquote{We're going to make sure that watch works again.'}
A Dangerous Wizard

The next two weeks passed quickly for Emma. Luckily, Narcissa had a clear view of what she wanted the wedding to look like. Not so lucky was the fact that she was unwilling to bend for anyone, save perhaps Mrs Malfoy. When Bellatrix complained that she had better things to do than to go dress shopping, Narcissa shot her a look that would have made even Lord Voldemort quail. Fortunately for the bride-to-be, money was not an issue, and many people were willing to fall head over heels for the united Black and Malfoy families. They were truly a force to be reckoned with.

Emma copied wedding invitations whilst Narcissa perfected her elegant script; she clipped flowers here and there, casting a temporary Everlasting Charm on the bouquets when she was finished - the irony was not lost on her - whenever Narcissa had to go down for an interview with Witch Weekly, or the latest magazine; she replaced Narcissa's butterbeer with a firewhisky whenever it looked like the older girl was going to break down and generally prepared for the wedding. It was going to be held right where they were staying, so one day she suddenly found herself in charge of an elite squad of capable house-elves.

Mrs Black had appeared at that very moment - not Walburga, but her sister-in-law - and had laughingly taken charge, saying that accommodation was the domain of the mother of the bride, something that Emma was thankful for. It seemed that Bellatrix had taken it upon herself to threaten anyone who said they wouldn't be able to make it to the wedding, so it looked like it would be a full house. Lucius dropped in on occasion, to help choose the band, the food and the seating charts, but other than that he was extremely busy with work. His boss had agreed to give him two weeks off for the honeymoon, but seemed like he wanted Lucius to catch up on all of the work before that.

Though the day was a whirlwind, in the evening Narcissa always took a couple of hours off of wedding planning. After dinner, which sometimes included Mr and Mrs Black, but more often not, since they were away on missions that Narcissa gave them in the morning, Narcissa and Emma always sat in the library with a cup of tea, researching on how to fix wizarding watches. Of course, they could have taken it to a jeweller's, but neither proposed the idea and neither felt like it would really fix anything.

Instead, they tried doing it the Muggle way. Or as Muggle a way as they could. They fit the pieces together as best as they could, using magic to slot the trickier parts together. Narcissa never complained about the growing pile of books that Emma piled onto the table and never suggested that they give it up for a night. Sometimes they talked about Hogwarts memories, sometimes they told each other funny anecdotes that they hadn't had time to in their letters. More often than not, they worked in comfortable silence. Rarely, Emma spoke about her mother, but each time Narcissa was patient and attentive.

In all honesty, though she wouldn't let Emma see it, she was afraid every time Emma brought the subject up. There was no proper way to act, something she had learnt from trying to comfort Lucius when Abraxas Malfoy died - ironically of the same disease - five years ago. It had happened not long after they had gotten together and that more than anything had served to bring them closer. Narcissa used to feel guilty that she had used the illness of Lucius's father to get close to him, but after many reassurances now she only felt the slight twinge now and then.

On occasion, Emma failed to appear downstairs on time, whether it be in the morning or the afternoon. Narcissa was never angry though, even if she had a right to be. She knew that the younger girl more than made up for it during the three evenings she had a shift to work at the hospital. The first time, she had come home to find the wedding magazine's neatly piled with various coloured
notes sticking to the sides, classing them by theme. Even if Emma hadn't fallen asleep at the table, quill in hand, she would have known that this was the work of no house elf. Since, she had felt guilty about leaving the girl by herself, but her parents had reassured her that they would be there some of the time. They lived in a cottage at the end of their plot of land, claiming that the quaint countryside was more than sufficient for them.

This evening had started out pretty much like any other, they were sitting in silence working on the watch, when an owl tapped at the window - a frequent occurrence those days. Narcissa crossed the room to let it in, allowing it to rest on a perch by the fireplace whilst she read the note.

'Oh no,' she sighed. 'They're all out of white orchids. Apparently, there was another wedding not long ago who had asked for the same flowers.'

'What?' Emma asked, outraged on her friend's behalf. 'But that shop was supposed to have an everlasting stock of them! That's why we went there!'

'I know,' Narcissa said sadly. 'I guess I'll have to pick something out of this list, though it doesn't look like much.'

'No!' Emma said a little too loudly. Narcissa started. 'This is your wedding. You only get one of these in your life. If you want orchids, then you damn well better have orchids! Your parents' aren't paying for someone's hand-me-down flowers! I'm going to Floo there right now to give them a piece of my mind.'

'No, Emma, you can't,' Narcissa caught hold of the hand about to throw the green powder. 'It's already half past nine. We'll go tomorrow morning, but really, I don't mind.'

'It's not fair though! They told you that you'd have white orchids! They promised!' Emma had tears in her eyes now.

Narcissa was starting to think that maybe this wasn't about the flowers after all. 'It's fine. I'll talk it over with my mother, usually she has some good ideas.'

'It's not fine,' Emma replied half-heartedly, but sank back into her seat, wiping a couple of stray tears away when she thought the older girl wasn't looking.

She had been getting upset over the most random of things recently. Once, Mrs Black had asked Emma what her parents did for a living, and she had burst into tears, much to the older woman's bewilderment. She had had to excuse herself to her room that night, curling up like she had on the night of Alecto's birthday to sob pitifully into the night. At times like that, she almost wished that Regulus was there to look after her, then chastised herself about her selfishness. Regulus had his own problems to deal with. She hadn't even owled him this summer yet, feeling like she had nothing to say that didn't sound too superficial.

'How about I make us a cup of tea?' Narcissa asked, breaking into Emma's thoughts.

She nodded glumly, trying to pull herself together. It had been two months already, she should be used to the gaping hole in her chest by now. It didn't help that her father's silence seemed to make the void yearn even wider. Narcissa said that he was still in the containment ward, but that his situation seemed to have stabilised.

Another owl appeared next to the first, pushing it off of the perch before going to crouch by the fireplace. It was only when Emma pulled the parchment off of its well-trained leg that she realised that she knew this owl. Its sleek black plumage and curved beak belonged to none other than Lucius
Malfoy, Narcissa's betrothed.

'Narcissa!' she called, sending the other girl running back.

'What's wrong?' Narcissa immediately asked, worried.

Emma waved the piece of parchment in the air. Narcissa grabbed it and opened it, mouth falling open as she read it. Emma grew concerned.

'What is it?' she asked, wondering just what could go wrong enough for Lucius to pay attention to wedding preparations.

'It's Lucius,' Narcissa, said a bit needlessly. 'He's coming tonight for dinner, and he's warning us that he's bringing his best man.'

That piqued Emma's interest. Lucius hadn't chosen his best man for a while, and everyone was wondering who it could possibly be. No one could imagine Avery at a wedding, and besides, he and Lucius didn't seem to get along very well any more. Rodolphus Lestrange was out of the question, since he needed to lay low for a while. He had been spotted by Order members and it took no genius to figure out that they would have spies in this high-profile wedding.

'Who's -'

Before the sentence was even out of her mouth, the fireplace flared green. With a swoop of her wand, Narcissa packed up the books and watch pieces, sending them back to the cupboard where they belonged. By the time Lucius strode out, the living room was immaculate. He barely had time to kiss his bride-to-be hello before there was another flash of green light. Emma's eyes immediately snapped to the fire, only to see someone she very much recognised straighten his black robes and long, lanky hair.

'Severus,' she nodded curtly.

'Emma,' he replied, equally short.

She had to credit him for remembering to not call her Potter. Then again, perhaps that sneer was solely reserved for her brother now that she had been accepted into the Dark Circle. She briefly wondered why he had never bothered with the same creative name-calling as the Marauders' "Snivellus". He walked towards her, and before she knew it they were cordially shaking hands. Thankfully, his palms were a lot cleaner than his hair.

'May I present Severus Snape, my best man,' Lucius announced unnecessarily. 'I thought we might dine together from now on, get to know one another. After all, I would like to name him godfather of our future children. Not long now.'

Emma looked at Narcissa with wide eyes. The older girl flushed a little, but was tactful in her reply. 'I thought we could wait a little, enjoy the time we can spend just together, at least for a couple of years.'

Lucius graced her with one of his quick smiles, before guiding her by the arm towards the dining room. 'Shall we?'

'We didn't know you were coming quite so soon,' Emma replied. 'The food isn't ready yet.'

In fact we didn't know you would be coming at all, she thought in annoyance. Though for Narcissa's sake, she would try to keep an open mind about Severus. Aside from their collaboration on hate-
Sirius campaigns, all she knew of him was what James said. And James hadn't said much recently.

'No matter,' Lucius said, lip curling. 'Dobby!' He snapped his fingers, bringing Emma's attention back to Narcissa's fiancé.

The house-elf appeared, looking slightly fearful. 'Yes, Master Lucius?'

'Prepare something for dinner. I want a good meal in ten minutes! Not a minute more, or there will be consequences. Understood?'

'Y-yes Master Lucius,' Dobby replied, disappearing with a crack.

Emma held back a frown. Even house-elves couldn't make a meal up to Lucius's standards in such a small amount of time. She reminded herself that not all wizards were as forward thinking as Regulus and Narcissa. *All of that will change, thanks to Lord Voldemort.* He hadn't specifically mentioned house-elves, but it was natural to start with goblins and giants first. Rumour had it that he was going to extend a hand to the werewolves too. *Maybe that will help James change his mind about this war,* she thought, her mind going to Remus Lupin and his condition. Lucius would understand soon. Still, she couldn't help brooding a little as Dobby poured them the Blacks’ finest wine. *He's already acting as though this was his house,* not Narcissa's, she huffed inwardly, following them through to the dining room.

She had to remind herself that Lucius wasn't all bad though, as the dinner progressed. Dobby had managed to make a nice pan-fried turkey covered in breadcrumbs - a dish that Lucius had never tried before and loved. He complimented the elf, making him beam from head to toe, and anyone with eyes could see how he doted on his fiancée. Even Severus had his good points. For one, he had a dry sense of humour that sent them all into hysteric. Emma wondered what James would say if he saw her at this scene. She knew what Sirius would say. Traitor. Home wrecker. In a sense, it was true, as she thought back to the circumstances of her mother's death. Sensing the familiar feeling rise up again, she forced herself to concentrate on the conversation.

'The new Dark Mark ceremony will be taking place at the end of July,' Lucius was saying. He nodded towards Severus. 'Are you ready for it?'

'Can't wait,' the younger boy replied earnestly, with no trace of his usual sarcastic tone. 'I've been wanting for this for a long time.'

'It's something you'll never forget,' Emma added, thinking back to her Mark. The wound had healed, but it still itched from time to time, reminding her that it was still there.

'What was it like?' Severus asked, addressing her properly this time. Lucius turned to her, obviously interested.

'Like you were chosen to be a part of something much, much greater.' she reminisced. 'And you feel like you could take on the world, with the Dark Lord backing you.'

'It is truly a majestic moment,' Lucius murmured in agreement, unconsciously touching his left sleeve. 'Not only do you feel more powerful and confident, you also gain a family.'

The table fell silent as everyone pondered these words. Emma noticed a strange emotion flit across Lucius's face and suddenly remembered that his father had died of dragon pox when he was still at school. It had happened before she had even attended Hogwarts, but she wondered if he felt the same pain she did now. Judging from the haunted look she saw as their eyes met, she would guess at a yes. Somehow, terribly, that made her feel better. She felt a sudden affection towards the reserved
young man, something that seemed to create a bond between them. She was so wrapped up in observing Lucius that she didn't notice the way Severus's eyes lit up with what could only be described as longing.

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'Severus, show us the new spell you've been working on,' Lucius said in a commanding voice.

They were sitting on the sofas around the fire in their snug. Who had a snug nowadays?Emma's parents did, but she knew of no one else who did, until now. She had forgotten how comfortable and well... snug... they were. The fire created a warm glow that went well with the small room's painted red walls, meant to make people feel at ease, but right now there was an excited tension in the air, as they tried to get Severus to talk about his new task. No wonder Lucius is rising through the Ministry so quickly. Emma almost wanted to jump up and execute his orders herself. But Severus was made out of sterner stuff than she.

'I said that it was for the Dark Lord's eyes alone,' he replied. 'This is my ticket to getting a Dark Mark, and if anyone were to use it in front of him before me...'

'Oh come on,' Narcissa cajoled. 'Which of us is going to use it? Lucius is busy with the Ministry and Emma and I are wrapped up in last minute wedding plans.'

Severus hesitated again, looking suspiciously at Emma. She stared straight back, raising her eyebrows slightly as if to suggest that she thought he couldn't do it. Of course, James's stories said otherwise, but from her experience, Severus was most impressive when antagonised.

He looked back to Lucius, who smirked at him in a proud older-brother-like way. This was not lost on Emma, who had been wondering just why Severus had been made Lucius's best man. It seems like their relationship's a little like mine and Narcissa's, she thought. Only Lucius is the protective big brother and Severus is the adoring younger sibling. She knew that Lucius had no siblings, but realised that she knew nothing about Severus's home life. Unless they were Squibs or went to another academy, he didn't have any as far as she knew. She supposed that he kept the secrecy for a reason.

Eventually, Severus gave a short, stiff nod.

'Excellent!' cried Lucius, conjuring a makeshift puppet.

'Sectumsempra,' Severus spat out quickly, making a slashing motion with his wand.

Cotton flew everywhere as great gashes appeared on the puppet's body. If it had been a person, they would have bled to death within minutes. There was a stunned silence. Severus stowed away his wand, the hint of a smile playing on his lips.

'Impressive,' Lucius finally got out.

The girls slowly nodded, still speechless. It seemed that Severus Snape was definitely a good wizard to have on your side.
Emma nervously smoothed her dress down for the fourth time that day. Narcissa had warned her not to disturb her before nine o'clock, but Emma had been up for hours making sure everything would go perfectly. Lucius and Severus had set up various Portkeys, Druella Black was busy making the bouquets, Cygnus Black was giving precise instructions to the horde of house-elves and Bellatrix was stationed at the door, ready to welcome guests and hex gatecrashers – especially the dangerous kind. Andromeda had not been invited.

So far, so good, she thought, checking the golden watch on her wrist. She and Narcissa had celebrated by dancing around the living room the previous afternoon when the first hand had ticked. Now, it was almost as good as new, save a small scratch on the glass. Narcissa had offered to fix it with magic, but Emma had declined. It would serve as a reminder - her father may have given her the watch, but it had been Narcissa who had acted as the real family member.

When she repeated these thoughts to her friend, Narcissa's milky face had flushed a brilliant pink and tears had sprung to her pale blue eyes. It seemed that it had been only the start to a very emotional couple of days, as the orchids Narcissa had been waiting for had finally arrived that evening.

Ting, the large hand reached the twelve o'clock mark with a small chime. It was time for the craziness to commence. Taking a deep breath, Emma readied herself for the plunge and knocked on Narcissa's door.

'Come in,' the older girl called softly.

To Emma's surprise, Narcissa was already in her wedding dress, looking perfectly composed. She looked around and patted on the stool next to her. 'Can you help me with the buttons at the top? I can't quite seem to do them up.'

'Is everything okay?' Emma asked hesitantly, doing as she was bid.

'Of course,' Narcissa frowned slightly. 'Why wouldn't it be?'

'I don't know,' Emma shrugged. 'I thought that brides were supposed to have a meltdown on the day of their wedding.'

'Why on earth would I do that?' Narcissa asked. 'This is the one thing I've been sure about in a long time. Plus, what with the war getting serious... I wanted some concrete proof that I count for just as much in his life as the Dark Lord does. Is that too much to ask?'

'You know it isn't,' Emma smiled. She wished that she could have something like that to hold onto in the coming times. 'I'm glad you aren't getting second thoughts, then.'

'It's funny,' Narcissa said. 'I thought that I would be so nervous today, what with the past couple of
weeks. But actually, everything's already done, isn't it? There's nothing left for me to worry about... except for tripping over my dress as I walk down the stairs.'

'You're the most graceful person I've ever met,' Emma laughed, doing the last button up. 'Finished. Plus, there's no way you're going to trip in a dress that doesn't even reach the floor.'

'True,' Narcissa grinned.

She had wanted an elegant, silver dress, not one of the big poufy white ones that seemed to be the fashion nowadays. She had complained that the bottom would get dirty and that the white would just make her look paler than ever. Emma had wisely let Narcissa's mother handle the dress business, accepting what she had been given. Oddly, she and Emily Parkinson - Narcissa's classmate from Hogwarts - had been given charcoal grey dresses to wear. Narcissa had apparently wanted a black and white wedding, because she thought that the colours of the flowers would stand out more. Or something like that, anyway.

'Have you got Lucius's ring?' she asked, the thought occurring to her.

'Right here,' the older girl replied, holding out a simple band of gold. 'Lucius said he needed Regulus for some sort of... surprise? Can you remind him about that please? I was to tell him when I was nearly ready. Give him the ring too – he's our ring-bearer. Oh and also the hair and makeup witch? Salazar knows that those spells aren't my strong suit.'

'I'm on it,' Emma saluted. 'Just sit and look pretty.'

Narcissa threw a hairbrush at her in reply.

Downstairs, the Black country house was chaos. Chairs were floating right and left, tables were being directed outside, since the day wasn't too windy and several wizards had taken it upon themselves to artfully decorate the banisters with Narcissa's flowers. In the midst of it all was Lucius, graciously thanking everyone who came with a shake of the hand and a smile. His long blonde hair gleamed in the sunlight, contrasting with his suit, which was the same colour as Emma's dress. Severus stood looking slightly awkward in a light grey suit, his hair slicked back for the occasion. Emma snorted, wondering how long it took to persuade Narcissa that silver just wasn't the right colour for a wedding suit. She did like her symmetry.

'So you're the bride. That's what the surprise is,' Rabastan said, grinning from the bottom of the stairs.

He had opted for normal black dress robes. As usual, he managed to pull the look off with a casual elegance, though Emma couldn't believe he had gotten past the Blacks – it turned out that all but Bellatrix shared Regulus's love for neatness.

'Only if you're proposing,' she replied teasingly, hopping down the last few steps. 'There's a surprise?'

'It's such a shame that I forgot the ring in the Floo powder pot,' Rabastan put on a look of dismay. 'Next time.'

'I can't wait,' Emma grinned. 'So, what's this about a surprise?'

'I thought that as the maid of honour, you would know all about it,' Rabastan said, genuinely surprised.

'I probably do, but since I don't know what the surprise is supposed to be, there's no way of telling if I'll let you in on the wrong secrets,' Emma replied matter-of-factly. 'Speaking of which, have you
'Why, does he know about the secret too?' Rabastan asked.

'No, but I need to find him,' she replied, craning her head around Rodolphus and Avery.

'Just say it,' Rabastan sniffed loudly, turning his head away and sticking his nose in the air. 'I'm not good enough for you, am I?'

'Shit up,' Emma rolled her eyes, before snapping her attention back to the entrance. 'Oh, there!' She heard, rather than saw, Walburga Black arrive with her husband and son in tow. The flowery exclamations could be heard from the stairs as she engaged Bellatrix in a conversation the younger woman really didn't want to have. When Emma arrived, the older Black sister looked relieved.

'Emma will show you to your seats, Aunt Walburga,' she said breathlessly. In an undertone to Emma, she added, 'the security hasn't arrived yet. There's no telling if Dumbledore's order of the bumblebees will show up or not.'

Emma couldn't remember what Dumbledore's resistance group was called, but she was sure that they were not named after a small insect that died as soon as it pricked you. Though that could have been an accurate description of the Ministry at the moment. It was getting more and more desperate as the war wore on. She was already growing tired of the division. You're not helping anyone, thinking like that, she told herself, before turning her mind to the situation at hand.

'Call Yaxely. He's supposed to be taking care of this. And remember to stand in the middle of the crowd, Bellatrix. You'll be targeted first.' Without waiting for a reply, she started ushering the older Blacks to their seats. She thought she heard a faint scoff that was half-way between feeling and disdain, before Bella walked off with a click of her heels.

'I feel like I'm just meeting you everywhere Emma!' Walburga exclaimed. Her hair was decorated with white lilies in the spirit of the occasion. Narcissa was the flower of the Black family, and the youngest girl to be given away. 'It seems that you're already so close with so much of the family!'

The Black matriarch gave Regulus a pointed look. The latter didn't even bat an eyelash. Rabastan, who had followed them to the Blacks' seats, had to turn away to hide his laugh. Emma just knew that they wouldn't hear the end of it when they returned to Hogwarts.

'And you, darling Rabastan,' Walburga dragged the chuckling teenager over to kiss him on both cheeks, leaving a trail of flowery perfume. 'Have you got a bride-to-be? After all, now that Rodolphus is happily married to my niece, there aren't many... pure... families to choose from anymore, are there? Better get in quick before someone else snaps up all the good ones?'

This time it was Emma who fought back her look of amusement. Walburga was really something. Orion on the other hand... He looks like someone has died, she thought. She wondered if he was thinking about Sirius, their eldest and disowned son. She didn't even know who she empathised with in the Sirius-Walburga feud, but it was evident from Orion's face that Andromeda wasn't the only casualty of war.

She lifted her eyes and caught Regulus's glance. He looked almost... protective. Defensive even. But then Walburga asked him a question and his polite disinterest returned. Emma hated that expression. She remembered Narcissa's request.
'Excuse me, but I'm going to have to steal Regulus for some wedding reasons,' she apologised to the Blacks. A mischievous thought crossed her mind. 'However, Rabastan is free to entertain you until the ceremony takes place. He's actually one of the dedicated hosts, like Bellatrix.'

Rabastan's smile wavered slightly. The message in his eyes was clear, *you will pay for that.* Oblivious to the teenage teasing, Walburga leaned towards Emma.

'You know, dear, Regulus's blood really is as pure as can be. The family has taken precautions for centuries to make sure so. And the Black fortune is no less grand...'

'Alright mother, we need to go,' Regulus interrupted her loudly, steering Emma away from his parents. 'She's become a nightmare since the holidays began. She realised that I was turning seventeen and still had no arranged match. And now that I'm her heir...'

'Who was Sirius matched to?' Emma asked, remembering Lucinda talking about how their circle was extremely big on arranged marriages.

'Marlene McKinnon, of all people,' Regulus made a face.

Marlene McKinnon was the most brash, loud, proud Gryffindor of all Gryffindors. A Beater on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, she had a fierce right swing and a temper to go with it. Many first years avoided her and many upperclassmen sought to "tame the lion". So far, none had succeeded. Not even pretty boy Sirius Black, before he had been swept up by Lou. *Maybe he'll succeed in getting her this year,* Emma least then he might concentrate on something other than corrupting her brother.

'So what are you dragging me away conspiratorially for?' Regulus asked, when they were in the upstairs corridor. 'Or was it just a ploy to make Rabastan suffer in your endless teasing war? You know he's creating something big, after that stunt you pulled with Alecto...'

'There was actually a reason,' Emma said defensively. 'Lucius needs you for his "surprise".'

'We're already at that?' Regulus asked, surprised. 'I'd better hurry then. Don't look for me before the ceremony starts.' He started to walk away, but stopped, coming back to stare her uncomfortably in the eyes.

'What?' Emma asked, looking away.

'Are you alright?' he asked softly, an emotion she couldn't quite comprehend in his eyes.

She blushed without knowing exactly why, and averted her eyes even more. Her eyelids seemed to grow heavy. She had put her mother out of her mind recently, strange as that might have sounded, what with all of her time spent on the watch. But it was easier to tiptoe around the gaping hole than to plunge right in.

'I'm better,' she replied, all of the energy seeming to seep out of her.

Regulus backed away with a quick nod, having caught on to the taboo nature of the subject. 'I'll see you at the wedding then.'

'Sure,' Emma replied half-heartedly, before rallying. 'Here, don't forget Lucius's ring!'

He caught it with his Seeker reflexes and Emma set off to find the makeup witch with much less zeal than before.

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Druella Black placed her wand over Lucius and Narcissa's conjoined hands. If Emma looked closely, she could see Druella's hand tremble ever so slightly as happiness radiated from the older Black woman. Unlike most of the younger generation of Blacks, Narcissa had always enjoyed a close relationship with her parents and Druella would have died before Narcissa was matched up with someone her favourite daughter didn't love.

I wonder how Bella's taking this, she thought, shooting a surreptitious glance towards the crowd. No one knew who had joined Dumbledore's little rebel group, and Bellatrix would have made too obvious a target if she were standing at the alter. Narcissa risked nothing, being the newspaper's sweetheart and Lucius had been protected by his ties with the Ministry, but an arrest warrant had been issued for Rodolphus and Bellatrix was not generally well liked by the public.

That hadn't stopped the older Black sister from insisting on playing door guard earlier though. It should have been Bellatrix in Druella's place, but times being what they were made it too dangerous. Emma was sure that Bella was seething.

'You may now say your three vows,' Druella declared, finishing the Latin incantation.

Lucius took his wand with his right hand and touched it to Druella's, 'I, Lucius Malfoy, swear to stand by my wife no matter her decisions in life.'

An odd choice of words for his wife, but many pure-bloods from the Malfoy line thought that the wife should be beneath the husband in all matters. Narcissa beamed at her husband-to-be as a tendril of silver snaked its way over to her ring finger.

She mimicked his wand gesture and took a deep breath, 'I, Narcissa Black, swear to put our family above all, protecting them no matter what happens in life.'

Another controversial topic. A burst of murmurs from the journalists could be heard as a gold light wrapped itself around Lucius's left hand. Narcissa had specifically kept her options open to be a Healer until this day. Some part of her still has the family flair for drama after all, Emma thought wryly. Narcissa had told her long ago what her decision would be.

'I, Narcissa Black, swear to support my husband through sickness and poverty, war and death,' Narcissa's voice wavered, but held resolutely for her turn to start the vows.

Emma knew that Narcissa was worried that someone would notice that she stole her line from Muggle ceremonies, but she couldn't find a sentence that portrayed her feelings better. Luckily, not many Pure-bloods took Muggle studies at school and the last part of the line was very much real. The audience grew quiet. Emma thought she saw Cygnus shedding a tear or two.

'I, Lucius Malfoy, swear to forever remain faithful to the only woman I've ever had eyes for. I knew since I first saw you called up to the Sorting that I wanted to marry you, Narcissa,' Lucius smiled as the next spell strengthened the band of silver. He hesitated for a second before his next vow.

'I, Lucius Malfoy, swear to forgive the fact that Narcissa once told me that I looked like a Veela with my hair. Since our children are surely going to inherit it, I very much hope that they are girls.' Lucius joked, eliciting a peel of laughter from the audience.

One of the rings Regulus was holding vanished and appeared onto Narcissa's hand. The silver substance solidified into a silver ring with periwinkle stones dotted across the top. There was a gasp of appreciation and some applause. Though the ring ritual was wizarding tradition, most families
couldn't be bothered to go through with the hassle of setting it up, since the witness binding the contract and the ring-bearer both had to be blood relatives of one of the fiancés.

'I, Narcissa Black, swear to overlook the fact that Lucius spends more time than I do preening said Veela hair, and to turn the peacocks in Malfoy Manor white blonde upon my entering the grounds,' Narcissa threw her last carefully practised vow out of the window upon hearing Lucius's.

There was a general flurry of movement as the journalists wrote this last vow down. Their marriage would be annulled if Narcissa didn't fulfil her vow within the first month of their marriage. A gold band materialised on Lucius's fourth finger and Druella pronounced them man and wife.

'I love you,' Narcissa said softly, but somehow her words carried throughout the room.

'I love you,' Lucius replied and he kissed the bride.

As soon as their lips touched, a dozen white doves flew out from behind Druella and spiralled up and through the Vanished windows.

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'Beautiful ceremony, wasn't it Luce?' Rabastan asked, his machiavellic grin fixated in place.

Lucinda's already rouged cheeks turned a deeper shade of pink. 'Shut up Rabastan.'

'Oooh Rabastan is it now?' he teased. 'So not only does the wedding make you bawl like a baby, it also made you turn polite?'

'Crying is a perfectly acceptable thing to do at a wedding Rab,' Lucinda retorted, sighing exasperatedly.

Regulus watched the two bicker with his usual smirk of amusement. Emma watched the guests take to the dance floor in the ball room. Tables had been arranged in little groups on the outskirts of the accommodating space. She drank another goblet of champagne as yet another Black walked up to the happy couple to congratulate them. _How many people are there in this family?_

'Lucinda?' a woman's voice trilled over the crowd. 'Oh, Lucinda, _there_ you are.'

Mrs Rosier – or Madame Rosier, as she preferred to be called – came into view, heels clicking across the marble floor. Her dyed blond hair was swept up into a fancy bun and she was wearing a pure white dress that made her round blue eyes look positively angelic. The white lily secured into her hair with a ribbon only reinforced her Alice in Wonderland look.

'White dress on a wedding day, Madame Rosier?' Rabastan teased. 'That's a dangerous way to live.'

Emma swiftly looked around to see if Walburga was within earshot, but luckily she was next to the happily married couple. _She's probably giving Lucius a list of orders he must obey or be hexed off of the family tree he's just become a part of_, she thought with a snort. She waited for "Madame" Rosier to react, but was left gobsmacked when she fluttered her eyelashes at the seventeen-year-old.

'Oh Rabastan, you know this is a black and white wedding. The rules don't apply as they normally do. Besides,' she added in a purr leaning over to him. 'I like to live dangerously.' She snapped back to her daughter and added in a more commanding tone. 'Come, Lucinda. There are a couple of clients I need to introduce you to.'
Rabastan watched her swaying hips as she left, Lucinda trailing in tow. Regulus punched him on the arm.

'Ow,' he said. 'What was that for?'

'Being a complete arse,' Regulus rolled his eyes. 'That's Lucinda's mother.'

'Yeah, and?' Rabastan raised an eyebrow.

'She's flirting with you because your father won't endorse her new business contracts. Any Lestrange of age can sign them,' Regulus spoke as if he was talking to a simpleton.

'So it's not my amazingly good looks?' Rabastan pretended to look hurt. 'I'm not an idiot, but nothing's stopping me from enjoying her attempts at manipulation. I'm off to find someone else to tease – like Bella.'

'You might want to throw away your Veritasum-ed drink first,' Regulus commented dryly.

'That little minx!' Rabastan explained, looking put out. He sighed, dumped the drink into the nearest plant pot.

Regulus rolled his eyes again and turned back to Emma. 'So, what do you want to do?'

'Drink?' Emma asked. Their champagne bottle was already finished. 'Well done on the birds, by the way. Lucius's secret?'

'Yeah,' Regulus replied. 'They won't stray far though. Each one of them has a mini-camera attached to them. They're the ones taking photos, since the journalists aren't allowed in anymore. They got their ceremony.'

They meandered off to the refreshments table to watch the happy event. Emma realised with a pang that Narcissa was going to start her new life without her. She wouldn't have time for her old best friend, at least for the meantime. And that was another person in her life that she could no longer depend on staying. Immediately feeling guilty for her thoughts, she downed another goblet of champagne.

'Excuse me,' she murmured to Regulus, suddenly finding the room stifling.

In the "ladies' room", which was basically just one of the downstairs toilets, she tried to pull herself together. Druella had been so happy at Narcissa and Lucius's union, Cygnus was busy telling everyone who would listen about how proud he was of his daughter and Bellatrix could not wipe the beaming smile off of her face. In the meantime, Natalie Potter was dead, Charles Potter was in a contamination ward and James seemed to have disappeared off of the world. She had tried sending messages to him, but the owls came back empty handed. In the end, she had given up.

She took her wizarding watch off and stared at the small hands. *This is all I have left of them,* she thought unhappily. *This and my necklace.* It seemed like a poor equivalent of a living, breathing parent. The cool of the watch seemed to just drag her mind to the empty hollow where her heart should have been and she cried again. Except this time, she didn't cry for her mother, or her father. She cried for herself.

When someone knocked on the door impatiently, she was startled out of her misery. Realising how selfish it would be if someone saw her breakdown on her best friend's day, she tried to calm herself down, staring in the mirror. She rose her wand to her temple and then paused. *How easy it would be to just Obliviate my memory of them,* she thought. But that path was too dangerous to venture down.
Instead, she muttered the incantation for a Cheering Charm, remembering how it had affected Regulus at one of their parties. Little did she know how much strength she had put into it.

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Two hours later, she was sitting on the stairs, groaning. Tears of laughter streamed down Rabastan's face and he ignored the dark looks Regulus was shooting him. Never again a Cheering Charm after so much champagne, she vowed. Luckily for her, the wedding revels had moved on outside, so they were relatively alone.

'Hey Emma,' Rabastan got out between splutters of laughter. 'Do you remember stealing Bathilda Bagshot's feathered boa?'

'No,' Emma replied frostily. 'Are you sure that you aren't just making these stories up now?'

'Oh, I wish,' Rabastan replied. 'I hope those doves caught a lot of it on camera. I swear that this is the most fun I've had in my life. Do you remember telling me you loved me and not letting go of me for at least ten minutes?'

'As if I would do something like that,' Emma rolled her eyes, before turning uncertainly to Regulus. 'Would I?'

The conflicted expression on her best friend's face told her all she needed to know. She closed her eyes in embarrassment and buried her face in her knees. 'Wake me up in fifty years.'

'No way am I letting you forget this, Ems,' she could hear the grin in Rabastan's voice. 'Do you remember -'

'Hey Bast,' Regulus interrupted him in a warning tone. 'Why don't you go and get us all some food? I'm sure Emma will want to hear everything once she's recovered from... her ordeal.'

'Fine, I know when I'm being dismissed,' Rabastan replied airily. 'Emma, you have an hour before I resume my torture.'

Emma wearily waved a hand, head still hidden under the other arm.

'Emma,' Regulus said in a softer tone than she had heard in a long time. 'Do you want another Calming Drought?'

'No,' she snapped, before dialling down her aggressive tone. She was trying to not push Regulus away. 'Do you mind talking about anything else?'

'Fine,' she could almost hear Regulus searching for another topic. 'Would you ever want to get married?'

She raised her head, wondering what brought the question on, but Regulus was looking out towards the wedding reception, an indecipherable expression on his face.

'I've never really thought about it,' she admitted. 'I... I don't know. It seems like a big commitment. Wizarding Vows aren't to be taken lightly. I don't know if I'd be ready to lose all of my possessions by breaking one of my wedding Vows. And also... I wouldn't feel like the ring was really mine, knowing it could disappear at any time.'
Wizarding weddings were different from Muggle ones for one reason: the Vows. They weren't as bad as the Unbreakable Vow, you wouldn't die if you broke one, however your partner would be entitled to a third of your worldly possessions for every Vow you broke. Hence the surprised reaction at Narcissa's peacock vow. On the other hand, it was easier to nullify a marriage – simply by breaking one of the Vows. Most didn't want to live with the consequences though. Sometimes Emma wondered why so many people married so young, simply because of the consequences of choosing the wrong person.

'What do you think?' she asked belatedly, realising that the silence had stretched on for a while.

'I think if you marry the right person, then the Vows wouldn't matter so much. Look at Lucius and Narcissa. Did Narcissa have any second thoughts?' Regulus asked, turning to her. His grey eyes seemed to be searching for something.

'No,' Emma replied. There was a short pause. 'Did Lucius?'

'No,' Regulus echoed, looking slightly disappointed.

Emma searched for something to say, but couldn't think of anything except how comfortable the stairs were. It seemed that Regulus's Calming Drought just turned her into a tired drunk instead of getting rid of all of the symptoms.

'Is it hard for you?'

Regulus's words brought her back down to earth. She knew exactly what he was talking about. She hated him for it, for baring her feelings in words when all she wanted to do was to bury them as far down as possible. He knew that she wouldn't believe in Vows when it felt like everyone she had loved had abandoned her.

'No,' she lied. He saw straight through it. She looked away, her heart thumping in her chest. Where's Rabastan when you need him? She asked herself, wondering how she could extricate herself from the conversation.

'Emma,' he said in a tone that forced her to look back. A reassuring smile appeared on his face. 'Narcissa's not going anywhere. Neither are Rabastan or Lucinda.' His voice dropped so she could hardly hear it. 'Neither am I.'

Something flared to life in the black pit of Emma's heart, something sharp and painful. She had been wanting to chase away the hollow feeling the way she had at Alecto's birthday, but she wasn't sure whether this unknown hurt was any better. Instead in her half-drunken state, she instinctively went to what had comforted her in the first place. Regulus's arms automatically closed around her as she felt herself crying for what seemed like the hundredth time in the past few weeks. She didn't know she had any tears left.

When Rabastan came back, he took one look at her tear-stained face and set the tray of food to levitate in front of them. He sat himself on Emma's opposite side and gave her a quick hug.

'Don't worry about everyone else remembering your shining moment,' he laughed. 'I Confunded them all.'

For once, Rabastan Lestrange wasn't joking.
New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry I forgot to post for so long! Here are two chapters to compensate

Emma felt another thrill of excitement run along her spine. Once again, she thought about how strange the situation was. Not even six months ago, she had stood along with her classmates, scared, unsure as to what would happen. One of the outsiders. Now it would be up to her to help the new Death Eaters don their soft, black robes. She hardly dared glance towards Regulus - she knew that she wouldn't be able to resist the urge to grin. This was supposed to be a solemn ceremony.

One by one, the others had proved themselves. Some, she knew just how. Severus, of course, and she heard rumours of Alecto tracking down Muggles like William. Ones that had reportedly driven wizards into insanity. Emma didn't want to know any more details. Sometimes she was uneasy at how her friend could just flip a switch and become unrecognisable. On the one hand, there was the loving, caring, intelligent friend with a witty sense of humour. On the other, a calculating witch who loved to cause pain. It was hard to reconcile the two, so she just turned a blind eye to it.

Next was Rabastan. Dear old trickster Rabastan was an old hat at leading people into traps. One only had to ask Moaning Myrtle, who would delightfully recount tales about the boy she had a soft spot for. She had even suggested him making her toilets a more permanent residence, if ever he needed to hide. Needless to say, the offer had been politely declined. Upon finishing school for the holidays, Rabastan hadn't taken two weeks off to help plan a friend's wedding, no sir. He had been involved in several schemes to misdirect Aurors and had discovered that he was quite good at it - to his surprise and that of many others. Rodolphus couldn't have been prouder and Bellatrix never missed an opportunity to brag about her brother-in-law.

Others, she wasn't so sure about. To her dismay, Wilkes and Mulciber were also about to be accepted into the inner circle. For the life of her, Emma couldn't think of single redeeming quality about Mulciber. Perhaps his brute strength. Or perhaps the Dark Lord needed a bully, now that Crabbe had been put on house arrest. In any case, these five were now to be elevated to the rank of Death Eater, Dark Mark and all.

It was different to Emma's induction. They were back at Rabastan's house, the memory of which brought a slight tinge of red to Emma's cheeks. Upon seeing Rabastan's cheeky grin, she quickly reprimanded her face. However, the colour quickly left when they entered the Lestranges' library. Something about it made Emma's blood turn cold. Maybe it had something to do with the amount of Dark books in the room. The shelves were practically oozing with power.

Emma could tell that Alecto was itching to get her hands on a couple. She wasn't going to lie, there were a couple that had caught her eye too, but Rabastan had promised her unlimited access during the summer. He had winked at her, holding out a hand to shake, saying that he was looking forward to working with her in the future. Then he had further infuriated Alecto by saying that she wasn't allowed, since she would be set to a different task than they. The look on her face had been priceless.

However, some things brought her back to that chilly spring day. The hands folded within velvet black cloth, the ceremonial masks that hid their identity from their enemies, the half-circle spread around behind the Dark Lord. There in the centre stage he stood, as majestic and terrifying as Emma
remembered. He spoke calmly, but there was a veiled threat behind each word. *If you cease to be useful...* it seemed to imply. Emma swore to herself that that would never happen in her case. This time, she was a part of what Lucius had so aptly named the Family. Since then, the word had taken on a capital letter in her mind. After all, she couldn't go around calling their group the "Death Eaters" in public. Of course, Rabastan had laughed when she told her friends, but Regulus's eyes had taken on a faraway look that proved that she hadn't been the only one to think it.

Severus's hand trembled slightly as she presented him with his robe, but she pretended not to notice. She remembered all too well that mix of fear and excitement. Since the wedding of their two closest friends, she had gotten to know him better. He was still snide, he was still rude, but she had grown accustomed to the strange but brilliant young man. Most of his unfriendliness seemed to have stemmed from a lack of caring and confidence anyway, though she would never mention it aloud. After seeing his *Sectumsempra* spell, she had no doubt that he would soon be at the frontlines alongside Bellatrix and Rodolphus.

Once the initiates had donned their cloaks, Lord Voldemort went to each in turn, speaking a few soft words before burning the brand into their skin. Though she had seen - and felt - her own Mark, Emma remained fascinated with the way the red tattoo snaked along the forearm. Of course now hers was an inky black – as it was whenever she was in the presence of the Dark Lord.

The snake of Salazar Slytherin. Rumour had it that the Dark Lord was descended from that great line of wizards. He made no secret of the fact that he was a Parselmouth. The skull, representing the Death Eaters commitment to the cause. Laughter in the face of death. What was death, when their aim was so just? What was a life in the balance of the history of wizardkind? A change was upon them, a turning point that would change the lives of all involved.

Emma touched her locket unconsciously, only realising it when Bellatrix sent her a strange look with those half-mad eyes of hers. *The war will be over before long*, she thought. *Then Dad will realise just how much better the world will become.* She quickly tucked the locket out of view.

Talk of the war had been postponed until the next meeting. This reunion was solely to celebrate the new Death Eaters. So when the Dark Lord beckoned Emma forwards with a slim finger, she was surprised. Dutifully, she walked forwards until barely a metre separated them.

'I heard about the loss of your mother,' he whispered, his voice hesitating slightly on the "s"s. It had changed since the last time he had spoken to her. It was less... human. 'A great sorrow indeed. As for your father...Well, I found myself in the position of needing to purge my family line too. Take care to make the transition smoothly. I trust you will be discreet in the matter. You haven't disappointed me yet.'

Emma stuttered an acknowledgement and left, dismissed with an elegant wave of the hand. She wandered towards the exit without paying attention, lost deep in thought. On her way out, Bellatrix caught her by the arm, nails digging in as she pulled her into the Lestranges' study. Then she whipped out her wand, shutting the door and casting silencing charms on it.

'What is it?' Emma asked angrily, before regretting her words.

One always had to speak calmly to Bellatrix, though it seemed like today was one of her good days. She ignored the rude question and grabbed ahold of the chain around Emma's neck, dragging the younger girl forwards along with it.

'What is this?' she asked in a dangerously low voice.

'It's a locket, as you can well see,' Emma replied, yanking the chain back. She pulled it from under
her robes and showed Bellatrix the insignia. 'For Slytherin.'

'Where did you get it?' the older girl tightened her grip on her wand, her pale face becoming even paler. It looked like she was about to have a fit.

'I don't remember,' Emma pretended, staring Bellatrix in the eyes. 'I've had it for a long time.'

Bellatrix visibly relaxed at that last sentence. She stowed her wand back into her pocket and took a step back. *What's gotten into her?*

'Oh,' she said. 'I thought...' She trailed off. Emma waited.

'I thought that you were thinking of betraying us,' she said. 'I had to be sure of where your loyalties lie.'

For once in her life, Bellatrix looked apologetic. She had surely thought that it was some kind of listening device, to record their meetings in order to hand the organisation over to the authorities. *She really doesn't know me at all,* Emma thought. But even as she thought it, she realised that Bellatrix's eyes hadn't quite lost that wild look. She seemed almost... scared? Suddenly, she got the feeling that the Dark Lord's right-hand woman wasn't being completely honest. But now wasn't the time to pry.

'With you, obviously,' she replied, sneering and wrenching her sleeve up to show the Dark Mark in all of its glory.

'Just so you don't forget it,' Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. 'You're the person with the most links to blood-traitors here.'

'In case you haven't noticed, your cousin is in Gryffindor, and your sister ran off with a Muggleborn,' Emma retorted before she could stop herself.

Bellatrix widened her eyes, looking furious. *This is how I die,* Emma thought, her hand going to her pocket, touching the comforting smoothness of her wand. But the older witch just turned and flounced out of the study. Relief flooded Emma, and she reminded herself that she needed to keep her Occlumency in check. *Or maybe just my mouth.*

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'Ouch,' Rabastan said an hour later, rubbing his forearm. 'Nobody told me it would *burn.*'

'Stop being such a baby,' Lucinda reprimanded pitilessly, lounging on a nearby armchair. 'So, Emma, what are you going to do now that your house is free and liveable?'

Emma shook her head, breaking out of her reverie. 'What?'

The three others rolled their eyes in unison. Rabastan groaned.

The four of them were hanging out at Rabastan's house after the ceremony. His parents were out, on holiday actually. Mr Lestrange Sr. had requested some time off, but everyone knew that it was just to give his sons the opportunity to shine. He was one of the original Death Eaters, part of the Knights of Walpurgis, a group formed by Voldemort in his early years. The group of Slytherins had only recently learned this fact, as it was deemed treasonous to speak of the Dark Lord's youth to a non-Death Eater. They needed him to become a symbol, something that transcended humanity. It was working - the Daily Prophet had started calling him "You-Know-Who".
Alecto had immediately been cornered by Bellatrix, who had reportedly looked pretty mad. Apparently, they were going on a "hunt", whatever that meant. Feeling slightly guilty, Emma hoped that her mood hadn't had anything to do with their little chat in the study. Alecto had been assigned Bellatrix as a mentor and therefore couldn't say no to any request that had been made. Even so, Emma suspected that even if she had had the choice, she would have said yes. Bellatrix's "hunts" usually ended up making the headlines.

'Lucinda asked what you're going to do with yourself,' Rabastan said, pronouncing each word with extreme care. 'You can't live at Narcissa's forever, especially now that she's married to Malfoy.'

Emma took some time to answer, mulling over her choices. 'I was thinking of getting a flat in Diagon Alley,' she admitted. 'It would feel too weird to go back. Plus, I have no idea if Sirius will still be there, and that's not my idea of a great summer.'

'Hear hear,' Regulus muttered sardonically.

'Sorry Reg,' she said immediately, remembering the fact that last summer he had been stuck with his brother and she hadn't replied to any of his letters.

He waved a hand to show that he was past caring.

'Can I come flat shopping with you?' Lucinda asked, her eyes lighting up. 'I know you, you're useless at shopping and I bet you haven't haggled in your life. What's your budget? How big do you want it to be? Oh Merlin, so many possibilities, I wish that I could come with you and -'

'Merlin's saggy underpants, Luce, calm down!' Rabastan laughed, before he too took on a thoughtful look. 'My family owns a real estate business, maybe Rodolphus could give you pointers…Actually he's in full-time warrior mode, we're better off asking my parents. Better yet…Wait here for a second. Lucinda, with me.'

He marched out of the room and up the stairs, Lucinda trailing behind him and chatting all the way. After watching them leave, Regulus raised an eyebrow at Emma. She made a face in return. 'What?'

'What were you really thinking about earlier?' he asked.

'I..' she hesitated. There was no point in lying to Regulus, and maybe if she mentioned it, he could remind her how crazy it sounded. 'I think the Dark Lord just asked me to murder my father.'

Instead of laughing as she expected, he only nodded thoughtfully. 'I think Bellatrix would jump at the chance to kill Sirius.'

'What?' Emma's voice broke on the word. 'How can you say that with a straight face?'

'Well, if you think about it, it makes sense. The Dark Lord can't make exceptions, not if he wants to keep a strong front. He can't have any opposition and Bellatrix is obsessed with the blood-purity part of his goal. The Dark Lord has more pressing matters to think about.'

Seeing Emma go slack-jawed, he hurriedly continued, 'I'm not saying kill your dad... Merlin this makes me sound like a psychopath. Just see it from the Dark Lord's point of view. He doesn't want any threats and sees people he doesn't personally know as pawns. That's what leaders do. If you want to become the next Bellatrix, then do so by all means, but I would suggest talking to the Dark Lord when he doesn't have so much on his plate. Three people have gone missing, and he suspects that Dumbledore is behind it along with that Order of the Phoenix thing.'

'Dumbledore?' Emma asked, unable to process the rest of the information Regulus had just dumped
She supposed that his family had been in the thick of it from the start, which was why he was so nonchalant. They blasted names off a tapestry, for Salazar's sake. At least the Dark Lord hadn't mentioned James. She would just have to convince him that her father was not a threat. Or at least convince him of a greater threat than a seventy-year-old man in hospital.

Just then, Rabastan and Lucinda re-entered, their faces betraying their bad news. Rabastan refused to meet Emma's eyes as they sat down, whereas Lucinda was looking at her with a pitying smile. What's happened now? Emma asked herself in resignation.

'Um…Ems..' Rabastan started hesitantly, a pile of documents in his hand. 'We were uh…digging around a little and…Well…'

'Hate to break it to you, but you've been disowned,' Lucinda sat down with a plop on the sofa, patting her friend on the back.

Always the tactful one, Emma thought, shaking her head, but keeping her mask of indifference in place. She shouldn't have been surprised that her father had removed her from the will, but it still hurt. It was more of a sting though. He had already caused her so much pain that she couldn't really feel anything anymore. He had told her that he had no daughter. It was hard to keep hope after a declaration like that. So instead of wallowing in the spike that had dug itself into her chest, Emma tried to reply offhandedly.

'Yeah, but my mother left me some money in her will.'

It had been read out to her three days after Narcissa and Lucius's wedding. She had asked Regulus to come, cheeks flaming red as she hated to ask for support - especially the emotional kind. Luckily, though, he hadn't commented, even when she had squeezed his hand so hard during the reading that she was sure that she had left bruises. James and Lou had also been there, along with Sirius, who had been surprisingly tolerable. James had spoken to her for a minute afterwards, asking her if she was dating Regulus - no - and to apologise.

She had finally received an explanation as to why her twin was so absent. Apparently, she reminded him too much of what they had lost, rather than experiencing her need to keep her brother closer. He hadn't spoken that much to Lou or Sirius either, for that matter. The only other thing he had to say was that he was doing a summer internship in Romania in the dragon enclosure for a change of air. He had finished the brief conversation with a hug and a few tears, admitting that he would miss her for the entire six weeks. Emma had choked out an "I miss you too" among numerous tears on her part and that was that.

She had been wrapped up in planning with Narcissa up until that moment. She understood completely why James wanted to go to Romania; she had been able to almost pretend that the rest of her life was a dream until the day of the wedding. Upon seeing everyone there with their families, she... Well, let's just say that Rabastan now had a feathered boa pinned to the wall of his room in memory. Back to the topic at hand, she scolded herself, unwilling to be reprimanded for inattention again.

'And I have a savings account in Gringotts,' she added rather uselessly. It nearly went without saying that every pureblood had a Gringotts bank account that they could access at the age of seventeen without the help of their parents.

'Perfect,' Lucinda clapped her hands. 'Now that the awkward part is behind us, let's start fake shopping.'
And so the rest of the afternoon was spent pouring over parts of Wizarding London: Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, and the little street in-between that no one seemed to remember the name of. Emma suspected that Lucinda was already getting excited about decorating the interior of the flat. She kept having to remind Rabastan that *no*, she did not want a chocolate fountain inside her living room, and Regulus that she wasn’t going to keep his extra set of history books in her bedroom, since Walburga thought they were a "waste of space and money".

All in all, they passed a peaceful, almost normal afternoon. Despite her misgivings, even Emma was excited at the prospect of having her own home and a new start.
thenewsomelibrary, I'd like to thank you for your numerous comments, and reply to them here, rather than creating a whole load of comments.
Everyone else, scroll down to the story!
I don't have a twin myself, but I did spend some time imagining what it would be like. I had some close friends who were twins, and I have a brother and sister, which helps a lot!
You're definitely right in saying that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff just seem to be... there. But I wanted to do a story about the "bad guys", since Slytherin seems to be evil and Gryffindor good, hence Emma!
Thanks so much for the compliments about the students' bullying. You can just imagine it - it's always the different kid that's picked on... Regulus seems to be in Sirius's shadow just as much as Emma (although she doesn't mind it so much) is in James's. Honestly, he's my favourite character! And yes, you're right, he is a "listener"! I find it funny you find the Bloody Baron's story like Jily's! And I guess their ends are a little similar, considering how tragic they are...
Anyway, I absolutely love the fact that you're reviewing with all of your thoughts at every chapter! I really like hearing what the story's like to the reader, how I might improve it, how they empathise/get annoyed at the characters. So you made my day, thank you very much! And if you've gotten this far- happy reading!

By the end of July, Emma was beginning to regret her decision. Lucinda had dragged her through the cloying heat of summer to visit numerous dodgy flats or outrageously expensive penthouses. Emma didn't even know that eight-story floors existed in the wizarding world. Who needed that much space anyway? Fortunately, today they were visiting a flat that Rabastan had suggested. Lucinda had been called away to help out at a big charity event with her mother, so the two of them had spent most of morning eating ice-cream at Fortescue's, who was more than happy to suggest the special ice-cream sundae, reputed for having the most toppings in the world. The two had immediately ordered one each, enjoying the fact that the shopkeeper had put an Anti-Melt charm on the food.

Emma closed her eyes, letting chocolate-chip cockroach cluster sauce melt on her tongue, enjoying the fact that they still had half an hour before they needed to meet the estate agent. Suddenly, a shadow fell on her face, blocking the sun. Feeling the sudden cool, she opened her eyes again to be met with the sight of Lou, her cousin.

'Emma,' she said in a strangled voice.

Emma would have thought that her cousin would be happier to see her. Come to think of it, Lou looked terrible. The skin around her eyes was stained purple from lack of sleep and the rest of her face seemed to be a deathly hue of white. The eyes themselves were bloodshot, and it seemed as though Lou was having trouble keeping them open. Emma frowned, pulling out a seat and ushering her cousin into it. After a moment's hesitation, she sighed and sat down.
'I suppose this was inevitable,' she murmured.

'Here, have some ice-cream,' Rabastan pushed the rest of his food towards Lou in an uncharacteristic gesture of worry.

_Maybe this war is making even Rabastan start to grow up_, Emma thought.

'I had hoped...' Lou trailed off with a small little smile, before mumbling to herself. 'I suppose it's better this way, in person.'

'What's better?' Emma asked immediately.

'I'm going back to France,' Lou admitted. '... Professor Dumbledore has been very kind, but I've graduated from Hogwarts and England... Well, I know I have nothing left in France, but I miss it.' She closed her eyes for a second, a pained look flitting across her face. 'That's not the only reason though. I'm scared, Emma. England is dangerous. The whole reason I came here was to avoid this kind of thing. My parents thought I would be safe here, but...' she trailed off.

'What is it, Lou?' her cousin urged. 'Has someone threatened you? Has Sirius done something?'

'No, no, it's nothing to do with Sirius. He understands,' Lou gave another small, tight-lipped smile. 'It's not what I expected, that's all. There's a war going on, the number of casualties increasing every day. Pierre is the one who inherited the love of danger and curiosity, I'm afraid.'

Lou laughed, a sad bark of a noise. 'I just want some peace and quiet. I can't deal with this, never knowing who's going to disappear one day, never to be seen again. My brother and I were going to sell my parents' cottage in France, but I think I've reconsidered. That's the kind of life I want. I can translate Ancient Runes from anywhere in the world, really, and the agency I've signed up with has agreed to receive my transcriptions by owl.'

Unspoken between them was the death of Natalie Potter, the life of Charles hanging on the edge. Emma didn't know if he was getting better or not - James had only said that he wasn't allowed to speak with their father either. Emma supposed that the hospital didn't want a repeat performance. Either way, Lou was probably reliving the problems with her own family.

Emma realised that she had never thought to ask Lou how her parents had died. She had just assumed that she didn't really know, the school year having still been underway when it happened. Emma knew that they had been murdered whilst on a secret mission for Dumbledore from eavesdropping on her parents' conversations, but didn't know if her cousin did. Looking at her now made her think that Dumbledore had ended up telling her the whole story. And she would hazard a guess that the whole story wasn't pretty. But now was not the time to ask.

'So I guess this is goodbye,' Emma said, her voice wavering a little. Her tone was still questioning, as though she couldn't believe it.

'I guess it is,' Lou replied. 'I'm only in Diagon Alley today to clear out my Gringotts bank here and tie up a few loose ends. I had hoped to leave without seeing either of you, but now I wish James were here, so I could say goodbye properly to him too... I suppose that's the way life is. I'm just not used to thinking of you as separate people, even after Hogwarts.'

She let out another small, humourless laugh and got up, swinging her - now that Emma noticed it - unusually large bag over her shoulder. _I'm not used to it either_, she thought, but her mouth stayed shut. Instead she got to her feet, giving her cousin a tight hug.

A foreboding feeling overtook Emma, a sudden clarity that told her that she would never see her
cousin again. Don't be silly, she thought, but still she hugged Lou more closely. All too soon it was over. She looked into her cousin's eyes, wondering if she could change her mind, but there was a steely resolution glimmering in the back of them. Lou would not go back now that the decision had been made.

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'Do you still want to look at the flat?' Rabastan asked as Emma stared at her cousin's retreating back. 'We can schedule it for another day if you'd like.'

'No it's fine,' Emma replied, tearing her eyes away to look at the anxious Slytherin. 'Besides, you said that someone was coming to visit afterwards, I don't want it to be taken, just in case this is the one.'

'My parents do own the agency you know,' Rabastan winked, setting some Sickles on the table as a tip to the friendly owner. 'They can always "lose" the file.'

'Bast!' Emma feigned shock, laughing.

He laughed too and they set off for the flat in far better spirits than before. Emma had long since learned that wallowing wouldn't do her any good. She stowed the memory of her cousin's goodbye in the tightly locked box at the back of her mind. It was starting to fill up.

'Here we are!' Rabastan announced suddenly, stopping in front of a very familiar shop.

'Broomstix?' Emma asked in astonishment, staring at the new Cleansweep in the window. 'Seriously? This is where the flat is?'

'Thank me later,' Rabastan winked. 'There's the estate agent now.'

Emma turned to see a gruff, middle-aged man dressed in plain brown robes walking up the street behind them. There was a clinking sound every time he moved, caused by what she supposed was the jangle of keys. How she hadn't heard him before was a mystery to her. Something about his shuffling gait reminded her of Argus Filch, and she felt the odd urge to laugh. She stifled it, but saw Rabastan's huge grin out of the corner of her eye. Something told her that she wasn't the only one having inappropriate thoughts.

'Good afternoon Miss,' the wizard said, giving her hand a firm shake. 'Mr Lestrange.'

There was a note of respect in his voice as he shook Rabastan's hand, a tone that sounded odd to Emma's ears. Rabastan was obviously lapping it up - his grin only grew wider.

'This way, if you please,' the agent motioned towards a side alley that Emma hadn't noticed before. They followed him around the Quidditch shop down a small alley, stopping in front of a small purple door set into the side of the building. Despite the colour, Emma thought that she wouldn't have noticed it if the man hadn't pointed it out. Seeing her frown, the estate agent explained. 'There's a small Charm on the door. Some of our residents like a little privacy, you know?'

He looked to Rabastan for approval, who nodded. 'We don't deal in just any kind of real estate Ems,' he added proudly.

'I see,' Emma smiled at his antics. Already, she was beginning to brush off the encounter with Lou.
There was no further conversation as they climbed to the third floor. There were six flights of stairs and even Emma and Rabastan were out of breath by the end of it, despite their rigorous Quidditch training. The agent led them down the hall right to the very end, stopping between two doors.

'Which one is it?' Emma asked, looking from side to side with interest.

'Number 23,' Rabastan read off of his paper.

'But this only goes up to number 21,' Emma replied, frowning.

'I repeat, did you think I'd just offer you any apartment?' Rabastan grinned. 'Who do you think I am, Lucinda?'

The wizard tapped the end wall three times and said, "Aparecium". Another staircase appeared, the wall turning slowly more and more transparent. Of course secret passageways don't only belong to Hogwarts, Emma thought. This set of stairs was smaller, made out of wood rather than stone, and winding. Emma noticed the many cobwebs around the entrance. A mouse scurried across the floorboards. Needless to say, it didn't look very appealing.

'A After you,' Rabastan said with a sweeping gesture.

Narrowing her eyes at him, Emma ducked through the entrance and climbed, stairs creaking with every step. Hanging from the ceiling, a single oil lamp swayed unsteadily. There was a wooden door to the right and one to the left with the numbers "22" and "23" stuck to them in carved copper. The middle-aged wizard hurried forwards with the right key, turning it in the lock twice before they heard the click. Rabastan nodded his head for Emma to go forwards. Slightly apprehensive, she swung the door open.

She should have expected to be surprised. She was a witch, and Rabastan had never failed to disappoint before. Still, she stood there in delighted shock, taking in the scene in front of her. Since they were directly under the roof, the ceilings sloped downwards on either side. The entire place was made out of a dark mahogany, smooth, but with the whirls of the wood still visible. Emma walked towards the kitchen area, sliding her hand along one of the counter tops. It was slightly cool to the touch. It was simple enough, an oven with hotplates sitting on top, a sink with a counter on either side. The fridge was a silvery-blue, separated from the oven by a small table with four chairs. On the third wall between the fridge and oven were several cupboards. One had a glass cabinet, showing her the crockery that was already stationed in the flat.

On the other side of the room, there was a low, glass table. Two armchairs and a sofa surrounded it, and behind them she could make out the mantelpiece of a chimney. It seemed like it hadn't been used in years - she could see the dust from where she stood in the centre. The furniture looked used, but she didn't mind that.

'Is the -?'

Before she could finish her question, Rabastan interrupted. 'Yes, the fireplace works. And it's connected to the Floo.'

A smile spread across her face. Looking around for the doors to other rooms, she spotted a couple of stairs leading downwards. Quickly crossing the room, she walked down the six steps and opened the door to the right, confirming her guess that it was the bedroom, made out of the same wooden floors as the upstairs part. There was just room for a double bed and a small bedside table with a little ever-lit lamp next to it. Opposite the bed was a wardrobe and nestled in the corner was a desk with a small green writing lamp. The chair was covered with a plush green cushion and looked to be almost as
comfortable as the armchairs in the Slytherin dorms. Exiting the room, she opened the other door to see a sparkling new bathroom, complete with shower and bathtub.

She climbed the stairs again to look out of the pentagon-shaped window. The view was of the bustling street of Diagon Alley, colourful and festive as always, though she couldn't hear the noise from the street below.

'So?' Rabastan asked. It was obvious from his face that he knew what she was going to reply.

'Bast, it's amazing!' Emma exclaimed. 'How is it not rented out yet? How much is it?'

It had to be too expensive, even for Emma's budget.

'First month's free,' he smiled at her. The agent looked like he was about to complain, but Rabastan quelled him with a look. 'We'll see about signing a contract with my father.'

'Thank you!' She pulled him into a hug before he knew what had happened. She had been doing things like that a lot since her mother had died. It felt like she needed to touch the rest of her loved ones, make sure that they were still there - alive and real. She put all the honesty she could muster into her words. 'It's perfect.'

'Well, I wouldn't say...' Rabastan trailed off, cheeks tingeing pink. He scratched the back of his head. 'I just thought you might like it.'

'Of course I do!' Emma practically yelled. She hadn't felt this excited since Christmas as a child.

They sat around the breakfast table to write up the contract. Emma couldn't keep the smile off of her face. I guess Lucinda was right in the end, she thought. I'll have to invite her around for her to make it seem homey. Her joy seemed to be infectious, or else Rabastan had won a bet with Lucinda, because he was beaming too. Then again, Rabastan always had a smile on his face for some reason or other.

'So, should I just put Mr Rabastan Lestrange on the contract, or do you want both of your names to be written?' the wizard asked, taking out a quill.

'Um...' Emma looked blankly at Rabastan, who looked even more embarrassed than when Emma had hugged him. He cleared his throat.

'We're not together,' he clarified.

'Oh,' it was Emma's turn to go red. 'Yeah, he's just helping me find a flat.'

The wizard looked a little sheepish and took out a clean sheet of paper. 'So, Miss...'

'Emma Potter,' Emma supplied helpfully.

'Birthday..'

'27th March, 1960.'

'Do you have anyone who can act as a guarantor?'

There was a pause in which they could hear the watch on Rabastan's wrist ticking. True to his nature, his parents had offered him a flamboyant watch that would associate itself with his mood. If needed, it would be invisible to all but the wearer, whereas when Rabastan was at parties, it would perform all sorts of magic tricks. Now, it betrayed his anxiety.
'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' Emma frowned.

'Do you have anyone who would be able to pay the rent in case you met with any difficulty, this being your first apartment. Usually people put their parents or an older brother or sister,' the man explained.

'Well that's going to be a little difficult,' Emma looked towards Rabastan for help.

'Why?' The wizard asked before Rabastan could reply.

'Well my mother is dead, my father is in hospital with no means of being contacted and my twin brother - who isn't older - is in Romania,' she ticked off her fingers.

It was easier to say all of this in a deadpan voice, without any sugar-coating. Ripping the plaster off, so to speak. Regrettably, this kind of plan usually had an unfortunate side effect. This time it was the wizard who was at a loss for words. Better him than me, Emma thought callously. Another silence pulled up a chair to sit at the table.

'It's alright, just put Narcissa,' Rabastan suggested at last.

'Do you think that would be okay?' Emma asked worriedly.

'I'm sure it's fine. I'm sure Lucius wouldn't mind, especially since you're a part of -'

The words stuck in Rabastan's throat. A part of the Death Eaters, he was going to say. It was an unspoken rule that they would support each other if needed. Of course if someone was caught, then it was their fault and there was no point in dragging anyone else down with them, but for little things.

'A part of?' The wizard repeated in a questioning tone. He looked a little too curious for Emma's taste.

'A part of their Family,' Rabastan rectified, emphasising the word family. Emma smiled at the inside joke. 'Well almost. You were their witness at their wedding.'

'That's true,' Emma conceded. 'Put down "Narcissa Malfoy",' she told the wizard, who seemed to have shrunk into himself upon hearing that surname. Emma and Rabastan pretended not to notice.

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'Well, it was good doing business with you,' the estate agent said, holding out his hand again. 'I guess I'll have to inform my next client that the flat's no longer available.'

They were back outside Broomstix and the wizard seemed to have recovered somewhat. Emma gazed up to see if she could see her room. She thought that it was the pentacle-shaped window right at the top, but then she remembered that there were two flats like that. She wondered if the other was rented, and if so, who would be her new neighbour. She felt a touch on her sleeve and turned around.

'What's he doing here?' she muttered angrily.

After her conversation with Lou earlier, she would have thought that Sirius would be crying in a corner somewhere, since her cousin had realised that she could do so much better. Okay, so that's what I hoped would happen, she admitted to herself. The other situation she had in mind was that
Sirius would go running after his love and spend his days happily ever after in a village far, far away. Actually, she would have liked Sirius to disappear to the village and Lou stay in England. She had never really given much thought to the fact that her cousin wasn't going to be at Hogwarts next year. She had never really seen much of her as it was.

'I don't know,' Rabastan replied, staring at the Gryffindor scarf blatantly displayed on Sirius's chest despite the summer heat. His eyes narrowed.

'Hello, my name's Sirius Black,' the Gryffindor said, holding out a hand for the estate agent to shake, completely ignoring the two people staring at him. 'I'm here about the apartment?'

'Oh no you're not,' Emma groaned. This is just my luck.

'Um, yes I am,' Sirius replied matter-of-factly. 'Why's this guy hanging around with you? Finally had enough of my wimp of a brother?'

Emma took a step forwards, but Rabastan spoke quickly before she could do anything. 'I happen to be the one who found her an apartment. The one right here, in fact. It's taken. The papers were signed not ten minutes ago."

'It's true, I'm afraid,' the estate agent added. 'However, if you would like to take a look at our other apartment, I think you would find it quite to your liking. It's a little pricier than the first, but larger. Our current occupant is leaving at the end of August, so it will soon become available. He's on holiday right now, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind you taking a look around.'

Sirius looked like he was going to agree. Emma felt her heart plummet. Couldn't this guy just give her a break? Not only was she forced to put up with him at school and in her parents' house, but here too? Forced to become neighbours? Forced to see his punchable face every. Single. Day? Luckily for her, Rabastan something else in mind.

'Actually, I'm sure he would,' he said boldly.

'I'm sorry?' the estate agent asked, as though he couldn't quite believe his ears.

'You heard me,' Rabastan replied coolly. 'This apartment isn't available for the likes of him. Not if you value your job.'

'Empty threats again, Lestrange?' Sirius scoffed. 'Please, stop wasting our time. He can't get you fired from your job,' he added to the estate agent, who looked very much like he wanted to Apparate out of England. 'No employer would listen to the accusations of a seventeen-year-old boy about a petty high school problem.'

'Even if the employer was his father?' Rabastan smirked.

Sirius's face fell, his eyes going to the estate agent, who nodded glumly.

'Get yourself a better employer mate,' he said, picking up a sheaf of documents which must have been flat prospects. 'Or better yet, a backbone. As for you,' Sirius turned on Rabastan. 'Enjoy daddy's power while you can.'

With a loud crack, the seventeen-year-old disapparated on the spot. The estate agent looked like he was going to complain, but was silenced by a look from Rabastan. Shaking his head in disgust, the wizard also disapparated away, leaving the two Slytherins to contemplate what had just happened.

'I have a feeling your father's going to be hearing about this,' Emma said hesitantly. 'Are you sure
you're not going to get into trouble for any of this?'

'Oh please,' Rabastan waved a hand airily. 'Now that I've got this,' he pointed to his left arm. 'He
doesn't care about anything else. Plus, Black's a blood traitor. Let's just not let this get around to
Regulus.'

'Good,' Emma replied, not wanting to press the subject any further. 'Now let's go find Lucinda and
give her the good news. We can get you some Murtlap essence along the way, I noticed you itching
your arm a lot today. You've got to be careful, people might become suspicious. Whoever has been
making us disappear will know how to recognise us by now.'

Neither picked up on Sirius's veiled threat.
'We're going to see Emma's new apaaartment!' Lucinda skipped along Diagon Alley as she sang.

A flustered Alecto ran after her to try to keep her in check - people were starting to stare. Emma smiled as she watched her friends. She had moved in a week ago, the first of August to be precise, but she hadn't had time to invite the others over yet. She had gone back to see the Giants on the Dark Lord's bequest - it turned out that they preferred her to McNair. She couldn't help but give a self-satisfied smirk at that. She had jumped at the opportunity to prove herself, maybe make the Dark Lord forget about her father. She was starting to think she had imagined it - he hadn't mentioned it since.

This time around she wasn't so afraid. Maybe it was the reinforced duelling sessions she had with Rabastan and Regulus - sometimes mentored by Bellatrix or Lucius - or maybe it was the presence of the Dark Mark on her left forearm, just a touch away. Of course, it was only to be pressed in dire circumstances. The Giants were going to participate in a mass revolt in Northern England, near York. It would give Giant exposure, so that the Ministry would have to do some explaining to the Muggle community, or else be forced to spend their time cleaning up the mess. Either way, it was a win for Lord Voldemort and his followers.

The Giants hadn't seemed that enthusiastic about holding up signs and whatnot, but warmed up considerably when she explained in simpler terms that they basically had to wreak havoc and general mayhem. She tried to remind them that it had to be scary, but peaceful, but she wasn't sure they had gotten the message. Either way, it was a certainty that they were going to riot this Saturday - incidentally the day that the five of them were going to tour the Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans factory.

Whilst she had been assured by Narcissa that everything was under control - she had pleaded Lucius to take over Emma's duties for the day - Emma couldn't help but check the time. 11 am. The riots would start at twelve. The tour would start at one thirty. Maybe she would be able to catch a glimpse of it on one of the Muggle moving boxes when they went to find the Portkey. In the meantime, she had invited Rabastan, Regulus, Alecto and Lucinda over for lunch.

Or something like that. As they entered the apartment, oohing and aahing over everything, Emma belatedly realised that she just had some pasta and baked beans in her cupboards, along with butter and milk in the fridge. Even then, she wasn't sure if the milk was off or not. *Guess I'll find out soon,* she thought wryly, watching Lucinda inspect everything with diligence. She wouldn't have been surprised if the blonde had whipped out a pair of rubber gloves to check the cleanliness of the place. In the meantime, Regulus had wandered over towards the window, whereas Alecto was admiring the sofa. Rabastan stood in the doorway, a smug smile on his face.

'So Lucy?' he asked, as they all sat around drinking glasses of water - the only drinkable liquid Emma had in her flat, apart from a couple of bottles of Firewhisky left over from a previous occupant.

'Fine, fine, I'm not ashamed to admit it,' Lucinda said. 'You found the best flat. I - on the other hand - have been appointed Emma's personal designer. So there.'

'Personal designer?' Alecto asked, cocking one eyebrow.

'Her words, not mine,' Emma clarified.
Lucinda rolled her eyes dramatically. 'It just needs a bit of a personal touch that's all. Look, here's what I suggest. I'll make some changes around here - all approved by the occupant, of course - and then we can all get some fish and chips from the Leaky Cauldron. You seriously need to go shopping, Emma,' this last sentence was said in a tone of disapproval. 'You can't go on living like this.'

'I know,' Emma sighed. 'I've been away.'

'That's no excuse for living off of baked beans,' Lucinda reprimanded.

'She's right, you know,' Alecto said. 'My stomach is grumbling just looking at all of those empty cupboards.'

'Can we please move onto a subject other than food?' Rabastan complained. 'All this is making me hungry.'

Emma looked towards Regulus, her last chance at finding an ally in this debate.

'Sorry, Ems, but even Kreacher stows away more food than this in his den,' he shrugged. 'Though I reserve judgement until next week. As you said, you have been away all this while.'

'Thank you!' Emma said loudly, giving the others a dark look.

'Still, that doesn't excuse this,' he added with a smirk.

He waved a hand towards Emma's two badly-hidden trunks sitting behind an armchair. One had been opened and clearly ransacked, though the belongings were nowhere in sight. The other's contents were spilling everywhere. Emma shot her would-be ally a flat look. He smirked.

'Salazar, I nearly forgot!' Alecto cried, making Lucinda jump. 'Narcissa reminded me to give you this.'

She walked out into the hallway and disapparated with a crack, re-apparating within seconds accompanied by a mewling sound.

'Fluffy!' Emma cried joyfully.

It felt like months since she had seen her cat, though really she had just neglected him for the duration of her stay at the Blacks'. How could she have forgotten to bring him here? Then she remembered the hasty mission that she had been sent on. Luckily, Dobby was a fan of everything furry and warm and had been taking good care of him. She resolved to take better care of the feline in the future. Fortunately for her, he wasn't one to hold a grudge.

'Since when do you talk to Narcissa Black?' Lucinda queried.

'Since she became Narcissa Malfoy,' Alecto replied. 'Most of the Death Eater meetings are at their house now. Lucius is too promising to even appear to look like a Death Eater, and Narcissa is everyone's favourite socialite at the moment.'

It was true that the moment Narcissa came back from her honeymoon had been a turning point in her life. The newspapers wanted interviews with two of the purest bloodlines coming together, hounding her with questions. Obviously a Healer wouldn't have had time for this, but her parents had pressured her into quitting for good. If she became the apple of the wizarding world's eye, then even Dumbledore would have to have hard proof to accuse the Malfoys of allying themselves with Voldemort. The higher Lucius rose within the Ministry, the closer Dumbledore observed him.
Rumour had it that Dumbledore would be elected the next Minister for Magic if Barty Crouch didn't get the position, and who knew what would happen then? He might make the Order of the Phoenix public.

'Let's not talk about things like that,' Regulus said quickly, shooting a glance out of the window.

Emma knew that he was becoming slightly paranoid about their safety too. They were too open, too cocky and had been winning too many victories. There had been whispers that Voldemort had found himself a spy within the Order, but none had seen him yet - not even Bellatrix and Rodolphus, the followers that the Dark Lord relied upon the most.

Lucinda shrugged and finished the rest of her water in a large swallow. Death Eater affairs were trivial to her if they didn't contain any major information or gossip. Mostly she just liked the funny anecdotes, though they were becoming few and far between.

'Right,' she said. 'Let's see what we can do here.'

Emma crossed the room to take the cage from Alecto. Fluffy immediately started purring when he was let out, rubbing himself against Rabastan's legs in delight. He didn't seem at all perturbed at the change in surroundings. Then again, he had been moved around so much recently that that was hardly a surprise.

'What kind of a name is "Fluffy", anyway?' Rabastan asked, as the cat moved on to Regulus.

'The kind an eleven-year-old comes up with,' Emma replied, watching Regulus pick Fluffy up and scratch him behind the ears. The cat closed his eyes in pleasure.

'I swear that's the most love I've seen Regulus give anyone in his entire life,' Rabastan joked.

Regulus gave him the middle finger without even looking up.

'Hey, hey,' Lucinda tutted. 'None of that in Emma's new apartment.'

They all rolled their eyes. Lucinda ignored them, conjuring up a fluffy white rug from who knew where. She rolled it under her arm, before standing and surveying the room with a critical eye.

'What?' was all Rabastan could get out.

'Don't even ask,' Emma replied. 'I bet she's researched tons of spells like this precisely for today.'

'As a matter of fact, I have,' Lucinda replied sweetly. 'Now if you could all get your wands out of your arses and levitate the furniture, it would be a great help.'

'I thought there was none of that in Emma's new apartment,' Regulus grumbled under his breath, but put down the cat and complied with the order.

Soon the walls were decorated with moving photographs of the Black Lake that the five of them had taken over the years. Emma could barely even remember some of them, and was touched that Lucinda had thought to pack all of them away somewhere. She was right, it did look more like home, though nearly all of the pictures were just of the scenery from around Hogsmeade and the Lake itself. Lucinda permitted Rabastan to chose one of them all together having a snowball fight on the low glass table as a small concession. He had tried to blow up their most hideous expressions into portraits to be hung on the wall. His suggestion had been met with such a resounding "no" that he hadn't spoken for the next half an hour.
'Let's move onto the bottom floor,' Lucinda said, once she had laid a white tablecloth on the table, sending the glasses to wash themselves with a flick of her wand.

'But...'

'No buts, Emma, I'm here to make your house a home,' Lucinda said matter-of-factly. 'If you've got knickers lying around somewhere, well, it's nothing we all haven't seen before.'

Emma turned scarlet. Ignoring her feeble protests, Lucinda led them all down the stairs. Rabastan seemed to have recovered, poking fun at Emma all the while. Emma herself racked her brains, wondering if she had had the foresight to kick her underwear under the bed first.

'How did you not get more O's in your O.W.L.s?' Alecto asked, impressed at Lucinda's handiwork.

'They weren't interesting enough,' Lucinda replied, shrugging, before stopping suddenly. 'Woah, Emma, did a bomb go off in here?'

'I tried to tell you,' the girl replied resignedly.

There were piles of clothes that had obviously been thrown out in a hurried need to pack, a rucksack lying in a corner - presumably from Emma's return from the Giant colony - and spell books strewn all across the bed, the table and the desk. The lamps had been set to levitate in order to make more room. Ink bottles were set neatly in a row on the desk, but that was all that seemed orderly. There was a Quick-Quotes-Quill that had somehow managed to plant itself into the bed, its green feather waving like a flag above the unmade bed-covers.

'Impressive, Potter,' Rabastan whistled. 'I never pegged you for one of those girls.'

'What kind of girl is that?' Emma asked, immediately on the defensive. 'It's not that bad.'

'Oh Ems,' Lucinda sighed. 'It is that bad.'

She plucked the quill out of the bed.

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An hour later, they were wolfing down their lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. They had fifteen minutes before their Portkey left for the factory, so fifteen minutes to get to Hyde Park in Muggle London to find a brown shoe in the duck pond. From the ferocious way Lucinda was devouring her food, Emma didn't dare ask how big the said duck pond was.

Together, they had managed to organise all of Emma's papers together, a hard task since it involved little amount of magic. Luckily, she had printed in capital letters the subject of the spell at the top of the paper, so it was just a matter of separating the piles. Lucinda created yet another fluffy white carpet and a dark green blanket that was suspiciously Slytherin-like in colour, which she flung at Emma, instructing her to do something with her pile of sheets. Emma easily made the bed with a balanced *Wingardium Leviosa*, and shoved the clothes into the wardrobe, despite Lucinda's protests.

Regulus surprised them all by then opening the wardrobe door and neatly folding everything within - T-shirts, robes, dresses and jeans alike - with one graceful arc of his wand. Without the slightest hint of embarrassment, he told them it was a trick that Kreacher had taught him. Rabastan had to try very hard not to tease him. In the end he failed, and ended up drenched in five bottles of ink. The remainder of his time in the apartment had been spent in the bathroom, trying to clean it all out with
several Scourgify charms. Emma supposed that Herbology did come in handy once in a while.

After all that was done, Lucinda decided that Emma needed some nice curtains, which all agreed was a beautiful spell on her part. The end result was a billowy white cloth that moved slightly with an unnatural wind. Emma wondered how long it would last and if they would still stay up without the help of magic. She made a mental note to buy a handbook on Muggle appliances, like the pole to keep the curtains up.

Regulus had disappeared after his wardrobe trick, but they found him as they made their way back upstairs. He had created a basket with red velvet cushions for Fluffy, as well as creating a hole in the bottom of her door for him to slip outside and in again. Fluffy had of course disdained the use of the basket and had been busy cleaning himself in one of the leather armchairs when they came upstairs. Claw marks were already visible along the side of one of the arms.

Speaking of scratches, Emma noticed Regulus wince as he got salt on the back of his scratched hand. He must have sensed her laughing gaze on him, because he suddenly looked up from his food. 'You really need to get that cat a scratching post.'

'What?' Lucinda asked nonplussed. 'Just what?'

'Oh, Reg's just annoyed that Emma's cat doesn't like him half as well as he likes it,' Rabastan grinned, nudging Regulus in the side.

'Shit up,' Regulus replied, rolling his eyes at the use of the nickname. 'Fluffy loves me,'

'Don't think we didn't notice those scratch marks on your arms before you healed them,' Emma reminded him. 'By the looks of it, you forgot one.'

'That's a sign of affection!'

'Mmmmhmm...' Emma munched on a chip.

'Well, at least we've finally found something that Regulus gets worked up about,' Alecto teased. 'Who knew it would be Emma's cat?'

'Much as I love this conversation, don't we have to get going?' Regulus addressed this question primarily towards Lucinda.

'Yeah, let's go,' Lucinda shoved some gold Galleons onto the table and dragged Rabastan out of the booth.

'But I wasn't finished!' he protested, grabbing the rest of his chips.

'Yeah well, you should have thought of that before you decided to be so chatty,' Lucinda was unforgivable. 'Do you want to come to the factory or not?'

That effectively shut down any retort that Rabastan had left. He contented himself with shoving the rest of his food in his mouth.

'You're such a pig,' Alecto said, disgusted.

He grinned in reply, cheeks bulging.

In the end, they only found the Portkey in time because Regulus noticed the large amount of strangely-dressed people hanging around one particular end of the pond. It didn't take long for them
to determine that they were wizards, especially when one person's daughter kept making the ducks turn bright colours. She was quickly brought away from the pool by her mother, who looked around fearfully to see if any Muggles had noticed.

Alecto made sure to stand next to the little girl when the Portkey left, making sure she didn't stumble too much when they arrived. The mother thanked her and Emma saw a strange - almost wistful - smile playing upon her friend's lips. Before she could ask though, mother Lucinda was herding them towards the V.I.P. entrance, talking all the while about the different anecdotes about the workings of the factory. They were getting quite excited by the time they reached the entrance, only to find it blocked by a crowd of reporters and complaining visitors.

'Who's going to run Bertie Bott's main factory from now on?' One shoved his wand next to a security guard's face. The man only grunted in reply. This didn't deter the reporter in the slightest.

'How is Patrick Mckinnon's family doing?'

'Do you blame the Ministry?'

'Do you think he's guilty?'

'Do you think he's innocent?'

'Just WHAT the hell is going on here?'

The sea of reporters made way for Lucinda, who had her hands on her hips. She tossed her blond locks in a regal manner, before marching up to the nearest security guard. All of the others had the presence of mind to stand behind the barrier they had erected.

'Excuse me sir, but my friends and I have five tickets for...'

Before she could go on, the security guard shook his head. 'No can do, little Missy. No one is to go in or out, boss's orders.'

'Do you know who I am?' she asked, rather shrilly.

'Lucinda Rosier,' he replied, folding his arms across his chest. 'I may look dumb Miss, but I promise you I'm not. Your father's at the Ministry trying to clear up this mess, maybe you should ask him what this is about. Come back some other day.'

'Excuse me,' Emma placed a hand on Lucinda's shoulder before she could throw a fit. 'Do you mind just telling us why we're not allowed in?'

'Isn't it obvious?' One of the reporters said, rolling their eyes. 'We're here for Patrick McKinnon. The Ministry of Magic just sent him to Azkaban. He's a Death Eater.'

'Patrick McKinnon, the manager of the factory?' Lucinda asked in shock. 'But...He doesn't even have time to see his daughter half of the time, let alone join up with the Dark Lord. What's he been taken for?'

Before anyone could reply, a woman carrying a three year old pushed through, her two little children tagging along. 'What is the matter here? I spent my savings on getting this trip with my children. I even bought V.I.P. tickets as a treat, since we never go out. What's happening?'

'Yeah,' a burly man with a pointy hat pushed through. 'I hope we're getting our money back for this. This is just appalling.'
'I'm afraid I can't answer any of those questions,' the security guard rumbled.

Emma admired his courage. If she had been in his shoes, she would have panicked and high-tailed it out of there, joining the rest of the guards behind their magical protection charm. But his feet were firmly planted in the ground, cool as a cucumber as he replied to the questions as best as he could.

'Excuse me,' a high, feminine voice cut through the masses. 'I couldn't help but hear that your name was Rosier. Do you happen to be related to Andrew Rosier, right-hand man of Patrick McKinnon?'

A young woman with horn-rimmed glasses and blonde curls made her way through the throngs. Obviously she commanded some kind of respect from the reporters, because they drew back a little to let her through. The families took advantage of the space to start a heated conversation with the security guard. The woman was now talking about her divorce with the children's father.

'Uh yeah,' Lucinda rolled her eyes. 'He's my dad.'

Regulus groaned, putting a hand to his face. Not the best idea Luce, Emma thought. Upon that sentence, the horde of journalists had swivelled their heads around, immediately turning their attention from trying to get through the barrier to interview the other security guards. A dozen wands were shoved at Lucinda's face, Alecto nearly getting knocked over in the process. She scowled at them, but nobody cared.

'What do you think of what's happened?' The woman asked eagerly, before a man jumped in.

'Do you think Patrick McKinnon's guilty? Has he displayed any violent tendencies?' the man grinned. Emma noticed that he was missing one tooth.

'I'm not saying anything until I know why the Ministry thinks they have the right to just up and arrest him,' Lucinda frowned, obviously upset.

Tears were starting to form in her eyes, though from sadness or incomprehension Emma didn't know. They might have even been put on for the cameras, but somehow she didn't think so. She realised just how little they knew of Lucinda's family life - aside from the business they did with Bertie Bott's. Rabastan and Regulus's families were pretty close, but other than that none of them really thought about each other's lives outside of school. Hogwarts took up so much time that it came as a surprise when they saw each other over the holidays.

'He blew up one of the factories in the North, that's what he did,' the man leered. 'The only one managed by a Muggleborn. Even set some Giants on the loose from what I heard.'

'That's impossible!' Emma heard Lucinda cry, but the pounding in her ears took over, drowning out any other sound.

The other journalists had scoffed at the idea of Giants, but Emma knew better. Her mind sorted out the facts with crystal clarity. One of the factories in the North. Today was when the Giants were supposed to go on the protest. Giants hated anything magical that they didn't understand, the town they were supposed to go to was supposed to be filled with Muggles and Muggleborns - shock but not hurt. A factory filled with wizards was not in the plan. Something must have gone horribly wrong... Who knew what kind of havoc they wrecked? If only she had been there, she knew that she would have been able to do something about it, somehow. But she had shirked her duties to have fun for a day.

And she had just landed an innocent man in Azkaban for it.

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'Right, we're off. Emma... Emma!' Regulus had to shout to make himself heard.

The situation had escalated more quickly than he could have possibly imagined, Lucinda was crying from the confusion of it all, the reporters were bombarding her with questions and suppositions, and Alecto's idea of rectifying the situation was to whip her wand out and threaten the horde. The usually cool and collected girl was extremely violent when she came across scary situations, as they had found out with William.

The security guard had called for backup, but who knew when that was going to come. The other guards were trying to separate the crowd without doing any damage, but it was hard and there were children in the way. After one reporter knocked over another's camera, the resulting scuffle had ended up slightly mad. People were trying to run past the security guards who had let down the wall, people were trying to get to Lucinda and the woman with three children was just trying to get out.

Alecto had noticed and had cast a shielding charm, around the family, getting as far away from Lucinda and the factory as possible. It was fairly easy - by now, the woman just wanted to get out, tickets or no, and Alecto wasn't afraid to blast people out of the way with strong *Expelliarmus* spells, unlike the guards.

Rabastan had been trying to deflect questions from Lucinda and fray them a path, but it was hard to do so with the reporters converging on them. They needed to get out, and get out fast, before things grew nasty. Regulus nodded to Rabastan, who grabbed Lucinda for a Side-Along-Apparation. Alecto understood just as quickly, but Emma wasn't responding. She was just standing there, glassy-eyed. It was a miracle she hadn't been shoved to the ground yet.

He cursed as he realised what was going through her mind.

Emma felt someone shake her by the shoulders, violently. She blinked several times, and Regulus's face swam into view, looking panicky for the first time in history. She looked around, as if seeing her surroundings for the first time. Still, her eyes remained unfocussed.

'Regulus,' she said. 'That factory...'

'I know, Emma!' Regulus glanced back to the Aurors that were now running towards them.

The reporters had decided to try to break in while the security was occupied with sending sparks into the air. It had worked, they had flung the doors open to reveal the building occupied with staff and Ministry officials. He thought he could glimpse Bartemius Crouch Sr., but wasn't sure. In fact, he wasn't sure why anyone was at this factory instead of the Ministry in the first place.

'Now's not the time for that!' he added, tearing his gaze away from the scene. Now was not the time for curiosity either.

'It wasn't McKinnon,' incomprehension written all across her face. 'I need to tell them that he's innocent.'

'Trust the Gryffindor side of you to appear at this moment,' he muttered. 'Right, plan B.'

He grabbed her as tightly as he could, picturing the Lestrange country house as vividly as he could. He had never tried Side-Along-Apparition with someone whose thoughts were somewhere else before. He just hoped that he wouldn't splinch them both and make things worse. Closing his eyes with a grimace, he turned on the spot.
Loose Ends

Emma rested her chin on the overly large mug she had recently indulged in. She had grown used to living alone by now, though at first it had come as a shock. She had been used to sharing a room with her dorm-mates for so long that the apartment just seemed too quiet. Even at the holidays, her own house was very boisterous, whether from amusement or from her fights with her father.

Fluffy jumped up onto her lap, purring. She absentmindedly stroked him as she stared out of the window at Diagon Alley below. The streets were unusually crowded today - for good reason. Today was the day they got their Hogwarts letters. Hers was nothing special, just a list of supplies that she had to buy for the next year, along with a note saying that she needed to schedule a meeting with her Head of House before Christmas in order to discuss which subjects were the most important for her future career.

She hadn't even thought once about the future this summer. After the Bertie Bott's fiasco three weeks ago, she had been shocked. Of course they knew that there was a war going on - hell, they were part of it - but somehow it had seemed to be almost a game. Somewhat unreel. The eighteen worker deaths at that factory had felt very real to her. The worst part of it was that she couldn't talk to Narcissa about it this time, since Lucius would surely overhear. Everyone was on edge at the moment, most of all Narcissa's husband. He had been the one to survey the Giants at the time and their loss of control had been blamed on him.

When it had been pointed out that the Giants were Emma's jurisdiction, the Dark Lord coldly stated that she was still in the first year of having her Mark and so her superior should take the blame. Her superior was in this case Lucius Malfoy. Narcissa had found herself in the unpleasant situation of being caught between her best friend and her husband. Wisely, she had opted for the route of neutrality, refusing to even mention the incident. Regulus knew all of this of course, when did Regulus ever not know? It was a bit hard to mask this problem seeing as he had splinched the nail off of his finger because of her.

Luckily a nail was easily grown back with a healing spell they had learnt in their sixth year. That didn't stop him from howling in pain when the skin knitted itself back together though. He had shaken Emma out of her trance when they left the factory and talked some sense into her about McKinnon. If she had gone to the Ministry, Crouch would know that she had been involved. And Crouch's memory for faces was legendary. He would immediately recognise her as the girl who may or may not have been involved in the Auror's attack earlier that year. Instead, Regulus had convinced Emma that Lucinda's father would handle it.

Indeed, he had handled it. Just not in the way they would have expected. McKinnon was at the scene of the crime when it happened… simply because he had been trying to stop the Death Eaters. As in: Patrick McKinnon was a member of the Order of the Phoenix. The reason why Lucius had lost control was because as they marched along with the Giants towards York, members of the Order appeared out of nowhere and started attacking. The bursts and shots of spells had enraged the Giants, many of whom had taken a direct hit. They stampeded, chasing the Order members towards the factory, where all manners of magical explosions could be heard - the result of the experimental flavours being tested out.

The rest… well, the rest wasn't hard to imagine. Evan Rosier had come across his dad's business partner, thanking Merlin that they had masks to cover their faces. They had duelled, but were cut short by the factory's explosion. Somehow among the mess of it all, the Giants had made their way
into the laboratory reserved to Fizzing Bangs - a product not yet sold because the explosions were too dangerous so far. In theory, the sweet was supposed to fizz on your tongue and then burst, sending flavours all around the sweet-eater's mouth. So far, they had only managed to perfect a larger version of them that usually resulted in craters around the room. Needless to say, the sweets had been knocked over, jinxed, thrown… whatever happened, the factory had come crashing down.

According to Lucinda, Evan had taken advantage of the chaos to Disarm his opponent and stow away his mask, before dragging him in front of the authorities. It created enough of a scandal to allow his fellow Death Eaters to slip away quietly and a letter had been immediately sent for their father. He had just flooed in when the group of teenagers had gone to the main factory.

Speaking of which, Lucinda and Rabastan had made the newspapers, a picture of Lucinda bursting into tears on repeat on the third page. Rabastan looked fairly murderous, obviously shoving the reporters away from his friend. There was a small paragraph spouting some nonsense about how Lucinda was distraught at this act of betrayal etc. etc… It was a good thing the reporters didn't actually listen to what Lucinda was saying, or she might have found herself in an awkward position. Evan was being hailed as a hero though, so the Rosiers remained largely unscathed by the "actions" of Mr McKinnon.

Patrick McKinnon had been sent to Azkaban for his crimes.

Lucinda couldn't wrap her head around the fact that she felt like Mr McKinnon had indeed betrayed them by joining with the other side. She hadn't spoken to them since she had sent them four copies of the article and a letter explaining what actually happened. Evan, on the other hand, was loving the glory the Dark Lord had bestowed upon him. Even Lucius's reprimand had been slight, because what had happened had in the end turned out better for them.

The thing that upset Emma was that the Death Eaters were becoming a name to be feared in the articles. McKinnon had been locked up for being a Death Eater, a terrorist. That wasn't what she had signed up for. She wanted to be part of the transition into the new world, not a destroyer of the old one. Regulus had tried talking to her, telling her that the fear was only temporary. As soon as we have the ministry, things will change, he had said. But even he couldn't quite hide the glimmer of uncertainty in his eyes. If they mentioned it to anyone else though, they would be accused of treason, betrayal. Emma only had to hope that Regulus was right.

A flash of green among the crowd caught her eye and she was shaken from her memories. Alecto, Rabastan and Regulus were waving towards her window from the street below, all dressed in their Slytherin robes. Alecto was brandishing her scarf like a flag, though it was still twenty five degrees outside. A grin spread itself across Emma's face and she shoved her robes, money and list into her bag.

She raced down the stairs, taking them two at a time, stopping in at the shop below to call out a greeting to the shopkeeper. During her time here, she had spent a lot of time in the shop just chatting to the owner, talking about different models of brooms and how to use them, discussing whether the Chudley Cannons could ever rebound from their losing streaks and generally having a good time far away from the real world.

'Should I expect you back later, honey?' he called out over the excited heads of second years.

'I don't think so, sorry,' Emma cupped one hand over her mouth and brandished the parchment in the other. 'Got some shopping to do!'

'This is a shop!' was the shopkeeper's response.
Emma just laughed and went back out to where her friends were waiting. A couple of minutes later, Lucinda arrived breathlessly.

'Sorry about that, accidentally flooed to the Hog's Head instead of the Leaky Cauldron,' she said, tying her mane of hair up into a ponytail. She had let it grow over the past couple of years. She noticed their looks. 'What? I was just thinking that in all of our six years at Hogwarts, we haven't been there once for a drink. Not once! It was an easy mistake to make.'

Alecto just shook her head.

'It's good to have you back Luce,' she said, pulling the blonde into a bear hug, surprising them all. Usually, they were bickering like mad.

'So, off to Flourish and Blotts?' Emma asked.

'Are you mad?' Rabastan's jaw dropped. 'Then we'll have to carry them everywhere whilst getting all of our other stuff! No way, that's last on my list.'

'And Merlin forbid you ever do any manual labour, right Bast?' Regulus joked.

'Shove off,' Rabastan replied, scowling.

He didn't last long before they were laughing again. Nobody said anything about the Bertie Bott's escapade. That was the way their group worked.

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As Emma got back to her apartment, spilling the books all over her little glass table, she noticed a piece of paper that had just fluttered to the floor. Thinking it was a piece of spare parchment, she knelt down to pick it up. She paused. There was already ink on the paper. Frowning, she turned it around.

'Dear Ems,

I know I suck at writing letters, even with my own family. It's inexcusable really. I'm so glad to have gone to Romania, it's really what I needed. Honestly, I think you would love it here - you get to fly on a broom with the tame dragons, and the hatching Hungarian Horntails provide all the excitement you would need! Maybe I should think of becoming a Dragon Trainer. It certainly has some appeal...

I just…I needed to get out of there, you know? England's so stifling right now, and I don't just mean the war. I think I was living in some kind of bubble up until now and I needed some time to readjust and collect my thoughts. After my time here, I've come to a decision. This fighting between you and Dad has to stop. I don't know what happened to get it so out of hand, but I'll talk to him and hopefully he won't be so mule-headed (something we both seem to have inherited).

As soon as he's released, we should move back home…to Godric Hollow. I heard that you're living in Diagon Alley right now, and I don't blame you. The house would feel too cold, too empty… Anyway, that's not what I'm writing about. Lou has gone to France (she wrote me a letter) and I can't have the rest of our family splitting up. I just can't.
I've enclosed a picture of the dragon trainers with the dragons, hopefully you can recognise which one's me! Hope you had fun at Bertie Bott's factory, catch up with you soon.

Your dear and loving brother James.

P.S. Do you mind buying my school supplies? I'll pay you back! I only get back on August the 31st!!!
'Seriously though, it looks like someone's ransacked the place,' Regulus commented, leading the way back upstairs and pointing towards the kitchen cupboard doors wide open and the books lying on the floor.

'That was me,' Emma admitted sheepishly. 'Somehow, James got a letter to appear on my table and I don't know where the owl came through. There aren't any holes or windows open, so I thought someone was in my flat. If someone could come for a letter, then they could have returned for anything.'

Regulus stared at her for a minute, before a smirk spread its way across his face.

'What?' Emma demanded, thinking that her reasoning was at least somewhat logical.

'Rabastan's father's buildings always have a special charm on the front door. Look,' he crossed the room to the door to point at a small opening just above the cat flap. 'This is a Muggle invention to let envelopes through. The door's enchanted to then send the letter to the nearest table, so the owner won't have to bend down to pick up his post.' He stopped to survey her for a second. 'You seriously didn't know about this?'

Emma felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment. 'Well, it's not exactly very common!'

'Actually, they're all over London. My parent's house has one too,' he replied matter-of-factly. The smirk only broadened.

Emma took a second to close her eyes at the shame of her stupidity. However, she refused to let that bother her. 'That's not why I wanted you here though.'

Immediately, the smirk fell from Regulus's face, his features stilling. He looked slightly the way he had back when they hadn't discovered each other's most horrible secrets, the faceless mask that was prepared for anything. Of course, now Emma had a new horrible secret. One that wouldn't let her look Regulus in the eye, for fear of what he would see there. She pushed the mix of feelings aside and walked over to James's letter, controlling the slight shake in her footsteps through sheer concentration.

'James is coming back next week,' she said. Then she paused, wondering how to phrase her request. 'He wants to see my dad.'

Regulus waited, obviously not comprehending the emergency. Of course, that was because he didn't know. She had never told him why her father had disowned her, and he had never asked. Or he had never had the opportunity to ask. Either way, she had been glad for it.

'You don't have to go with him, if that's what you're asking,' he eventually said.

'It's not,' she replied, hesitating again. 'I'm scared of what he'll find out.'

'But what can James possible find….Oh,' a look of comprehension appeared on his face. 'Charles knows.'

'Charles knows,' Emma repeated. 'And he found out in the worst way imaginable. I can't…I can't let him talk to James, have James judge me when my father doesn't understand - had never understood - anything about me. If James should know about the Dark Mark, he should find out from me.'

Regulus gave her a sympathetic look, but he was still frowning in puzzlement. 'Um…Much as I'm flattered that you came to me first, perhaps Alecto would be more helpful when it comes to Charms of that sort?' he asked delicately.
'Ah,' Emma said. 'I don't think you've quite understood what...well, I'm not going to jinx my father with a Memory Charm if that's what you're thinking. I don't want anything to go wrong and I don't think I'll be able to get that close to him anyway. I've got a brand across my forehead whenever I enter that hospital. I was thinking...well,' she looked down nervously at her fidgeting fingers. 'The only people who would be allowed to get close to Charles Potter would be his son, James Potter, and his surrogate son...'

'Sirius Black,' Regulus finished, his features falling into the carefully composed face from before. 'You're asking me to impersonate my brother.'

'Only... Well, you don't have to do anything, not if you don't want to, but it's just...'

'I'll do it,' Regulus cut through her stuttering. She looked at him, almost disbelievingly. 'I'm not so cold-hearted as to leave your last relationship with your family tattered to shreds,' he muttered.

If she didn't know better, Emma would swear that Regulus's cheeks were turning pink. It must be the heat from the fire, she thought. Her face had also gone red far too many times that day. That was the only thing it could be, she told herself. Soon they would be back at school and the impenetrable masks would have to become even more opaque. So she ignored the gratitude she felt at his monumental effort, as though it were a simple request, and ploughed on.

'I have the Invisibility Cloak,' she said, fetching it from the pile of things. 'I'll come with you if that helps.'

'Sure,' Regulus ruffled his hair, a sure sign that he was uneasy.

Of course he's uneasy, she thought, as she went to get the Floo powder. He's impersonating the only person he loves and hates at the same time. That can't be easy. Ironically, she reflected that he was saving her from the person that she loved and hated. Sometimes, she hated nature's humour. Turning back to Regulus, she saw that he had loosened his shirt and tousled his hair in an effort to look more like his brother. The resemblance was frighteningly similar. Luckily, Regulus's hair was too short to be mistaken for Sirius's shoulder-length locks. She had to bite back a laugh at the way he seemed disgusted with his scruffiness though, as though he had bent to a whole new level.

Shaking the coat over her head, she followed his lead and said very clearly. "Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries."

Here we go again.
Burns and Betrayals

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!
Just scroll down to the chapter if you're not thenewsomelibrary.
So to the newsomelibrary: thank you so much for all of your reviews! I haven't been ignoring them, or annoyed that you're clogging up my inbox, far from it! I'm glad you're enjoying it so much and are giving me feedback. I've actually replied on two comments, as the message was just getting waaay too long!

Emma's heart was beating faster than it ever had when Regulus gave his brother's name at the front desk. Of course, it would be teeming whilst she was under the Invisibility Cloak. No one wanted to run into an imaginary wall, so she made sure to step out of everyone's way – who knew hospitals could be so busy? The last time she came, it seemed like it was almost empty.

Back then, she had been nothing but relieved at hearing about her mother's recovery. Now, she knew exactly what was on the line. Not only was she risking James and Sirius finding out that Regulus had come to visit her dad under his brother's name – and alerting them to the fact that all was not well – but also Regulus finding out just why her mother had died. She didn't think she could handle him discovering the truth, not when she was the only person in his life that hadn't betrayed him about his family situation. What would he say – he, who would sacrifice everything for his family – if Charles told him it was Emma who had killed her mother?

She had no doubt as to what caused the stress that had ended Natalie Potter's life. She could only hope that he wouldn't believe what her father told him, but deep down she knew that she couldn't lie. Not about something like this. Besides, she had protected her pride once before by lying to him, and she wouldn't do it again. Not when she saw his betrayed expression upon thinking that she really had slept with Sirius.

*He's moving,* she realised with a jolt. She hurried down the corridor after him. She had never been more thankful for Regulus's acting abilities. From where she was standing, he seemed cool and collected, his posture betraying the slightest hint of worry necessary to better sell his role. He walked nonchalantly, imitating his brother's gait with ease. She just hoped that she wasn't asking too much of him.

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'Take a seat, Mr Black,' the Healer said, reaching over his desk to shake Regulus's hand. 'My name is Henry James, I'm the Healer assigned to the Potter family.'

'Trust me, I'm only a Black in name now,' Regulus reassured him, trying to imitate his brother's scorn for his family.

His insides twisted unpleasantly, reminding him of his brother's betrayal once more. He refrained from glancing backwards, not only would that arouse suspicion, but he wouldn't even be able to see Emma. He hoped she had managed to get through the door before it closed.
Instead of leading him to Charles Potter's quarantined room, he had been directed to the Healer's study – a small room off the waiting room corridor on the first floor. He wondered why it wasn't on the second, where Charles was being kept, but then realised he had more important issues to worry about.

Merlin let me get through this, he prayed inwardly, hoping that James wouldn't get back early from Romania and foil the plan. That was the problem – there wasn't a plan. There was just Emma, springing this up on him, expecting him to solve everything by imitating his brother. Regulus preferred to plan out every outcome beforehand, maybe even brewing a Polyjuice Potion. Of course, there hadn't been time for that, and he hadn't been able to refuse the desperate look in her eyes.

After all, his own relationship with his family had only improved after having acquired the Dark Mark at such a young age. He only wished that his mother hadn't been quite so perceptive... or not perceptive enough. He had no idea why she made those little comments about marrying Emma – it only made things worse. He had made his peace with his silence, though Rabastan was against it. He was her best friend, the person she trusted most in the world, and he wouldn't throw that away for something so trivial as unrequited love. Besides, at least that kind of thing wouldn't be on her mind for a while, after what happened with her mother. He hated himself for rejoicing in being so close to her, even as she cried her eyes out over this most recent tragedy.

'Are you quite alright, Mr Black?' the Healer was saying.

'Excuse me,' Regulus gave him a slight smile. 'My thoughts were elsewhere.'

Then he realised he was being Regulus, not Sirius Black. It was easy to predict his brother's actions – the opposite of his own.

'Look, can I go to see him or not?' he asked aggressively, radically changing his behaviour.

The Healer seemed slightly taken aback, but then relaxed. Relatives could be unpredictable in trying times, and this boy had already lost his mother – in every sense of the word but the traditional one. Even Henry James had heard of the Black fiasco, even if it was only because he had read his patient's file.

'I'm sorry, but we're not taking any chances for Charles,' he said gently. 'Natalie was very disturbed after a visit from her family, and we want Charles to recover in a safer environment.'

Regulus got up and started pacing, running a hand through his messy hair. 'So there's nothing I can do? Can I write to him, at least?'

Henry James shook his head. 'I can tell you this – Charles is on the way to making a safe recovery. I estimate him being released within a month. The Potters seem to be very resilient,' he laughed. 'Most older patients can't hold on past the critical stage. But Charles – like Natalie – seems to have bypassed the most dangerous part of the disease. That's why – more than ever – we need to keep him out of any family feuds.'

'Any what?' Regulus stopped pacing, coming to a stand before the Healer's desk. His shock wasn't fake this time.

Henry James stood up, making his way to the door. 'Mr Black, your dispute with your surrogate sister is legendary, even in the hospital. I suggest you take this up with her. Here,' he scribbled on a piece of paper, 'this is the name of a good counsellor. If I see that you two are back on good terms, then I'll let you and the two Potters in to see Charles.'
'Fine,' Regulus almost spat. He stopped for a minute at the door, visibly calming down, whilst actually giving Emma enough time to leave the room. 'I'm sorry, this is pretty stressful for me at the moment. Do... do you mind not telling James if he comes? I don't want to see him even more upset at the idea that it was because of Emma and me that he can't see his dad...'

And Regulus conjured the guiltiest puppy dog expression that he had ever seen Sirius use, determined to play the ruse to the end.

'Of course, Mr Black. I wish you well,' the Healer looked at him pityingly for a moment, before shutting the door.

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'I told you,' Emma said, looking away. 'I don't know what you mean. The fact that Sirius and I hate each other isn't exactly news.'

They were in an unused waiting room and Emma's Cloak was bunched up in Regulus's hand. Emma should have guessed that he would be mad at having not been told the entire truth. Luckily, Healer James hadn't given everything away... he must have read her mother's file too. You should count yourself lucky he still played along to the end, she thought guiltily.

'What didn't you tell me about your visit with your parents? I had wondered why you hadn't pushed harder to visit your father when you found out he had the same illness. What happened? It wasn't just your mother's death, was it?' The words came tumbling out of Regulus's mouth.

He stopped for breath, but his eyes were still staring into Emma's, as though the gift of Legilimency would be granted to him if only he concentrated hard enough. Emma felt both afraid to look away and afraid to hold his gaze. His irises had become chips of hard flint, and inwardly she was panicking. He's going to find out, she thought. He's going to find out and he's going to hate me. Or worse, he's going to just ignore me, like he did when I accidentally hurt Kreacher.

'Well?' Regulus demanded when his words were met with silence. 'Is this really how you repay me for helping you?'

Emma cast for an excuse, a way to tell him part of the truth, but not the whole of it. Damned if I do, damned if I don't. Just then, the door opened. Emma's mouth fell open.

'James?' her voice cracked.

Her brother had just walked in, cool as a cucumber. He was stockier than she remembered, though she supposed that dragon training would do that to someone. He looked less tanned than a summer in Romania should have left him, but then again, their skin was the burn-white-never-tan kind. For a split second, Emma thought James looked panicked as she studied him, but then his old grin spread across his face. Her appraisal was cut short by the enormous bear hug he pulled her into.

'Thank Merlin you weren't eaten by a Snizzling Snoutback,' she almost sobbed.

'Emma!' he pulled away, holding her at arm's length. She noticed a few small scars across his face. They were new. 'What are you doing here in the Burns section? Last I looked, it wasn't you fighting dragons.'

'Well, I...' she stammered, before white-hot pain shot across her right forearm. She reigned in her hiss of pain before continuing. 'I tried my hand at cooking,' she let an embarrassed smile make its way
onto her face. 'Needless to say, I don't get along very well with ovens.'

She pulled up her sleeve before James could notice the tear and showed him the crescent of raised white flesh on the inside of her arm. Thank you Regulus, she thought, even as she took the hint that he was still mad. The modified Stinging Hex hurt like hell.

'Oh,' he let out a sigh which sounded more like relief than worry. 'Same old Ems.'

Emma frowned, but brushed it off. You can't even recognise your brother's reactions, you've grown so distant, she thought sadly. Then she remembered who James was probably staying with.

'Anyway, I see your burn and raise you one,' he replied, unwrapping the bandage for her to see.

Emma gasped, and James's grin grew wider. That's the reaction I was hoping to get.

James's upper forearm was a mess, skin tearing off in some places, oozing in others. The burned flesh was obviously healing, but slowly, and it was clear that the scarring would be horrific.

'What was that?' she asked.

'Hungarian Horntail,' James answered proudly. 'The wound reopened, that's why I'm in St Mungo's early. I would love for us to sit and talk, but I think the hospital would probably take a long time to check this out. I was sent home to get better medical attention – over there, it's mostly Muggle stuff for now. Sirius should be bringing me some of my stuff soon.'

Emma opened her mouth, to ask him anything – everything – before she heard a cough from behind her. Right... she thought, happy mood fading almost as soon as it began.

'Listen, we should probably go before Sirius gets here,' she said reluctantly. James's face fell. 'James, you know what a recipe for disaster it would be if we saw each other. Especially Regulus and Sirius.'

She hated using Regulus to get out, especially after the huge favour he had just done her, but it wasn't to be helped. Glancing over to him, his cold demeanour suggested that he was not impressed.

'I guess I'll see you on the train then,' James smiled gently, before hugging her again.

She hoped that the promise in his voice wasn't a result of wishful thinking.

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'Are you going to explain?' Regulus asked.

He had waited until they had Flooed back to the apartment. Emma supposed that she was kidding herself if she had thought he would forget about it during the journey. Even after all he had done for her, she was only listening with half an ear. James was back and mostly safe, mostly whole. He had seemed a great deal better than when she saw him last, from the short time that she had seen him. Another thing that Sirius has stolen away from me, she thought viciously. Her reunion with her brother had been cut short and only served to remind her just how much she missed him.

'Don't make me ask a second time,' her best friend warned.

She should. She knew she should, but just imagining her best friend's face when she told him that she was the cause of her own mother's death stopped her in her tracks. So instead, Emma turned to face the window.
'No,' she replied, hating herself as she did so. 'I don't have time for this conversation.'

This wouldn't have happened to Regulus. He would have thought to conceal his mark. If she couldn't hide the Dark Mark from her father – who she knew was a staunch opponent to their crusade – then what was she even doing with the Death Eaters? It was stupid and it was risky. If he hadn't been contaminated... *That's your fault too,* she reminded herself. If Charles hadn't been worried for her mother, he would never have made contact, never have contracted the disease. *Maybe he was right when he said Sirius would be a better son than I, a daughter.*

'Nothing to do...' Regulus seemed at a loss for words. She could still feel the resentment simmering beneath the surface. 'You're unbelievable. I didn't have to help, you know. You can't call me when it's convenient for you and then keep me out of the loop. If it weren't for me, you'd still be explaining yourself to James now.'

'Thanks for casting that Stinging Hex,' she said, lifting her sleeve up to check the angry welt.

'Believe me, it was my pleasure,' he replied sarcastically.

The beginnings of a Slytherin sneer were upon his face. Emma knew that he was going to shut himself off soon, which was exactly what she wanted. Already, she had managed to get a rise out of him – something rare. However, he surprised her.

He walked up to her, staring at her until she turned to look at him. 'What is it Emma? What is so bad that you can't even tell me about it? What did Sirius do? Are you protecting him?'

'Not likely,' Emma snorted. She was protecting herself. 'It's just... It's nothing to do with Sirius, not really. I... I got into a bit of a fight with my dad when I went to visit my mum, that's all.'

She had already said too much. Regulus had ferreted out a secret with less information than this before. A lump had formed in her throat by now. 'Look, Regulus, I really appreciate everything you've done for me. I'll find a way to repay you.'

Regulus didn't move an inch. She turned her head, back to watching the street below, trying to appear as cold as she could at Hogwarts.

'You know that you can tell me anything Emma,' he tried again.

'Well, maybe I don't want to tell you,' she retorted, knowing that it would hurt him, but not caring. She finally turned towards him, eyes hard, thinking of nothing but the situation they had put themselves in. 'We've got more pressing problems, Regulus. What if Healer James spots Sirius and realises that you were an imposter? What if he changes his mind and tells James and my brother confronts yours?'

Regulus looked at her for a long while and for a second, Emma thought that he would insist further. She set her jaw and concentrated on the welt she knew would leave a scar, willing her cheeks not to colour in shame.

She knew what she would say if she was in that situation. *That's your problem then,* and maybe curse him for good measure. Though Regulus had already got the curse out of the way. But Regulus wasn't her. She ignored him until she heard him move away, only daring to look up when she heard the Floo being activated.

He didn't return.
'Just think, this is the last time we’ll be here, at King's Cross at eleven o'clock, 1\textsuperscript{st} September,' Lucinda said in a hushed whisper.

Rabastan, who had been about to leap on the train in his usual manner, paused for a second, then jumped off the step, earning him several complaints from the students below. He dragged Lucinda back to where Alecto was saying goodbye to her parents, then took them both to the middle of the station, waiting for Emma and Regulus to join them. It didn't take long; Emma had already spotted them.

Regulus still hadn't spoken to her and although the silence was cold, there was something about his expression, as though he hadn't quite puzzled out why she reacted the way she did a couple of days ago. This was the first time they had seen each other since, and Emma ignored the atmosphere as best as she could, pointing towards their friends.

'What are you lot doing in the middle of the platform when the train's about to leave?' she asked when they had drawn close enough.

'Making memories for Luce,' Rabastan replied, stealing Lucinda's camera from her handbag. After having decorated Emma's apartment with photos of previous years, she had decided that it was high time to keep a camera on her at all times. She didn't want to miss a moment of their last year together and though she wouldn't mention it, the last year in which they were all safe. Who knew what the future would hold?

Ignoring Lucinda's squawk of protest, Rabastan snapped a picture of the train. Then he motioned them all to get on and took another of them stepping up the steps. In the compartment though, he went completely mad, taking photos of Fluffy to Alecto's Tongue Twister toffee wrapper. In the end, Lucinda snatched the camera back.

'Stop it, you'll waste all my film!' she protested.

Rabastan stuck his tongue out at her, but didn't insist. He had the whole of their seventh year for that. Emma was just about to go back to her favourite occupation in the train - staring out of the window - when Regulus moved her travel bag off of the seat next to her.

'Merlin, Emma, what do you keep in here?' he complained, before looking inside. 'Why the hell have you got your school books in here? And why do you have the Herbology one here? I'm definitely sure you didn't buy that when we went book shopping.'

Emma looked at him, creasing her eyebrows. Normally he would just stay quiet if they had a fight, though the others usually picked up on it. Now, he was going out of his way to pretend nothing had happened. \textit{But why?} She asked herself. It wasn't as though they needed to hide the visit they had paid to Charles, although she was grateful he hadn't broached the subject.

'Because you remember every book Emma's ever bought?' Lucinda teased.

Regulus ignored her. She was probably right.
'Oh yeah,' Emma remembered, reluctantly getting up from her comfortable position. 'That's James's.'

Regulus seemed to accept this explanation, but Emma could see the questions rising in Lucinda's mouth. She hastily stepped over the trunks that they had left in the middle of the floor and went on a search for her brother. The corridor between the compartments was cold, despite the warm September day. Most of the students had already found compartments, so she resigned herself to the long and boring task of searching them one by one. To her surprise and relief, James and his friends had set up only three doors down.

A sudden flashback to last Christmas played in her mind, when she had slid the door open in much the same manner and had come across the Marauders caught between laughing and pranking. She hadn't dared run over to hug James then, the way she didn't dare now. But that was where the similarities ended. She stopped in the doorway, taking a proper look at him the way she hadn't been able to in the hospital.

Now, James looked tanned and healthy, but tired. He had put on another growth spurt whilst he was away and hadn't had the time to go shopping for new trousers, so his socks were peeping out from under the grey. They were pink with golden Snitches on them. That was the only joyous note in the whole of his appearance. He looked…sad. James Potter not smiling was a rare thing indeed and from the concerned look on his friends' faces, they found it more than abnormal too.

*Where has the flicker of the old James disappeared to in such a short amount of time?* She had seen none of this in the hospital, though maybe it was because of her state of mind at the time – so happy to see him that she hadn't noticed that the light hadn't properly reached his eyes.

*It's not supposed to be like this,* her inner child wailed, stomping a petulant foot on the ground of her mind. James was supposed to be the unchanging, the unruflable - except for when it came to his hair and a certain redhead. That was a fact of life. But that fact of life had disappeared. Emma hesitated in the doorway, mouth half open as if to say something, but she couldn't remember what.

Fortunately for her, James knew exactly what to do. Crossing the small room in two quick strides, he engulfed her in another hug. He was so tall now, Emma remarked, as her feet lifted off of the ground. She wasn't complaining though, soon returning the tight embrace. His friends had the wisdom to stay silent during the two minutes of solid hugging. Emma knew what James was feeling as much as he knew her. The physical lack of distance seemed to overcome the psychological one and for a second it seemed like they were just one mind and heart again. Or maybe it was just because both of them felt like they each only had half a heart left.

'Glad to see you haven't got an arm full of puss,' she teased.

James laughed. More quietly than he would have another time, but at least he laughed. 'I see you got my card,' he said, releasing her and looking at the contents of the bag. 'Hold on a sec, I'll pay you back.'

'It's really -' Emma's protest was cut off by Peter Pettigrew.

'Why does he have to pay her back? Aren't they from the same family? Don't they have the same Gringotts account?' he asked in a loud voice.

'Peter, shut up,' Remus said in a controlled whisper.

But that was all that was needed for Sirius to start.

'Well, there's always a slight money problem when someone's disinherited,' he said airily.
'Sirius,' James warned in a rumbling voice.

'What?' Sirius asked, stretching languidly. 'I was commiserating.'

Looking at the cold glint in his eye, Emma wondered just what he was supposed to be commiserating with. James ignored him and turned to his sister. 'Do you want to stay and chat for a bit?'

'Um...' Emma looked back at the scene behind him. She had to give credit to Remus, who was doing his best to overshadow the other two with an overly welcoming smile. 'Actually, I think I have to get to the Prefect's carriage...'

'Okay,' James replied nonchalantly.

That stung a little. Had he just offered his compartment out of politeness? Did he really miss her as much as she did him? Had he forgotten his promise of catching up? He certainly seemed different from when she had seen him at the hospital. The niggling doubts had barely begun to form in her mind when she realised that he had followed her out of the compartment.

'Um...I don't need to be walked to the carriage, thanks,' she said awkwardly.

To her surprise, James blushed a deep red. He pointed to a little badge next to his Quidditch Captain one. Squinting against the reflection on the gold surface, Emma made out the initials H.B.

'Actually, I was made Head Boy,' he replied sheepishly.

Emma felt the shock flood her. 'But Slytherin won the House Cup,' she stammered stupidly.

'Apparently they wanted unity between the two Heads this time, so they had to come from the same House,' he explained, suddenly finding the floor very interesting. 'Since the Head Girl was Lily, they decided...Well, I don't know why they went for me and not Remus, but there you have it.'

Emma was silent for a second before the embarrassment kicked in. I'm such an idiot, she thought. How was that my first reaction?

James looked even more uncomfortable than she felt, which was saying something. She tried to make up for her initial lack of enthusiasm.

'Congratulations,' she said, laying a hand on his arm. 'You really deserved it James.'

'I'm not so sure..' he started, biting his lip nervously.

'Come on,' she interrupted. 'You're top in most of your classes, a star Quidditch player and a lot of students respect you. Plus, you've become more studious recently,' she added.

All of this was true and more. Most of the younger years adored James. He used to be cocky, but was never mean, unlike Sirius who took teasing too far. The older students found him annoying around exams, but in their sixth year James had taken the rules a little more seriously than he used to. Once or twice, he even reprimanded Sirius.

'I suppose if you put it like that...' he replied thoughtfully. 'I thought it was a sort of sick consolation prize from Dumbledore. Hey, sorry your mother died, here's a badge to make up for it.'

'James, if that were the case, then Sirius and I would be Heads too, and many other students whose family members have recently gone missing.'

Presumed dead, she added in her mind, thinking of the Bertie Bott incident. Marlene McKinnon was
in Gryffindor with her brother. She wondered how she was dealing with the fact that her father was a supposed Death Eater. Before James had a chance to reply, they had arrived at the Prefect’s compartment.

The usual crowd was there: Regulus from Slytherin, Amos Diggory (puke) and Abigail Dean from Hufflepuff, Helena…what was her last name? and Michael Finns from Ravenclaw and of course Lily Evans. Remus slipped in behind the twins, taking his seat with a muted apology. Emma slid into the seat between Regulus and Lily - of course there would be a space between the Gryffindor and the Slytherin - whilst James dithered for a while.

'Where are the sixth and fifth years?' he finally asked.

From the bewildered looks on their classmates' faces, none of them had even given a thought to the other Prefects.

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'Don't mistake my silence for letting this go,' Regulus whispered as he got onto the carriage. Before Emma could reply, or even follow him in, a group of second years ran giggling past, holding their cloaks over their heads to protect them from the rain. It had been pouring for hours now, almost as soon as the train had passed into Scotland, and showed no signs of letting up.

'Bloody second years,' Alecto grumbled as the two of them waited for the next carriage.

If there is a next carriage, Emma thought. They were the only ones left – everyone else had already been spirited away to Hogwarts. She couldn't help but notice that there were fewer students than usual – some parents had probably wanted to keep their kids close to them this year.

'Should we start walking?' she asked dubiously after a while.

'Guess there's nothing for it,' Alecto sighed. 'Do you think this counts as being at school?'

'I'm not sure, why?' Emma asked curiously.

'This,' Alecto said. 'Impervius!'

Suddenly, the rain started flying off their cloaks, preventing them from being completely soaked. Emma smiled appreciatively and conjured two student hats for them too. It wasn't much, but it prevented the walk to Hogwarts from lasting longer than it had to. If they got told off for using magic outside of Hogwarts... Well, they were of age, and they could always blame the school for not having enough carriages.

'How are things with you?' Alecto asked after a while. 'I feel like I've hardly seen you all summer.'

'Oh you know... Trying to make people favourable to the Dark Lord's reign.... not that you're helping much with your “climate of fear”,' she nudged her friend.

'Come on, you know Bellatrix thinks that fear is the fastest way to people's hearts. Besides, she's getting the purebloods riled up with the Mudblood issue,' Alecto brushed off the comment. 'So... Tell me. How was seeing James for the first time in two months like? Has he changed at all?'

'He's.... well, he hasn't changed since the end of last year. Mum's death hit him hard, maybe harder
than me. He's more serious now,' she said, her eyes unfocusing at the memory. 'I guess he's grown up. But it's strange. At the hospital he had seemed like the same old James.'

'At the hospital?' Alecto asked sharply. 'What were you doing there?'

Emma glanced towards her friend, who had changed so much over the summer. She had tied her long red hair in a no-nonsense bun, a habit she had picked up from fighting Order members over time. There was a scar on her face, running down one side near her ear. It was faint, but there. Emma wouldn't even have noticed it if Alecto hadn't described one of the battles on the journey to Hogwarts. But her eyes were still creased with concern and her tone was honest.

'I saw him at the hospital,' she said, deciding to trust in her friend who had been there from the start. 'Because I went there to see if he would be able to visit our dad.'

'And why would you do that?' Alecto frowned. 'Surely that would be a good thing, right?'

'I'm not so sure,' Emma said. 'The thing is, Alecto... My father knows.'

'Knows....' Alecto trailed off as her mouth fell open in understanding. 'He knows.'

'Yes,' Emma said quickly. 'I accidentally showed my Dark Mark when I went to visit my mother.'

'And you want to be certain he won't be able to tell James and Sirius all about it,' Alecto concluded.

'Yes,' Emma replied simply.

There was a short pause in which Alecto digested this new information. She won't make the link the way Regulus would, Emma reassured herself, searching the redhead's expression for anything odd, but all Alecto showed was a slight frown.

'Don't worry,' she added. 'My dad's still in quarantine. They won't let anyone see him.'

Relief was plain on Alecto's features. Emma almost sighed in relief, happy to have gotten the weight off of her chest without giving herself away. Alecto may be clever, but she wasn't known for her deduction skills. Still, better safe than sorry, she thought.

'Anyway, enough about my farce of a family. How did your mission with Bellatrix go?' She steered the conversation to another topic.

'Badly,' Alecto cursed as she slipped on the wet ground. She gave a small smile of understanding, accepting that the subject was finished. 'She couldn't find Sirius or Andromeda.'

'Oh,' Emma replied, not knowing what to say. She certainly hadn't been expecting the mission to be a familial one. 'If you don't mind me asking... What did she intend to do with them once she found them?'

'Kill them of course,' Alecto said nonchalantly.

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'Good evening students,' Albus Dumbledore greeted the Great Hall.

The excitement of the Sorting had died down - were first years really that small? - and everyone was more or less patiently waiting for the Headmaster's speech to be over, so that they could get to the
important part of getting back to Hogwarts: the feast.

Alecto and Emma had arrived just as the clapping faded, in a considerably more irritated mood than they had upon their arrival at Hogsmeade station. Luckily, the Slytherin table was in the centre of the room this year, so they didn’t have far to walk until they could slip into their seats.

'Where were you?' Lucinda hissed.

'There weren’t any more carriages,' Alecto replied grumpily, before repeating. 'Bloody second years.'

'You know it’s not the second years' fault Alecto,' Emma said, rolling her eyes. 'They must have miscalculated the number of returning students.'

'Three cheers for the people's trust in Dumbledore,' Alecto added drily, upper lip curling in disdain.

From across the table, Helen made a shushing movement with her hands and the friends turned to listen to the Headmaster's annual speech. Emma's eyes swept over the room. There were a few notably empty seats across the tables, though she noted with surprise that McKinnon was still in her usual spot near James and Sirius. The Gryffindor was staring daggers at Lucinda's back, paying no heed to what was going on. When she became aware of Emma's haze, her dark brown eyes shifted to the black-haired girl with just as much hate. Emma quickly broke eye contact and tried to listen to the speech. So she does blame Lucinda's family for what happened, she mused. I wonder just how much her father told her.

'As you all know, we have a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher,' Dumbledore was saying.

'What’s new?' Rabastan asked in a low voice, rolling his eyes. 'How does he even find anyone willing to do the job anymore?'

There was a murmured assent that the new professor had to be mad.

'Though she is young, she is very experienced in the matter - having trained as an Auror beforehand. She knows full well what the world outside has in store for you,' Dumbledore paused, surveying the room with a critical sweep of his electric blue eyes. 'Please give a warm welcome to Amelia Bones.'

A collective gasp rippled through the Great Hall. Everyone knew Amelia Bones - i.e. the woman whose parents were murdered during the summer. As for the Slytherins, they were under no illusion as to what happened to Mr and Mrs Bones. Rabastan in particular grew pale under his summer tan, though they pretended not to notice. It was best if the masks were put back on for Hogwarts.

Emma had grown so used to their little group of five having broken down their barriers and finally trusting one another, that it seemed strange that now they were all wrapped in their own thoughts, not daring to speak aloud. Though Mulciber, Wilkies and Snape - Severus - were all part of the "Family" now, that didn't mean that they were trustworthy. Not in the slightest. If Wilkies could denounce Rabastan without implicating himself, he would do so in a heartbeat. Then he would be able to take his place in the hierarchy of things.

Amelia Bones stood up to hesitant applause, stoically looking down upon them. Her jaw was clenched and there seemed to be a hardness to her that could be noticed even from the other side of the room. She was in no way like the Hufflepuff Emma vaguely remembered from her first to third year. Then again, losing someone close to you changed you. Emma would know.

'I would also like to inform you of the imminent danger that the Wizarding World has been placed in,' Dumbledore continued gravely. 'There is a Dark wizard that has taken upon himself to terrorise Britain. He styles himself as Lord Voldemort.'
Another gasp ran through the hall, though this time of fear and awe. Dumbledore nodded.

'Do not be afraid to call him by his title. Fear of a name is fear of the thing itself. In order to better protect yourselves, I have added three more hours of Defence Against the Dark Arts to all of your curriculums. It is paramount that you understand this danger and that you stay united throughout these trying times. I had thought of cancelling the Quidditch Cup.'

A burst of angry muttering swept across the room. Dumbledore raised his long fingers in a calming manner.

'However, my professors have advised me not to. Quidditch - after all - builds strength of body and character, and the matches themselves brings unity amongst students. Nevertheless, I must warn you once more that House unity is not enough in this situation. We must ally ourselves with those who we fight in order to overcome the greater enemy. Inter-House unity is for the greater good. That is all, thank you.'

There was a quiet clapping as the food materialised on the tables. Low murmurings broke out, as opposed to the usual loud chatter that rang out through the Great Hall.

'Sounding more and more like Grindelwald each day, isn't he?' Regulus muttered to Emma.

His voice had been barely above a whisper, it wouldn't do to have any of the others hear even if they were close friends. Some things, they just wouldn't understand. Like how Emma and Regulus privately agreed with Grindelwald on some level, but were hoping that Lord Voldemort would have a better chance at winning his war. Like how neither liked Dumbledore because he was a hypocrite, rather than the senile old fool the Dark Lord made him out to be.

'What a buffoon,' Barty Crouch's lip curled, having obviously not heard Regulus's side comment. Emma noticed his shiny Prefect's badge pinned with pride on his chest. 'As if cancelling Quidditch would have made anything any better. He might as well have started a Duelling Club.'

'I bet McGonagall had something to do with him keeping it,' Rabastan smirked. 'She was gutted over the fact that Gryffindor lost so badly last year.'

Across the table, a different take on the topic was being discussed.

'Enough about Quidditch, how the hell am I supposed to graduate?' Sophie asked in dismay, not even touching her favourite roast beef. 'I didn't even take Defence Against the Dark Arts last year! I only know about the Patronus Charm from Charms class that I was also planning on dropping this year!'

Their part of the table fell quiet for a moment as Professor Bones was surveyed with a critical eye.

Alecto was the one to break the silence. 'What does she think she can teach us anyway? She couldn't even keep her own parents from dying.'

Lucinda gave a sharp intake of breath and looked around. 'Alecto!' she reprimanded breathlessly. 'Well it's true!' Alecto defended herself. 'Plus, I doubt many people heard me.'

Emma was only glad that Alecto hadn't mentioned Rabastan's brother's involvement in the Bones murder. It had been agreed that it was a necessary evil. Neither had been persuaded to the Dark Lord's side, but were too powerful to be left alone. Unfortunately, that meant killing two perfectly pure-blooded wizards, which was a shame in the Death Eaters' books. Emma wondered when the Dark Lord would amass enough power to squelch all of that pure-blood nonsense.
The conversation was brought to a halt by Professor Slughorn passing them their timetables for the next year. Emma quickly scanned hers: Double Defence Against the Dark Arts on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Luckily, Charms was also on two of those days, so the homework wouldn’t be too horrendous. Unfortunately, Arithmancy was just before DADA on Fridays, which meant that she would be exhausted at the end of the week. At least she had a free period that morning to catch up on her sleep beforehand. She caught Regulus's defeated look and sneaked a peek at his Fridays: Herbology, History of Magic and DADA. She fought the urge to laugh.
Two months later, she didn't feel like laughing. Not one bit. She quickly learnt that the free periods that she wanted to sleep through were spent in the library more often than not, revising or looking up a spell that the professors only mentioned briefly, but assured them were important for the next stages of non-verbal spells. Most of the time, she would spot James there too. She was past being surprised - no one had been more shocked than her to see James turn into a studious student last year. Maybe he felt that he had been wasting his time pranking, since the trend had continued into his seventh year.

Lily Evans was a frequent study partner for the brother that Emma - she admitted - had taken to spying on. In a surge of petulant jealousy, she had come to the conclusion that the redhead had now replaced her in her twin's life and started ignoring him. She had been even more stung when she realised that he hadn't even noticed. So she had been reduced to stalking him and sulking. Regulus caught her in the act once and shook his head, but didn't comment. It was a good thing he hadn't, because Emma would probably have berated him for being a hypocrite.

Without the slightest bit of guilt, she and Regulus passed some of their Prefect duties onto the fifth and sixth years. Emma had started to trust Cassandra Greengrass with a lot of the tasks that she should have done herself. The younger girl didn't seem to mind that much - in her mind it was just prepping her for Head Girl the next year. One thing about being a Prefect that Emma didn't besmirch was their special bathroom. It was the closest thing to heaven after a long day of studying plus Quidditch in the evening.

Returning to Hogwarts didn't necessarily mean returning to an isolated bubble, though. On their first day back, Emma had been prevented from flopping down onto her bed by a slim book already occupying the spot. Upon opening it, Emma realised that it was a directory of all of the students attending Hogwarts that year. Some of them had been circled in red. Emma was under no illusion as to what that meant. The Dark Lord needed to recruit witches and wizards now that the war had begun in earnest. The younger the better for the informants.

Now that Halloween was upon them, their teachers had let off a bit for half-term. Of course they still had mountains of essays to finish, but at least Emma could sleep in before she did. However, that didn't mean that she was relaxing. She wondered if she was masochistic to set Quidditch practice for every day of the holidays except the last Sunday, but the truth was that they really needed the practice. She hadn't been spending nearly enough time with them. And with four of them being in seventh year, well… She suddenly realised that Barty would have his hands full the next year in trying to replace all of them. *Oh well,* she thought. *At least he gets to train a team from scratch.*

As she was thinking up tactics to overcome the Ravenclaw captain on her way back from the library, she bumped into someone.

'Oops, sorry,' she apologised, as they bent down to retrieve one of her books. As the boy
straightened back up, she realised that it was Remus Lupin, one of James's friends. Suddenly, she was struck with the opportunity. 'Oh Remus! I was looking for you earlier. Regulus is ill, so do you mind filling in for him on patrol tonight?'

'Sure,' the Gryffindor looked a bit bewildered. 'I saw him about ten minutes ago and he seemed fine though...'

_Drat_, Emma thought. Why did the one non-Slytherin Regulus was on friendly terms with have to be Remus Lupin?

She put on a confused expression, 'that's odd, I saw him in the Hospital Wing this morning...’ she trailed off, an idea coming to her. 'I bet he's taken too many Pepper-Up potions again, so that he can catch up on his work and still do his Prefect duties. I told him not to, it's dangerous when they wear off and you haven't had enough rest!'

'It's fine,' Remus assured her. 'I know what it's like to try to back on top of your homework after being sick. Tell Regulus that I wanted to swap with him because today is better for me, if you like.'

Emma guiltily realised that he was talking about having to shift many patrols and take extra potions for being a werewolf. Of course he would understand her lie. It was the truth of seven years - if not more - for him.

'Great!' she chirped, plastering on a smile. 'I'll see you in half an hour then.'

After rushing down to the Slytherin common room to inform Regulus of his "illness", she met Remus on the third floor to start their patrol. Usually, they would start there and make their way up, the lower corridors usually reserved for teachers and fifth year Prefects. There were less broom closets down there. They walked in companionable silence for some time, but when they moved up to the fourth floor, Emma decided that it was time to put her plan into action.

'How's seventh year going for you?' she asked, deciding to start with a neutral topic.

'Same as anyone else, I guess,' Remus shrugged. 'It makes the O.W.L.s look like first-year exams. The only classes I find even remotely achievable at the moment are Care for Magical Creatures and Defence Against the Dark Arts. The others seem to ask impossible feats. How about you?'

'About the same,' Emma replied. 'It's hard to schedule Quidditch practice on top of all of it too. But I guess I shouldn't complain, you often have to miss school because of your sick mother, don't you?'

Remus's face turned white. 'H-How did you know about that?' he stammered.

'James told me,' she pretended not to notice his lack of comfort. The conversation was going exactly the way she had planned. Now Remus didn't know whether she knew about his secret or not. 'He thought that it would make me feel better, what with what's happening to our parents.' She didn't even need to act when her face fell. 'Or should I say _parent._'

Remus's eyes filled with compassion. 'I've been meaning to say this…I am sorry about your loss,' he said awkwardly, hating the stereotypical phrase. 'I know that it hit James very hard…he's quite different from the way he was before.'

'I know,' Emma replied quietly, then decided that it was time to play the "we have something in common card". 'Actually, I feel a little bit like I have no one left. James is always with his friends or Lily and let's just say that my father and I haven't really seen eye to eye recently.'

Remus didn't look surprised. Emma guessed that Sirius had been bragging about it in the Gryffindor
common room. *That's not fair*, her brain chided herself. *James probably mentioned it.* She gave a theatrical sigh. 'I suppose James has already told you something of it. The worst part is that I can't do anything to fix it. It's not my fault I was Sorted into the House he hated... Have you even been treated radically differently for something you have no control over?'

'You have no idea,' Remus muttered, almost to himself. Emma caught herself in a grin.

'I just wish that there was something, some way to stop people being so prejudiced, you know?' she asked. Remus nodded understandingly. She wished that she could talk about the werewolves, but knew that that wouldn't be a good idea. 'Someone who would be powerful enough to show people how they should act, rather than just telling them to stop. Someone like...'

'Albus Dumbledore,' Remus said, a hint of reverence in his voice.

That stopped Emma short in her tracks. 'Why do you say that?' she asked suspiciously.

'No reason,' he replied hurriedly. Before Emma could press the matter, though, they had reached the end of the seventh corridor. 'Well, I better get off to do some of that revision we had been talking about. Have a nice night!'

And with that he all but fled.

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Twenty minutes later, Emma entered the common room and threw herself into her favourite armchair with a huff. A pair of eyes looked up from "Hogwarts, a History", smirking at her pouting expression.

'I take it the plan didn't work then?' Regulus asked.

'What do you think?' Emma rejoined sarcastically.

'What plan?' Rabastan eagerly shut his books and scooted over to their end of the sofa.

'I had tried to... see if Remus Lupin was going to be a part of our Family, since members seem to be dropping like flies lately,' Emma chose her words carefully.

They seemed a little callous to be talking about the potential death of her father and her brother's new-found closeness with his friends, but they would do for the casual outsider. Rabastan whistled.

'Merlin Ems, you don't do things by halves do you?'

'Excuse me if *some* of us have ambition,' she replied snottily, pointing out one of Slytherin's trademark traits. Rabastan mimicked her.

Before she could retaliate, Regulus intervened, 'So what happened? How did you try it?'

'How did Emma try what?' Barty Crouch Jr. asked, plopping onto the seat next to Rabastan.

He had planned on taking the Dark Mark as soon as possible long before Emma's task had been set, but had been discouraged by the other Slytherins from trying before he had obtained his O.W.L.s. They all knew how intelligent he was, but the older Death Eaters would prefer some concrete proof of his abilities. Emma opened her mouth to repeat her cryptic phrase, but Rabastan had a better idea.
'She tried to get him to go on a date with her,' he smirked, expecting a spluttering reaction from the girl. But Emma wasn't planning on giving him the satisfaction.

'Why would I ever ask Remus to Hogsmeade when everyone knows perfectly well that I want to go with you, Rabastan?' she asked with a deep, heartfelt sigh. 'If only...' she let her voice trail off theatrically.

'Everyone knows...' Barty processed this new information with wide eyes. For someone so intelligent, he was oddly gullible.

Regulus rolled his eyes at his friends' antics. 'She wants him to join us in Hogsmeade, Barty,' he said, emphasising the word join. Barty's mouth formed into an "O" of understanding. 'So Emma? Care to part with some of your charming secrets? After all, they're good enough to interest even the Dark Lord.'

His voice was as soft as ever, but something in them seemed insulting to Emma. Then again, she was tired and fed up of having failed. 'It doesn't matter anyway, he's too besotted with Dumbledore.' She spat the name as though it were a curse.

'Oh, is Emma having another of her Dumbledore rants?' Alecto asked, stopping behind the sofa on the way to the dormitories.

'I do not have Dumbledore rants,' Emma denied hotly. 'Honestly, I think you're confusing me with yourself sometimes. You always did say he was the most filthy Muggle-lover that ever lived.'

'And I will maintain that truth until the day I die,' Alecto proclaimed, sliding into a spare seat.

'Enough about Dumbledore, I want to hear about Remus Lupin,' Rabastan said impatiently. 'How did you think you could get a Gryffindor on our side?'

'Well, I used all of the usual tricks,' she sighed.

'Seduction?' Rabastan wriggled his eyebrows suggestively.

'Oh shut up Rab,' Emma replied. 'No, I do not plan on seducing Remus Lupin. I made him feel unsafe, as if people would find out about his secrets, then I confided in him so that he would feel the need to share something in return. I actually thought it was going pretty well, until I suggested things that should have lead to the Dark Lord and he blurted out Dumbledore's name.'

'Tough luck,' Alecto said. She knew how depressing a failed mission could be. Just before the holidays, Edgar Bones had hit her with a Stinging Hex to escape - elementary magic that Alecto hadn't seen coming. 'So tell me, what are Remus Lupin's secrets? Do you think he's a part of the Order of the Birds?'

'No!' Emma's voice came out a little bit louder than expected. Four surprised faces turned to meet hers. 'I mean, I don't think Dumbledore would let schoolchildren into his precious club,' she said as venomously as possible.

'So what is Lupin's secret that you thought would turn him to our side?' Regulus asked curiously.

His voice had been carefully neutral, but Emma had grown used to noticing Regulus's slip-ups by now. The knowing half-smirk was to pretend that he already knew - after all, his principal quality was gathering useful information - but the grey eyes clouded with annoyance showed that he wasn't happy with her knowing something he did not and not sharing it. Luckily, he had also forgotten her outburst in his curiosity.
If Remus Lupin is a part of the Order, then that would mean... She thought back to when Dumbledore had asked to keep James in his study for a little while longer, how her brother had paced her room one day and announced that people who decided to stay neutral in a war were as bad as the enemies themselves. She shied away from the direction her mind was going.

'That's your job to find out, isn't it?' she smirked in reply. She uncrossed her legs from their comfortable position on the armchair and stood up. It was time for her to practice her Animagus skills.

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Emma groaned in annoyance. This is impossible, she thought, kicking the tree trunk. As though in retaliation, a gust of wind swept through, shaking the branches. Emma made a face, brushing the leaves out of her hair. It had been a week already and she was no closer to attaining her Animagus form, no matter how determined she was. She hadn't given up on Remus Lupin either. Either he would join once he heard about the werewolf initiative, or he would join with Dumbledore and maybe give her some information she could put to good use. It was a win-win situation.

Her wizarding watch chimed, indicating it was time for her Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Emma rolled her eyes, her mood worsening. She would have to listen to the Gryffindors boasting about how good their spells were, whilst Amelia Bones looked on disapprovingly. Emma was sure that she had started to make the connection between her parents' murder and the students in class. It was only a matter of time before she realised who had joined up with the Dark Lord...

By the time she reached the practice area in the Forbidden Forest - Bones had told them she would be pitting them against Dark creatures - the rest of the class was already there. With surprise, she noted that the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had joined them. It wasn't the first time - Bones had taken Dumbledore's advice of getting the Houses to work together to heart.

Another reason for mixed Defence classes was that students were randomly assigned classes that fit with their schedules. This also gave them the opportunity to test their duelling skills against all kinds of people.

Upon seeing Sirius, Emma gave him her most withering stare, which he countered with a smile showing every white tooth in his mouth. Regulus noticed almost immediately and broke off his conversation with Rabastan, moving surreptitiously towards her.

'I wish you wouldn't do that,' he muttered.

'Do what? ' she asked without looking at him.

'Stoop down to his level.'

Emma tore her eyes away from the older Black brother, about to make a snappy retort, but softened. She knew that Regulus still loved his brother, deep down. So she swallowed her words and offered him a smile instead. Immediately, his face lost some of its earlier hardness. Since the incident at the hospital, neither of them had talked about it - or Sirius, declaring a truce. Emma had apologised, of course, and Regulus had admitted that he could have made his hex less powerful.

'Time to split up the friendships, I think.' Amelia Bones said in a ringing tone, narrowing her eyes at Regulus and Emma. Neither had been listening to what she had been saying.

In the end, Emma found herself in a group with James, Remus and Alecto. The students had quickly
cottoned on to Bones's way of teaching, and so made sure not to associate themselves with most of their friends. It was odd, as many would be seen eagerly chatting away with people they hated moments before Bones arrived in her newly designated place - there was no one specific classroom that would cater to her needs, it seemed. Emma sometimes wondered if that was the teacher's true objective, as she was obviously not so stupid as to fall for that trick. However, she wasn't so perceptive as to see who truly were their closest friends, so they were often paired with each other anyway.

You'll never be paired with Regulus again though, she told herself angrily. The Gryffindors had mostly been found out, as they couldn't keep a charade to save their lives. Strangely, the Marauders had managed to split themselves in two: James and Remus pretending not to know one another and the same for Sirius and Peter. Emma was sure it wouldn't last though. The "Marauders" were famous throughout the castle, including the staff room. They had only got away with it so far, because Bones distanced herself from the other teachers too, despite their friendly advances.

She was a good teacher though, Emma would give her that. So far, they had learnt more counter-curses than in any of their Defence lessons up to that point, though the Patronus Charm was something that seemed increasingly difficult to manage. Bones had reassured them that it was natural and that most wizards never learnt them anyway. So far, only Lily and Remus had managed to cast one. Emma suspected that the reason behind this was that most students felt far from happy as the terror of the war only mounted. But Remus has probably known more sadness in his life than most, she reminded herself with curiosity. It had been one of the reasons for her approaching him. Perhaps this lesson would help that, though she couldn't let James suspect anything.

'Today, we will be practising Thestrals,' Professor Bones announced.

There was an outbreak of muttering. Thestrals were a rare magical creature, but mostly harmless. *How do you “practise” Thestrals?* Emma frowned, thinking.

'Isn't that something that should be reserved for Care for Magical Creatures, Professor?' Lily Evans raised a hand before the noise had died down.

Bones graced her favourite student with a rare smile. 'Normally, yes. However, I have taken it upon myself to teach you about them, as most of you have given up on Care for Magical Creatures by now. The only subject that all seventh-years take is Defence Against the Dark Arts, hence why you are all here.'

This time it was Michael Finns, the Ravenclaw prefect, who raised his hand.

'But Thestrals aren't a Dark creature, miss,' he said. 'Most of us can't even see them.'

'I wouldn't count on that, Mr Finns,' Bones replied darkly. The mutterings stopped. 'Thestrals, if treated correctly, can prove to be a valuable ally against Dark forces. Their link to death makes raised corpses such as Inferi fear them, and so they are a force to be reckoned with. The staff does not have enough time to "make friends" with them, so to speak, not even the gamekeeper Hagrid. So it has fallen to you students to convince this flock that we are on their side. Should Hogwarts even be attacked, the Thestrals will play a key part in defeating Lord Voldemort's army.'

There was a collective gasp at the teacher's use of the Dark Lord's name. Alecto narrowed her eyes in displeasure, but soon turned her expression to fear after a reminder from Emma's elbow.

'So it's true then? You-Know-Who has raised an army of Inferi?' someone asked in a loud whisper. The students craned their heads around to see who spoke.
'If that is all you learn from the lesson, Mr Lestrange, I will have to consider a change of career,' Bones replied drily.

Emma and Alecto looked at one another, puzzled. What possessed Rabastan to draw attention to himself in such an idiotic way? Turning to look at him, Emma received one of his trademark smirks and winks. Of course, she realised. What Bones really wants is to find out future Death Eaters, or at least a connection. She's out for vengeance, and Rabastan just removed himself from the list of suspects. A Death Eater would have known that information, and would never degrade themselves to call the Dark Lord "You-Know-Who" like some scared little boy. Impressive, Rab…impressive.

By the time she started to pay attention to the class, Bones had emptied a sack of raw meat onto the floor in front of them. Alecto muffled a gasp, looking behind Sirius's shoulder. Emma focused on the point, but of course saw nothing. Neither could James or Sirius, to Emma's relief. If James had joined the Order of the Birds, then he would surely have seen death at one point or another.

She had barely enough time to rejoice in this discovery, before Amelia Bones turned her hawk-like gaze on Alecto. James and Sirius also had suspicious expressions. Emma suddenly realised that Alecto was a pure-blood. There would be no reason for her to have had a death in the family, as the Dark Lord privileged her blood status. The only explanation would be that she - or someone close to her - had seen death. Evidently, Bones had already drawn this conclusion, as her mouth was drawn into a thin line.

'If you don't mind me asking,' she said carefully. 'Can you see the Thestral?'

'Y-yes…Alecto stammered. It was lucky that she was already so pale, Emma noted, otherwise she would have given herself away immediately. 'I didn't think…Well, my uncle had an accident when I was five. I don't even…I don't even remember going to see him in hospital, just my father explaining death to me at the funeral. I didn't think it would count…'

Her story had to have some grain of truth to it, in order for her to invent it that quickly. It did the job though, since Bones just gave her a short nod and a pat on the shoulder, before moving on. Emma let out a deep breath, one she hadn't realised she was holding in, when she felt something hard hit her shoulder. She cried out in shock, turning around even though she expected to find nothing, and stopped dead.

There, less than a metre away from her, was a skeletal horse with holes where the eye sockets should have been. It was a terrifying sight, though she knew logically that it would not harm her. It didn't stop her from stumbling back into Alecto though, using her friend to steady her balance.

'Can you see it now?' her friend whispered.

Emma squeezed Alecto's arm longer than necessary as she righted herself, hoping that the redhead would get the message. Her fall had not gone unnoticed, though. James and Remus were both looking at her with odd expressions, obviously wondering what had happened.

'There was one right behind me,' she explained, opting for the semi-truth. 'It startled me when it touched my shoulder. It's so weird to not be able to see them…Where is it now, Alecto?'

Alecto immediately understood, and described the Thestral to them. Emma made sure to keep her gaze unfocused as the redhead stroked the horse's neck as instructed.

'That is so weird,' James said in awe, picking up a piece of meat and watching it slowly disappear into nothing.
Before Emma had the chance to wonder why she hadn't been able to see the creature from the start, a bark-like laugh reached her ears. She turned in disgust, unable to prevent her eyes from rolling. It was Sirius, of course, regaling his audience with his trademark lopsided grin.

'I mean, we all know she's hoping to ferret out Death Eaters,' he was saying. 'Isn't it obvious? I think only the Slytherins should have been forced to come today, we all know it's them who are causing the problems. This way is just punishing the families of people who have defied Voldemort. I mean we all know that no Gryffindor would ever go dark.'

He sneered at his brother, who merely fed his Thestral an extra piece of meat. Emma tried to see if Regulus could see the horse-bird, but his expression gave nothing away. Rabastan on the other hand, standing next to Sirius, looked rather like he would have liked to feed him to the Thestral. Emma stifled a grin as Alecto whispered angrily beside her.

'How dare he use the Dark Lord's name? Who does he think he is?'

'Relax Alecto,' Emma reassured her seething friend. 'He probably does it so he looks cool.'

Emma, personally, had never seen the problem with using the Dark Lord's name. After all, wasn't it one he had chosen himself, as the legend went? That was what Rabastan's father had told them, anyway.

Still, Alecto took a step forwards, to do what, Emma would never know, as James's owl suddenly swooped down over them, dropping a letter on the top of his head. Pandemonium ensued, a couple of the Thestrals were startled and reared, students fled in all directions, many of them running directly into other Thestrals, and Professor Bones had to try to calm the winged horses down.

'Class dismissed!' she called anxiously, her stone face slipping as she tried to regain control.

'Emma!' Remus put a hand on her shoulder.

She turned from the scene of chaos reluctantly. He guided her to where James seemed to be reading the same words over and over again on the parchment. As she drew closer, he lifted his head, one of his old smiles beaming like a neon light on his face.

'It's dad,' he said. 'Emma, he's getting better!'
'Merlin, what am I going to do?' Emma asked herself, pacing in front of the fireplace.

She had picked up Regulus's habit of running a hand through her hair and was currently twisting it into knot upon knot, trying not to panic. She had held it together throughout Care For Magical Creatures and Potions, but was thankful for her free period. Though it was meant for homework, today she had allocated this time to more important things. More specifically, finding a solution to the father problem that just seemed to be getting larger and larger. The Dark Lord's words floated through her mind, "take care to make the transition smoothly". Of course in theory, the easiest thing would be…well, that spell, the one the Dark Lord was so famous for.

She quickly shook her head, driving the dark thoughts from her mind. To do that would only prove her father right, and she was under no illusion as to her capacity to perform the spell. That leaves the Memory Charm, she thought, coming to a conclusion. The problem was, would she really be capable of it? More capable than the Killing Curse, Emma... Besides, how would she be able to perform it without James or Sirius suspecting something? She supposed that the visits would be highly regulated at first. In any case, she would have to act quickly - her time was running out. James was probably writing to the hospital at that very moment.

Making her decision, she raced down the stairs to grab the Invisibility Cloak, only to run back up almost as quickly, earning her several odd looks from the sixth years in the common room. She couldn't betray her father using his most precious gift. That, she wouldn't be able to forgive herself for.

Relax, she told herself. The Memory Charm is reversible. Even if it wasn't, you could explain everything. Even better, if you do it well, you'll be solving two problems at once.

Briefly, Emma imagined regaining the trust of her father, his last memory of her making amends with her mother. She almost smiled. Who am I kidding? It'll feel like a lie. She would have to wait until this war was over in order for him to understand. Plus, technically, he isn't your father any more.

'Woah!' Rabastan broke through her thoughts, massaging his arm. 'Where are you going in such a rush?'

She had closed her eyes upon that painful last thought. Coupled with her haste to get through the common room exit, she hadn't noticed Rabastan leaning on the wall in front of her, chatting with the usual crowd of seventh years.

'She can probably feel the burn more than you, Lestrange,' Mulciber sneered. 'Girls are sensitive like that.'

'What?' Emma asked, nonplussed.

Even as Regulus meaningfully looked towards her arm, she realised that her left forearm was burning hot. Pulling back her sleeve slightly, she saw that her tattoo had turned to an inky black - the sign that the Dark Lord was calling them. Cursing her luck, she remembered that the Dark Lord had planned a sortie for Halloween - he was adamant on the significance of things. Halloween was a symbol of evil witches and wizards for Muggles - let them see what real witches and wizards would do in retaliation for their quashing of magic.

'This couldn't be a worse time,' she muttered between her teeth. Out loud she said, 'I thought the
event was planned for nightfall?"

'It is,' Regulus replied, before Mulciber could get in another word. 'Lucius wants us to go over the plan first.'

'And he wants us to come now?' Emma asked, exasperated.

'Hey, I would gladly take your place!' Barty piped up from behind Regulus. Emma hadn't noticed him before.

'You'll get your moment, kid,' Rabastan laughed, ruffling Barty's hair.

Barty wrenched himself out of the older boy's grasp angrily. 'I'm almost sixteen! I'm only a year and three months younger than Regulus!'

'You're underage, Barty,' Regulus reminded him. 'You'll be traceable.'

'S'not fair,' Barty mumbled, pushing his way through the doorway.

Emma made a note to herself to cheer him up, make sure he felt useful. After all, it wasn't fair, when she and Regulus had gotten their Dark Marks at sixteen. Meanwhile, she had found a way to erase her father's memory before it was too late. As luck would have it, it was Friday and she was certain Dumbledore would allow James to see Charles the next day, if not that very night. But no amount of cajoling would help her. In fact, it only made Mulciber doubt her even more.

'You're just jealous you got your Dark Mark six months after I did,' she snapped at him. 'Everyone knows you're just here to swell the ranks now that the Aurors are on the prowl. We need cannon fodder if we're going to win this war.'

'Hey,' Regulus tried to intervene, but Mulciber already had his wand out.

'Say that again, you filthy Blood-traitor,' he snarled, sparks flying out of his wand.

'At least I can control my magic,' Emma replied condescendingly.

'Why don't you tell that to your friend here,' he turned, mocking Alecto instead. Mulciber wasn't known for staying on topic. 'She's the one who got herself banned because the sightings of a redhead became too suspicious. Or was that on purpose so big brother can do all the work for you?'

Alecto had been banned from going out that night. Though they wore their masks, there was always the risk of them slipping. Bellatrix was now on the run, having been identified as Voldemort's right-hand woman, and the Daily Prophet had posted pictures of Alecto and Bellatrix together whilst they were on a mission. Though the pictures dated from before Bellatrix had been branded a killer, and weren't incriminating in the slightest, Dumbledore's Order - including Professor Bones - had been taking a special interest in Alecto recently.

Just as Emma was about to retort, an idea occurred to her. There was no one better than Alecto at Memory Charms, plus Emma knew she knew about the Invisibility Cloak. A little rummaging around would see her find it, and Emma trusted Alecto to find a way to get into St Mungo's.

'What? Got nothing left to say?' Mulciber was getting impatient for a fight.

'You Muggle,' she taunted back, wildly improvising. 'Didn't you know Alecto is being used for espionage today? Oh, well...Maybe you just weren't trustworthy enough, but are you really so dumb as to think she would just be sitting in the Great Hall twiddling her thumbs tonight?'
Rabastan and Alecto's faces took on a puzzled look, but Regulus didn't even twitch. Luckily, he was the only one within Mulciber's line of sight, as his eyes were now riveted on the wand Emma had pulled out of her pocket.

“What?” Alecto mouthed, but before Emma could reply, Lucinda came striding out from behind her.

‘Alright children, let's break it up. Honestly, you're lucky only fifth years and up are in the common room at this time of day - you're shouting like a bunch of Gryffindors. Why don't you just save those wands for the Muggles, and keep you mouths shut about Death Eater business until you’ve safely passed through the seventh floor, alright? Honestly, call yourselves adults.’

'But it was getting so interesting,' Severus replied dryly, the only sound that had come out of his mouth during the entire conversation.

Ignoring Severus and with an expression warning them to heed her speech, Lucinda shoved Regulus and Emma out of the way of the door, simultaneously reaching behind Mulciber to grab Alecto.

'My father,' was all Emma had time to whisper to Alecto as she passed by, but the steely look in the red-head's eye told her that her friend had understood all she needed to.

So she allowed Lucinda to shut the door and shoved her wand in her pocket, following the grumbling seventh-years to the hidden Room of Requirement, where it was possible to connect an unregistered Floo gateway.

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'Building down!' someone shouted from afar.

It was impossible to tell from which side the shout came, what with all of the flashes of light, smoke and bangs. Emma could barely see five feet in front of her as she ducked. She thanked Merlin that spells couldn't be both soundless and invisible. *Merlin had nothing to do with it*, a rational voice said somewhere in the back of her mind. She pushed it away, it was not the time for a philosophical discussion.

It was her first battle. Lucius had instructed Rabastan and Emma to try and stay out of the conflict, as it was their first mission on the front. Usually their roles weren't quite so…in the thick of it. But this time, they were out to get a group of Muggles notorious for their hatred of witches and wizards. It had started off as a community of Squibs, that could see magic, but not practice it. The talent was passed from generation to generation; the knowledge was not so fortunate. They had somehow managed to convince themselves that manifesting magic was a sign of the devil's work, and would often abuse children, trying to "beat the magic out of them".

One of the Unspeakables working with the Dark Lord had discovered this information. It turned out a small branch of the Ministry was dedicated to observe at what stage magic "snapped", and would carry out tests as to how far was too far. The justification was that it was all for knowledge, and that somehow it would help those in St Mungo's unable to control their magic, but Emma found it sick. She had heard too many stories about this kind of thing before. Lucius suspected that the Dumbledore's Order would be watching for the Dark Lord's targets, so here they were.

*The word "Order" says so much, she thought in disgust. That's the way things are, they can't be changed. The order of the world. Well, the Dark Lord wants to break that Order down and redefine it.*
'Emma!' Rabastan crawled his way towards her. 'Are you alright?'

She nodded in response, just as another door crashed past them. They covered their heads, coughing with the dust. One of the problems with the Death Eater mask was that it was hard to breathe in this sort of situation. Emma pulled hers off, making sure she remained hidden behind the car she had been using as a cover. She took a few deep breaths, feeling the cool air dry the sweat on her forehead.

'Emma!' Rabastan said urgently. 'Put it back on. You can't be discovered, you know that.'

'In a minute,' she waved him off.

Without the mask, she could see the battlefield a little more clearly. She recognised the rapid green shots and high-pitched giggle that carried through the air as Bellatrix, and guessed that she was fighting a couple of the most senior Order members. Her kill count was phenomenal, her duelling without equal. Perhaps Dumbledore himself could have assisted his Order, but he was nowhere to be seen or heard of in the fray. Coward, Emma thought in disgust.

She scanned the moving bodies, but couldn't find Regulus in the crowd. She spotted Wilkies, sending stunner after stunner from behind a wall at a Shield Charm. Those were the easiest to pick out: the shimmer of silver could be seen better than the bodies of the duellers. Spotting a pair moving towards their hiding spot, she quickly reattached her mask, the magic sealing it onto her face.

'Bast, on the count of three, look,' she moved closer to her fellow Slytherin and pointed.

As the smoke cleared, they could clearly make out a burly figure that could only be Mulciber or Amycus Carrow - they recognised him as one of their own by the cloak and mask. Rabastan clenched his wand so tightly Emma could see blood trickling down his palm. Her own heart was thudding harder than it ever had before, and she felt like she could be sick at any moment. Her blood seemed to have turned into electricity; she could feel the current running through her fingers, through her feet, hear it whistling loudly through her ears. Her stomach itself had been flooded with adrenaline and she could barely concentrate on the spell at hand.

'The Reductor Curse,' Rabastan shouted, close to her ear. The din had grown so loud she could hardly hear him.

She nodded to show she had understood and held a hand up, counting to herself as she did so. One. Two. Three. They let off the spell at the same time, but somehow, the curses collided and split into opposite directions. The tree they had been aiming at behind the Death Eater's partner stayed intact, but one of the flashes of light definitely hit the person, because their own spell went flying off-target.

'Damn it!' Rabastan swore, only noticing the collision.

The Death Eater didn't even look around, just made a break for it as soon as the Order member's attention was diverted. Emma was about to congratulate Rabastan on their success, but just as she was going to point towards the Order member, a flash of light illuminated him, clearly revealing him to be staring in their direction.

'Run, Rabastan,' she said instead, shaking her friend's arm. 'Run!'***

Emma had managed to stumble into a graveyard, losing Rabastan along the way. She was so far
beyond panicking that if she had thought of her reaction to the news about her father, she would have laughed. Though it was the dead of night and most of the street lamps had been knocked over—or put out by some spell or other—it was as if she could see clearly wherever she looked.

'Ouch!' she couldn't help but yelp as she stumbled over something in the dark.

The downside was that she could hardly see anything else at all. It was as if she was wearing James's glasses again, except that the blurriness was on the outside. As she tried to right herself, her foot caught on a body and she fell, hitting her face and cracking her front tooth on one of the tombstones. The agony was unimaginable, the tangy taste of blood sharp in her mouth. She was just about to let off a string of swearwords when she heard someone shout.

'What was that?'

Quickly, she rolled behind the gravestone and clamped her hands to her face, stuffing her knuckles into her mouth in case she couldn't hold herself back.

'Fabian, Gideon, is that one of you?' a gruff voice asked. 'Constant vigilance, remember!'

Emma knew no Fabian, no Gideon and couldn't remember ever having heard the phrase “constant vigilance”. She took her hands away, fearing that she would start to choke before long, but the pain when the pressure was released was unbearable. Against her will, she let out a whimper. Immediately the voice changed, and she imagined she could hear every blade of grass crunching under heavy boots.

'I can hear you,' it called angrily. 'Come out and you'll be put in Azkaban. Resistance will mean death. Surrender, and the Ministry will make sure you are not harmed.'

Emma blinked the tears clouding her vision, snot and blood dripping from her nose. She must have broken it when she fell. Without relinquishing her death grip on her face, she tried to crawl away from the voice. Instead she found herself face to face with the person she tripped over, his wide eyes staring at her in terror, inches away from her face. Impossible to tell whether it was a Muggle, or a wizard. The tears started flowing down her face as the horror of what was happening sunk in, and she anxiously tried to push the body away in order to clear a path.

It was too heavy though, and she didn't dare use her wand for fear of revealing her position. So instead she steeled herself, lay flat on the ground and tried to commando crawl her way to the nearest shed. Once inside, she could try to Apparate away, if possible. Suddenly, a hand grabbed her arm and she was hauled behind one of the fancier tombs, with a weeping angel to watch over the dead. She was too shocked to scream, but obviously her companion didn't want to take any chances, clamping a hand over her mouth.

She cried out, unable to stop herself as a searing flash of pain across the front of her mouth threatened to knock her into unconsciousness, her vision blinking before her. The bobbing light of the person searching for Death Eaters drew nearer, and another wave of adrenaline brought her senses back.

'Shhh, Emma,' Rabastan was whispering. 'It's me.'

Relief washed over her, though she had suspected that the person grabbing her had also been hiding from the Auror. Though it may have been an Order member too, since it was an illegal organisation. How was the Ministry to know who was on whose side?

'Bwoke my deeth,' Emma mumbled quietly, almost too softly for her to hear. She could only hope
Rabastan could hear properly, what with all of the explosions from earlier.

'Come on, we have to get out of here,' Rabastan cupped his wand in his hands and raised it above her head.

Emma didn't hear the incantation, but the trickling sensation running down her scalp told her it was a Disillusionment Charm. She berated herself for not having thought about it earlier. Rabastan repeated the action on himself, but the Auror must have noticed the movement, because he gave a shout of triumph and started running towards them, not bothering to check other places where the sound may have come from.

Rabastan was just as fast though, grabbing her hand with his, slicked in her blood, and pulling her away, racing towards the edge of the graveyard. They would have to trust on the Auror not being to hear them over his own footsteps. Thankfully, another explosion resounded from the main area of the battle, loud enough to set their ears ringing again. Immediately, Rabastan changed course, towards the battle. He dragged them into the first building they saw, a shop, judging by the huge entrance and the amount of glass on the floor.

'There, that should give us a bit of cover,' he said, gasping for breath. He turned towards Emma. 'Merlin you're a mess. I would offer to help, but I know nothing about Healing magic. I would also advise you not to try it yourself, who knows how your spells would turn out. Actually, try not to talk at all.'

It seemed that Rabastan was a nervous talker under pressure. Thinking hard, Emma made a sound to attract his attention, then snapped her fingers and twirled.

'Apparate?' he asked, after a repeat performance without the Disillusionment Charm. 'Don't you remember what Lucius said? If Aurors come, you can be sure that they've cast Anti-Disapparition wards all over the place – Gaah!'

His voice cut off suddenly as he was pulled backwards into a staircase by an invisible force. At the same time, five streaks of light hit the wall behind where he had been standing in quick succession, reducing it to a pile of rubble.

'Rabathdan!' Emma dived after him under the stairs, only to find him unharmed and accompanied by none other than a furious Regulus.

'What are you two idiots doing?' he hissed. 'Anyone could have seen you or heard you. You didn't even bother to check the area before racing into the house. What if I was Dumbledore? What would you have done then?'

He looked as though he was about to say more, but quickly silenced himself when the bust of an angel burst through the newly-made hole, hovering in the middle of the room. As if by reflex, Emma wordlessly levitated part of the rubble towards the stairwell, creating a sort of shelter for them. It wasn't good, but it was inconspicuous, and the best she could do in the circumstances. In fact, she was surprised at her body's reaction before her mind could even comprehend the situation.

Regulus quickly pulled her to the ground, muttering a quick Episkey as he did so. Her nose repaired itself with a small pop, removing most of the pain. Before Emma could thank him, an Auror with shaggy ginger hair entered the room, dragging one leg behind him. He held his wand aloft, keeping the statue in place. When he turned towards them, Emma had to stifle a gasp. It was the same one she and Rabastan had been aiming at earlier.

As the heavy clunk of his boots drew nearer, she couldn't help but recoil, grabbing the first thing her
hand came in contact with. Judging from the wince, it was Regulus. He didn't let go though, merely pulled her closer, and the three of them huddled together, waiting to be found.
'I think they're gone,' Rabastan ventured, ten minutes later.

They had been saved in the nick of time by Rodolphus swooping in to duel the Auror, who they now knew to be none other than Alastor Moody, dueller extraordinaire and responsible for most of the Death Eater imprisonments in the past couple of years. He was one of the few dangerous Aurors that was always on high-alert, no matter what the occasion, and could tell the difference between someone who had been Imperiused or not in two seconds flat. All of this was urban legend of course, none of them had had the misfortune to cross him before. Even now, they had never fought him outright.

And I'd like to keep it that way, Emma thought.

Rabastan moved to push the rubble that had fallen on them - it was a miracle the building was still standing - but Regulus quickly stopped him.

'Might I remind you who had training for this sort of thing?'

'Don't need to tell me twice!' Rabastan said in a display of Slytherin self-preservation.

Emma knew that Regulus would have been rolling his eyes if he wasn't scared the dust would blind him. The pressure on her hand was released - she had forgotten about that - and Regulus moved carefully out of their hiding place.

'Coast's clear,' he said in a loud whisper a moment later.

Emma and Rabastan climbed out of the rubble whilst Regulus crept out of the doorway, if it could still be called that, to check out the battlefield. Emma looked around: the place was a mess. The walls and ceiling were filled with holes, mortar and plaster was strewn across the floor, and a wooden beam was spread diagonally across the room, still attached to the wall by a few twigs.

Suddenly, the strangest noise reached her ears.

'Did you hear that?' she asked Rabastan. 'It sounded like a bark.'

'Shh,' he replied, looking fearfully around. 'I'm going to check the other side. Tell me if you hear anything.'

Emma rolled her eyes, it was as if he hadn't even been listening. He's probably right though, she said to herself. Any animal would have fled the area by now. But then she heard it again.

'It's coming from upstairs,' she said, but nobody was there to hear her.

She carefully made her way up the stairs, each creaking step threatening to cave in at any minute. The upper part of the building hadn't fared much better than the ground floor. The attic had fallen through, cobwebs hanging everywhere. Muggle junk was everywhere, from their soft, white parchment to electrical appliances. One corner of the room seemed to be smoking, a couple of sparks lighting up every now and again with a buzzing sound.
'Homenum Revelio,' she muttered, drawing her wand.

Nothing happened.

'Lumos.'

The soft glow cast shadows around the area, making it look even more creepy than it had before. Somehow, the absence of human presence seemed to drown out the sound of the outside world, as if she was in some kind of time lock where the seconds passed more slowly.

Then the wand's light reflected back at her, two little pinpricks of yellow. Out of habit, she touched her face to make sure the smooth material of her mask was still in place, though she knew it couldn't be removed by non-magical means. As she drew closer, she could make out the shaggy fur of a large black dog, covered in dust. It whined, pawing at the floorboards. It was then that she noticed that it was stuck, its bottom half hanging out of a window, but its top half stuck in place by a beam that had wedged itself between its front legs and belly.

Upon seeing her approach, it started panting heavily, panicking. The scratching and whining grew louder, and Emma feared that it would attract attention, though that would have been impossible without either Rabastan or Regulus warning her. She wondered if they had been hit by stunners, as the building was still quiet. She resolved to go back out as soon as she had freed the dog - after all, the poor animal was innocent in all of this.

'Shh,' she hushed it, petting the fur. 'This'll only take a moment.'

The animal went into a wild frenzy, forcing her to stumble backwards as it started snapping.

'Stupid dog,' she muttered, as she tripped backwards over a mop and bucket. 'Diffindo!' The beam broke on one side, falling to the floor with a crash. The other side immediately tipped over, trapping the dog into a triangular hole. Quickly, Emma used the spell again and the dog fell out of the window with a howl. She rushed over to the opening to see if it was alright, but a resounding crash told her that she had just made the situation worse. It turned out the beam was holding the ceiling in place and a large creak told her that the roof wouldn't hold for long.

Forgetting the dog, she bounded across the room and down the stairs, only to have her foot pass straight through the third step from the bottom.

'N-n-n-no,' she muttered to herself, trying to pull her leg out of the step.

A cabinet fell through the ceiling along with most of the plaster and a few roof tiles straight in front of her, startling her and sending her leg through past the knee. Her wand fell out of her hand, rolling into the side of the cabinet. Emma couldn't help herself. She screamed. Stretching as far as she could, she tried to grab her wand, but to no avail. It was too far down and impossible to bend over to get it.

Someone came running into the building. Emma had no idea whether it was a fellow Death Eater or an Auror, but before she could properly devise a plan within her chaotic state of mind, Rabastan came into view.

'What are you still doing here?' he shouted, grabbing her arms and pulling as hard as he could.

Instead of replying, Emma pushed against the rest of the stairs and succeeded in pulling up the step with her. The battered staircase shuddered, but didn't give way. Just as they stumbled back into the cabinet, a beam came rolling down the stairs, proving too much to handle. Emma pushed Rabastan's head down as the beam went flying over their heads, the steps that had been hit breaking into
'We need to get out of here!' Rabastan yelled.

'Wait, my wand!' Emma shouted back, scrabbling on the floor.

'Hurry up!' Rabastan replied, turning and creating a Shield Charm from the tiles now raining down on top of them.

'Found it!' Emma held up the stick of wood just as Rabastan's shield gave way.

He grabbed her by the back of her robes, dragging her out of the collapsing shop, throwing her bodily to the ground several feet away and dropping to the floor with his arms protecting his head. When the debris had finished falling, Emma risked a look behind them. The building looked like it had been hit by a bomb.

'I guess your Beater skills came in handy,' she said to Rabastan, once they had caught their breath.

'Are you crazy?' he replied. 'I found Avery, he told me where the anti-apparition wards end. We need to get there fast, the Aurors are bringing in reinforcements.'

'What about Regulus?' Emma asked, looking around.

'I can't find him anywhere. I thought you had both already left before I heard you scream. What were you doing in there?'

Without waiting for an answer, he set off back towards the graveyard at a run. Emma didn't dare answer him, she knew that Rabastan would think her an idiot. Hell, she would have berated him for the same thing if their roles had been reversed. It was such a Gryffindor act, and yet remembering the fear in the dog's eyes, she couldn't help but feel that it was the right thing to do.

***

Thirty minutes later, Emma and Rabastan were sneaking down the staircase to the dungeons as quietly as they could. Emma's face had been repaired as best as possible by Narcissa Malfoy, who was in charge of a secret Portkey leading to Malfoy Manor, where they could then access the Floo Network. The newly-wed had frowned at her friend's injuries, but was hurried along by Rabastan's father, who had come to personally insure that all Death Eaters were gone from the village by sunrise, and all underage Death Eaters well before that.

So instead, Emma had a tube of bruise paste in her hand as the two crossed their fingers Filch wasn't on the staircase. There was only one exit per floor and nowhere to hide, but it was also the quickest way back down to the Slytherin dungeons. They had caught a glimpse of Wilkes running down the fifth floor, chased by Peeves, at which they had had a good laugh.

Fortunately, they made it without any incident and bid each other good night with a grin, amazed that they had made it out alive. For once when she got into bed, Emma drifted off to sleep immediately, just glad to be back at Hogwarts at least for a little while longer.

***
The next morning, Emma was lazily brushing her teeth in the Prefect's bathroom, the middle of her face smudged in bruise cream, when an intense knocking disrupted her peaceful routine.

Usually, Prefects didn't knock if the bathroom was being used. After all, taking a bath wasn't that urgent – and if they needed the toilet, there were plenty more on each floor. A teacher was also unlikely, they would probably be more embarrassed than the student if they caught them half-naked. So Emma could only assume that the person in question was here for Helena, the seventh-year Ravenclaw Prefect, known for wanting to “let off steam” in the evenings in the Prefect bathroom.

*Weird that she would be doing this at 11.30am on a Saturday,* Emma thought, before yelling.

'Wrong room! Helena's not in today!'

'Emma, you idiot, it's me!' Rabastan's voice surprised Emma even more. 'Open up!'

Emma automatically did as she was told, wondering why Rabastan was still up – he was infamous for needing his beauty sleep on weekends. *Probably because he's so hyped up the rest of the time.*

'Uh... Nice look, Ems,' Rabastan said stupidly, obviously forgetting what was so urgent.

Emma looked down, she was just wearing a normal jumper and jeans, what was the problem with that? Then she realised that she had tied her hair into a topknot on the top of her head to get it out of the way of the bruise cream. She flushed red, but it was too late now.

'Come on, you saw my bruises,' she sighed. 'What was so important then, huh?'

'Oh, right,' Rabastan said, obviously overcoming a fit of giggles. 'is Regulus here?'

Emma rolled her eyes. 'Why on earth would Regulus be in the Prefect's bathroom with me?'

'Oh right, sorry,' Rabastan grinned for some reason, not sorry at all. 'What I meant to say was, have you seen Regulus today?'

'No, why?' Emma asked. 'When I woke up, Lucinda and everyone had already gone to get breakfast, and since you weren't in the common room or the Great Hall, I just assumed you were still sleeping.'

'I was,' Rabastan said, looking worried now. 'Regulus wasn't. He hasn't come back all night.'

Suddenly, Emma understood the need to knock on the door. 'Just a second, I'll be out soon. You do the school, I'll search the grounds. Don't ask anyone though, we don't want to draw attention to ourselves.'

Rabastan nodded, setting off immediately.

Emma closed the door with no hint of her previous calm. She raced around the room collecting her things, stopping only to remove the bruise cream and untie her hair from its ridiculous position. The area between her eyes and nose were still yellow with a tinge of purple, but she didn't want to waste any time applying a second round of paste.

She had thought Regulus had already arrived at the Portkey, since he was used to the battles, but what if he hadn't made it? What if the Order had found him, questioned him, sent him to Azkaban? He was of age, even if he hadn't left school.

Still, she couldn't go out looking like she had been punched in the face, so she wasted five minutes modifying a Concealment Charm until she had hidden the bruise, without looking like a chunk of her nose had been ripped off. *Thank Merlin I can do Charms,* she thought, remembering all the times the
skill had gotten her out of a sticky situation. There was nothing a well-placed Charm couldn't smooth over. With the exception of the Patronus Charm, of course.

Passing through the Great Hall, she grabbed some sandwiches to eat during her search – on Saturdays there was always a mix of breakfast and lunch until two in the afternoon – and set out to scour the grounds.

***

'Emma!' Alecto waved from behind Hagrid's hut four hours later. 'I've been looking all over for you.'

She jogged over to where Emma was contemplating entering the Forbidden Forest, pausing so that the other girl could react. When she didn't, Alecto continued.

'I just wanted to let you know... it's done. And before James or Sirius could get to him either,' her voice dropped conspiratorially.

Emma started. The Regulus situation had driven her father clean out of her mind. She turned to Alecto, who was looking at her with sorrowful eyes.

'Thanks Alecto,' she said, trying to relieve her friend of the guilt that wasn't hers in the first place. 'I really mean it. I'm sure it wasn't an easy thing to do.'

'Well, what's done is done,' replied Alecto, giving a weak smile. 'I suppose I've had a lot of practice recently.' She changed the subject. 'So, what are you doing out here? When I asked where you were, Lucinda just shrugged and pointed outside.'

'I was looking for Regulus,' Emma said, a frown creasing her brow. 'I don't think he's come back from last night's raid.'

'Well, I don't think he would be in the Forbidden Forest,' the redhead steered Emma towards the castle. 'I mean, why would he go there? We're better off gathering up everyone and checking all of the usual haunts at the same time. Maybe he just took last night harder than the rest of you and is holed up somewhere, brooding in his usual manner.'

'You're probably right,' Emma conceded.

But after having found Lucinda and Barty in the common room, Rabastan guiltily eating chocolate cake in the kitchens, and convincing Cassandra that Regulus was needed to brush up on his Quidditch skills, Regulus was nowhere to be found. The hope that he would pop up that evening in time for dinner was also a false one, so Emma gathered her strength and decided to ask the one person that she knew would be tracking Regulus's presence, even if he pretended not to: Sirius Black.

Emma wasn't stupid. She knew that she would need Sirius alone, to prevent the worried face of her brother, who was happily singing and skipping down the corridor, but also to prevent Remus's inquisitive nature, who would surely see the loophole in her plot – namely to be so worried after one day's disappearance. But Sirius would always believe the worst of his brother, so if he came to the conclusion that Regulus was a Death Eater – one he had long believed to be true – then no one would pay the accusation much attention.

'Diffindo,' she whispered, pointing her wand at Sirius's bag.
It split along the seams, revealing a number of odd objects that would surely be used in their next pranks. To name but a few: Odd Onyx's smoke powder, Fizzing Whizzbees, a Frog Spawn Soap, and several Witch Weekly magazines complete with free test products.

'Go on without me,' Sirius waved off the other boys, as Emma had guessed he would.

What she hadn't counted on, was the fangirls.

They swarmed as soon as the other boys left, no longer intimidated by the group effect. Thinking quickly, Emma cast another spell, this one less harmless.

'Titillando.'

The Tickling Hex burst forth, though she hadn't aimed at one girl in particular. It latched onto one of them, who immediately started squirming and accidentally elbowed another. Soon all of the girls were fighting among each other, and Sirius escaped unnoticed by all.

All except Emma, that was.

She finally cornered him at the end of the hallway.

'Sirius,' she said, coming up to him. 'I need to talk to you.'

'What for?' he snarled. 'What could you possibly have to say to me?'

Emma fell silent, her question dying on her lips. What did I do to deserve such a reaction?

'Look, if you've come to gloat...'

'Why would I have come to gloat?' Emma asked, nonplussed.

'Everyone says that we've switched families,' Sirius said slowly, the words seemingly forced out of him. 'That either you stole mine or I stole yours. That only James is left. Well, congratulations, you chose the winning side.'

'I don't understand...' Emma trailed off, frowning at the emotional boy in front of her.

'Didn't you hear? Charles Potter's dead. I chose the wrong family, because I chose the dead one.'

He stifled what sounded suspiciously like a sob, and ran out of the hallway in a very inelegant, un-Sirius-like manner, leaving Emma to soak in his words.
The words were like a punch to the stomach. Literally.

Black dots appeared in her vision as Emma stumbled back. A cold chill washed over her in several waves, but at the same time the confines of the hallway seemed stifling. There was only one place she could turn to, the one place where she could forget about everything bad that happened in her cursed life.

Because that's what it felt like: she was cursed. Everything she tried to set right seemed to collapse, and everything she left for a later date was whisked out from underneath her feet, as though life was mocking her. *Think you've got time for that? Think again.*

She should have known she couldn't turn her back for even a second.

Out on the Quidditch pitch, the last of the day's light was fading from the horizon. The cool November air dried the beads of sweat she hadn't even noticed form on her face. The chills were still coming, but she could ignore them, pretend that they were merely the result of the autumn cold settling in for the night.

*You would think I was used to this by now,* she thought grimly. A Thestral soared through the night sky, reminding her of their earlier lesson. She remembered why she could see them now, remembering the Giant's head sliding to the ground as the Gurg delighted in his new gift. A gift she had given him. Emma supposed that that was the first death she had been responsible for. She hated herself for not even giving the Giant a second thought.

*Just like we don't give Muggles a second thought,* she reminded herself with disgust, recalling the previous day's events. The face of the man, staring up at her in horror in the graveyard. There was no difference between wizard and Muggle. Not when they were dead. Why should there be one when they were alive? If it weren't for wizards, her father wouldn't have survived. If it weren't for wizards, her father would still be alive.

The irony of it sent a bubble of hysterical laughter from Emma's mouth. The sound reverberated unnaturally around the pitch and she clasped her hands to her face, as if to force the feeling back down.

She had always assumed that Charles would still...be there. She had vowed to show him what a fool he'd been, in the end. She had been expecting his shameful but still cheeky grin as he hung his head, a habit James had picked up on, when he welcomed her back into his arms. She had half been hoping that it would be her first year all over again, that after a stern conversation with her mother he would tell her that he still loved her, that he had never stopped.

But the conversation with her mother had never come to pass.

Because she had killed her mother too. How many people would pay for her ambition? Was this what it meant to be a Slytherin? Was this what the greater good meant? Was the greater good even worth it?

Emma closed her eyes, concentrating on taking breath after breath. By now, she could identify the tell-tale signs of being overwhelmed. It would not do to panic right now. She needed to calm her thoughts, needed to organise herself.

*Who was the strongest person she knew?*
An hour into Emma's introspection, she felt more lost than ever.

Were wizards really that different to Muggles? Should Muggles be persecuted for things that only some Muggles did? But what if the families of Muggleborns only accepted them because they were family? But Charles hadn't accepted her, even if they were family.

Were Muggleborns lesser wizards? Regulus's research had proved their cause just, but Lily Evans had simply set all of their theories ablaze with a toss of her flaming red hair. Besides, not all Purebloods were good wizards. Though the Dark Lord had suggested that that was to do with impure genes...

The Dark Lord was indeed a formidable wizard. He wouldn't just ignore these flaws. Though he inspired fear in the hearts of his followers, including Emma herself, he was extremely intelligent. She would just ask him the questions. She wasn't deviating from the cause, simply clarifying the case of Lily Evans. She would just have to find a way to ask him in person, away from the prying eyes of Death Eaters looking for spies.

With a short nod of her head, Emma regained conscious of the world around her. She was shivering from the cold, almost shuddering. The sky had faded to an inky black, pinpricks of starlight the only means of observing her surroundings. In this dim light, the shadows cast by the Quidditch posts seemed distorted, out of this world. They comforted her, more than familiar surroundings would. In this time of doubt, she could rely on Quidditch to make her feelings seem clear. Plus, in this netherworld, it was hard for reality to affect her.

Although Emma felt like she was in a state of dreaming, she had enough sense to realise that she might do herself some damage if she didn't warm up quickly. Conjuring her favourite bluebell flames, she held her hands over the flickering light. The pain of the blood warming in her hands was a distraction, but a welcome one. It gave her something to concentrate on, the way the Muggle problem allowed her to dwell on something other than the hammer that seemed to be pressing itself further and further into her chest.

A wave of warmth rushed over her body in the form of a cloak. A presence settled itself next to her and without even turning her head, Emma knew it was Regulus. Questions vaguely bubbled up in her mind, but they were quashed by the peacefulness of the night. Whatever it was, it could wait. Regulus would explain it anyway. He wouldn't have come to the Quidditch pitch for anything else.

'You should keep warm on a night like this,' he admonished softly.

There was no need to warn Regulus to keep his voice down. He could read an atmosphere the way others read books. Emma assumed that it was a trait left over from childhood instincts. Merlin knew that he would have needed them.

'So what brings you out?' he asked.

This was a first. Usually Regulus sat in companionable silence, and it was left to Emma to break it. Sometimes, they would lie in the middle of the pitch for half of the night, before mutually deciding to go back to the castle. Then again, the past two years had changed them. Emma wasn't sure that it was for the better.
She swivelled her head to face him, surprised when she saw her feelings mirrored in Regulus's
expression. The blank mask was gone, disappeared without a trace, allowing her to see the deject
misery colouring his features. His grey eyes had lost their spark, their inquisitiveness that Emma
usually associated with her friend. They were half-closed, allowing Emma to see the curving sweep
of his eyelashes, as black as his hair. They were slightly clumped together, silvery with the reflection
of the firelight.

Wait…has Regulus been crying? she asked herself, waking from her trance-like state.

Now that she had a clear look at him, Regulus's whole face had gone slack from despair, as though
he had given up. His mouth was downturned. On his features, it seemed as like a haughty, arrogant
expression, but Emma instinctively knew that it was to reign in the pain. She knew it all too well.
Upon further study, Regulus's grey eyes were rimmed red and puffy, a sure sign that he had been
crying.

She was about to ask him that very question, when she stopped herself short. That wasn't the way
things went, with Regulus. She couldn't make him look weak, not when it was Slytherin's most hated
trait. She couldn't deprive him of the one thing Regulus prided himself on – his composure.

She remembered that fateful Occlumency night all too well. She needed to coax the story out of him,
a story she wasn't all too sure she wanted to know. But it was too late to think of something now, the
silence had already gone on for too long and he was giving her a strange look.

Realising her lips were pursed as if to talk, Emma surprised herself by saying, 'Have you ever done
something unforgivable?'

'As in an Unforgivable Curse?' he asked, also holding his hands over the flames.

Emma muttered a spell to make the fire larger. The scene reminded her of when they had camped out
near the Giant's enclave. Why are you remembering that day, now of all times? She quashed the
thought. Why didn't you tell Alecto what you clearly wanted her to do?

Wrenching her mind back to Regulus, she already felt better, now that she wasn't left alone with only
her thoughts for company.

'Something along those lines,' she agreed.

'Can I skip this question?' he joked half-heartedly. He was rewarded with a look and the pretence of
humour was dropped. He seemed to think for a minute, as though he wasn't sure he wanted to
answer her. 'Nothing I've done, as such...' His voice became quiet. 'More like something I didn't do.'

'Like with your brother?' Emma asked.

Something about the night made secrets seem like a betrayal. She asked him upfront because she was
sure the subject wouldn't be avoided. This strange reality with half-lights and shadows would remain
apart, separate from their day to day lives. Anything could happen, just like what happened on the
Quidditch pitch didn't affect the players' relationships.

'Like with Sirius,' Regulus agreed, the name echoing a little around the stadium. It seemed as though
Regulus was summoning the memory of his brother to serve as witness to his crime. 'I...'

He clamped his mouth shut, but it seemed like an involuntary reaction. His eyes dropped to the
dancing blue flames. 'There was something I should have done, but I didn't. I'm too much of a
coward. Sirius was right..."
Emma moved closer, tentatively putting a hand on Regulus's arm. It was warm to the touch, even through the woollen jumper. When he didn't move, she tilted her head, forcing him to look her in the eyes.

'Trust me. I'm the last person to judge you on that front,' she said firmly. 'I left things the way they were with my father instead of trying to explain. Now...it's too late to do anything.'

'I watched as the Dark Lord killed mine,' Regulus's voice was little more than a whisper.

Emma willed her face not to betray her shock. She waited for the rest of the story.

'She...Bellatrix...saw Sirius. Last night...’ Regulus paused, as if the words were stuck in his throat. When he next spoke, his voice was hoarse.

'During the battle,’ he said, 'Sirius was there. He must have joined the other side. So much for Dumbledore's "protect those at school" policy. Oh well. He's seventeen, I suppose that's what counts. Anyway, when I realised there were too many of them and made for the exit, Bellatrix grabbed my arm. She told me that she was calling a family meeting, right then.'

Another deep breath.

'When we got to Grimmauld Place, Narcissa was already there. Druella and Cygnus were abroad, collecting money from their French accounts in order to help us finance this war, so they were absent. But my parents...it was as if they already knew. My mother was white, my father barely rose from his chair. Then Bellatrix broke the news. Of course, Mother turned into a raving lunatic. She shouted how she would kill the ungrateful boy, and Bellatrix was all ready to march on Hogwarts, just the two of them. Of course, Narcissa stayed silent. I saw the wisdom in her course of action.

'Then Father had to get in the way. He told mother that blowing Sirius's name off of a tapestry doesn't change blood. Sirius is their son, simple as that. Blood before anything else. Toujours pur. Well, Mother didn't like that. She went completely off the rails, calling him a traitor, saying that this "blood" must have come from him, Orion, because Walburga didn't have that stench running through her veins. I've never seen her so angry in my life.

'So the blood had to go. Even Bellatrix stayed back for that part, though I don't know if that's because she thought my mother could handle the situation or if she was genuinely scared. I was ready to vomit; the only thing stopping me was the thought of the wand turning onto myself. Narcissa was the calm one. She walked up to me, put a hand on my shoulder and a finger on the Dark Mark. I don't know what she expected, but I suppose that she thought anything was better than the scene before us.

'The Dark Lord arrived to see my father's blood staining the carpet, my mother slashing wildly here and there. It didn't even touch him. He was above such pettiness. With a single flick of his wand, he sent my mother to the armchair and Imperiused my father to stand. The Imperius didn't work, and the Dark Lord didn't like that. My father stood up afterwards – he always did like the dramatics. The Dark Lord asked my father what the most important thing was, what we Death Eaters were fighting for.

'My father had the strangest look on his face, as though he was the one with the power, not the Dark Lord. For a second, I was sure that the Dark Lord was...afraid. As though Father knew something that could undo him. Father smirked, but he only said one word: "Blood". The next thing I knew, there was a blinding green light. I think you know what that means.'

Just as Emma thought Regulus's tale was over, he shook his head, a sob escaping his lips. Emma
drew nearer, trying to infuse her friend with her strength, ashamed of her own problems. As they had before, they were nothing near to the horror Regulus was going through. He continued, not even noticing her presence.

'I stood there, without making a noise, the whole time. What kind of a son am I? What kind of a person is that despicable?'

Shame flowed through Emma, removing the last trace of cold from her body and squeezing her heart in a death grip. She couldn't stand it any longer, Regulus's guilt for something he took no part in, the same questioning in his tone as he spoke of the Dark Lord.

'I made Alecto kill Charles,' the words tumbled out one by one, as though they couldn't wait to be free.

They hung in the air, as though burned with a wand, alongside Orion's bravery.

Regulus's eyes widened, his jaw going slack. But only for a second. Then Emma saw understanding in them, an understanding that she herself didn't quite realise, but knew that it was what she had needed. Her crime suddenly seemed less monstrous and before she knew it, she had thrown herself into his arms, knocking him to the ground in her desperation.

She wanted to bury her face into his chest and never come out, because here she was safe from the world and the world was safe from her, and it didn't seem like she was quite as lost and as bad a person as she was coming to know herself as, but whereas she shut her eyes tightly, Regulus lowered his face to look at her, leaving her nowhere to hide, the way she had stripped him bare minutes before.

Suddenly, Emma realised that Regulus was kissing her and she was kissing him back and when her eyes darted back to his she saw the same shame, the same fear, the same self-loathing that she had been feeling ever since she had killed her first parent, let alone now there were two, and then they were kissing again, searching for a way to bury their feelings without self-destructing, because they were Slytherins, and Slytherins were survivors.
'Shit… shit, shit, shit!' Emma cursed under her breath with increasing frequency, hunting for her clothes under Regulus's enlarged cloak.

She blushed as she accidentally touched his bare chest, but was quickly admonished by the voice in her head, *now you've gone and done it*

'Don't remind me,' she groaned, pulling her stockings back on, before slipping her school shoes over her feet.

Of course, the voice in her head didn't listen to her - it never did. Since when did she listen to herself?

With a quickly modified *Aguamenti* charm, she splashed some water onto her face, freshening herself up a little. Glancing over at the bluebell flames, Emma decided that Regulus might be grateful for their warmth a little while longer. He knew the dispel charm anyway.

Satisfied that she had everything she needed, she ran her fingers through her hair on the way back to the castle – a sad attempt at brushing out the tangled knots. She knew that she looked bedraggled, and bedraggled was not in the dictionary of a seventh-year Slytherin. Poised, cool, collected. That was what they were, and the traits the Dark Lord prized in her.

The sun was peeking its face over the hill, bathing the castle in a misty light. The ground crunched under her feet, and she thanked Merlin the Quidditch pitch floor was impervious to the elements - preventing any fatal injuries upon hitting the ice. It wouldn't be easy to sneak back in, but Emma was an old hat at this kind of thing by now. She just hoped none of her roommates would be awake yet. The odds were with her, on a Sunday morning.

Jogging the rest of the way up the stairs, preparing her alibi just in case she did meet someone, she tried to reduce her embarrassment about the situation. It wouldn't do for her to go bright red at any mention of it - that would give it away. So she had slept with Regulus, so what? It wasn't that bad, was it?

*Who are you kidding,* the voice asked snidely in the back of her mind. *You've messed it up so much, you don't even know how bad it is.*

Of course Emma knew that Regulus had slept with other girls. It didn't matter, why would it? They were friends, and she knew that it was a coping mechanism of sorts. She should have known that would be his first instinct last night. After all, they weren't fourteen anymore. She just couldn't believe she'd let him. It would change their relationship, tiptoeing around this as if it had never happened. Because in Emma's mind, that was the only way to deal with this.

Still, even if she did preserve her dignity, she would know that she was another notch in Regulus's belt. She was supposed to be special, something she readily admitted to herself. She had turned her nose up at this kind of thing – she had no time for it, there were better things to be doing with her time. But for her to be doing it with *Regulus* of all people... This made her no different from the other girls who had fawned over him, even Lucinda. Regulus had never had much respect for the blonde, even if she was his friend.

*Merlin, Lucinda,* she realised with a jolt. On one hand, she would love to talk to her friend about this, ask her how it was for her and so on and so forth. She could never imagine this conversation with
Alecto, especially not now of all times. But how would Lucinda react, when Emma had scoffed at the idea of fancying her best friend? She would think that Emma had driven a wedge between Regulus and Lucinda on purpose all those months ago.

That hardened her resolve. Emma would push past this, the way she had pushed past every other obstacle life had thrown at her. She would use that part of Gryffindor stubbornness she had inherited, and put it to good use.

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'Emma!'

This was it, Regulus had cornered her. She had been avoiding him ever since he came up from breakfast late that morning, stifling yawns as she tried to do her Arithmancy homework. Homework. Now that was a laughable activity after the weekend she had had.

But appearances had to be kept up, and Amelia Bones wasn't going to fall for their innocent trick within a couple of months. She had to be irreproachable, an ordinary student, ambitious for the future. It was bad enough that she had abandoned her duties as a Prefect, though most of the others in their seventh year were also groaning under the weight of the pressure.

Lucinda smiled her sympathy. She didn't know about Charles yet, and had readily believed Emma's excuse of having gone down to the pitch for the morning. It helped that Emma had been slacking off recently - also because she was covered in sweat and grime despite her best effort that morning. Regulus must have used the Quidditch showers and pretended he slept in, though how he got that excuse past Rabastan was beyond her.

Speaking of Regulus, he was looking at her intently from the bottom of the staircase, his intentions obvious from the seriousness of his face. He wouldn't approach her, not within hearing distance of Lucinda. Without any of the others in the room, she would dismiss the secretiveness as Death Eater business and be happy that she could have plausible deniability if Bones ever came breathing down her neck.

Sighing, Emma stood and made her way over to him. Best get this over and done with, she thought.

'Look, Emma,' Regulus said, before stopping.

The double use of her name promised an awkward conversation. He looked sheepish, ruffling his hair the way he always did when he was nervous. And were his cheeks reddening?

Emma decided to end his misery for him. After all, looking at it pragmatically, it must have been even worse for him to have his side of the conversation. She could at least offer some compassion… and pretend that it didn't mean anything to her either. Hopefully after a few weeks they would laugh about it. Or forget about it entirely. Truth be told, it happened so fast I'm not even sure I remember everything, she confessed inwardly.

'It's okay, I get it,' she replied, cutting through whatever he was about to say next. 'Don't worry, I know it didn't mean anything. I mean, it didn't mean anything to me either. I was upset, you were upset...these things happen. Neither of us were in our right mind. So let's just...leave it be, and get on as if nothing changed, right?'

She finished the sentence in a rush, her heart rushing to her throat. What had they been thinking last night? She almost couldn't believe herself, but going back to the moment, she had felt so different, so
separate from her usual self, that it almost seemed as if it had happened to two different people. She supposed that that was good, in a way. It would make it easier to remind herself of the fact that her relationship with Regulus was one that she really couldn't mess up.

Regulus seemed at a loss for words. He opened his mouth, closed it, and fought hard to conceal the expression that had tried to make its way to his face. Emma closed her eyes for a moment, hoping against hope that he wouldn't give her the cold shoulder, that he wouldn't tell her the same things Lucinda had repeated to her that New Year.

'Okay,' he replied instead with a shrug, and stalked down the stairs to the boy's dormitory.

Well, that went... more smoothly than expected, the voice remarked in her head. Somehow, Regulus's reaction had caught her off-guard. She had been building up the tension in her head and he had brushed it off as though it were an everyday occurrence. "Could you take over patrol for me tonight?" "Okay, Emma!"

Oh stop the dramatics, Emma, what did you think he would do? Slightly ashamed of herself, Emma meekly obeyed the voice.

'What was that all about?' Lucinda asked as Emma returned to the fireplace, making sure to sit close to the fire to explain the blood rushing to her cheeks.

'Oh, just family stuff,' Emma mumbled. 'You know, Sirius and stuff. That's why he went missing yesterday.'

She couldn't have been more vague, but Lucinda was more than used to having less to go on when it came to Regulus and his mysterious ways, so they moved on to Transfiguration. Human Transfiguration was the hardest to master, so it came as no surprise to either of the girls when Lucinda's left arm turned into a table leg, nor when Emma found her lower half transformed into half of a knitted blanket. Fortunately, Professor McGonagall had provided them with several counter-spells in case of partial transfiguration.

Thank Merlin we aren't doing animate objects, Emma thought. If she couldn't even become an Animagus, what chance did she stand to transform Lucinda into a bird? Though supposedly it was easier to transform others into a specific animal...

'Is this seat taken?' an unsure voice asked.

Emma looked up, but upon seeing Alecto her eyes narrowed.

'I guess,' she said, purposefully off-handedly.

Lucinda looked from one to the other, probably wondering what Death Eater drama had happened to make her friends act the way they did. When neither girl deigned to enlighten her, she closed the heavy A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration with a snap.

'Alright, I'm sick of this. What's up?'

Emma looked at the blond girl. Her eyes shone with a steely determination. She wasn't going to let this go. But it was bad enough that Alecto and Regulus had seen the ashes of her family tree. Lucinda wouldn't pity her even more than she already did. Slytherins weren't supposed to feel weak, let alone look it.

'It's because of Halloween,' Emma sighed, letting enough of her doubt creep into her voice in order to seem plausible. 'I know it had to be done, I just can't really wrap my head around it.'
'It'll get easier each time,' Alecto latched onto the excuse. 'I wish I could have swapped with you. We all have our part to play here, and it wasn't fair on you or Rabastan to use you in a field you weren't comfortable with.'

Emma scrutinized Alecto, wondering if there was a hidden meaning behind her words. *Does she think I might defect? Does she resent me for sending her to kill an old man in hospital?* Maybe she should take her friend at face value, after all there were next to no secrets between them. But some part of her rebelled, checking every word for the shadow of another.

'I wish you had gone too,' she replied, inwardly adding, *so that my father could still be alive.*

'Oh Emma,' Lucinda sighed, a long, heart-felt sigh that put the other girls' acting to shame. 'This is why I never wanted to be a part of all of this business. Everyone seems to be growing up so fast, when we should be just enjoying our last year at Hogwarts.'

Emma never took her eyes off of the redhead, whose eyes revealed nothing but flatness.

'Maybe you were right to,' she replied, swinging her legs off of the sofa. 'But it's too late now. We've already changed so much. I think the Quidditch practice was a bad idea though, I'm exhausted. I think I'm going to lie down for a bit.'

Alecto caught her arm at the top of the stairs, her nails slightly digging into Emma's bare skin as she handed Emma her book bag back. Her eyes were a little wild, as she tried one last time.

'I don't understand,' she hissed. 'I did this for you, as a friend! It's not like you had to hold the wand.'

'I only wanted you to remove his memories, Alecto!' Emma whispered back, the anger she had been holding in for the past day finally seeping into her tone. 'Not fucking kill him!'

'How was I supposed to know that?' Alecto asked, genuinely hurt. 'You should be thankful I would go to such lengths -'

She looked as though she was about to say more, but a horde of fifth years ran giggling towards the staircase, thundering down to their dorm room. Emma waited for a second on the steps, but Alecto merely flashed her eyes in anger and shook her head, storming out of the common room.

Later, fuming inside her four-poster bed, she wondered if she hadn't just made a huge mistake. After all, it was not wise to create an enemy of someone who knew your every secret. If Alecto so wished, she could sell Emma out to either side with all of the evidence she had. Clasping her locket in her hand, Emma resolved to never give out another shred of information.

*Trust no one*, the voice whispered a long-forgotten motto, as she drifted off to sleep.

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The next day in Charms, Alecto made sure to be partnered with Emma, Levitating Rabastan out of his seat two rows down. The unfortunate boy looked around in bewilderment, but by the time his eyes locked onto the redhead, Flitwick had called for their attention. As a result, Rabastan was praised for promoting inter-house unity, by pairing up with a Hufflepuff.

The scowl on his face was matched only by that of Hestia, the Hufflepuff in question who already had a history with Rabastan. Emma had to stifle a laugh at the memory of the Polyjuice Potion fiasco in their sixth year.
The smile on her face faded quickly as she realised she would be paired with Alecto for the duration of the class. Determined not to make a scene, she concentrated on the subject at hand – putting their frog into a deep sleep. They would be moving onto their partners in a few weeks, but since many of the frogs actually stopped breathing, Flitwick wanted to make sure that every single person got the incantation right.

Ironically, Alecto and Emma were supposed to be practising the non-verbal version, as they had both mastered the charm within the last week. Little did Flitwick know, the Dark Lord encouraged the command of this charm, especially when it came to subterfuge. He had discovered Alecto's special talent with Memory Charms and was putting her to good use – someone needed to clean up Bellatrix's messes, after all.

'Emma,' Alecto tried to get the dark-haired girl's attention.

Emma ignored her, but her incantation went awry, causing one of her frog's eyelids to droop drastically. The frog tried to take advantage of the situation, but miscalculated his leap, jumping straight into her ink bottle. Cursing, she grabbed the frog and sat it back into the middle of her desk.

Alecto cleared up the mess with a wave of her wand. 'You can't just go on ignoring me, you know. It'll look suspicious.'

Realising that she wasn't going to escape the conversation, Emma resignedly cast *Petrificus Totalus* on her frog in case of another escape attempt. The glum expression frozen onto its face almost matched her own as she sat back petulantly in her seat.

'Listen, I'm sorry I misunderstood your intentions. But really, I did you a favour. The Dark Lord will be pleased when he hears about this, and you'll be trusted with even more missions. No one will ever doubt you again!'

Emma looked at the redhead incredulously, but there was no trace of guilt in her eyes.

'Are you fucking serious?' she asked.

'Language, Miss Potter!' Flitwick cried, surprisingly close to their workspace. 'And charming your frog into a statue first could be considered as cheating in the exam!'

Both girls started in their seats, wondering if he had heard Alecto's words. After a moment, they went back to their conversation, satisfied that no one was listening. Emma un-petrified the frog, letting it recover whilst she replied furiously.

'You just don't get it do you?' she whispered. 'You don't just go murdering people, because they're inconvenient. Unlike you, I'm not a total sociopath!'

Her words just threw salt on the wound. Emma had certainly not forgotten about that small matter, nor how she would have been homeless and penniless if her mother had not drawn up a separate will just in case.

Venting her rage on the frog, she jabbed the wand into its belly. *Somnus*, she thought, imagining Alecto falling unconscious on the floor.
'Well done, Miss Potter! Ten points to Slytherin!'
The quill hovered over the parchment, the occasional drip reminding Emma that she always filled it with too much ink before finding the words to write. Fascinated, she watched the blots seep into the parchment as if trying to become part of the paper. You could still see the faint lines criss-crossing the expanse of white though.

Emma sighed, waving the parchment clean with her wand. She usually wrote to Narcissa in a weekly update of what went on in the school – potential Death Eaters, those who seemed like they were weak enough to be coerced into submission, and those strong enough to be deemed a threat. In a way, she was a spy, though technically Hogwarts wasn't enemy territory. Unless one counted its headmaster, which the Dark Lord obviously did.

With the appointment of Amelia Bones as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Emma had to write her correspondence as though it would be read by Alastor Moody – innocent enough to escape notice.

*Dear Narcissa,* she wrote.

*As you well know, this week has been rather hectic. I'm sorry to disappoint, but I have no gossip to tell about my classmates. I wanted you to hear this from me: My father has recently passed away, it turns out that Dragon Pox is as unpredictable as it is fatal. I heard that some similar illness took hold of Orion, please send all of my best wishes to Walburga and your parents.*

*Regulus is holding up as well as can be imagined, I don't believe it will side-track his studies in any way. He's made of the sterner stuff, just like all of you Blacks. I can't think of you as a Malfoy – I guess that will change as time goes on.*

*I doubt I will be invited to my father's funeral, in any case I will be unwelcome. It may sound callous, but I feel like the last obstacle has been removed between James and me, as if we can start our relationship anew. At least Lily's been a good influence. She of all people would have reason to hate Slytherins, but instead she preaches inter-house friendships almost as much as Dumbledore does. Minus the hypocrisy, of course. Remember her friendship with Severus? It's a shame that he burned that bridge...*

*Moving on, I've found my skill in Charms to be improving in leaps and bounds, though I can't say the same for my Transfiguration. I suppose there's just a lot on my mind. Transfiguration needs a ton of concentration, that I apparently don't have. I'd like to blame it on McGonagall being the head of Gryffindor house, but she's as fair a teacher as they come. If she has favourites, she picks them on skill, rather than House. Before you ask, no that does not apply to Quidditch!*  

*How are you, anyway? You told me last week that you and Lucius were trying to have children? Isn't that a bit early? I remember you once telling me that you wanted to live a little before having a child consume your life. Have you gone all motherly on me now?*

*How's your herb garden doing? Now that the frost has settled in, I suppose your stock isn't as*
plentiful as you might have wished. Your birthday's coming up soon, maybe you'd want some plants? I can always nick some from the greenhouses! (Joking, Professor Sprout would murder me, if her plants didn't beat her to it).

Faithfully yours,

Emma

Rubbing her eyes, Emma sprinkled some sand onto the parchment to let it dry. She could have used a spell, but the effort of writing a coded message had given her a headache. Could somebody tell her the herb garden was used for Healing activities?

She was sure that the Order of the Phoenix knew about Narcissa's internship. The Malfoys were one of their prime suspects – one of the reasons Lucius wasn't used too much in the field. Instead his skills had been put to use in coordinating attacks. The Dark Lord was on the hunt for something big, something that could turn the tide of the battle. Nobody knew what, not even Bellatrix, apparently.

But even keeping that in mind, could they know that the state of her stock told those inside Hogwarts how their numbers were faring? If Narcissa had no herbs, that meant that they had all been used up in Healing injured Death Eaters back from missions. Specifically, the mission on Friday night. If Narcissa told her about a herb needing to be replaced, it meant one of their own had died. Rabastan had helped her think of that one.

The part about McGonagall, aside from everyday banter, was to tell Narcissa that Emma didn't know whether she was a part of the Order or not. The truth was, Professor McGonagall was very close to the Headmaster, but Emma had no hint of them being anything other than colleagues.

As for her paragraph on James... Well, if Sirius was in the Order, then Emma knew without a shade of doubt that her brother would be too. Her face fell at the thought. She had been counting on convincing James of the righteousness of their cause now that Charles was gone. Their father was no longer there to dispute every word that came out of his estranged daughter's mouth. But it seemed like she was too late. What she had done in her letter was damage control.

The only way to keep James safe was to imply that he wasn't prejudiced like the others. By reminding Narcissa of Lily's friendship with Severus, Emma was saying that there was more than what meets the eye to that girl. If Lily was a target, then James would stop at nothing and no one to make those responsible pay, but hopefully Emma could steer the Death Eater ship clear of Lily Evans. Maybe even convince them that she could join. The seed for this plan was planted in the letter – the emphasis on James's skills in Transfiguration.

By the time she had finished analysing every possible case scenario, Emma's feet had found their way to the Owlery. Normally she would have asked a friend, but shaken by the thought that the Order had spies amongst the students, Emma instead selected a perfectly average barn owl, one undistinguishable to the rest of them. Of course at Malfoy Manor it would stick out like a sore thumb, but by then there wouldn't be anyone to care about its physical appearance.

Hopefully, the letter would contain enough information to keep the Dark Lord happy, whilst gaining the much-needed explanation of what had happened to the others after the fight. In the meantime, Emma would have to pick up the work that she had left off recently.
Emma had made sure to sit by Rabastan for that week’s Potions class, thanking Merlin once again that they didn’t have randomly assigned seats. Though if there was a seating chart, you’d know how to sweet talk ole Sluggy into granting you an exception, she thought, as Slughorn bobbed his bowler hat at her, sweeping past her desk. She was mildly surprised that he hadn’t had a “little get-together” for Halloween, though it was just as well.

‘What a pleasure, Miss Potter,’ Rabastan said theatrically. ‘And to what do I owe this?’

Emma involuntarily glanced over at Regulus’s table. It was true that she always partnered with him, on the days she wasn’t working with Lily. The latter was whispering furiously with Sirius, both breaking off as they saw James enter the room. Emma quickly averted her eyes, she didn’t think she could ever look her brother in the eyes again after what had just occurred.

‘I just thought we should spend more time on the Ravenclaws,’ she replied, quickly starting on the Sopophorus Beans.

‘Woah, woah,’ Rabastan said, laying a hand on Emma’s to still the knife. ‘The book says “slice” not “squash”. Who are you intent on murdering next?’

Emma gave him a dark look.

‘Sorry, just an expression,’ he replied quickly, taking the knife away and looking around to see the cause. ‘I should have realised... Well, that explains it. Have you spoken to your brother yet?’

His partner shook her head mutely. Rabastan sighed and started to skin the Shrivelfig, making sure the juices all fell into the bowl below.

‘In a way, this couldn’t have come at a better time, you know. I don’t know who killed Charles Potter, but the faintest whiff of foul play has got you back on His radar. If he thinks you’re responsible and are dedicated to the cause, then He will cut you some slack when we all get out of here. Plus, it's not as if you ever got along anyway.’

‘I suppose not,’ Emma replied.

That's the second time someone's mentioned that, she thought. Trying to analyse the situation logically, putting her feelings aside to examine them, she supposed that she shouldn't have been surprised to discover what she found there. You're not actually upset at his death. In fact, it’s a huge relief. It's just because he was your father that you feel like you need to feel something, and he hasn’t even been that for the past six years. So actually, you feel guilty about not feeling bad, causing you to feel worse.

‘And there's Alecto,’ she reminded the cold voice in her head.

‘What?’ - Rabastan started, before the Sopophorus bean juice started dripping onto his robes. He yelped and moved aside. ‘How the hell did so much juice get out of those?’

Emma wasn't even listening; she was staring thoughtfully at the redhead who had turned at the sound of her name. The dark haired girl nodded ever so slightly, showing that she didn't blame Alecto for the situation any more. But their relationship would never be the same again, at least for Emma. Alecto had revealed that she could become a cold-blooded killer without question. Something about that chilled Emma to the bone.

Unbeknownst to his fellow Slytherins, Severus Snape's calculating eyes flicked between the
beans and the knife, before jotting a side-note in the cramped margin of his Potions book.

'I'll get some more,' Rabastan sighed, cutting into Emma's exchange.

'No, let me. You're tending to the potion right now, and this step doesn't come in until after
the mixture's stirred,' she replied, feeling responsible for the mess. 'You never know when the potion
turns from purple to blue.'

Inside the storeroom, Emma was forced to hunt for the remaining beans. Evidently, many of
the students were also having trouble, since usually it was impossible to even break the bean. Lots of
them seemed to squirm out from under the knife, only to shoot into the flames beneath the potion.
Having located the complete seven needed – two were on the floor – Emma straightened up only to
have the top of her head knock painfully into someone's head, forcing their teeth to clamp shut with a
click.

'Ouch,' Regulus said, rubbing his jaw.

Emma's eyes were still smarting. She was about to laugh, to make some kind of witty joke.
But she completely clammed up. The blood rushed to her face in embarrassment and she ducked
through the doorway with a mumbled apology, leaving a bemused Slytherin behind her.

'So, how did you manage to cut up those beans?' Rabastan asked, intent on making a good
elixir for once.

The aim was to complete an Elixir to Induce Euphoria by the Christmas holidays. It was up
to the students to bottle their attempts and select the best potion to be marked at the end. They had
done the same with the Polyjuice Potion during the months of September and October, but Slughorn
wasn't quite as lenient then. Nobody wanted a repeat performance of the previous year.

Emma knew how important this potion was, that it would probably be featured in the
N.E.W.T.s since it was one of the only potions that could be brewed in a single session, but she
couldn't concentrate on the Sopophorus beans for the life of her. Instead, her eyes were trained on the
grey-eyed seventeen-year-old emerging from the supply room, wondering if she hadn't made an even
bigger mistake than she previously thought.

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The strangeness Emma had felt with Regulus was happening again.

They were in the library, working on a mountain of papers. Literally. Emma could only see
the tuft of black hair that marked Rabastan as still sitting opposite her, as opposed to having bunked
off the way Alecto had. The redhead had declared that no one would have time for Muggle Studies
in a war that wizards were clearly winning, and had marched out of the room – probably to torment
some gullible first years with stories of the Bloody Baron.

Scratch that, the Bloody Baron wasn't nearly scary enough for Alecto.

Lucinda groaned, though she was only taking four N.E.W.T.s: the compulsory DADA,
Divination, Herbology and Charms. Still, the theory needed was backbreaking work. Literally. They
were all bent over, their eyes blurred from reading the books, their index fingers bearing the
indentation of a permanent quill mark.

'I'm off to find something else on DADA,' the blonde said, swinging her legs out from under
the bench. 'There must be something that can repel Dementors aside from the Patronus Charm!'

There was a mumbled acknowledgement from the three others, though they were mostly engrossed in their own work. Emma was regretting ever taking Arithmancy; her dream of becoming a Curse Breaker seemed to be dwindling further and further into the distance. The Wizarding War was dragging on, with no signs of stopping. She couldn't pretend that it would be over by the time she graduated anymore.

_There was a time when you prayed for the war to end after graduation_, the voice in her head said snidely. _How would you prove yourself if you didn't even get the chance?_

_Shut up_, she replied vehemently, imagining herself chucking the Arithmancy book at the voice. The fantasy was enjoyable for a moment, before she realised that the voice didn't even exist.

Hoping to take her mind off of things and feeling like she couldn't take one more line of code, she cast her eyes about for a change of topic. They settled on Regulus, who had decided on a Quick-Quotes-Quill, mouthing words silently as he read his enormous dusty tome. Emma peered at the cover, angling her head sideways: _House-elves and Garden Gnomes, an Understated History_.

_Well, that was unexpected_. Emma couldn't imagine old Binns droning on about House-elves or Gnomes, though that was mostly because by now she couldn't even remember what his voice sounded like. Unsurprisingly, she didn't mind this slip of memory.

The script itself looked to be in fine print, enlarged by Regulus's wand as he passed it over the page. Emma studied it, comparing it to her own. One summer, before the holidays and after the exams, they had all compared wand types and wondered what they meant.

Her wand was made from hawthorn, giving it a grey tinge that sometimes made her wonder if it was real wood until she touched the smooth surface, her fingers slotting into the grooves made from constant use. By contrast, Regulus's wand was a light brown, almost orangy colour. She remembered being surprised the first time she saw it, as it contrasted with his mostly black and white appearance. In fact, in his school robes, the only colour on Regulus was the green from the Slytherin logo.

What was his wand wood again? Cypress, that was it. Regulus had smirked and twirled it in his hands, saying that Ollivander had told him it was meant for heroic deeds. All the old wand maker had told Emma was that it showed that she could be a blessing or a curse, whatever that meant. Her mother had told her not to worry about Ollivander's ramblings and her father had laughed, saying that she should be happy she had something more enigmatic than James's “excellent for Transfiguration”.

Emma wondered if you could tell what the core of a wand was by observing the person, or by observing the wand. She supposed that it was a wand maker's secret. Come to think of it, the choice must be extremely hard. No wonder she had gone through thirteen boxes before settling on the right one.

Regulus's was made with the tail hair of a unicorn, whereas Emma's core was made from dragon heart-string. That made sense. Emma's magic was a little like a dragon, sleepy, but powerful and completely out of control when angered. Regulus was shyer and less prone to displays of powerful magic, but every spell he cast was carefully controlled, measured: not too much, not too little. Though if Regulus ever heard her compare him to a unicorn, she'd definitely see a bit of dark magic in the near future.

Emma reigned in a laugh at that, but went back to work when Regulus looked at her.
quizzically. Her mind wasn't on the Arithmancy though – instead she suddenly became uncomfortably aware that Regulus's other hand, the one that wasn't holding the wand, was on the back of her chair. In her haste to look like she was studying, she had leant back in her chair, causing said hand to almost be trapped between her back and the chair though.

Regulus didn't seem to mind, and why should he? But Emma felt as though he was steadily burning a hole through her robes, all of her focus shifted to that one piece of him that was touching that one piece of her. She snuck a glance back at him, smiling when she saw that he had fallen back into a deep concentration almost a second later.

It was only when Lucinda slammed down a stack of DADA theory books that Emma realised she had fallen into a reverie where Regulus was kissing her again.
'Is there something going on between you and Regulus?' Rabastan asked at the next Potions class.

They were stuck together as partners until the end of term now. Emma didn't mind too much. She needed to wrap her head around the whole Regulus thing, and she didn't think she'd ever not feel uncomfortable around Alecto. Besides, it wasn't so bad. Rabastan reminded her of a Slytherin version of James – less reckless, but still a jokester – and he wasn't half-bad at Potions. Well, he knew how to follow the recipe, and that was all they really needed at the moment. It wasn't a by-heart situation yet.

Emma didn't even take the time to look up as she replied, concentrating on attacking the Sopophorus beans, nearly mashing them in her haste to squeeze out the juices. If they managed to make a near-perfect potion this time, it would leave them the better part of two months to redouble their efforts on separating the older students into categories.

By the time January rolled around, the Dark Lord would have written off any seventh-years as no longer impressionable. Besides, with the support of the werewolves, the giants and some goblins, he barely needed people anymore. He certainly wasn't recruiting too many Death Eaters, now, with the exception of Barty Crouch Jr, who was turning seventeen next year.

'No, what do you mean?' she asked, playing it cool.

'Well usually you've got your little conspiracy circle going on,' Rabastan continued, scraping the juice into an empty container.

The water would need to boil before they started on the elixir. Ordinarily, every step should be done right before adding the ingredients, but Rabastan and Emma were cheating a little, casting spells on the juice so as to keep it fresh for the cauldron.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Emma said. 'You of all people should know that Regulus isn't much of a talker.'

'Aha, but you are,' Rabastan lifted his finger with an air of triumph. 'And you're oddly silent. Did something happen? Why are you acting so strange around him? Is it...'

Emma skinned the Shrivelfig, hoping that Rabastan hadn't noticed what it was. Logically, she knew that there would be no reason for him to guess her... well, she refused to call it a crush. The snide little voice that wouldn't shut up told her that her feelings were trying to latch on to Regulus because it had been the first time that she... well.

The point was, if anyone was to guess at what she was feeling, it would be Lucinda. She was uncannily good at recognising the signs of impending gossip. Or Regulus himself, with his legendary insight. Which proved to be yet another reason for avoiding him.

'It's about Orion, isn't it?' Rabastan asked in a low whisper. He slammed a palm on the counter, scattering their porcupine quills. 'I knew that there was something fishy about the Vanishing Sickness! Kreacher keeps that house as spotless as a Thestral's backside!'

'As spotless as...' Emma was rendered speechless from laughter.
Rabastan twisted his face into a pout, before he too began to laugh.

'What?' he asked, shaking the quills into the potion. 'You know, because a Thestral is invisible, so you couldn't see the spots... And even if you can see them, they're black, so -'

'Oh, stop trying to justify yourself,' Emma snorted. 'Thestral's backside...'

'Shit up,' Rabastan said sulkily. 'Besides, that wasn't the point. There are more important things than my use of common wizarding expressions. Was Orion... killed by the Order?'

He asked this question in a hushed whisper, one that Emma wouldn't even have heard had their heads not been pressed together behind the cauldron in order to hide their laughter. Slughorn was a lenient teacher, but he took pride in his classroom. If he thought the two Slytherins had performed the Cheering Charm ahead of schedule, they'd have him breathing down their backs all lesson.

The smile was wiped from Emma's face. She straightened up, sombrely observing their mixture. Once the purple turned to blue, the liquid needed to be stirred. Last session, Rabastan had accidentally stirred five times instead of four, causing their potion to take on a deep orange colour instead of the described sunshine-yellow.

'No,' she whispered quietly, so quietly that Rabastan had to bend down to hear.

He waited for more, but Emma was too busy looking over at Regulus. He was working with Helena, the Ravenclaw prefect, since Alecto had partnered with Sophie Parkinson and Severus had asked to work alone, as there were fifteen students in the class. Slughorn wasn't going to object to one of his most efficient students, though he didn't adore Severus the way he loved Lily Evans.

Was Emma so selfish as to forget the very reason why they had gotten so... attached Saturday night? Regulus was coping with the loss of a parent, and whereas he had been for there with her mother, she was avoiding him like the plague. But did he miss his father, who had obviously preferred Sirius to his dying breath? Had he come to terms with Orion's fate the way Emma had filed Charles's death in her mind along with other unpleasant memories, or was he bottling it all up in a true Regulus fashion? Suddenly, she felt guilty, but because she might have abandoned her friend in his time of need.

He looked up, sensing her gaze. Did he seem upset? Were his eyelids a little droopier than usual, his shoulders hunched as though part of the hope in him had died? Rabastan followed her line of sight, tilting his head in reflection at this new situation.

Suddenly, Regulus's eyes widened, his mouth opening as if to shout a warning, but it was too late.

Emma had stirred the potion to the point of explosion.

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That weekend was – for some reason – a Hogsmeade weekend. Maybe the staff thought the students would be too worn out by the Halloween feast last weekend to venture out. In any case, Emma was glad to get out and breathe the fresh air without homework niggling at the back of her mind. She had spent too much time inside the school grounds; it was starting to feel stifling.

More out of habit than by choice, the five of them had kept up the same meandering pace
together. Helen and Sophie had tried to convince Lucinda to join them shopping – Slughorn had
spread the rumour of an “exclusive” winter party coming in December, and the girls liked to be
prepared.

But Lucinda, who had discovered somehow that she had a knack for transfiguring clothing,
had refused, intent on getting her parents to send her some quality silk so that she could make her
own dresses. For once, she insisted that they visit the bookshop once they reached Hogsmeade, so
she could get some ideas for her designs.

True to her Slytherin nature, she was discussing prices with Rabastan, who was helping her
by explaining how his father priced the houses he sold. The two of them seemed to be enjoying
themselves, creating more and more elaborate ideas on how Lucinda might create a business to rival
Madam Malkin’s, though Lucinda found adjusting school robes boring.

She had gone off the idea of going into the family business when the whole business with Mr
McKinnon went on, even more so when her father started hinting that he might sell his shares in
order to help finance the Dark Lord’s cause. Of course, Evan was overjoyed, off enjoying the finest
dragon hide jackets money could buy, convinced that dragon hide could ward off certain spells.

Alecto was drifting off slightly to the side, lost in her own world. Emma wondered if she
even remembered William, the Muggle she had fallen in love with in her fifth year, before he had
turned out to be a wizard-hater.

Why are you even thinking about this? She asked herself. He’s not worth a second of your
thoughts.

As if he had read her mind, Regulus reduced the distance between them. The troubled
expression on his face prevented her mind from straying anywhere else.

‘Do you ever think...’ he started, before trailing off. He lowered his voice so much that Emma
had trouble hearing him past the light autumn breeze. ‘Do you ever think that we might have made a
mistake? About Muggles?’

‘Of course not!’ Emma snapped automatically, though she had been wondering the same
thing. She relented. ‘I don’t think the Dark Lord would make that big of a mistake. Sure, they might
look like us, but on the inside they’re completely different. They’re not evolved enough to accept that
wizards could actually help them lead easier lives. They’ll understand once this war is over.’

‘But they don’t even know there is a war,’ Regulus protested.

‘That’s because of the Ministry of Magic,’ Emma started to argue, before realising that it
sounded like the person needing convincing was herself.

‘What about the Mudblo- Muggleborns?’ Regulus asked. ‘You can see for yourself just how
talented Lily Evans is.’

‘She’s one of a kind,’ Emma replied, something she had often repeated to herself.

‘Helen’s also a Muggleborn,’ Regulus pointed out.

‘Helen?’ Emma asked, frowning.

‘You know, the Ravenclaw prefect,’ Regulus reminded her. ‘She’s also taking at least five
N.E.W.T.s and wants to become a Healer.’
We can't have got it wrong,' Emma said, and this time her voice really did sound unsure. 'Not after everything that has happened.'

The closed look on her face stopped Regulus from continuing, though his features settled into a slight frown for the rest of the journey to Hogsmeade. Emma found herself worrying about him. Could Orion's death have shaken his beliefs? They had been so secure, so cemented in a fact merely a year ago. The truth was that if even Regulus was doubting their cause, how could Emma have faith in it?

Her mind shied away from the train of thought. Too much at stake for that one, a frantic voice seemed to say, pushing all of the relevant memories into a box and bringing out the ones that reassured her in her beliefs.

Muggles attacked wizards when they found out they had powers that Muggles could only dream of.

Muggles feared and hated wizards who tried to help them, the way they had during the Witch trials.

Muggles couldn't defend themselves against more dangerous magical beings, and only the Statute of Secrecy was preventing them from being killed off by Dementors.

Wizards had sacrificed themselves in order to save the Muggle population from deadly curses and attacks, saving them from going mad when they saw something that was too overwhelming.

It would be better under the Dark Lord's leadership.

So why was Emma having trouble believing?

Her troubling thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a dark haired heavyset man, his muscles evident even through his robes. He was leaning casually against the wall of the Three Broomsticks, twirling his wand dexterously in his left hand. His permanent cocky grin and green eyes were the only thing he had in common with his younger brother, though Rabastan's danced with barely hidden mischief, whereas this man's had a calmer, almost duller look to him.

What is Rodolphus Lestrange doing in Hogsmeade?

She barely had time to turn her head in Rabastan's direction, before the older Death Eater stopped playing with his wand. Giving them a short nod, he briskly walked towards them, pulling his hood over his head. Personally, Emma thought it made him look conspicuous, though the wind was chilly enough for the action not to be out of place.

'Quickly, I wasn't sure if you'd be out this week,' Rodolphus told them, wasting not a single word to say hello.

With a look to Lucinda, who ushered them away, the four of them hurried to keep pace with Rabastan's brother. Somehow, he managed to look both more beefy than during his school years, and more gaunt. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and his skin was pale under the tan. Once he was satisfied he had got them moving, he broke into a broad grin.

Emma wasn't sure it became him.

'Salazar am I glad you decided to come,' he said, clapping Rabastan on the back. 'Bella was breathing down my neck for potentially missing a meeting, but I had to see if you'd be in Hogsmeade. Avery's going to be gutted; he was hoping Snape would get the task.'
'What task?' Rabastan asked curiously. 'Why didn’t you just owl us?’

'Bones has all of the school owls watched. Dumbledore’s increased security, though you wouldn’t be able to tell from the inside. He knows the Dark Lord wants to get into Hogwarts,’ Rodolphus explained shortly, lengthening his strides so that Alecto was puffing slightly from the effort.

'Why does he want to get into Hogwarts?’ Emma asked, her curiosity also piqued.

'You'll see, little snake,’ Rodolphus replied, showing her his teeth.

Emma noticed that one at the back had been knocked out, probably by some Dark curse if it hadn't been regrown by Narcissa. They hurried across Hogsmeade, criss-crossing the streets until Rodolphus was satisfied that he would have spotted their tail if they had one. After that, it was a short, direct route to what looked like an old wine cellar.

It was behind a small shed, the steps down slippery with frost. The metal grating ground open with a shudder, almost coming loose in Rodolphus's meaty hands. Reevaluating the sight before her, Emma wondered if the older Lestrange was going to lead them into the sewers of Hogsmeade. It certainly smelt like it.

Fortunately, they didn’t end up in the sewers. That didn’t stop Emma from lifting her robes slightly in order to step around certain puddles. She didn’t mind a bit of mud, but the layers of ooze on the floor seemed like they had been formed from more than dirt and water. She caught Rabastan muttering an Impervius Charm a few seconds later, reinforcing her belief.

Her eyes dropped to Rodolphus’s robes – they seemed slightly singed at the bottom, though his dragonhide boots didn’t seem much worse for the wear. She wondered if they were magical, and if so, how long magic lasted in clothing before it wore out.

Concentrate on the matter at hand, Emma, she chided herself as the hallway opened up into a larger area.

The roof sloped downwards, forcing the two brothers to duck before they could straighten up again. It was a far cry from the Dark Lord’s usual haunt, but then again, the Dark Lord had changed too. Emma remembered him as having pale, nearly translucent skin. Now, he looked as though he belonged in a wax museum, his face as if he had been drained of his blood, his features unnervingly still.

The same aura of power washed over her, but instead of her usual nervous behaviour, Emma felt more relaxed than she had in a while. It was the feeling she would get when she was young, when her parents always knew what was best and her worries were quickly smothered with the sense that here was a person much wiser than her, ready to make everything better again.

She was so caught up in her contemplation of the Dark Lord that she hadn’t noticed the snake draped across his shoulders, seemingly asleep. As if noticing her gaze, the green reptile rose up hissing, twisting its head in several directions. It must have been longer than the Dark Lord was tall, as Emma glimpsed the hint of a tail near the bottom of the Dark Lord’s cloak. A forked tongue shot out to taste the air, as though the wind would tell it which of these newcomers was likely to pose the biggest threat to its master.

‘Nagini.’

The one word of warning was enough to settle the creature. Emma supposed that it was the snake’s
‘My dear young friends,’ the Dark Lord’s voice was as soft as ever. The final “s” lingered in the air, tasting it the way his familiar did with her tongue. ‘I find myself having to call upon your efforts once more.’

He paused, letting them drink up the praise of being needed by the most powerful wizard in the world. Bellatrix, never far from her master, was almost panting in anticipation, though surely she must have known of the Dark Lord’s plan in advance. Lucius, Emma noted, was nowhere to be found. *Maybe this is simply a quick stop on the way to a more important destination,* she thought.

Other than the Lestrange couple, only one person was present – one that Emma recognised from her trip to the werewolf packs. His yellowed fingernails, caked with dried blood, sent a shiver up her spine that was hard to repress. As though sensing her discomfort, the man bared his sharply filed teeth at her in a mockery of a smile. A muffled whimper from behind her told Emma that Alecto hadn’t missed the display.

‘I have been informed of the swell in the ranks of this... order... Dumbledore has attempted to gather together,’ Voldemort’s mouth twisted the words out, as though it physically repulsed him to speak them. ‘It seems that he has noticed the swell in our most hallowed ranks and has taken it upon himself to recruit unsuspecting students to his cause.’

Another pause allowed the information to sink in.

‘Well, this perversion of young pure-blood minds just won’t do, will it? Already, poor young Sirius Black has fallen victim to the old man’s charms.’

Bellatrix made an animalistic noise that was hushed by the raise of a slender palm. Regulus remained stoic, unaffected.

‘But that doesn’t mean that others are too far gone. You, my enlightened disciples, must bring your fellow students back to the right side of this war. Inform those purebloods that will not fight for our cause to get out of our way. Only dirty blood need be spilled from now on. However, if needs be...’

Emma realised that James would be on the hit list. Her mind raced, trying to think of a way to protect him from the wrath brought upon Orion Black. Quickly, she squashed any plan. Now was not the time for dangerous thoughts. Unfortunately, her face must have betrayed the inner turmoil, because as Rodolphus led her fellow seventh years back out of the door, an arm was thrust out to prevent her from leaving.

She looked up to see Bellatrix grinning down at her, the madness fully unleashed. Realising that resistance would be construed as betrayal; Emma turned back, a familiar feeling of dread washing over her. This time though, it wasn’t within the presence of Amelia Bones.

‘Emma Potter,’ the Dark Lord stated, as if calling her up to be Sorted.

Emma felt rather like an eleven-year-old again, pretending to be brave whilst knowing that she was not. She made sure her hands were folded within her velvety cloak, the one given to her by this very man. She was acutely aware of the black tattoo seared into her left forearm, the snake writhing back and forth. It was oddly comforting, giving her something to concentrate on so as to avoid the oncoming Legilimency.

‘Once again, you have exceeded my expectations.’

Emma jerked her head up sharply, wondering if she had heard him wrong.
‘Bellatrix informed me of the sudden demise of Charles Potter. I have no doubt that you were an instrument in the purging of your family tree,’ the Dark Lord’s voice grew introspective. ‘I, also, have had the misfortune of inadequate blood relatives.’

His lip curled in distaste, though Emma knew this time that it was not at her. She wondered what he was remembering, then tentatively tried to imagine what “inadequate” encompassed in the Dark Lord’s vocabulary. No wonder he had no living blood relatives to speak of.

‘Indeed,’ the Dark Lord said in reply to her thoughts.

Emma tried not to show her surprise.

‘Keep an eye on your fellow Death Eaters,’ he said, red eyes boring into blue. ‘I trust that you will keep them in line.’

Emma realised that she had just – in a way – been promoted. The Dark Lord trusted her enough to make sure the others wouldn’t waver. *If only he knew,* she thought wryly, before remembering that she had dropped her Occlumency walls around all but certain memories. It wouldn’t do to have the Dark Lord think she was hiding something from him.

‘If only I knew what, my dear?’

The chilly tone sent warning signals across Emma’s brain. Hastily, she stammered out the thing that had been occupying her thoughts for months.

‘Lily Evans is a Mudblood,’ she said without thinking. ‘But she’s talented, possibly the best witch in Hogwarts. James...’

‘Ah,’ the Dark Lord said in understanding. ‘I see why you might doubt our cause.’

Bellatrix tensed, wand at the ready.

‘Have no fear for your brother, my dear,’ Voldemort continued, surprising both women. ‘The subject of Lily Evans has puzzled me in the past, but know that her lineage is pure. She merely has the misfortune to live amongst Muggles. Your brother will come to no harm in consorting with this particular witch. Indeed, I would have the both of them join our cause, when you think they are ready. Perhaps your blood family can join your new one.’
Emma had pondered the Dark Lord’s words all the way back from Hogsmeade. It felt like a load had been lifted, her mind free of the shadow of her father’s opinions. She had proof now, that Charles was wrong. She hadn’t realised how much weight his words had carried until now.

She chatted and laughed with Lucinda and Helen, promising to sit around the fire and gorge herself on sweets like the good old days in third year. After all, this was the last year they could do so. She had a feeling that sweets wouldn’t be at the top of her to-do list upon graduating.

When she got back, she found her fellow Death Eaters hanging around in the Great Hall, seemingly killing time before the evening meal. In reality, she knew that they would have carried the Dark Lord’s words to heart, devising a plan with which to separate the student body and identify the threat. It wouldn’t be all too different from recruiting fellow Slytherins to their cause, though they would have to proceed with more caution. After all, only Slytherins would keep the secret to heart.

Emma could only imagine what a Gryffindor would do with the information, especially a hot-head like Marlene McKinnon.

‘Emma,’ Rabastan called her over, waving an arm.

As if she hadn’t noticed them already. There were only two or three groups in the Great Hall, though technically it should be used as a study hall. Rabastan’s voice echoed throughout the room, sending a ripple across the enchanted ceiling. Emma glanced up – it looked as though they’d be in for a storm that night.

‘We’ve made a list of possible suspects, seventeen and over who could have already joined up,’ Alecto said almost as soon as Emma sat down. She motioned towards several rolls of parchment. ‘There’s no point in checking the lower years; by the time they’re old enough to do any damage the fight will already be over.’

Emma gave a short nod, slipping into the role of Quidditch Captain without even realising it. She scanned the shortest list.

*Sirius Black – known sympathiser*

*Marlene McKinnon – grounds for action*

*Mary McDonald – Mudblood*

*Lily Evans – Mudblood*

*James Potter – known associate of Sirius Black*

*Remus Lupin – known associate of Sirius Black*
'These are all Gryffindor seventh years,' Emma said, looking up at Alecto.

'They’re the most likely candidates,’ the redhead replied with a shrug.

Emma forced her bubbling annoyance to recede into the depth of her stomach. She wouldn’t protect James by being defensive, instead she’d use cool cunning – the way a true Slytherin would. Knowing that she would never be able to pull off Regulus’s impenetrable mask, she adopted a frown of concentration.

'We can cross Lily off already,’ she said, picking up the quill and drawing a line through the name. ‘The Dark Lord has informed me that her lineage is in fact pure.’

'I knew you would try to... wait, what?’ Alecto had already taken a defensive magic stance in preparation of Emma’s anger. Instead, she was at a loss for words. Emma took the opportunity to plough on.

'The others will be investigated, of course, other than Sirius Black, who will have to be monitored. Rabastan and I will take care of that. Regulus, you find out anything you can in the rumour mill. Alecto, I trust you’ll find a way to dissuade the younger students from joining, especially the Ravenclaws who will calculate which side they would gain the most from joining,’ Emma paused, glancing at a second sheet of parchment. ‘Quirrel seems like a good start. “Interest in Defensive Theories of the Dark Arts”, however no one knows the reason behind it.’

‘He’s been bullied for a while,’ Regulus chimed in. ‘We should inform him of the practical uses of the Dark Arts in these situations. I’m sure Barty would love to help out, he’s in his year.’

‘Good,’ Emma nodded. ‘As for -’

‘Wait a minute,’ Alecto cut through, impatience bleeding into her tone. ‘You can’t investigate your brother. You’re too close. Besides, who gave you the right to commandeer this operation?’

‘I’d rather like to know that too,’ Rabastan leant back into his seat, folding his arms.

‘I was going to suggest that Rabastan investigate James,’ Emma smiled sweetly at her former best friend. ‘I’ll take on Remus, as most of the younger Slytherins now believe I have a crush on him, by no small means thanks to you.’

She took a moment to glare at Rabastan, who in turn looked unapologetic. Savouring this petty victory, Emma felt a smirk creep across her face as she said her next words.

‘As for who gave me the right? Why, my dear Alecto, Voldemort himself.’

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Emma was positively radiating with excitement for the next couple of weeks, planning strategies and calculating possible opponent weaknesses along with Rabastan. By contrast, Regulus seemed even more reserved than usual.

Usually, Emma didn’t mind his taciturn ways, but she had begun to feel like the silence was awkward. She couldn’t read him the way she was used to, becoming shy whenever he glanced her way. Try as she may to curse her stupidity out of her brain, she couldn’t help it. As a result, she spent
most of her time avoiding his gaze, all the while staring at him from a safe distance, trying to puzzle
him out.

‘Emma! Hello?’

Rabastan shot a Stinging Hex at her.

‘Ouch!’ Emma exclaimed, rubbing at her arm. ‘What was that for?’

‘You weren’t listening,’ Rabastan shrugged. ‘What was I supposed to do?’

When no response was forthcoming, he carried on.

‘You haven’t scheduled a Quidditch practice in ages, and the first match is coming up. Maybe we
should spend more time on that and less on a wild goose hunt for Order of the Birds members.’

Emma’s shoulders sagged a little. As far as they could tell, there wasn’t a way to see how these
potential members were all meeting up. She was certain Sirius was a part of it, but even camping
outside the Gryffindor dormitories with the Cloak every night had yet to yield results.

Alecto had taken the plan a little excessively to heart, and the rumour mill of Dark Arts being
practiced at Hogwarts had started up again. Emma had thought that they were finished with that
along with Avery, but it seemed like Alecto had thrown caution to the winds.

*That’s not fair,* she chided herself. She couldn’t let her personal feelings cloud her judgement. Their
broken friendship had been grudgingly patched up again, but both girls knew that there was now a
gulf between them. *I just can’t trust her.*

While it was true that most Slytherins had a slightly scary side to them – their willingness to do
whatever it takes rivalled almost the bull-headed Gryffindors – it was usually kept under control.
Rabastan, for example, whilst unabashed at using the darker side of magic, had managed to devote
the maniacal side of his personality to hunting the Dark Lord’s opponents during the holidays. At
school, he kept it to pranks and their new project.

Alecto, on the other hand, seemed to have developed a taste for ruthlessness to the point where she
was disappointed if the student joined their side. As Regulus had suspected, Barty had managed to
cheerily point Quirrel from Ravenclaw to a stack of books on the milder side of the Dark Arts. After
that, it was only a matter of inserting a few... more interesting... volumes into the pile.

Barty himself had proved to be a great asset, using his powers of imitation to almost creepy levels.
Emma was sure that the Dark Lord would induct him for his seventeenth birthday. It helped that it
would be a slap in the face to Barty’s father, the Head Auror. Somehow, Barty Crouch Sr. seemed to
be one step ahead of them all the time, managing to capture or kill no less than ten Death Eaters and
ruin countless of the Dark Lord’s plans.

‘Emma!’ Rabastan said in exasperation. ‘You’re doing it again.’

‘I haven’t forgotten,’ Emma replied. ‘I’m just thinking. Why don’t we give it a rest for now, then,
pick it up at the weekend? I’ll schedule a practice for Friday evening, which should give us plenty of
time to think of a new strategy.’

Rabastan harrumphed, clearly not satisfied, but knowing that he wouldn’t get a better answer from
her. He rolled up the scrolls, placing a different warding charm on each one. Try as they might, they
hadn’t been able to replicate the security of James’s Marauders’ Map. That had been one thing
Emma hadn’t been willing to steal from her brother. *Leave him some security,* she thought. *Just in
She wondered if Lily Evans had noticed the change in Slytherin behaviour towards her.

‘Aren’t you going to tell him then?’ Rabastan was asking.

Emma followed his line of sight. *Merlin’s beard, just what I needed.* Rabastan had caught her staring at Regulus – the one time she had actually been thinking about something else.

‘Tell him what?’ she asked, as coolly as possible.

‘That you need to patrol, of course,’ Rabastan replied, stretching like a cat. He nodded towards their fellow seventh year. ‘Unless you think staring at him will make him remember.’

Emma rolled her eyes, secretly glad that he hadn’t guessed at some ulterior motive. *Why would he?* a rational voice asked in her mind. *You’ve been friends with Regulus for years, it’s not like Bast’s going to know that something has changed.*

Soothed by the thought, Emma stood up, but not before she caught Rabastan winking at her from the corner of her eye. She cocked her head in puzzlement, but he only laughed and sauntered off to tease Lucinda. Still wondering about his behaviour, she made her way to the fireplace. As Rabastan had guessed, Regulus was deep in thought, his eyes watering from staring into the flames. A small frown creased his brow, and Emma wondered what he was thinking about that would break his stony expression.

‘Regulus,’ she said.

He started.

‘We’re patrolling tonight, remember?’ the words seemed to come out awkwardly, forced.

If he noticed anything, he didn’t show it and they left the toasty dungeons behind to scour the castle.

***

They hadn’t got far before Emma felt the need to break the silence. It felt ominous, constraining instead of companionable.

‘So, did you find anything out about McKinnon? Does she want revenge against what the Dark Lord did to her father?’

At first, Regulus didn’t reply. It was a change from Rabastan’s near constant chatter. Unexpectedly, he bit the side of his lip, clearly unhappy.

‘Do you mind just not talking about that cursed mission for two hours, please?’ he asked, his voice strained.

‘Oh,’ Emma said, blinking in surprise. ‘Um... sure.’

They carried on for a little while, Emma not daring to broach another topic of discussion.

‘Do you really think Lily’s an orphaned Pureblood?’ Regulus asked, as they climbed the stairs from the Entrance Hall.
'I don’t know,’ Emma replied honestly. ‘But why would the Dark Lord lie about it? Why wouldn’t he just tell us what everyone else does, that she’s a fluke or that she’s stolen her power?’

‘Do you believe that?’ Regulus challenged.

‘Of course not,’ Emma scoffed. ‘But it would explain a lot. Why, what’s changed for you to ignore everything you believed in up until now?’

*Including me,* her mind added pathetically.

‘Do you really need to ask?’ Regulus asked unhappily.

‘I do, actually,’ Emma replied. ‘I feel like I can’t understand you anymore. When my mother died, you didn’t let me blame myself, or our cause. You did nothing wrong, Regulus, it was all Sirius’s fault.’

‘Sirius wasn’t the one to turn the wand on my father,’ Regulus replied in a low voice.

Emma didn’t know how to reply to that. Short of telling Regulus that his mother was a complete psycho and that Bellatrix was too, she couldn’t say anything. She felt that it would be inadvisable to say even that, since it would be implying that Regulus possessed the blood of the maniacs, too. She was saved by his next words.

‘The thing I don’t understand is... why did the Dark Lord kill him? My father was always a strong supporter. He’s forgiven things in the past, so what made him so mad that time?’ Regulus said the words slowly, ponderously, as though he had been turning them in his mind for a while. ‘Why did the mention of blood anger him, when blood is what we fight for?’

Emma tentatively took his hand, feeling guilty for the rush of pleasure it brought her to feel his warmth again.

‘Regulus,’ she said gently, concern written in her eyes. ‘What the Dark Lord did... Well, it seems like he was trying to put your father out of his misery. Allow him a peaceful death. No one could survive that amount of torture.’

Regulus set his jaw, as though he wanted to argue, but said nothing, instead entwining his fingers with her own. She willed her strength to flow through the link, feeling helpless. *So that’s what has been on his mind all this time? An explanation?*

Remembering her guilt in her own mother’s death, she decided that it wasn’t up to her to judge his grief. She would speak to Lily on Monday, find out about the adoption. Surely Lily would know by now. She couldn’t remember James saying anything about it, but then again, she hadn’t exactly paid attention to her brother recently.

Regulus still hadn’t let go of her hand, and she was unwilling to break the contact first. Involuntarily, she squeezed his palm, an instinctive act of reassurance. Sneaking a peak at him through her lashes, she couldn’t help but wonder what he thought of her now. Had she disappointed him in reminding him of the truth? Did he feel just as strange as she did now, to be holding hands? Surely he knew by now about her aversion to contact. Did he just think that she had replaced James with Regulus, in a brotherly way?

A blush rose to her cheeks as she scrunched up her nose in disgust. Surely Regulus knew that she would never have done... *that...* with James. She suppressed a shudder of horror at the thought, trying to banish it from her mind.
The movement alerted Regulus, who quickly slid his hand out of her grasp in embarrassment.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled.

The trouble was, Emma didn’t know what he was apologising for.

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They were patrolling the second floor corridors when – against all odds – James came careening towards them, a wild look in his eyes. His hair was even messier than usual, his robes haphazardly thrown on.

'James!' Emma exclaimed.

'No time to stop Ems!' he called, rushing past them. 'It's a matter of life and death.'

Regulus raised an eyebrow, cool as a cucumber. Emma supposed that she shouldn’t be that surprised, since her brother was a renowned prankster. But there was something different this time. Emma still knew her brother enough to know that something was very, very, wrong.

A blood-curdling howl interrupted whatever Regulus was going to say.

'The full moon,' Emma breathed, connecting the dots. 'James, what have you done?'

The two Prefects rushed after her twin, catching up with him in the Entrance Hall. James had stopped, panting. He looked as though he had raced all the way down from the Gryffindor tower.

Emma wasted no time in bombarding her brother with questions.

'James! Tell me what's happening. You're not seriously thinking of going out there alone are you?' she asked, but stared hard at him, trying to convey the rest of the message: Not without Sirius and Peter to help you.

'It's Sirius. He's really messed up this time, but I can't stop. Much as I hate the git, he can't get eaten.'

The girl frowned. That wasn’t the response she had been expecting. Regulus, though, hadn’t a clue about the situation at hand. He had only understood one thing, and that made his blood run cold.

'Where is he?' he asked. Anger flashed across his face, only to be unseated by worry. The two emotions warred across his features, showing the inner conflict.

'In the... Gryffindor Tower,' James wheezed, but before he could say anything else Regulus had set off back up the staircase. Emma turned to go after him, but James caught her arm. 'It's not... Sirius. It's Sirius's fault. He... told Snape... to go and see what was beneath the Whomping Willow... on the full moon.'

'What was beneath the Whomping Willow,' Emma repeated, a horrified expression spreading across her face when comprehension dawned. 'Is that -'

'Yeah it's Moony. Stay here.'

'No, I'm coming to help you. Alone against a werewolf? Besides, with you, I trust Severus as far as I can spit: I'm not leaving your safety in his hands.'
'Emma, you can't! It's dangerous for humans!'  
'There must be a teacher around somewhere,' Emma cast her eyes around, before noticing the silent plea on her brother's face.  

He didn’t want Remus to pay for Sirius’s mistakes.  

James kept his vicelike grip on her arm until a second howl tore through the night. His face whitened, and his attention was concentrated elsewhere. The pressure receded.  

'Humans can’t go out tonight,' he said faintly, his voice distorted. When his eyes rolled back into his head, Emma realised that he was going ahead with his plans.  

'Well I'll just have to learn quickly then,' she retorted.  

If I survive this, I'm going to kill that boy once and for all, she thought viciously, and concentrated harder than she ever had before. A stag appeared out of the corner of her eye, but she ignored it, trying to find the magic within her veins.  

And then it happened. It was an odd sensation: she could actually feel the fur growing on her face, but it seemed like the room got larger rather than herself getting smaller. The senses all rushed to her at once: everything had turned to shades of grey, the area directly in front of her in sharper detail than she had ever seen before.  

Disorientated, she concentrated on the one sense that overpowered the rest: The smell of fear on a teenage boy. She followed stag-James out of the door and padded down the steps on black paws. The motions came as naturally as walking – evidently, the hard part of the process was over.  

To the great amusement of some part of her mind, she had a tail, which she could curl around herself like a fluffy red blanket. Instinctively, she sat down. The Great Hall was nice and warm, compared to the snowy exterior. Maybe she should stay. Why would she want to go somewhere danger was?  

The stag stomped its foot down, we don't have much time! Her human mind regaining its senses, Emma trotted after her brother. She watched in admiration as James lowered his antlers, rushing through the branches of the Whomping Willow to press his hoof against the base of the tree.  

It was easy to dart through the frozen branches after him, quizzically sniffing around the area James had pressed. Some sort of hidden button revealed itself, coated in magic. Meanwhile, James re-transfigured himself into a human – it wouldn't do to have Snivellus find out all of their secrets.  

'Trust you to become a fox,' he said, patting her head. 'Stay here and keep a lookout. Bark if Moony comes out before we do: Sirius is smart enough to put two and two together. If we come out, stall the wolf until we reach the castle: he'll probably think you're some kind of cousin, but after that run. He's dangerous and don't forget it.'  

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A long while passed before James emerged again, dragging a pallid Snape through after him. Emma yawned, her tongue lolling over her canines, before she loped off into the woods – a real fox would have been scared away by humans. James was glad she had the sense to imitate one, at least.  

'He's a werewolf!' Snape gasped, foxes the last thing on his mind. 'How could Dumbledore let a werewolf in? I'm going straight to the headmaster's; he has a right to know.'
James shot a worried glance towards where the fox was hiding in the shadows, but he couldn’t risk letting go of Snape and having the whole school know. He hoped that Emma would know what to do when the time came. Besides, he was more at risk than she was right then.

Before the two boys had even reached the castle, a loud howl ripped through the grounds. James shook his head, wondering at the solidity of the Hogwarts walls. The howls were only audible when Moony was out and about, and even then only on the ground floor, perhaps the second if a window was open. He had no time to reflect, however, because it seemed like Remus had picked up on their trail. James picked up the pace – and this time he didn’t have to drag Snivellus with him.

A large humanoid wolf came sniffing out of the tunnel, turning its head this way and that before noticing the humans. It - he - let off another howl, and seemed prepared to leap in their direction, when the fox desperately nipped at its heels like a little terrier. She backed away, waiting for the werewolf to turn, and then bit it again, bounding off in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Dear Merlin, I hope this works, she prayed silently, willing it to follow.

James breathed a sigh of relief when they entered the castle. Snape shook his arm free of James's grip and noticed to his disgust that Sirius Black was standing there too, along with his brother. Both Black brothers had their wands out, though James wasn’t certain that was to do with the Snivellus situation.

'I'm telling the headmaster,' Snape said immediately.

Sirius opened his mouth, presumably to tell the Slytherin that Dumbledore already knew about Remus, but James shot him a look, talking over him loudly.

'Sirius can go with you,' he said. 'Regulus is a Prefect, so he should probably the both of you up.'

A cacophony of expressions crossed Snivellus’s face, but he seemed to think the better of it. With a disdainful curl of the lip, he whirled around, cloak flapping about him like some kind of oversized bird as he stomped up the Entrance Hall steps.

*Probably thinks he can get Sirius expelled too,* James thought, turning to go back outside.

'Are you mad?' Regulus asked. 'You're going back out there?'

'Yup,' the Gryffindor replied, popping the “p”.

Before Regulus could use his power as Prefect to stop him, he ventured back out into the dark outdoor world. *Besides, I’m Head Boy,* James thought with satisfaction. *A Prefect can’t boss me around.*

He chuckled gleefully, and was rewarded with a cold gust of wind freezing his teeth. Immediately, his cheerful mood evaporated.

*Where are you Emma?* he thought, changing into a stag and rushing to the Whomping Willow. The tree had by this time reset itself, but the tracks were visible. The branches wouldn’t erase them unless somebody came too close to the trunk. He could see neither sign nor sight of his sister or Moony, but he recognised the werewolf tracks leading towards the forest.

His hooves thundered through the thicket, his antlers removing twigs and branches from the vicinity of his face. He didn’t stop until he found them, playing some sort of cat-and-mouse game. He joined in, head-butting Moony gently, and soon the werewolf had calmed down to his usual self on their nightly escapades. Only the scent of human blood had the werewolf enraged. As long as Moony was well-fed before he turned, he was as docile as a puppy.
Perhaps not the best metaphor, James, he thought, remembering the days when Padfoot was like a puppy. Even the memory of his friend's boundless energy made him feel tired to the bone.

Still, the twins stayed with Remus until he started to transform back, at which point James led his sister out to the Quidditch shack. It was the twilight moment before the first rays of sun hit the horizon. James never ceased to wonder at the way the half-light transformed the forest. He quickly switched to human, only to realise that the fox was looking at him bemusedly.

He realised that it had been Emma’s first transformation and coached her on how to turn back: it was the easiest part of becoming an Animagus.

She didn't look like she had been hurt apart from a couple of scrapes and bruises, but she did look exhausted. He could admit that he was used to missing out on sleep once a month, but he knew that this wasn’t just from last night. In the morning light, he could see the huge dark circles in her eyes, standing against a too-pale complexion. One, he realised, he was all too used to seeing in the Slytherins recently.

'Are you alright?' he asked, worriedly.

'Fine,' she replied, brushing him off. 'Why are we at the Quidditch shack?'

'Well usually Sirius and I pretend we've gone out flying before breakfast as an excuse,' James explained sheepishly. 'Peter’s small enough to slip back up to the common room unnoticed."

'Right,' Emma said, then groaned. 'I actually do have Quidditch practice today. If only I could get out of it.'

'But you're the Captain!' James pointed out indignantly. It was not a position to be taken lightly, in James’s opinion.

'Yeah, I know, but I just don't have time for it really,' Emma sighed, sitting on the extra Bludger chest.

'But you love Quidditch!' James gave his twin a long look. It scared him the way he couldn't read her the way he used to. He sat on the normal Quidditch box, taking care not to squash the Quaffle area. 'What's wrong? What aren't you telling me?'

'I'm just tired, James,' she looked at him through half-closed eyes. It did look as though she was about to drop off. 'I thought I’d found a routine with the O.W.L.s, but the N.E.W.T.s are so much harder, and then I have Prefect duties, and Quidditch practice, and....' she trailed off.

'And?' James pressed.

He also had N.E.W.T.s and Head Boy duties and Quidditch practice. He knew that his sister thrived on pressure as much as he did himself. It was what made them such good Quidditch players. There had to be something else.

'And it's exhausting, that's what.'

She put her head on James's shoulder, and they stayed there for a moment in silence. James was about to get up when he realised that his twin had fallen asleep. Typical Emma, he thought fondly. If only I could ask Regulus, I bet I could get him to tell me what's up. But Sirius would never forgive him for talking to his brother.

He had seen his friend's barely suppressed hatred the night before: the brothers had probably gotten
into another fight. If James ever had the misfortune to call Regulus Sirius's brother, that hatred turned to James himself. His family had disowned him, so he disowned them. James didn't blame him.

Regulus made no secret about being a fan of Lord Voldemort and treated Muggleborns with just as much, if not more contempt than the psycho Lestrange. But for some strange reason, he was James's sister's friend. She was probably the only reason Regulus didn't insult James like the other Gryffindors, even bordering on friendly when they had been paired up in Transfiguration. Maybe James could convince him that Emma needed her brother.

After all, it was only the two of them now.
James was still mulling over it at breakfast. For once, he had ignored Lily’s offer of having a private breakfast in the Head’s dorm – their Saturday morning tradition. He had almost caved at her pouting expression, but resolved to make it up to her later. She never stayed mad for long.

*Not anymore,* he thought with a grin, remembering the tantrums she would fly into during their earlier years.

Had he been spending too much time with Lily recently? He remembered the argument he had with Padfoot the night before.

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‘Why would you do this, Padfoot?’ James asked, raising his hands to his head.

*Of course, the odd prank on Snivellus was still fun, but this? This was something much deeper, much darker, than their childhood rivalry.*

‘I don’t know, okay?’ Sirius cried, wringing his hands. *Sirius always acted on impulse. He never stopped to think about the consequences. ‘I was angry, Snivellus was just there. Besides, he’s a Death Eater! He’s one of them! He deserves it!’*

Sirius had a scary streak when it came to the Slytherin populace. He believed each and every one of them was inherently evil, that none were beyond redemption. Even Emma was blamed for their parents’ death, something James found abhorrent. But James forgave Sirius, because of his past. Lily didn’t understand, because Lily didn’t know what Sirius had endured for his beliefs. As Dumbledore had warned them, the war was forcing them into a choice: between what was right, and what was easy.

James took a deep, calming breath, counting to three in his head. It helped him prevent most of his most rash actions.

‘Sirius,’ he replied. ‘Just because you don’t like Snape doesn’t mean that you have the right to kill him!’

‘Kill him?’ Sirius went white. ‘I didn’t.... I just wanted to scare him, shake him up a bit.’

‘Sirius,’ the frustration leaked through despite James’s best efforts. He spoke slowly. ‘What did you think would happen if you sent a boy into a werewolf den with only one, small exit?’

The rest of the blood drained from Sirius’s skin, before his defensive reflexes kicked in. His face took on a haughty expression that wouldn’t have been amiss on Regulus or Narcissa Black. Sirius looked more like his family than he realised.

‘Now you’re even starting to sound like her!’ he said accusingly, pointing a finger at his fellow Gryffindor. ‘What’s happened to the Prongs I knew? He was always up for some adventure, some risk-taking.’

‘That Prongs died along with both of his parents!’ James had yelled back, finally losing control. He was glad he had put the Muffliato charm up before initiating the conversation. ‘In case you hadn’t
remembered, I don’t find the risk of death very appealing anymore!’

Sirius deflated a little, consternation making its way back to his face. He dropped into an armchair, his lower lip trembling like a child’s. Eventually his eyes darted back to James, dropped in humility.

‘I just wanted it to be like the old days, you know?’ he said quietly, a quaver in his voice. James had never seen Padfoot look so vulnerable. ‘I wanted us to be happy and carefree... I thought maybe... one final prank. One that would make us forget about this war.’

James let out a breath he hadn’t realised he had been holding. So Sirius wasn’t going dark. He was just trying – in his own way – to fix the scars that had been left on the both of them. James had used his relationship with Lily as a crutch – she was much more interested in him when he wasn’t making the effort to impress her – but had he left Padfoot to wallow in his sorrow by himself?

And had Sirius, in turn, started to abandon Wormtail and Moony? After all, none of them had decided to accompany Remus on his nightly transformation this time. James should have known that it would come back to haunt them. Moony would never say a word, but they all knew that he needed them as much as he needed the Shrieking Shack. They had all let the Marauders down, some way or another.

As for Wormtail, they had ignored his struggles at the N.E.W.T. level homework. James had been too occupied, Sirius too morose, Remus too tired. James had never had any problems with magic. Had he also underestimated the toll their broken friendship would take on Peter? What could be worse than sending someone to certain death?

‘Stay here,’ he said aloud. Perhaps it wasn’t too late to fix one of their mistakes.

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Remus was in hospital, as usual. Sirius was nowhere to be found, probably sleeping. Peter was probably off cramming some last-minute homework in before classes, though they started the day with Herbology. James was sitting in the centre of the Gyffindor table as usual, eating toast with peanut butter.

James let his eyes drift over to the Slytherin table. By now, Emma had found her way to the Great Hall. At first, James wondered how she had managed to get changed so fast. He himself had “borrowed” one of the school’s old brooms to fly up to the Tower. Then he remembered that the Slytherin common room was in the dungeons.

Duh, James, he felt like knocking his thick head on his goblet of pumpkin juice. Ouch, he thought, rubbing his head. Who knew copper could hurt so much? He returned to his spying.

Emma still had the exhausted look of this morning, but she had found an energy James would have thought impossible. Actually, it reminded him of when she had caught the Firebug Flu. She seemed too wired up, her movements feverishly fast. He slid his gaze to either side of her. Surely her friends must have noticed something?

But James realised that Alecto Carrow – her closest friend throughout Hogwarts – had the same sunken gaze, eyes glittering with some sort of resolve. She had put on a bit of weight since he had last noticed her – stress from exams? Lestrange was also exuberant, though from what James had gathered, he was always like that.

Actually, come to think of it, Lestrange had also been acting odd lately. He had been overly
courteous, almost gentlemanly, towards Lily, who had accepted the change of behaviour with
delight, taking it as a sign that some of the Slytherins had changed their minds about Muggleborns, in
light of recent events. But James knew better.

The Slytherin had always been friendly to James, and whilst the Gryffindor could appreciate some of
his pranks, he knew that something was up. Lestrange was still at the centre of many rumours of
Dark Magic being performed on students, and more than a few Hufflepuffs went out of their way to
avoid him. Obviously, Hestia hadn’t forgotten his treatment of her in their sixth year.

So what made Lily different now? Were they planning something, or was it because she was now
associated with James himself? He was under no illusion that he influenced the Slytherins’ opinions,
but he could hazard a guess that Emma kept them under strict instructions when it came to her
brother.

If Sirius was here now, he would scoff at James’s naivety. He would go back to their hashed-out
argument about Halloween. They had both been there along with the Order, though not even
Dumbledore knew about their Animagus forms. At some point, Sirius had gotten stuck in some
rubble in dog form, unable to get out or send a Patronus.

According to Padfoot, a girl their age had tried to finish him off, though he had never seen her face.
He was adamant that it was Emma, on the side of the Death Eaters. She knew that they were
Animagi, though she didn’t know anyone’s form save her brother’s. James was adamant that it
wasn’t. His sister wasn’t so deranged as to murder a random dog, even if there was a possibility of it
being Sirius.

Especially if there was a possibility of it being Sirius.

James knew his sister had many faults, but “murderer” was not among her foremost traits. Another
voice, deep down, told him that if it had been his sister, she would have taken the opportunity to
make Sirius suffer, as much as she believed Padfoot had made her suffer. Either way, she wasn’t
guilty.

Going back to the Slytherin table, the only one who seemed to keep a semblance of normalcy was
Regulus Black. Of course it would be, James thought discontentedly. He didn’t know exactly why
he didn’t like the younger Black sibling, only that he was sure that anyone that calm would be hiding
something.

That, and Sirius’s treatment, though even James couldn’t blame an eleven year old for not standing
up to Walburga. After all, James himself hadn’t noticed Charles’s behaviour towards his sister until it
was too late.

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‘Hello, Black,’ James said, sidling up to Regulus in Herbology.

Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, he cursed himself. Calling Regulus “Black” is a great
way to start an intimate conversation, a voice said in his head snarkily. Well done, James.

‘Potter,’ Regulus replied shortly, as expected.

In Herbology, you could pretty much have a private conversation as loudly as you wanted. It was
like Potions – everyone was so concentrated on the dangerous object in front of them that no one
cared what the others were doing. Rabastan also took Herbology, but James thought he’d have less
of a chance at getting information out of him.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, taking care to not get the Angel’s Trumpet on their skin. The plant was highly poisonous, which was why they treated it in seventh year despite its relatively calm disposition. Today, they were transferring them into bigger pots, wearing their pointy hats in case the pollen shook out of the flowers. James would have found the scene comical, if he wasn’t trying so hard to be tactful.

The problem was... James wasn’t known for his tact.

‘So, you’re close to my sister, right?’ he asked awkwardly.

Regulus froze, digging his fingers into the pile of dragon dung. His face – neutral up until this point – became as still as one of the Hogwarts suits of armour. For half a second, James wondered if somebody had cast Petrificus Totalus on the younger boy.

‘Yes,’ the Slytherin replied hesitantly, as though not sure that it was the correct answer.

‘Did... did something happen?’ James asked, wrapping the flowers in film, so as to not damage them during the transplant.

Regulus looked as though he had seen a ghost. In fact, he looked the way Sirius had when James had wrung out his confession about Snape the night before.

‘You might want to be a little more specific,’ was all he said, fertilizing the plant pot. He glanced back at James. ‘A lot has happened recently.’

James felt his face heat up. Regulus was obviously referring to their father’s death. James had been so wrapped up in his grief that he hadn’t wondered what it felt like for Emma, to know that Charles had gone to his grave denying her heritage. Ironically, Sirius couldn’t have been happier at the fate that had met Orion.

Suddenly, James realised that Orion was also Regulus’s father. Emma had spent a lot of time there in her fifth and sixth years; was it possible that Orion was to her what Charles was to Sirius?

He shook his head, casting the thought from his mind. The Potters were old hats at family deaths. This was something else, something strange. He corrected his earlier question.

‘Has she got the Firebug Flu again?’ he asked instead, holding the top of the plant whilst Regulus covered the base in soil. ‘I know her; she won’t admit something’s wrong until it’s too late.’

‘The Firebug Flu,’ Regulus repeated slowly, and to James’s disbelief a smile spread along the Slytherin’s face.

Well, maybe “smile” isn’t the right word. It was more like a cross between a smirk and a sneer, as though James had no idea what he was talking about. It was the most patronising thing James had ever seen... with the exception of Dumbledore’s eye-twinkle. Before the Gryffindor could express his outrage though, Regulus continued.

‘In a way, I suppose it is,’ the Slytherin mused, a hint of amusement in his voice. James felt like throttling the little twerp. ‘I guess you don’t know her as well as you think you do.’

‘Look, Regulus, I don’t know what your problem is, but if you find my sister’s illness funny, I will hex your face into this plant,’ James said in a low voice. His wand found its way to Regulus’s throat,
hidden by the leaves of the Angel’s Trumpet.

‘She’s not ill,’ Regulus said, unperturbed. ‘But I’m sure she’d find it hilarious if her brother hexed one of her friends just because he wasn’t paying enough attention himself.’

James withdrew his wand, keeping back a Sirius-like snarl with some effort. He pursed his lips, silently counting to three.

‘So what is it, if she’s not ill?’ he asked, his tone measured.

The smirk was wiped from Regulus’s face in an instant. His eyes fixed on a point to the left of James’s head. The latter turned around grudgingly to see Lestrange and Evans lowering their plant into the pot. There was nothing suspicious in their behaviour in the least. He turned back to the Slytherin with a questioning look.

‘Something you wouldn’t understand,’ Regulus said evenly, his face back to the infuriating Black mask.

‘How do you know I wouldn’t understand?’ James demanded, releasing the plant with a little more force than necessary.

The leaves came flying free and the two boys ducked, narrowly missing the drooping flowers. The pointy hats flew off and they took cover under their arms from the pollen. Even bound, they flowers could cause damage if there was an uncovered corner of the petals. James nearly missed Regulus’s response, so low he thought he had imagined it.

‘Because I don’t understand anymore either.’
Monday came around faster than Emma had expected. She and Rabastan had spent the weekend following Sirius under the Invisibility Cloak, but to no avail. The older Black brother certainly led a very boring life. That weekend, he had been to the kitchens, to the Gryffindor Tower, and back. And this was supposed to be the party boy of Hogwarts.

Rabastan theorised that the Order of the Phoenix only recruited Gryffindors, since they had the least amount of links to families in the Death Eaters. Emma wasn’t too sure. Hufflepuffs were the ones reputed for never turning to Dark magic, not the lions. The idea had merit though, since Dumbledore gave obvious preferential treatment to the red and gold house.

Emma got up early that morning to study the lists without Alecto talking over her thoughts. Though Alecto wasn’t deranged to the point of endangering their project, she was inclined to find reasons to hex the Gryffindors. Ordinarily, Emma wouldn’t have minded – there was little love lost between the two houses. However, for their plan to work, they had to appear as neutral, so that they would be able to find out information. Going around saying that Mudbloods were dirt wouldn’t exactly make the students inclined to talk about Dumbledore’s rebellion.

She was certain that Sirius Black and Marlene McKinnon were a part of this Order thing. Knowing her brother’s tendency to try to save the world, she could safely bet that he was a part of it too. She shouldn’t have been surprised, what with their father’s indoctrination. Her brother simply didn’t know better.

Mary MacDonald had held a grudge against all Slytherins ever since the incident with Avery. Emma couldn’t care less about the talentless Mudblood. If she tried anything against one of the Death Eaters, she would be crushed like a worm under Bellatrix’s boot.

One worrying person on this list was Benjy Fenwick, from Ravenclaw. Not only was he from a more neutral house than the rest of the candidates, but he would also mouth off to anyone who would listen about the Dark Lord and his Dark ways. He claimed that the Dementors and Inferi would follow the Dark Lord to the end of the world. Ordinarily, Emma would have ignored the self-professed “seer”, but there had been hints that the Dark Lord was preparing to use Inferi if necessary.

Emma understood the mindset behind this tactic. Why use live people and risk killing them, if those who had died for the cause could further the agenda? Theoretically speaking, it was less dangerous, more economical and if they were captured for questioning, they wouldn’t be able to give anything away. Unfortunately, a lot of wizards just remembered the legends of zombies in South America, who had rebelled against their masters and slaughtered nearly the entire wizarding population.

That wouldn’t happen here.

_Maybe Fenwick can be discredited somehow_, she wondered. He was fairly clever, good grades, respected by the student body enough to become the sixth year Ravenclaw Prefect.

‘Did you even go to sleep?’

Lucinda had appeared on the bottom of Emma’s bed in her pyjamas, yawning. With a jolt, Emma realised that it was already eight o’clock. The blonde plucked the piece of parchment out of Emma’s fingers before she could react.

‘I thought Rabastan had told you to leave this alone this weekend,’ Lucinda said reprovingly.
Though she never asked about Death Eater business, she always ended up knowing everything anyway. Her inquisitive nature and organisation skills always made her helpful in the end, though Emma found herself wishing more and more often that Lucinda wouldn’t intervene. The blonde was still on the fringe of the war, not untouched, but still innocent, awakening a protective instinct within the raven-haired girl that she hadn’t known she had.

Emma wasn’t the only one – she had noticed Rabastan escorting Lucinda discreetly through the corridors. There was no knowing who would take the opportunity to jinx her, and although Lucinda wasn’t powerless by any means, she hadn’t received the combat training the rest of them had.

‘Why have you circled Fenwick?’ Lucinda asked, true to her character.

Emma sighed. There was no use in trying to dissuade her.

‘I’m worried he’ll make people fear the Death Eaters.’

Lucinda raised an eyebrow. Emma hastily corrected her sentence.

‘More than they already do, anyway. We have to think of what will happen after the war, after all. He’s going around saying that we’ll all be turned into Inferi, that Hogwarts will be turned into an Anti-Muggleborn school.’

‘Mudblood,’ Alecto said automatically, coming out of the shower.

Emma hadn’t even noticed the redhead get up. She cast an eye around the room – Helen had already left. Sophie was still sleeping, so Emma motioned Alecto to come nearer. They had dragged Lucinda into this, no need for Sophie to get involved.

‘Fenwick’s going to be a problem,’ she explained again, though she would have preferred to handle this more quietly than Alecto’s methods.

‘Memory Charm,’ Alecto said immediately.

It was what they had used on anyone who looked as though they suspected about their identities. With Bones openly checking the students now, they needed to protect themselves more than ever. Emma shuddered at the idea of Azkaban, still under the control of the Ministry.

‘It’s not going to be that easy this time,’ she shook her head. ‘See what Regulus has written here? Fenwick’s taking the History of Magic N.E.W.T. and they have to choose a topic on which to do a dissertation. Apparently, Fenwick’s chosen to compare the rise of different Dark Lords and their aftermath. He must have stacks of notes on the issue.’

Alecto frowned, biting the inside of her cheek in thought. Emma racked her brain in vain; there was nothing they could do which could fly under the radar, unless they ignored him.

‘Easy,’ Lucinda said, surprising the two Death Eaters. When they looked at her quizzically, she sighed and elaborated. ‘We get him a girlfriend.’

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Feeling rather pleased with the results of the morning, Emma walked into Potions with a self-satisfied smirk on her face. All she had to do was get a Love Potion to Lucinda, and the latter would do the rest. Well, first she needed to actually find a Love Potion.
Merlin didn’t answer her prayer, but Slughorn did. By now, most of the class had finished their final Elixirs to Induce Euphoria and were just practicing for the N.E.W.T practical.

‘Students,’ Slughorn’s voice boomed with his usual good humour. ‘As I’ve decided to host another Slug Club party, to which you are all, of course, invited, I thought I’d shake it up a bit by playing a well-known wizarding guessing game. I am certain that you will all succeed your N.E.W.T exams, so for this Christmas, I will host the coming-of-age Potions game!’

He waited for them to applaud. A couple of half-hearted claps were her. Slughorn wasn’t deterred.

‘I’d like each pair to brew a harmless, but potent brew for the party. The effects must not last for over twelve hours and the potion must be found in your copy of Advanced Potion-Making. You have two weeks, and this will count as a bonus mark towards your mock N.E.W.T.s. Questions? No? Begin!’

A flurry of pages and mutterings spread through the class, students pairing up with those that were the best at the solution they wished to make. Severus was already heating the cauldron, whilst Lily was halfway to the ingredients cupboard. Before Rabastan could even open his mouth, Emma ordered him to wait at their table, seizing her opportunity.

‘Lily?’ she asked, loudly enough to be heard, but not enough for her voice to carry.

‘Mmhmm?’ Lily hummed, collecting various ingredients into a basket.

It was a much more efficient way than Emma stuffing them into her robes.

‘Do you have a minute?’

Something about the way Emma phrased the question made Lily pause, setting down her basket. The Slytherin had practiced this moment all weekend.

‘I suppose I can spare a moment,’ the Gryffindor wiped some silvery powder off her robes. ‘What is it, Emma?’

‘I was wondering...’ Emma searched for the phrase that would allow her to slip under Lily’s guard. If only she knew Legilimency... She decided to go for the approach that had failed with Lupin. ‘Have... have you ever felt that you never fit in with your family?’

She knew that it was a gamble, jumping right in, but they had precious few minutes and she couldn’t risk James being there when she talked to Lily. The Gryffindor girl seemed to never be alone.

‘Emma,’ Lily looked torn between her potion and her compassion. In the end, her heart won. ‘Why... has James done something?’

‘Not exactly,’ Emma replied, inwardly rejoicing at the first victory. ‘I was just wondering at the differences between me and the rest of my family. If I didn’t physically resemble my brother, I would have thought I was adopted.’

‘And you’re telling me this because...’ Lily’s brow was furrowed in incomprehension.

Emma delivered the coup de grace.

‘Well, James told me that the rest of your family are Muggles. Not only your parents, but your sister too. Usually Muggleborns run in the family, so I just assumed...’

‘You assumed wrong!’ Lily’s voice was suddenly constricted, tears springing to her eyes. ‘Sorry
Emma, but I’m the wrong person to talk to about this.’

Though she had only succeeded in upsetting her brother’s girlfriend, Emma allowed her mind to rest. No one would have had such a strong reaction if they weren’t being defensive. It was silly of her to have doubted the Dark Lord in the first place.

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Thirty minutes later, Emma and Rabastan were hard at work at their Amortentia. They had to finish the first part that day, as it took nine days to brew properly. If they took some of the potion on the final day, Slughorn would be checking for suspicious activity. Instead, they needed to pretend it was at an earlier stage than usual, aided by a camouflaging spell. Lucinda had instructed them to wait for at least a month before giving it to Fenwick, as it would become more potent over time.

Lucinda herself was working through a list of possible candidates. Administered to fall in love with anyone was easy. Making him feel like he had fallen in love of his own will necessitated a plausible girl. The trickiest bit of the equation was that Emma and Rabastan had to make sure they didn’t touch the potion.

Emma had tied her hair up with one of Lucinda’s hair bobbles, a pink, diamond-encrusted thing that clashed greatly with her inky black hair. Rabastan had to duck away from the potion with laughter before they had even added the peppermint.

‘You idiot,’ she giggled, a symptom of Rabastan’s infectious laughter. ‘This is serious business we’re doing!’

‘You’re right,’ Rabastan tried to control himself, before bursting out in another peel of laughter. ‘Honestly, the look suits you. You should lighten up a little more. I wouldn’t advise wearing it on the Quidditch Pitch though, you’d lose all credibility.’

‘Shut up, before I stuff it down your mouth,’ Emma joked. ‘I’ll even coat it in the potion; see how you like falling over yourself in order to please Lucinda.’

Rabastan laughed again, though this time it had a forced quality to it. ‘Huh, yeah. Imagine that.’

He skinned the thorns from the rose with more force than necessary. Emma stopped crushing her moonstone, thunderstruck.

‘No,’ she said in a low whisper.

‘No what?’ Rabastan asked, smelling the roses. ‘You know, this is a bit of a waste of a pretty flower. Maybe I’ll keep them.’

‘To give to Lucinda?’ Emma raised her eyebrows suggestively.

‘Not necessarily,’ Rabastan replied, too offhandedly. ‘There are a lot of girls vying for my affections, you know. It wouldn’t do to give preferential treatment.’

‘Yeah?’ Emma grinned, clearly not believing a word he said.

Rabastan eyed her suspiciously, wondering why she dropped the subject so easily and yet unwilling to continue.
'You know,' Emma went on lightly. ‘I could drop in a good word for you. You know, plant the idea in her mind. If you were interested, that is.’

‘Why would I want you to do that?’ Rabastan snorted. There was a pause, as they peered at the potion, waiting for the exact moment to drop the rest of the peppermint leaves. In a small voice, he added. ‘But would you? Hypothetically.’

Emma quashed her instinct to poke fun at one of her closest friends, but she couldn’t help the grin from spreading.

‘Hypothetically, I might be inclined to do so,’ she teased.

‘For a price, I’m guessing,’ Rabastan replied, watching the peppermint dissolve. ‘It’s always an interaction with you.’

‘It’s an interaction with everyone in Slytherin,’ Emma snorted. ‘But this time... let’s say it’s a favour. For a friend.’

Rabastan lost all interest in the potion and slowly turned towards the raven-haired girl, searching for some kind of deceit in her face. After a long while, he relaxed. A smile tentatively graced his face, his normally mischievous features looking oddly vulnerable.

‘Thanks,’ he said, appreciation warming his voice. ‘I count you as a friend, too.’

Only a Slytherin would understand the implication behind those words.

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‘You’re coming with me,’ James said as soon as Slughorn finished talking. He hooked Regulus’s collar with his ladle, forcing the younger boy to jerk backwards.

Sirius gave James his best glowering look, but James ignored his best friend. He would explain later. For now, Sirius would just distract him with his conspiracy theories. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched his friend team up with Marlene McKinnon, the remaining Gryffindor in the room. A girl with long brown hair James vaguely recognised was looking a bit put out. He realised it was the Ravenclaw Prefect, Helen something-rather.

Too bad, he thought. Regulus’s girlfriend’s going to have to sit this one out.

Regulus’s features twisted into a snarl of annoyance before he regained his composure. James had to admit; much as it irked him to see the unruffled Black traits, he kind of admired the Slytherin’s self-restraint.

His back stiff with indignation, Regulus leafed through the book, looking for a fairly easy recipe. He was under no illusion as to the reason of his manhandling. He chose the Poison Antidote – a Beozar stone would suffice. They would just have to add enhancing agents to the boiling water.

Unfortunately, James didn’t much appreciate this stroke of genius. The happy-go-lucky trickster Emma mentioned seemed to have vanished behind this angry teenager, though Regulus knew that deep down it was just worry. The Slytherin glanced over at Lily – she looked mad about something too. He could only imagine how angsty their children would be.

‘Hey, wake up,’ James said, snapping his fingers in front of Regulus’s face.
Cool grey eyes turned towards the Gryffindor. They reminded James of how different the brothers were – with Sirius you could read the stormy emotions flitting through his face, whereas Regulus’s were glassy, mirror-like.

‘I’ve been thinking about what you said on Friday,’ James continued, trying to remain cordial.

_Is he even listening to me?_ Regulus had poured the water into the cauldron, heating it up to an average boil. James decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

‘What did you mean by “you don’t understand either”? What is it you don’t understand?’

Regulus remained tight-lipped, though he gave James a look that clearly said _you won’t like what I have to say_. Encouraged by the fact that the Slytherin was actually paying attention, James continued.

‘Is it the stress from school work? Is she being bullied?’

Regulus snorted. James had to admit that was a stupid question. His sister could clearly handle herself. James thought harder, frowning, whilst Regulus added a healthy dose of Dittany to the potion.

Dismissing the death of their father – Emma had never been close to him anyway – James found his eyes drifting to the table she was working at with Lestrange. They _had_ been spending a lot of time together recently. Plus, they had the same wild look in their eyes. Right now, they were barely containing their laughter. Was it the result of an Elixir to Induce Eurphoria, or was it something else? James decided to voice his thoughts.

‘Am I asking the wrong person here?’

Regulus turned his flat gaze back to James. If looks could kill, he would have dropped dead on the spot. James briefly remembered the time when they were younger, when the gulf between Gryffindor and Slytherin hadn’t grown so wide. Regulus had prided himself on being able to find out secrets. James was about to play on the Slytherin’s pride and wheedle the information out of him, when he noticed Regulus surreptitiously glancing towards his fellow classmates. Suddenly, James realised he had the wrong emotion...

James would have recognised that look anywhere. He had experienced it on many occasions. But he had never expected it to make its way to the famously cold Regulus Black.

‘Helen isn’t his girlfriend, because...’

‘You’re in love with my sister,’ James said, jaw dropping in surprise.

Regulus started, the first sign of unease James had seen in him all day.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ the Slytherin hissed, glancing around.

James’s mouth stretched itself into a grin of its own accord. Unrequited love? Been there, done that. Regulus Black was now in the palm of his hand. Now, what was so bad about what happened to the Slytherins that Regulus wouldn’t tell him?

Unfortunately for the rejoicing Gryffindor, Sirius stuck his foot in it again.

‘Ha! I knew it!’ Sirius was almost dancing with glee at the table behind. Marlene had gone to fetch more ingredients. ‘I knew it ever since the Yule Ball! Oh little brother, you’re going to pay for last week.’
Before James could react, Regulus had launched himself at his brother; stuffing something into the latter’s mouth. Horrified, James watched as Sirius turned purple, then blue, falling to the floor. His hands flew to his mouth, which made choking noises. James’s instincts cut in.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ he cried, shoving the Slytherin away from his best friend.

Slughorn noticed the commotion, squeezing his bulk between stations. Regulus ignored James, instead picking up a stone and dipping it into their potion. It dissolved into a pebble-sized rock, smooth and black. He dodged James’s flailing arms and pushed it between his brother’s teeth. Immediately, Sirius stopped scrabbling at his throat and took deep gulps of air.

‘What is going on down here, boys?’ Slughorn asked, panting slightly.

By then, Regulus was smiling, as sweet as could be.

‘Sirius wanted to try our potion. Unfortunately, he took the poison instead, so we had to test the unfinished product on him. Looks like it worked, James.’

‘Good thinking, my boy!’ Slughorn clapped the Slytherin on the back. ‘Ten points to Slytherin and Gryffindor, for you lads’ quick thinking. As for you, Sirius, I admit myself to being disappointed. As a N.E.W.T. level student, I expected you to show more caution.’

Sirius’s eyes streamed with pent-up rage, unable to express a coherent thought. James sat back on the floor, stunned. *What just happened?*

‘Don’t go looking for trouble if you can’t handle trouble finding you,’ Regulus advised, a glint in his flinty eyes.
‘What the hell was that?’ Rabastan hissed furiously, dragging Regulus into an alcove as soon as the other students were out of sight.

Emma followed, casting privacy and silencing charms around them. Rabastan was angry, Emma was just confused. She had never seen Regulus lose his cool like that before. Well, technically you still haven’t, she thought. They had only seen the aftermath. It was clear to everyone except Slughorn what had happened, though.

‘We’re supposed to keep a low profile, Reg,’ Rabastan reminded him. ‘So whatever feud you’ve got going on with your brother, do it under wraps. I don’t care if you kill the traitor; just make sure it doesn’t fall back on us. We’ve got too much riding on this.’

‘What, scared that people will notice us for who we really are?’ Regulus sneered, yanking his robes out of the taller boy’s grip. ‘Soon it’ll be evident anyway. Who are we kidding, trying to take down the Order of the Phoenix from the kids? What does Dumbledore care about not getting James Potter to join his cause?’

Emma started at the mention of her brother. Of course Regulus would read through the transparency of her actions. They were trying to stop the Order recruiting, yes, but for Emma it was the opportunity to see if her brother and his friends weren’t too far in. Speaking of which, she had completely forgotten about her plan to talk to Remus Lupin. She hadn’t spent as much time with him as she had in sixth year – now he was just another of James’s friends, albeit the nicest one.

‘I’d rather like to hang on to my life with Bones breathing down our necks,’ Rabastan replied, the venom retreating from his voice. ‘I never thought I’d need to remind you about how the Dark Lord treats his failures.’

Regulus flinched, as if Rabastan had physically hit him. The latter hadn’t meant to wound him with his words, as seen by his regretful expression. Emma supposed that Bellatrix had rejoiced in recounting the story Orion Black to her husband, and in turn Rodolphus had told his brother.

‘Reg, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to -’

‘It’s fine,’ Regulus brushed him off. ‘You’re right, anyway.’

Rabastan opened his mouth and then closed it again, at a loss for words. In the end, he just walked away, fists clenched in his robes. Emma watched him go, feeling sorry for him. He had just tried to warn Regulus – he probably hadn’t known that Regulus had been there to watch the scene unfold. As soon as he disappeared around the corner, she turned to her remaining friend.
‘What was that about?’ she asked.

She knew better than to comment on the end of the two boys’ conversation. Her real question was about her friend’s brother. Still, Regulus kept his mouth clamped shut, unwilling to give her any information. They stood like that for a while, locked in a battle of wills, before Regulus eventually gave up, looking away. He pulled a piece of the crumbling stone away from the wall of the alcove.

‘He needed to feel some of the pain,’ he mumbled, both defiant and apologetic. ‘He still doesn’t know... He’ll not get that satisfaction.’

Emma frowned. She could understand wanting to make Sirius feel what Orion must have felt in protecting him, but why didn’t Regulus tell him about what had happened that night? Surely that would cause more pain than anything Regulus himself could inflict. She knew firsthand the burden of being the death of a parent.

Two, actually, the snide little voice reminded her.

What was satisfactory about that?

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James was back on his rampage. Well, not quite a rampage. He wasn’t throwing things around and yelling at the top of his voice. He was relieved Sirius was alright, but left him in the Hospital Wing with Peter. His fellow Gryffindor had ruined his chance of forcing a confession from Regulus and he could be sure the latter wouldn’t be in the mood for emotional blackmail.

He was under no illusion that Regulus had attacked Sirius simply because of a crush. There was something underlying it, something that James instinctively knew he wouldn’t want to get into. After seeing how far Sirius would go to force James into a prank, he didn’t want to know anything about his relationship with his remaining family members. James had done his duty in helping him get out. Sirius himself would have to deal with the consequences of his actions.

James wasn’t particularly worried about Regulus anyway. Though he had shown himself capable of dangerous intent, James doubted he would be the cause of Emma’s behaviour. Instead, James had a new target in mind.

‘Lestrange,’ James plastered a grin onto his face, clapping the Slytherin on the back with a little more force than a friendly hand.

‘Potter,’ Lestrange managed a feeble smile in return.

Interesting, James thought. Lestrange was tall, with the Beater muscles to back him up. Not only that, but he was pretty good overall with a wand, quick to master silent spells. What had ruffled his feathers?

‘Let’s have a chat,’ he said aloud, steering Lestrange into a courtyard.

‘But it’s snowing,’ the Slytherin pointed out.

James cleared a bench with a warming spell.

‘Good as new,’ he proclaimed, sitting down. He waited for Lestrange to join him ‘Now, let’s cut to the chase. What are your intentions towards my little sister?’
'I thought you were twins,' Lestrange replied unhelpfully.

‘Answer the question.’

‘You’ve got the wrong Slytherin,’ Lestrange smirked, brushing the snow off of his cloak. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me...’

‘Sit,’ James ordered. To his surprise, Lestrange did as he said. Why were the Slytherins so accommodating and so infuriating at the same time? ‘I know you’re up to something.’

‘Yes, we are,’ Lestrange said, the smirk now firmly stuck in place.

James waited, but the smirk just grew wider and more crooked.

‘I suppose you think you’re charming,’ James said.

The Slytherin shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t be so presumptuous as to say it myself.’

He winked.

James had had enough.

‘What exactly are you doing that’s made Emma forget about even Quidditch?’

‘You know, it’s rather funny,’ Lestrange said, ignoring the question. ‘You’re here, quizzing me on the health of your sister, when she herself asked me to get close to you to verify the exact same thing. Huh,’ he gave a short laugh. ‘Like brother, like sister, I guess.’

‘What?’ James was nonplussed. Ever since venturing into the Slytherin world, it seemed like he just met surprise after surprise. ‘But I’m fine.’

‘So is she,’ Lestrange replied, taking his wand out and twirling it. ‘I guess you’re even then.’

‘She doesn’t look alright,’ James replied dubiously.

‘Neither do you,’ Lestrange pointed out. ‘James – may I call you James? You’ve been orphaned, lost both orphans in the space of a year. I’d say that’s enough for anyone to not look alright. Add that to the fact that Emma’s been taking some slack for her views on Muggleborns...’

Rabastan let his voice trail off, allowing James to finish weaving the web.

‘Why? Who?’ James’s mind was working like clockwork. Much easier than those pesky Aurors. ‘Wait, you hate Muggleborns. Wasn’t it you torturing “Mudbloods” just last year?’

Rabastan yawned languorously, cat-like.

‘Let’s say I’m reformed,’ he said, ‘for conversational purposes. Let’s say... I’m keeping my opinions on the quiet side, since to show compassion for Mud... Muggleborns is death in Slytherin. Let’s say... Mulciber and Snape have been keeping an eye on Emma, making sure she tows the line.’

He paused, feeling no guilt whatsoever about throwing Mulciber to the Gryffindor’s mercy. After all, his time as Hestia the Hufflepuff had hurt quite a bit. Plus, he didn’t especially like Snape – mostly because Snape didn’t like him. Did Snape even like anyone?

James was hanging onto his every word. Rabastan realised he had mused on Snape’s likes and dislikes for too long now. He sighed dramatically, unfolding his legs from under the bench.
'If only there was some way of being certain the Dark Lord wouldn’t find her and hunt her down after graduation.'

It was a gamble, mentioning the Dark Lord’s name. Any spies within the courtyard would now know that Mulciber and Snape were Death Eaters, or at least had the intention of joining up. Not to mention only Death Eaters seemed to call Voldemort by his title. Plus, James would never join the Dark Lord if he thought his sister was in danger, though Rabastan thought it was safe to bet that as a Gryffindor, he wouldn’t join anyway.

Before the Slytherin had even reached the inner corridor, James had called out to him.

‘Wait!’

Rabastan allowed himself a victory smirk. He turned to the Gryffindor, noting that James had gone from potentially dangerous to frightened in the space of a conversation.

‘What if there was a way?’

Well done Rabastan, he inwardly patted himself on the back.

Why, thank you Rabastan, another voice purred in his head.

He had just bagged himself an Order of the Birds member.

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‘So, let me get this straight,’ Lucinda said, pointing her fork in Rabastan’s direction. ‘Regulus went total badass on his brother and tried to poison him in the middle of Potions class.’

‘Yes,’ Rabastan said, sighing over his toad-in-the-hole. ‘Of course, I had to miss the fun part.’

‘Way to go, Reg!’ Alecto reached over to high five their silent friend.

He grimaced, half-heartedly returning the favour. ‘It was a mistake.’

‘Yeah, a badass mistake,’ Alecto chuckled.

‘Even I have to admit, I didn’t think you had it in you, Black,’ Mulciber said from across the table, his grin more of a leer.

Regulus’s grimace grew wider. Obviously, his poker face powers weren’t quite back yet. Mulciber didn’t seem to take any offense though, instead imitating Sirius choking. Emma didn’t find it funny, though she found some satisfaction in seeing that Sirius himself hadn’t quite returned to his normal colouring.

‘Emma, do you mind if I have a word with you after dinner?’ Rabastan asked, surprising her. ‘In private.’

There was a low whistle from Barty Crouch’s direction, along with a heartfelt sigh from Cassandra Greengrass. Emma had forgotten about her crush on Rabastan. With a pang of guilt, she realised that she had barely paid attention to the Quidditch practice on Friday. They were going to get creamed by Gryffindor.

‘Um... sure,’ she replied, wondering what he wanted.
A glance over to Lucinda reinforced her suspicions that the blonde didn’t know about Rabastan’s affections. She was happily eating her fish, berating Regulus on the dangers of poisoning people in public. Regulus’s eyes met Emma’s, though when she gave him a conspiracy smile, he didn’t wink as he usually would during a lecture. Instead, he looked as serious as their conversation earlier that day.

The smile falling from her face, Emma realised that she didn’t have much appetite left. Rabastan had consumed vast quantities of food at his usual rate, so she offered to leave early.

She didn’t notice the pair of grey eyes that followed them to the exit.

‘Alright, Bast, what is it?’ Emma asked.

‘Have you ever realised that I have two nicknames, whilst Alecto has none?’ Rabastan asked thoughtfully. ‘I suppose “Aly” doesn’t really suit her, does it?’

‘Not really,’ Emma replied. ‘“psycho”, on the other hand...’

‘She has developed a taste for torture, hasn’t she?’ Rabastan mused. ‘And you two used to be so close... What changed?’

Emma raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh come on Ems,’ Rabastan said. ‘Between you and me, we know you like hexing people for the fun of it, don’t you?’

‘Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?’ Emma asked, deflecting the question.

It was true that Emma didn’t mind shedding a bit of blood. But only for defensive purposes. Even then, the memory of the Auror she and Regulus had attacked sometimes made her feel sick to the stomach. Besides, it was one thing to require violence. It was another to voluntarily kill a man in his sickbed.

‘Not really,’ Rabastan dropped the subject, to Emma’s relief. ‘I thought you’d want to know this before I told anyone else. It won’t stay a secret for long.’

‘What is it?’ Emma asked dubiously, a foreboding feeling starting to eat away at her.

‘You’re not going to like it,’ Rabastan said, a serious expression on his face. ‘Your brother’s a part of Dumbledore’s rebel group.’

Emma closed her eyes for a second, blood rushing to her ears. It had been a futile hope, anyway.

‘Sorry,’ Rabastan said, placing a hand on her shoulder. ‘Is there anything you want me to do?’

For once, Emma welcomed the contact. It steadied her, and the knowledge that Rabastan came to her first made her feel better about her brother’s chances. She racked her mind for something, anything, useful. The only thing that came to mind was to tell the Dark Lord about James’s talents. Make him seem indispensible, so that the Dark Lord would think twice about killing him.

Being a Pureblood wasn’t going to cut it anymore.

‘I don’t think so,’ she replied. ‘But thanks anyway, Rabastan.’ A thought occurred to her. ‘How did you find out without revealing anything?’

‘Well, this is the part that makes it a bit awkward...’
Emma had scheduled a Quidditch practice that Tuesday evening. They all needed to let off some pent-up energy after the Defence classes that day. Amelia Bones had taken to training them on how to resist the Imperius Curse – something she deemed as very helpful in these troubling times.

She had also recently honed in on those who could not yet produce a Patronus. Apparently, Dumbledore claimed that those too far gone in Dark magic would not be able to produce one. Fortunately for the Slytherins and unfortunately for Bones, there were a great many people unable – or unwilling – to learn the Patronus Charm, notorious for its difficulty. However, that hadn’t stopped the professor from eying them up during the class. Emma thanked Merlin she had taken a place near the back of the queue. Having a witch like Amelia Bones use her body as a puppet was not on Emma’s list of most enjoyable things.

Her team was pretty miserable. They were all good flyers with potential, but Emma had nothing near the enthusiasm of her previous years of captaining. They were running on auto-pilot, something that had won them their game against Hufflepuff through sheer luck. Sheer luck – and the fact that Hestia was the new Seeker. Rabastan only had to fly her way menacingly, club in hand, for her to race in the opposite direction. That had been before Regulus’s father had died, though.

In this practice, paying attention as she hadn’t previously, Emma noticed that Regulus had become much more reckless in his attempts to catch the Snitch. Most of the time, this paid off, but there were a few close calls with the ground. Emma had found herself reprimanding him on several occasions; if they lost their Seeker the game was as good as lost.

Finally, after two hours of gruelling practice under sporadic rain, Emma allowed her teammates to go back up to the castle. Barty had dawdled a little, glancing at Emma from time to time. Taking the hint, Emma had advised him to get changed, and that she’d come to speak with him later that evening.

In actual fact, Emma was concerned with Regulus. First the Potions incident, now this? It was so unlike her cautious Seeker that she decided it was her turn to seek him out. Informing him that she wanted him to catch the Snitch one last time, Emma had no qualms about casting a short-lived Disillusionment Charm on the winged ball – just for the time it took the others to get back to the castle.

He eventually caught it, slamming into the mud angrily.

‘You did that on purpose,’ he accused.

‘You can’t prove it,’ Emma replied matter-of-factly, fastening the small ball back into the practice box.

Regulus grunted in reply, taking his gloves off and storming up to the castle.

‘Wait!’ Emma shouted over the wind. ‘I’m not done with you yet!’

She enchanted the box into the Quidditch hut and quickly fastened it shut. To her surprise, Regulus had dawdled. He was only a few paces away from his initial spot, but she still had to run to catch up with him. He was obviously torn, wanting to get away from her, but the anger of the past few days making him more confrontational than usual.

‘You could have fooled me,’ Regulus said as she approached, speeding up.
‘What?’ Emma asked, genuine surprise making her voice higher than usual.

‘You could have fooled me,’ he repeated loudly. He glanced back for a second, before clarifying. ‘That you were done with me.’

‘What do you mean?’ Emma frowned. She lengthened her strides until they were shoulder to shoulder.

‘You know what I mean,’ Regulus replied. ‘You barely even talk to me unless there’s a problem now. Our patrols are carried out in near-silence. Even your brother thinks we’re not friends anymore.’

‘That’s rubbish,’ Emma said defensively, although the pit in her stomach was telling her that it was true. Still, she tried to justify herself. ‘You like silence. If you didn’t, maybe you’d talk some more. Maybe I’d know what this is really about, since it can’t have sprung out of nowhere. As for my brother, he doesn’t know anything. He thinks I fancy Rabastan, of all people.’

‘Well, is it really that surprising?’ Regulus suddenly stopped; the stairs to the Entrance Hall in sight. He turned to face her, gesticulating with one hand. He was frowning when he finally said what was on his mind. ‘I saw you two yesterday evening. You looked pretty close from where I was standing.’

‘He was comforting me,’ Emma lifted her eyes to the sky, indignant.

‘Yeah, the way I comforted you before you turned around and ignored me completely,’ Regulus said heatedly.

His cheeks were red, even though it had started raining again. He bit his lip, as though to prevent more words from spilling out, but his sleet-grey eyes were staring at her defiantly. Emma was vaguely aware of her freezing skin, but her blood was boiling on the inside.

‘Well, sorry if I haven’t had as much experience as you in that department,’ she couldn’t help but raise her voice. It was a low blow, but it had been preying at the back of her mind for a while. I’m the insensitive one?

‘Much as it might be hard for you to believe, I’m not that cold. It’s hard for me to pretend I don’t remember what happened that night, to go on as if nothing had ever happened.’

‘Oh really?’ Regulus asked, his voice laced with sarcasm. ‘Then what happened with my brother in fifth year? I guess I should have known that if you couldn’t have him, then you had to settle for me.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Emma asked. Hot tears spilled down her face, but it felt as though the cold rain had solidified into a shard to pierce her heart. I had trusted you, she thought, before another followed immediately afterwards. Never trust a Slytherin.

She brushed the tears away angrily, mixing them with the rain. She was ashamed they had even slipped out. She couldn’t help the injured tone her voice took on, though. ‘You know what happened that night. I can’t believe you would stoop so low as to use that against me.’

That seemed to bring Regulus up short. His eyes blinked hazily, the anger losing momentum. He stilled as he tried to process the words, make sense of them before the next volley of words.

Emma ungraciously wiped the snot from her face, blinking several times. She wanted to press her point, to scream at him for treating her the way he had everyone else, but she didn’t think she could without losing her composure and fully breaking down from nerves. Instead she stared him down, thinking that maybe she could cause some guilt to appear in those mirror-eyes for once.

‘So you didn’t sleep with Sirius?’ Regulus asked hesitantly, unwilling to relax his posture.
'Of course not, you arsehole,' Emma replied as indignantly as she could muster, though the effect was lost by her voice cracking.

She would have cursed him in ordinary times. Even now, her wand was clenched tightly in her hand, slippery with sweat and rain. But Regulus already looked like he realised his mistake. He deflated, looking less imposing, and more like a seventeen-year-old who wasn’t sure of himself anymore.

‘So that night... was it the first time you...’ his voice trailed off into the wind.

‘Yes, alright? Does that make you feel better? Regulus Arcturus Black is allowed to break hearts here and there as he pleases, but Merlin forbid the girl be anything other but besotted with him.’

Emma turned away, ashamed at the state she had been reduced to. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Regulus was the one who was never supposed to hurt her, who had always been considerate and kind. Instead, she felt like she had ended up as one of Sirius’s fangirls, crying over someone who had only seen it as a fling. It was pathetic.

‘Wait,’ Regulus said, his voice breaking too.

‘Wait,’ he repeated more urgently, when she didn’t react.

Emma’s eyes flickered back to him. Through the rain, she could make out his grey eyes catching the light in the water. The last time they had shone that way was when they had been to the lake, and the sun had reflected on the water. Automatically, she glanced up, but there was no light. The only way that could have happened was if... Why would he be crying too? She dismissed the thought. Regulus Black didn’t cry, especially not for a girl.

‘Emma,’ he said, his voice oddly hopeful.

He grew closer, close enough to count the individual drops on his eyelashes. His arms were warm despite his soaked Quidditch robes, drawing her closer towards him. How did he even get that close? But Emma didn’t step away, her breath hitching in a treacherously weak manner. Hadn’t she just promised herself Regulus wouldn’t be able to make a mess of her? But the warning thought passed when the rest of her mind took over.

It was silly to hope, as though she was in a romantic ballad where the wizard who had never known love reformed his ways for his best friend, the one who had been with him until the end. If reality followed the songs, this would be the moment where Regulus would declare his undying love and they would kiss and ride hippogriffs into the sunset. Get a grip, Emma, she told herself. You’ve stared down werewolves. Just tell him...

When Emma met Regulus’s gaze his eyes darted away, then back to hers, then away again, as though unsure of where to look. Emma’s thoughts died away into an incoherent babble. When grey finally met blue, Regulus’s eyes were stripped of the Occlumency mirror he usually walled himself up in. Now, he looked more vulnerable than Emma had ever seen him. Against her will, her heartbeat sped up, thumping crazily in her chest as it seemed like her library fantasies would come true.

She closed her eyes when his lips touched hers, but they were nothing like the time before. The kiss was sweet, hesitant, and Emma would have sworn that his lips were trembling if she wasn’t so sure that it was her own.

Suddenly, she took a step back, breaking the trance.
‘I won’t do that again,’ she said firmly. If she didn’t tell him now, then he would think she was fine being another of his Prefect’s bathroom girls. ‘I... It had been a mistake the first time.’

At the same time, Regulus had been forming a thought of his own.

‘I love you,’ he said, the words tumbling out of his mouth.

Grey eyes widened in horror as he registered what he had said, coupled with Emma’s previous words. He gulped, eyes darting around as he searched for an exit. As for Emma, she froze, transfixed by those three words. As it dawned on Regulus that she wasn’t running away, he seized the opportunity to kiss her again.

Emma was still staring at him when he opened his eyes, wide-eyed in disbelief. Had she heard that properly? Did he really just say the words that terrified her more than anything else? Just as she had herself convinced that she had misheard, he spoke again.

‘I love you,’ he repeated, brushing the loose strands of hair away from her face.

*Maybe I was wrong the first time*, she thought. *Maybe I’m the wizard who had never known love.*

She wrapped her arms around the best friend who had been there since the start, meeting his lips with a kiss of her own.

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Eventually, they broke apart. It could have been seconds, it could have been minutes. When Emma came to her senses again, it felt as though it had been hours. Though she would have gladly frozen time, she realised that she was shivering so badly that her teeth felt like they were vibrating.

‘We sh-should p-probably go ins-side,’ she said through her chattering.

‘Yeah,’ Regulus smiled, one of his genuine smiles that lit up his face. ‘I guess we should.’

The road to the Slytherin common room was painfully awkward. For Emma’s part, she felt shy, as though she didn’t know what to do with herself anymore. One hand was loosely roped through Regulus’s, but the other seemed to swing aimlessly by her side. As for Regulus, he kept glancing back, then glancing at their interlocked fingers, as though to reassure himself that he hadn’t been imagining it.

By some miracle, the room was empty. They stopped for a minute to dry their clothes by the fire and ended up sitting side by side on the sofa. It was a start, though it didn’t halt the cold that had seeped into Emma’s bones. She pressed herself against Regulus for warmth, who kissed the top of her head almost instinctively. She looked up at him, suppressing her sudden urge to giggle. The voice that used to reprimand her for such frivolous behaviour seemed to be on holiday.

‘So,’ Regulus said, clearing his throat. ‘What now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Emma replied. She took a step back, but kept her arms around Regulus’s waist. ‘This... thing. Whatever it is, I... I don’t want to lose you because of it. What if we mess it up? What if someone else messes it up? What if James -’

‘Emma,’ Regulus interrupted. ‘How could our lives be more messed up than they already are? If... if you’re not sure that this is what you want then...’
This time it was Emma’s turn to interrupt.

‘It is what I want,’ she clarified quickly. She closed her eyes tiredly, instinctively snuggling further into his chest. She realised that they had grown so close that the relationship didn’t even feel different from before Halloween. A confession escaped her lips from her position of safety. ‘I just want something to go right for a change. Something to last’

Regulus moved so sharply it forced her to open them again. He stared at her with as much seriousness as he could muster. He understood the unspoken words that lay between them. People close to me die, Emma thought. She didn’t know if she could handle it if Regulus joined the ever-growing list.

‘It’ll last,’ he said, so sure of himself that Emma couldn’t help but believe him. ‘It’ll always last for me.’

Some cautious part of Emma warned her to wait until morning, to see if he was really speaking the truth, but deep down she knew he was. It felt as though it had only been a matter of time. Now she knew what James was on about when he said mushy things about Lily. Before, Emma had mocked him for his Celestina Warbeck phase. Oh, how he would make fun of her now.

In that moment, in front of the warm fireplace, and secure in the arms of the person she trusted the most in the world, she didn’t think even James’s teasing could ruin her happiness.
Interruptions

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Alassea Riddle for reviewing!

‘Oi, lovebirds.’

Emma blearily opened her eyes, rubbing them to remove the dryness. Why was she so thirsty? And what was a guy doing in her room?

Emma’s memories of last night came into focus at the same time as the room. She realised that she had fallen asleep on the common room sofa, the fire burning away as usual. **Well, that explains the dehydration.**

Regulus groaned as he took his arm away from her, rotating his stiff shoulder no doubt. Emma felt a little jolt in her stomach. So she hadn’t dreamed it up. Repressing her grin for fear of encouraging Rabastan’s teasing, she realised that Regulus was grimacing from the pain in his arm. She felt a little guilty for sleeping on it, but the scene before her eyes more than made up for it. The questions was, what happened now?

‘I see you’re not even trying to deny it,’ Rabastan continued, making sure his tie was properly straight in one of the mirrors above the mantle piece. He glanced at their reflection. ‘So...?’

*How is Rabastan acting so cool about this?* Emma asked herself. There was no way he knew she fancied Regulus. *And good luck finding out about any of Regulus’s secrets,* she snorted inwardly. That boy’s face was as emotive as a rock if he put his mind to it.

‘How about you keep it to yourself for now?’ Regulus asked.

Emma’s head shot around so quickly she got a crick in her neck. She gasped, massaging the burning muscle.

‘Not sure the lady likes that idea,’ Rabastan helpfully informed his friend, leaning against the wall to watch the show.

‘Don’t be a Gryffindor,’ Regulus replied disdainfully. ‘It’s not as if we’re going to hide this, but... there’s no way I’m giving Sirius ammunition after what I did last week. Besides, who knows what Dumbledore’s people would do with the information? They’re already trying to use Narcissa as bait against Lucius.’

‘Hey, I’m more than capable of removing myself from that kind of situation,’ Emma protested indignantly. She would not be reduced to the wallflower state that Narcissa had found herself in.

‘I know,’ Regulus said, smiling. He moved as if to kiss her, but his eyes slid back to Rabastan and he settled for putting a hand on her arm instead. ‘But I’m not sure I want to deal with James’s wrath now that he’s become more concerned about you.’

Emma grinned in reply, her fears of this night being like the last falling away. Still, it was better safe than sorry. As Regulus moved away, she pulled him back by the robes to kiss him. It was much better
Out of the rain.

‘Ew, guys,’ Rabastan waved his arms, separating them. ‘I’m right here, you know. Anyway, Emma knows what I want in return for keeping the peace.’

Regulus raised an eyebrow in query, but Emma just gave him a mysterious look.

‘I haven’t forgotten, Rab.’

‘Just making sure,’ a comb appeared in the green-eyed boy’s hand, as he combed his hair back. It fell back in wavy locks that James would have killed to obtain so he could impress Lily. ‘Well, make sure you clean up your act before breakfast. If no one spots those lovey-dovey eyes, then they deserve to be blinded by the sight.’

Emma shook her head at Rabastan’s antics, but scooted away from Regulus anyway, just in case there were any other early risers. She agreed with Regulus on the fact that they should keep... whatever they had... on the down low. However, her reasoning was more that she didn’t like other people finding out at the same time as Emma herself. If this was going to work, then she wanted it to be her and Regulus, no complications.

She looked at the grandfather clock – it was barely six in the morning. What was Rabastan doing up so early? As she turned to ask him, the secret door swung shut.

Guess I’ll have to wait ‘till the next Potions class, she thought, certain that he was up to no good.

‘So,’ Regulus said, moving closer again. ‘What’s the plan... girlfriend?’

His eyes took on the deer-in-headlights look from last night. As his mouth opened to backtrack, Emma couldn’t resist poking fun at him. Who knew when she would be presented with another golden opportunity?

‘Who said I’m your girlfriend?’ she asked teasingly, pushing off the couch. She could have heard a pin drop in the stunned silence. She paused at the top of the girl’s staircase, uncertain of her boldness, before deciding to push forwards. ‘Although, if there was a boy who knew how to get into the secret room above Hogsmeade station...’

‘We do have a free period in common this morning...’ Regulus’s voice trailed off. His cheeks went red as he realised the implication of her words.

‘You mean you... I-I’ll see you there,’ he stuttered hurriedly and nearly ran into the boy’s dormitory, leaving Emma chuckling in his wake.

Who knew it was so easy to make Regulus Black blush?

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Regulus, you lucky git, Rabastan thought with a wry grin.

Neither of his friends had turned up to breakfast that morning and Rabastan could guess all too well the reason why. Later, he would find out that his roommate’s mind wasn’t quite so dirty, and would feel better about himself. In the meantime though, he didn’t begrudge his roommate; Merlin knew he had waited long enough. Rabastan couldn’t even begin to imagine pining after Lucinda Rosier for that long.
In fact, he wasn’t sure what had happened with Lucinda. One moment, he had been teasing her, business as usual, and the next he had been admiring the way her golden hair caught the light. Suddenly, he found that he quite liked her annoying, but funny lectures and the way she took care of the rest of them.

Alecto and Barty were chatting away next to him, but he turned the noise to a quiet buzz in his head. Enough thought about romance – he had bigger fish to fry. Namely, Amelia Bones. Through a cryptic letter, his brother had warned him of the threat she posed to the Dark Lord’s reign.

Rabastan was under no illusions that she would ship them off to Azkaban the minute they graduated. So his solution was simple: get to her first. If he failed, then he was sure that the school would protect him. After all, he was a good student with a (fairly) good track record. Sure, he might skip a class here or there, but no one pegged him for an “evil Death Eater”. But let’s make sure this plan works anyway, yeah? a voice nagged in his head.

He watched as the young professor ate her breakfast, stealthily slipping out and around the Great Hall the minute she had cleared her plate. He would have asked Alecto to perform a powerful Memory Charm – Salazar, she could make them good – but he was worried her magic already had too distinctive a pattern to it. Alecto was about as subtle as blunt axe.

Besides, there were only so many Aurors that could turn up dazed in an alleyway before the Ministry for Magic put the pieces together. If Amelia Bones lost her memories, they would bring the Law Enforcement department swarming over Hogwarts like ants. And Rabastan wasn’t quite ready to leave Hogwarts yet. He liked the steak-and-kidney pie too much for that.

He knew that the Defence professor’s class with the third-years would take her outside, down to the lake. What she didn’t know was that he had obtained several Hinkypunks from the gamekeeper, known for his obsession with strange animals. The giant man had only been too willing to sell a couple of the creatures for the name and location of a gambling pit which specialised in the buying and selling of restricted creatures.

Rabastan had spent his morning lashing the creatures to the spot, telling them they would get fresh bait if only they did him this favour. They didn’t need to know that the fresh bait would be them, once he threw them into the lake. As a sign of his goodwill, Rabastan had Accio-ed deer to their hiding spots. He had to bite back a laugh at the sight of the animals zooming towards him, if only because he needed to duck.

Maybe I should ask Alecto to Obliviate that memory, he thought, suppressing a shudder of disgust as he remembered the way the Hinkypunks fed. Here she is!

Amelia Bones was striding towards the lake. Rabastan watched with baited breath from his hiding spot. It was now or never.

She didn’t even notice the first Hinkypunk, but the second caught her glance. It darted across the path, leading her towards the forest. Rabastan sent a few more leaves scattering across his trap, admiring his handiwork. You could only tell there was something wrong if you looked closely. It had been hard to dig the ten-foot deep pit, but worth it. He had borrowed some non-stick wax from Barty, who was almost as good as Severus when it came to inventing spells. Multiplied tenfold, Rabastan had been able to coat the length of the hole with it. Anyone who fell in would have a hard time getting out, especially if he took their wand.

If the animals in the Forest got her, no one would be implicated in the unfortunate accident.

Bones was drawing nearer. There was no time for a last-minute Disillusionment Charm, so Rabastan
retreated further into the trees. The final Hinkypunk was dancing in the distance, emitting human-like noises.

‘Children?’ Amelia Bones called. ‘It is not quite dawn; it is not safe to be in these woods alone.’

Too true, Rabastan thought. Just a little bit further...

Suddenly, a shriek cut through the air, like fireworks on bonfire night. Rabastan’s head shot up, his eyes scanning the horizon. There was nothing. He went back to his vigil, only to find that the professor had disappeared.

‘Shit,’ he swore. ‘I almost had her!’

A shadow moved through the trees ahead; it could only be the Defence teacher. Rabastan followed at a slower pace, unwilling to give himself away. All thought of stealth was lost when he saw what had drawn Bones attention.

There, twenty feet above the Black lake, floated a very large replica of some fop’s wavy blond head.

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‘What’s going on?’ Emma asked, watching the crowd of students swarming out of the Entrance Hall.

Regulus shrugged. They had been on their way to the kitchens when they were met with the sight of Prefects and staff yelling at throngs of students, portraits running here and there into others to gossip about what might or might not have happened.

Grabbing Regulus’s hand – she still felt a thrill of adrenaline whenever she did, as though it was still some forbidden fantasy – Emma shot trip jinxes here and there, clearing a quick path outside. From there, it was easy to follow the trail of students to the Black Lake.

Whatever she might have expected, she could never have foreseen the scene that unfolded out before her.

There, in the middle of the lightening sky, was what could only be described as the enlarged head of a thirteen-year-old boy. Wavy blond hair perfectly framed an oval face, cheeks still pudgy from baby fat. If the head hadn’t been so enlarged, one might have overlooked the slightly too-large nose, the eyes obviously squinting at the rising sun. The reason for this was because there, in the middle of the face, a practiced smile grinned in the form of large, pearly-white teeth.

Several professors were casting spells into the air, attempting to remove the atrocity from the Hogwarts skyline, but to no avail. Professor Bones had caught the culprit – an easy feat when there was nowhere to hide. In fact, it seemed as though the third-year was enjoying the attention immensely, waving to anyone who would glance his way. He ignored the Defence teacher’s repeated pleas to find out the appropriate counter-curse, claiming that he would only remove the object once the whole student body had the opportunity to admire it.

Emma was dumbstruck.

After assessing the situation, Regulus tugged on her sleeve and pointed. Rabastan was skulking in the entrance of the trees behind the cordoned off area, evidently waiting for the commotion to die down. What’s he gone and done this time? Emma asked herself with an audible sigh. They made their way down to the waterfront, only to be stopped by Professor Flitwick.
I’m sorry, but students may not bypass the restricted section. We don’t yet know how Mr Lockheart has achieved this level of spell casting. There’s the high possibility that he has found a powerful artefact and has simply claimed all credit.’

In a side-mutter, the Charms professor added: ‘It wouldn’t be the first time…’

‘Prefects may stay to help control the situation,’ Professor Archedis, teacher of Arithmancy, reminded his colleague.

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ Flitwick nodded. ‘You two try to get the students back to the castle. There really isn’t anything to see here.’

Regulus turned back; probably to come up with a plan in private, but Emma noticed that McGonagall was nearing the spot where Rabastan was hiding. That probably wouldn’t have been a problem, if it was anyone other than Rabastan. He would be taken in as an accomplice to the boy’s quest for fame and would be punished for what he was actually doing in the area. And with Rabastan, who knows what that could be?

‘I believe that it is some sort of variation on an informative spell,’ Archedis was telling Dumbledore. ‘I’ve been trying to read the numbers that assemble it, and there is a strong chance that the number four is key to this sequence. Four is used in directional spells too, and what better landmark than an image sent into the sky for all to see? That being said, don’t you find that it oddly resembles the Dark Mark You-Know-Who uses to announce his presence?’

The last sentence caught Emma’s attention. Of course, she thought, pulling her wand out. It’s simple.

‘Emma,’ Regulus warned, realising a split-second too late what she was going to do.

A pure white beam of light shot out of Emma’s wand, directed at the annoying face. She took great satisfaction in seeing the makeshift portrait disintegrate. A collective “aah” could be heard from the crowd of students, who immediately broke up into groups to discuss how great the prank was and to debate on whether Lockheart could really have cast the spell.

The boy in question groaned in disappointment. He shot a look of loathing towards Emma – evidently; he had spent a lot of time inventing the spell. Emma wondered who would have been so careless as to put the idea in his head. Rabastan? She asked herself. It would explain why the Slytherin was there.

Before she had time to go over and question him herself, she found herself being beset by fellow Prefects.

‘How did you do it?’

‘Did you know about what he was going to do?’

This last one was from Helen the Ravenclaw, who Emma liked rather less than Regulus did. Though that was mainly to do with their pairings in Potions. Stop being a hypocrite, Emma, she internally reprimanded herself. You stole his partner from him when you paired up with Rabastan. Luckily, she was saved by her Arithmancy teacher.

‘Brilliant work, Miss Potter,’ he said, clapping her on the back. ‘You’re a natural at curse-breaking. Of course, this wasn’t a curse, but you found the magical sequence with ease! Instead of working on the current curriculum, why don’t you instead write an essay on the essence of Mr Lockheart’s spell work and how you deduced the formula to dissipate it?’
Emma wondered if she hadn’t just made life more difficult for herself in creating this new homework. Still, the old professor’s remarks fended off any other questions people might have had. His voice still carried weight in the castle and soon enough people’s attention was concentrated elsewhere.

Regulus had disappeared, probably considering Rabastan a greater liability than herself. Better not go to the forest then, she thought. With any luck, Regulus would corner their reckless friend and bring him to the kitchens. In the meantime, Emma was starving. She had been up for three hours without anything to eat. As she turned back to the castle, Emma’s eye caught that of Amelia Bones. The young woman’s gaze was hard, suspicious even.

Emma no longer wondered whether life would become more difficult. She was sure.
James rubbed his hands with glee. The prank had gone as planned, funnier in fact. He hadn’t expected Lockhart to manage the spell on such a grand scale, even if he had help from the Marauders.

Funnily enough, it had been Peter to suggest the spell. James took it as a good sign. With Sirius and himself distracted, the smaller boy usually so easy to miss had really stepped up to the plate. He was proud of the little guy. Of course, Sirius had to go and ruin it with his teasing, but from the glow on Peter’s face, the latter knew he had pulled off a Marauder-worthy joke.

It was a shame they couldn’t take credit for it. Once the Arithmancy professor had linked it to the Dark Mark, no one in their right mind would claim that prank. Just another thing this “Voldemort” has ruined, James thought. He was of the mind that whoever needed to stick a title in front of their name probably didn’t deserve it.

The one down point in his morning was that Sirius had given him a meaningful look when Emma had taken down the head. James would never admit it, but he was relieved he wouldn’t have to stare at Lockhart’s face all day. However, there was no one more self-involved that Peter could find. He should have asked Sirius, James snorted. No, it wasn’t the end of the prank that had dampened his mood – it was the fact that his best friend was clearly insinuating that his sister knew something about the Dark Arts, just because she had figured out the counter-spell for the Dark Mark-like construction.

Really, if Sirius was going to be so paranoid, maybe he should have asked Peter how he had come up with the idea in the first place. Picturing Wormtail as a Death Eater was almost as laughable as Emma taking the Dark Mark. His second snort in as many minutes had Moony giving him a strange look.

‘Don’t you think Wormtail’s prank was hilarious?’ James asked, shaking the absurd notion from his head.

Moony just gave him one of his half-grins – the ones that said “I actually found that prank very funny but I’m trying to keep a straight face lest I encourage you and that would be bad because I’m a Prefect”. James was pretty good at deciphering Moony’s expressions, if he did say so himself.

Satisfied, James checked his watch – the one with gold Snitches embedded around the clock he had received for his seventeenth birthday, not the one Sirius gave him that spurted out random spells on the hour – and realised that he still had half an hour until Potions started.

Moony still took Potions, but because of conflicting schedules, he had to take the class with the Ravenclaws. James wondered if he ever felt left out, remembering the shy first year who hadn’t wanted to make friends, so scared he was of hurting them. He felt a rush of affection and pity for his friend that had gone through so much, yet who never complained.
'Let’s get some chocolate,’ James suggested.

Moony looked as though he would protest, but his stomach then gave a long rumble. He was always hungry after the full moon.

‘I guess my excuse of going to the library isn’t going to cut it anymore,’ Remus said ruefully.

‘You can always finish up your Astronomy essay in the kitchens,’ James suggested.

He knew how much Moony liked the class, the idea that everything had a place and a time to happen. Even though he had to be extra careful about his excuses for the full moon, Remus always maintained that it was worth it. James always privately thought the class helped Moony keep as calm as he was.

Bouncing along the corridor, to the amusement of his slower friend, James hummed a little tune.

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Emma tucked into her beans on toast. She had guessed correctly, Regulus and Rabastan were both currently sulking in the kitchen. Regulus, because Rabastan wouldn’t tell him what he was doing in the Forbidden Forest, and Rabastan, because apparently whatever he had been doing hadn’t turned out in his favour. Emma had wisely stayed out of it for once – siding with Regulus would just make Rabastan say that she had taken her best friend’s – boyfriend’s – side again, whereas siding with Rabastan would make Regulus give her that hurt look she had come to recognise and abhor.

‘Look,’ Regulus sighed. ‘I believe you about the Lockhart thing, okay? I only asked about it in the first place because he certainly didn’t do it by himself and I couldn’t think of anyone else it could be, alright? I should have known that after last week that you would never risk a stunt like that...’

It was a tribute to what Rabastan’s friendship meant to him that Regulus was justifying himself with so many words. Emma suddenly felt uncomfortable, as though she was intruding upon something. She got up to scrape the rest of her baked beans into one of the bins before a house-elf all but wrenched the plate away from her, somehow commanding her in a servile tone to leave him to take care of it.

By the time the tussle with the little creature was over, Regulus and Rabastan seemed to have moved on, Rabastan telling Regulus some kind of joke whilst the latter smiled and basked in the attention. In fact, they seemed closer than they had in weeks. She was loath to interrupt the moment, but her watch was an uncomfortable reminder that they were going to be late for Potions.

‘We should get going,’ she tapped Regulus on the shoulder.

‘Sure,’ he replied, a flurry of looks crossing his face until he settled on his usual faint smirk.

Leaving them to sort out the uncomfortable atmosphere, Rabastan went to open the door, sure that he could catch the fruit in some compromising position or other. As usual, he was disappointed. But that was more than made up for when he found himself face to face with James Potter. Taken aback, he searched for something nice to say.

‘Hi,’ he stated dumbly.

James just stared at him.
'Come on, James, we don’t have long until we’re late for Potions,’ an impatient voice came from behind the Gryffindor.

James moved his arm so that Remus could see his fellow Slytherin.

‘Ah, it appears that we weren’t the only ones in the mood for a second breakfast,’ the Prefect said light-heartedly.

Rabastan felt an arm drag him out of the doorway.

‘Now, now Rabastan,’ Emma said laughingly. ‘Don’t stand in the way of a Prefect and his breakfast. You know how Regulus gets, and he’s in a friendly House!’

Regulus just shook his head, shrugging his book bag onto his shoulder.

‘We should probably go,’ he said, nodding to the two Gryffindors. ‘I’d advise you to be quick about it, Potter, Slughorn wants to start the exam this week so the last week of term is free for his Slug Club.’

It was probably one of the most cordial conversations in Slytherin-Gryffindor history.

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‘Did you have something to do with Regulus acting strangely this morning?’ Emma asked under her breath.

Technically they were only allowed to say things like “pass me the silver knife”, or “can I have the chopping board?”, but Emma had decided to risk a simple question. Regulus had been having problems with his potion – not anything major, but Emma had noticed that he was reading instructions twice over, or almost letting his cauldron overheat. It wasn’t the calm, focused Regulus she was used to seeing.

‘I may have mentioned that it was time he acted like you were his girlfriend, not just his friend,’ Rabastan grinned back.

Emma flushed scarlet and pretended to read the blackboard over again. She met James’s stare just as he turned back around with a frown. *What’s that all about then?*

*Rab could really give Reg a break, she thought. It’s barely new to us anyway; it wasn’t our fault he walked in on us... even if we were in the common room.*

Suddenly, her quill started moving across her parchment of her own accord. Startled, she looked around, only to see Rabastan concentrating on her Potions book. She hastily placed her had around the quill as though she was jotting down notes. In actual fact, she was reading the words forming in handwriting different to her own.

*Look, I didn’t want to mention everything in front of the house-elves...*

*Plus, I know Reg would have been angry with me when he’s done his fair share of stupid things this past week...*

*And it wasn’t stupid.*
Emma rolled her eyes, *get to the point already, Bast.*

*I tried to get rid of Amelia Bones.*

*I think she’s onto us.*

There was a long pause, during which Emma could hear her cauldron bubbling, signifying the water was ready.

*I’m scared of being caught, Emma.*

She lifted her eyes from the parchment to meet Rabastan’s. The omnipresent flecks of laughter had disappeared from his eyes. He was serious. He nodded back towards the parchment.

*I tried luring her into a trap and it almost worked. Thanks to that Hufflepuff dunderhead, I’m back at square one with a witch on the lookout for dark magic.*

Emma snatched the quill away, Rabastan’s magic only giving the slightest resistance. She turned over the page and applied fresh ink to the feather.

*She’s on the lookout for dark magic from me, Rab. We’ll discuss this in the girl’s dorm, tonight. Bring Reg, he’ll understand, you know he will. I’ll make sure Helen and Sophie are indisposed. In the meantime....*

A second’s pause.

*In the meantime... Stay on your guard.*

And she would make sure that her friends would stay safe.

***

James cornered Emma later that day to do some revision for the N.E.W.Ts. This alone should have triggered an alarm bell, but he had spent so much time recently studying with Lily that it seemed normal. Plus, it seemed like a delayed reaction to try to reconnect, the way Emma had after their parents had died and James had pulled away.

“So,” he said after a while of scratching away at essays on Animagi. “I know that you know this subject by heart, and so do I. I think I’ll be finished in about five minutes, and the snow outside is just itching for me to turn it into caricatures of the Heads of Houses.”

Emma cracked a smile at that, imagining a glacial McGonagall. It was surprisingly easy.

“Go ahead,” she replied. “I have a ton of Arithmancy to do, anyway.”

“Before I do,” James hesitated, and it was then that Emma realised that they weren’t there to do their homework together. “I wanted to ask you about something.”

“Go on...” she said slowly, running the multitude of possibilities in her mind.

*What did he find out?* Studying his uneasy expression, she decided that he couldn’t have found out about anything important. He would look angry, unhappy at least. Now, he was twirling his quill between his fingers, trying to choose the right words to say.
‘I know it’s early,’ he began. ‘But I was thinking... We should have Christmas at home, one last time. Before you go off to break curses and I – hopefully – start Auror training and won’t know when Christmas is anymore.’

‘You mean -’

‘Godric’s Hollow.’

James waited with bated breath as Emma’s features arranged themselves into a doubtful expression.

‘I don’t know, James...’

‘It’s what Mum would have wanted,’ he said, looking at her with big hazel eyes, like when he asked their mother for an extra Troll Toffee. His glasses slipped down his nose a little, but he made no move to adjust them. The quill stopped turning as his attention focused on his sister.

‘Mum’s not who I’m worried about,’ Emma replied quietly.

‘Emma -’

It was her turn to interrupt him. ‘What if Dad’s placed some sort of enchantment there keeping me out?’

‘Come on, that’s -’

‘Ridiculous?’ Emma finished James’s sentence heatedly. ‘James, he disinherited me. He tried to drive a wedge between us; he probably would have tried to Obliviate me from his memory if it weren’t so dangerous. He hated me, James.’

‘So I’ll check the house. I’m not Dad. Would you do it for me? So that we can have one moment in our final year without having to deal with all of this House rubbish?’

James looked so forlorn that Emma couldn’t help but let a crack enter her defences.

‘If I did... Would Lily be there?’

‘I’m not sure,’ James replied with a frown, taken by surprise. ‘I can ask her if you’d like. Why?’

‘Well, I’m guessing Sirius will be there...’ she pulled a face.

Here James took a deep breath. ‘I was thinking... I know you’re not on the best of terms with Sirius, so what if we invited Regulus too?’

‘I don’t know that his mother would like being alone,’ Emma replied, thinking of the ominous Grimmauld Place and the frenzy of Mrs Black after having lost her husband. On the other hand, she was sure that Regulus wouldn’t object if Kreacher was allowed to come too. ‘On second thought, he probably wouldn’t care.’

‘Does Regulus not get along with his mother?’ James asked curiously. ‘Sirius always spoke as if his little brother could do no wrong.’

‘It’s complicated,’ Emma replied tersely, thinking of a similar remark made by Regulus about his older brother. Tentatively, she pictured the scene in her mind. ‘Would you mind me inviting a second guest?’

‘I draw the limit at your boyfriend,’ James frowned, his eyebrows nearly meeting. ‘I couldn’t handle
that, even if we do get along better than before.’

Emma didn’t understand.

‘But you just said you wanted to invite Regulus!’ she raised her voice slightly. ‘Besides, you don’t know who it is yet.’

‘Of course I do,’ James replied immediately. ‘I pay more attention than you think. You know that I saw you in the kitchens this morning, and besides you spend all of your time practically attached at the hip.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Emma matched her twin’s frown. ‘Do you want to invite Regulus or not?’

‘I just said that I would, didn’t I?’ it was James’s turn to raise his voice. ‘I just don’t want your boyfriend coming along. I know that we aren’t in fifth year anymore and I don’t have the right to question who you do and don’t date, but I don’t trust him. Sure, he looks out for you, but I can never tell if he has an ulterior motive.’

He adopted his most disapproving look, even though he knew it would wind Emma up. He just wanted Emma to admit that she was seeing Lestrange, the way he had opened up to her about Lily. He was slightly hurt that despite his best efforts to bridge the gap that had opened up between them these past few years, Emma was still stubbornly pretending that he knew nothing about her and her friends.

However, seeing her open her mouth angrily made him realise that he was achieving the opposite of what he came to the library with her for. Taking a deep breath, he spoke over whatever Emma was saying.

‘Honestly, I never thought I’d say this, but why don’t you want to go out with Regulus? At least he’s in love with you.’

Emma immediately fell silent. James regretted his outburst. He had just been making progress with her closest friend and now he had gone and blabbed his biggest secret. One that Sirius, apparently, had been holding over him for years. Had he just alienated the one friend Emma had that James could trust?

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ his sister asked instead, nonplussed.

Well, I hadn’t expected that, James thought. He gave her a strange look.

‘You might not believe it, but Regulus fancies you,’ he said. ‘And I swear that if you give him a chance, I won’t try to ruin it for you as... as I may have in the past.’

‘Now you admit it,’ Emma snorted, calming down a little. ‘But James, I already know that Regulus fancies me. It would be a bit weird if my boyfriend didn’t.’

That word again “boyfriend”, Emma thought. It felt strange on her tongue, but gave her a thrill to say it, even if it was to James, who was the last person she had thought of telling – she wanted time to prepare Regulus for Stinging Hexes and numerous pranks before telling James.

‘Wait...’ James said, his features falling back into a neutral expression. ‘So let me get this straight. Lestrange... isn’t your boyfriend?’

Emma nodded.
‘Regulus is?’

Emma nodded again, raising an amused eyebrow.

‘Well that’s a huge relief,’ James let out a sigh for good measure, falling back onto his chair. He hadn’t even noticed getting up.

Emma was shaking her head in disbelief.

‘I can’t believe you thought I was dating Rabastan,’ she said.

‘Well, how was I supposed to know?’ James cried in mock indignation.

Emma just gave him a look. He laughed, half out of relief. A thought occurred to him.

‘Wait, so if Lestrange isn’t the second person, who is?’

‘Kreacher,’ Emma replied simply, so simply that James wasn’t sure if she was joking or not.

He raised his eyebrows at her, but before she could explain her eyes were drawn to something behind her brother. James turned to see Regulus enter the row of bookshelves near their table, spot them, and walk towards them. Still giddy with relief that Emma’s boyfriend was the only Slytherin James knew he had a chance of cracking – probably the only one who was halfway decent, although he tried not to act prejudiced – he heartily clapped him on the back.

‘There he is!’

Regulus’s back went stiff, but to his credit he merely looked towards Emma for guidance.

‘So... My brother may know that we’re together,’ she said sheepishly, suddenly finding her shoelaces extremely interesting.

Regulus looked back to James, who was still grinning, and then to Emma again. He cleared his throat.

‘Well... now that I know you’re in the library, I guess I’ll just... you know,’ Regulus hemmed, pointing back the way he came.

‘No, stay,’ James said, pulling up a chair. ‘Emma was just about to tell me who Kreacher was.’

‘Sirius didn’t mention –’ Regulus broke off his sentence before it finished, muttering instead, ‘no, I guess that would have slipped his mind, not important enough for him.’

‘Kreacher is the Blacks’ house elf,’ Emma said, deliberately cutting Regulus off.

‘Oh, well then,’ James said with an air of finality. ‘Of course he can come then. Well, I guess that’s me done. I’ll leave you two up to your kindling romance then. Cheerio!’

He gave them a half-hearted wave over his shoulder, mussing his hair up one last time on the way out. Meeting Regulus’s questioning stare, Emma groaned and thumped her head on the table.
Once James was no longer in sight – and she had made sure that the Invisibility was still safely tucked into her satchel – Emma turned to Regulus with a questioning look.

‘What was it you wanted to talk about?’

Instead of replying straight away, Regulus came around to sit on the chair next to her, turned so they were facing each other. His expression turned sheepish and he couldn’t help but glance back to check that they were alone.

‘I’m not sure how I should... Are you...? I mean...’ He paused, glancing at his hands, which were wringing knots. Taking a deep breath, he started again, laying his hands flat on his thighs. ‘I’m sorry for saying we should keep this secret, when we hadn’t talked about it before.’

‘Regulus,’ Emma couldn’t quite keep the grin of amusement from her face. Regulus frowned and resumed his thumb-twiddling. ‘Did Rabastan put you up to this?’

Her boyfriend’s glance backwards gave him away when his lips wouldn’t. *So he did,* Emma thought. And he’s probably waiting in the corridor as we speak, in case Regulus chickened out. She didn’t know whether to laugh or shake her head at Rab’s behaviour. He really was more like James than he cared to let on.

‘You don’t have to worry about that Regulus,’ she smiled again, more gently this time. She briefly brushed the back of his hand with her fingertips. ‘I understand the reasoning behind it.’

‘Everything’s always been so controlled,’ Regulus replied, changing topics abruptly. ‘I don’t... There isn’t a guide to this,’ he gestured. ‘Us, I mean... Am I doing this right? Should I act differently now that... you know... we, uh, are... dating?’

Emma had never seen Regulus so tongue-tied. Speechless, perhaps, but if he was at a loss for words he would simply stay silent. Seeing him like this... she wondered what Rabastan could have said to him to make him stammer in such a way. Her stomach clenched at the realisation that he must have put a lot of thought into how they had acted this morning.

Sensing that he needed reassuring but not sure as to how to act, she linked the tips of her fingers with his.

‘I don’t think there’s a manual for this one Reg,’ she replied, before remembering that he hated the nickname. Covering her mishap, she hurried on. ‘Besides, if we could take on five Aurors at age sixteen, I think we’ve got this covered.’

Regulus let out a short laugh, a quiet version of his brother’s bark, but he slid his hands forwards so that their hands were properly interlocked. He played with their hands for a bit before continuing thoughtfully.

'I was thinking about what you said last night, and you're right. I want this to go right just as much as you do, after waiting so long...'

He cut off abruptly, a look of horror overcoming his face. It was too late though.

'So long?' Emma asked curiously.
'Forget I ever said that,' Regulus said hurriedly, but Emma pressed on, slightly hesitantly in case she had misinterpreted his words.

'Did you...Have you fancied me for a while?'

A deep blush washed over Regulus's features, giving Emma an insight as to why he was usually so controlled - with skin as pale as his, the slightest blush was immediately detectable. He looked down, twisting his thumb over hers.

'It's entirely possible,' he admitted. 'This isn't exactly the topic of discussion that I had wished for...'

Though Emma was burning with curiosity – and her mouth wanted to plaster a huge smirk on her face – her compassion won the inner battle. So instead of insisting upon the issue, she leant forwards and gave him a gentle kiss. When she felt his lips curve upwards in the semblance of a smile, she knew she had made the right choice. She could pester Rabastan later - suddenly those knowing looks made a lot more sense - but the warm, bubbly feeling in the pit of her stomach made the wait worthwhile.

As the kiss grew more heated, Emma took her hands out of Regulus's to steady herself against his shoulders, but her boyfriend had other plans, pulling her forwards to half-sit in his lap.

When they broke apart, Emma's cheeks were as flaming as Regulus's. She had just remembered that they were in the library, a very public place, though no one seemed to have noticed them just yet.

'Want to get out of here?' she asked, closing her library books with a snap.

'You read my mind,' he grinned back, placing a kiss on her shoulder before going out into the corridor to wait for her.

*To get rid of Rab,* Emma corrected herself silently, suddenly remembering her promise to their fellow Slytherin. If what Regulus had let slip was anything to go by, there was a large chance that she owed him more than a word to Lucinda.

***

That evening, Emma convinced Lucinda to come up to the dormitory to her, under the pretext of not knowing what clothes she should buy at the next Hogsmeade visit. Lucinda happily followed her upstairs, chatting away about Christmas presents and the New Year party that Evan wanted to hold to celebrate his new position as manager of the Bertie Bott's factory.

Once upstairs though, Emma stopped in her tracks - Lucinda nearly running into her - and closed the door, putting a new type of Muffling charm Severus had taught them that summer into use.

'So, we don't have much time before Alecto comes up - she knows I'm not interested in clothes right now and that this is a code for talking about Fenwick's possible girlfriend without alerting the guys,' Emma informed Lucinda with one single breath.

Before the blonde could reply, Emma continued, in the same, hurried manner.

'I have two things to talk to you about before then, the first is about Regulus and the second is about Rabastan - which do you want first?'
To her credit, Lucinda caught on immediately. 'Let's go for Regulus, there isn't much I don't know about Rabastan if we don't have time.'

Here Emma paused, suddenly remembering that Lucinda slept with him during their sixth year. Unsure of how to proceed with an already embarrassing topic of discussion, she paused in her train of thoughts. She had expected Lucinda to reply “Rabastan”, since she enjoyed teasing him so.

'You don't…still have feelings for him, do you?' she asked rather awkwardly.

'Please,' Lucinda snorted, flopping down on the bed, her skirts fanning out around her. 'We've been over this already. No, I do not, and frankly, I think I was mostly interested, because I enjoyed the idea of fancying people in sixth year, had read somewhere that the mysterious type is the best in bed and on New Year's I was drunk. Why?'

Emma's face felt like it was on fire. That was certainly not the response she had been expecting. 'So during the start of sixth year, you're telling me you just enjoyed fancying people for the sake of fancying someone?'

'Basically, yeah,' Lucinda grinned. 'Why, do you fancy him? I could tell you what he was like, you know.'

'Um, no, that's okay,' Emma stammered out, trying to get the picture of Regulus and Lucinda out of her head to no avail.

Of course, she had known that Regulus had been with other people, but she didn't need to imagine it in detail with one of her best friends. Unfortunately, the more she tried to suppress it, the more her imagination tried to conjure up the image.

She blinked a couple of times and tried to go on. 'I, uh…Well, you see, we might have…'

'You slept together?' Lucinda asked excitedly. 'Oh this is great; I always thought you were perfect for each other. Annoyed me to no end last year, but then I realised I wouldn't have enjoyed being with Regulus anyway. Too silent and broody. Tell me everything.'

'Well, yes, we did, but that's not the point,' Emma took a deep breath to process Lucinda's enthusiasm.

‘Don’t tell me… How for the love of Nimue did this even happen?’ Lucinda asked, her brain catching up with her romanticism. ‘I hadn’t pegged you for... er... I mean I could never imagine you and Regulus having a fling. Plus, you said you weren’t interested last year.’

'I wasn’t,’ Emma said truthfully, ignoring the rest. That wasn’t relevant to the topic. ‘We're going out now. And I won't give you the details – that would just be weird.'

*Besides, it's not as if I remember much,* Emma thought. *That night was a bit of a blur.* They had decided that after that rushed start; they might take it a little slower now.

Lucinda broke into a broad grin, obviously accepting Emma’s secrecy. *She’s probably touched that I decided to tell her early,* Emma thought, thankful for Regulus’s plan.

'I don't mind telling you that I think he's liked you for the past year now, then,’ the blonde was saying. ‘I was upset after New Year's because I realised that the only reason he was with me, was because you were with Avery. By the way,' she added as an afterthought. 'I much prefer you dating Regulus to Avery. He gave me the creeps.'
They shared a shudder.

'I never dated Avery,' Emma clarified, feeling like she was going off-track. 'Look, I wanted to tell you because I wanted to know if you had any advice. James found out - I won't go into detail about how - and he wants Reg to come over for Christmas dinner. With Sirius. I won't even begin to describe how awkward that is.'

*No, Emma,* she thought. That wasn’t at all what was supposed to come out of her mouth. *As if Lucy knows anything about strained Black relations. Rabastan would be the better choice, with Bella as a sister-in-law.*

'Quite a conundrum,' Lucinda agreed thoughtfully, surprising Emma again. As if she had noticed, Lucinda laughed.

'I'm trying to remove all of the slang from my language for when I start a business,' she explained. 'As for your problem, I only have one solution really: slip Sirius a calming draught. Regulus too, for that matter, if he's going around poisoning family members.'

The girls shared a look, both knowing that the event was destined for awkwardness at the very least. Emma felt her face grow hot again. *Now or never, Emma, or do you want to remind Alecto of William the Muggle?*

'There's also something else, that I would appreciate you not telling anyone else about,' she started, feeling like a fool. 'I never really spoke with my mother these past few years, and I didn't want to look it up in a library in case someone saw but…Do you know how to…um…protect yourself from, um…'

Luckily, Lucinda understood enough from Emma's stammering to know not to ask again. 'Yeah, I have a few contraceptive spells,' she replied. 'But potions work much better, if you can handle asking Mme Pomfrey.'

Emma's look of horror said it all.

'Of course, you can just order it from a catalogue,' Lucinda laughed. 'I'll let you borrow my owl; it would be a little strange to use James's or a school owl. Mine knows to deliver straight to my dorm. In the meantime, I think I have a stock of them somewhere in my cabinet, you never know with this sort of…'

Her voice died down and she paused in the rootling of her affairs. Turning back towards Emma, who had made herself comfortable on Lucinda's bed, a thought struck her. 'Do you mean that you haven't…protected yourself…so far?'

*And here I was, thinking the worst was over,* Emma shut her eyes, preparing for her pride to take another hit.

'Um…no,' she admitted, realising just how big of a mistake that one night could have been.

'Emma!' Lucinda looked scandalised. 'Don't you know how dangerous that could be? Magical abortions are always worse than Muggle ones - the foetus develops the magic at the same time as the child, so as to protect it from illness. So if you try to abort it after its magic is attuned, the magic will try to protect the child and causes irreparable damage to the mother!'

Emma's stomach churned at the possibility. Some of the worry she saw on Lucinda's face sank in, but before she could panic, Lucinda was asking her another question.
'How many times has this happened? Quick, mix some of your blood into this potion.'

A vial was thrust forth before Emma could understand what was happening.

'Only once,' she muttered, casting a quick slashing charm on her arm and letting the blood drip through.

Lucinda handed her a pink handkerchief as Emma gave the vial back: neither of them knew any healing magic other than "Episkey". Emma went to wet it under the tap while Lucinda checked the results.

'Well?' Emma called, keeping the tremor out of her voice as she returned to the dormitory, arm safely wrapped.

'All clear,' Lucinda breathed a sigh of the relief.

The potion had turned a pure turquoise blue, no hint of blood to be seen.

'Useful,' Emma commented, the stress deflating out of her like a balloon.

'Don't do that again!' Lucinda admonished, before a sly grin spread across her face. 'So, was he that bad huh? Only once?'

Emma was saved a reply when a mane of red hair appeared out of the door.

'Knock, knock?' Alecto asked. 'All clear?'

Emma nodded as Lucinda stowed her potions away. She would have to talk to the blonde about Rabastan another time.

***

An hour later, Sophie and Helen had been successfully turned away with the help of some Confunding charms. A necessary evil, Alecto had deemed, and Emma was inclined to agree. At least Alecto wasn't so far gone as to want to Obliviate their fellow roommates.

Regulus and Rabastan arrived at nine o'clock on the dot, and Emma explained the plan that had been brewing in the back of her mind all afternoon - with the help of Regulus and hindered by his kisses. Even now, she couldn't help the smile spreading across her face as they made themselves comfortable on the floor, and she was rewarded with the smallest of smirks from her boyfriend.

Rabastan, of course, noticed this exchange and rolled his eyes with a sigh that sounded suspiciously like "lovebirds". Emma only had to look at him to remind him what she held over him, and Rab rearranged his features into such an un-Rabastan-like pleasant expression that Emma had to reign in a laugh.

'When you two are quite done with your shenanigans, would you be so kind as to inform us of your master plan?' Alecto asked dryly.

'Of course, my dear Aly,' Rabastan replied, borrowing the unsuitable nickname from an earlier conversation.

Alecto glowered at him, red sparks shooting out of the wand still clutched in her hand.
'Now, now, children,' Lucinda admonished, summoning a cushion to sit on. 'Why am I included in this little club?'

'As you all know,' Emma started, getting straight to the point. 'Rabastan has been feeling…a little uneasy, shall we say, about our DADA teacher this year.'

'Haven't we all?' Regulus asked.

'Hear, hear,' Alecto replied, frowning. 'Do you know how we're getting rid of her? I heard Barty talking in the common room of Transfiguring her into an inanimate object after a grilling on Unforgivable Curses – is that even possible?'

'If it is, then I'm sure that only Barty the genius could accomplish it,' Emma replied, and maybe James or Sirius. 'No, the plan I had in mind is less conspicuous. The only problem is that it might link us to the Death Eaters.'

'Muffliato,' Regulus said quickly, casting it at the door.

They had forgotten to renew the spell. The five of them froze for half a second, expecting Bones to crash in any minute.

'Good thinking,' Alecto approved at last. 'Go on, Emma.'

'Well, Rabastan's father is influential in the Wizengamot,' Emma explained. 'If a place high on the board of those entrusted to take care of the Death Eater trials was to be vacant...'

She let her words trail off, letting the implication sink in.

'Then Mr Lestrange could propose Bones for it,' Lucinda realised. 'And my mother is very persuasive if needs be...'

'So she could convince others to vote for Bones,' Rabastan finished. 'Brilliant. But how could it link us to the Death Eaters?'

'If your father asks for Bones to be placed as trial judge, then the Ministry will believe that he is on the "light" side,' Regulus explained, scrunching his face at the terminology. 'But Dumbledore is cleverer than that, and realise that your father thought you were in danger.'

'Then that would make them believe I was the Death Eater he was trying to protect!' Rabastan exclaimed. 'It'd be swapping one danger for another!'

'Out of the fire and into the furnace,' Emma agreed. 'But what if there was another way? You're not going to like it, Rab.'

'What is it?' Rabastan asked heavily, letting his head slump back against Emma’s bed.

'We get your father to agree to the plan, then stage a break in and Confund him, leaving Dumbledore to wonder who would do such a thing.'

'And it would take suspicion away from my family, instead drawing attention to its influence,' Rabastan concluded, before he set his jaw grimly. 'And the Dark Lord will want to know how my father was Confunded.'

'That's the beauty of the plan,' Regulus interrupted. 'Having Bones on the panel of judges would suit the Dark Lord, since most of the prisoners aren't Death Eaters. She'll have her hands full trying to sift
through the cases, and with her legendary penchant for justice, she'll want to examine each case as carefully as she can.'

'I doubt your father would be punished,' Emma agreed. 'But it would mean putting him at risk: he won't be able to defend himself if he's confunded.'

'He can go to France for a while, take a holiday,' Rabastan waved a hand dismissively. 'No, I like it. I think he will too. He always liked a good manipulation. He says it reminds him of his schoolboy days.'

Regulus leaned forwards. He had been relatively relaxed about the plan to take down Bones, but something Rabastan said had caught his attention. When he didn't say anything though, Emma realised that he simply wanted Rabastan to go on without giving his interest away. Although they were among friends (though privately she excluded Alecto), he seemed to have kept the habit of not letting people know what he wanted. It was a sure-fire way to grab a Slytherin's attention.

She was just about to make a joke of it when Alecto interrupted. Not being able to help shooting her a cross look, Emma quickly forgot all about it.

'So why don't you and Lucy go straight up to the Owlery to send the message? No time like the present,' she said matter-of-factly.

Rabastan's eyes flickered to Emma, who gave the slightest shake of her head. There was no way Alecto was trying to set the two up; though it was unfortunate that Emma hadn't been able to talk to Lucinda earlier. She resolved to get straight to her self-made task that very night. It was odd that Alecto told Lucy to go too, but it would be considered very impolite for either Rabastan or Lucinda to point it out - fearing that the other would misinterpret their remarks in a negative way, so the two got up with bemused expressions to do as they were told.

Alecto watched them go, her head snapping back around to Emma and Regulus as soon as the door swung shut.

'Right,' she said. 'Now that that's out of the way, let me tell you about a plan B. I don't want Lucy any more involved than she needs to be, and we can't be sure that Rabastan won't crack under pressure.'

Emma opened her mouth to protest and then shut it again. It was true that Rab could be a little jumpy sometimes. She noted with interest that Alecto hadn't become a complete psychopath, if she still cared about Lucinda's welfare. Regulus simply arranged his features into polite curiosity, as if they were discussing a change in the weather.

'After all, with Emma and I already a part of the Dark Lord's army, we'll need someone to carry on the pureblood legacy of our generation,' Alecto continued.

_There goes that theory_, Emma thought, lifting an eyebrow.

'I'm pretty sure that Parkinson's a pureblood too, you know. And there are plenty of other girls in the other Houses and years,' she couldn't help but point out.

'Yes, but none of them have the same potential as us,' Alecto said, as if stating the obvious. 'We are the only ones to succeed in obtaining the Dark Mark before we were even out of Hogwarts!'

Emma conceded that she had a point; though the idea of the war continuing over the span of twenty years made her stomach roil.
'Genetics aside, I have another solution to the Amelia Bones problem. If this doesn't work, then I suggest we get Barty Marked as quickly as possible - it enhances your power in dark magic, you know, and get him to practice this Transfiguring idea of his.'

'I don't know anyone who would be a willing subject for that,' Emma immediately pointed out the flaw in the plan.

'We'll get him some Mudbloods,' Alecto said impatiently. 'They're not that hard to trick: Emma, you lure them, Regulus you stun them, and I'll Obliviate them later on. If they get stuck like that then… less work for the Dark Lord.'

Emma and Regulus shared a dubious look. Alecto misinterpreted their wariness for incomprehension.

'It's simple really. When Barty's ready, we'll have to find a way to make Mulciber or Wilkes reveal themselves as a Death Eater to Bones - no one thinks they'll go very far anyway - and then Barty shows up and transfigures her into a bone,' she explained in a rush. 'Of course, we'll have to be on standby, in case he has any trouble. Regulus, I hear you're a skilled dueller, and Emma, I know you have an affinity with the Cruciatus curse.'

Alecto smiled, pleased with herself. Emma had to concede that it wasn't a bad plan, other than its questionable morals. But if it would save them from getting caught…She felt a little guilty that Alecto had complimented her torturing skills - she hated using the Unforgivable curse, but it had a way of slipping out when she was angry.

'Whilst a bone is very poetic, I'm not sure it's the most innocuous thing to have lying around. What will we do with it? What if the spell wears out?' Regulus was asking the proper questions. 'Plus, why would Mulciber or Wilkes ever reveal themselves to Bones?'

'I was hoping you'd ask that,' Alecto replied. 'Her DADA lessons were somewhat useful after all: I thought we could either give the bone to Hagrid's dog - that oaf would probably think it came from one of his pets, or transfigure her into a slab of meat - I heard that might be easier, like condensing Bones's form - and feed it to the Thestrals. The evidence would be disposed of before the enchantment could wear off.

'As for Wilkes or Mulciber, this is why you need to be in on this Emma, I was thinking we could slip the love potion you and Rab are making to Wilkes. Everyone knows he has some kind of deluded crush on you - he's even asked his father if he could petition for your engagement. Those heightened feelings plus your skills of persuasion would be all that Wilkes would need to confess to Amelia Bones if he thought you were in danger. Which,' Alecto pointed out, 'you are, after that display with the huge head above the grounds.'

'You've done your homework,' Regulus replied, clearly impressed.

Emma had other things on her mind.

'Wilkes is trying to arrange a marriage? How could he do that, my parents are both dead!' Emma protested, before a thought occurred to her. 'How do you even know about this stuff?'

Alecto looked smug, folding her arms across her chest. 'Whilst you and Rab have been casting your nets out into the rest of Hogwarts, I went digging for dirt on the Slytherins. Just in case anyone was having any second thoughts about their commitment to the cause with Bones breathing down our necks. Wilkes might even succeed - he's asked Cygnus and Druella Black, who are considering his offer.'
'How in the name of Merlin's black cat do Druella and Cygnus have the right to arrange my marriage?' Emma was aghast.

She knew that many pureblood families arranged their children's marriages, both out of convenience and out of fear for corruption of the line. Narcissa and Bellatrix were both the products of this arrangement, Sirius almost was and Regulus was being put through the process, but her parents had considered the tradition archaic. She hadn't given a single thought to the idea of marrying someone against her will.

'Well,' Alecto said, enjoying the power of information all too well in Emma's opinion. 'Your closest living relative is your great-aunt Dorea Black.'

'Who is sister to my grandfather, Pollux Black,' Regulus finished, looking slightly green.

'Which makes you two family!' Alecto exclaimed. 'Honestly, Emma, don't you study your family tree? It's a noble one, with the small marr of Regulus's disgusting blood-traitor cousin - no offense Regulus, I know you would remedy the situation if you could.'

'Quite,' Regulus said shortly, his mouth tightening.

Emma was still stuck on the idea of Wilkes.

'But surely I'm overage, they can't do that. If anyone had the right, it'd be James,' she pointed out, hating that in the world of most purebloods, the son had the prerogative. She calmed down a little after thinking about it. 'The Blacks would never consent to it though, Narcissa wouldn't let them, and even if her opinion doesn't count, I'm sure Walburga will put her foot down.'

'And why would she want to do that?' Alecto snorted. 'The Wilkes might be new money, but they're good money, and we're running low on campaign funds, what with all of the half-breeds the Dark Lord's bringing in.'

Emma couldn't her eyes flicking over to Regulus, who come to think of it, didn't look very happy at all anymore.

'Oh,' Alecto said, nodding in understanding. 'Of course, Regulus. The only male Black heir, after Pollux himself. Of course, you'd have the right of veto. But really, Emma, would it be so bad? Just think of the stability it would bring you. You wouldn't even really have to pay attention to him; it could be like Bellatrix and Rodolphus.'

'At least Rodolphus has half a brain,' Emma muttered darkly. 'I'm starting to like this plan of Amelia having to catch Wilkes to get rid of her.'

Besides her, Regulus was smirking at Alecto, surprised that she hadn't put two and two together. Emma was even more outraged that he wasn't angry about Wilkes. Didn't he care that his family was going to sell her off like cattle? Instead, he decided that the better plan was to win Emma’s ally's - if not her friend's - sympathy.

'Just imagine, Alecto,' he said. 'How would you like it?'

'Not much,' Alecto admitted. 'In fact, that's part of the reason I'm so dedicated to the Dark Lord. My parents think I'm fulfilling my familial duty so far. Plus, they have to marry Amycus off first, or he'll seem ineligible - good luck there.'

Emma remembered Amycus from their duel: a lumbering giant of a man that hardly resembled Alecto, even if she had put on a few pounds these past few months.
The sound of giggling in the stairwell broke the contemplative silence that had fallen over them, alerting them to the presence of Helen and Sophie's return.

'Well,' Regulus said, stretching out his legs. 'I think that's my cue to leave the conspiracy circle.'

He leaned towards Emma as if to kiss her, and then reigned in the action with a smirk. Thinking better of such an obvious action, he took up her hand and kissed it instead, his lips lingering a little too long on her skin.

'Madame Wilkes,' he said with a short bow.

Alecto let out a snort of laughter. Emma was too busy blushing from the intense look in his eyes as he did so, promising her that he wouldn't have settled with formalities if they had been alone.

'The fair bachelorette,' he nodded to Alecto, and then was off, with what Emma thought was a slight cockiness to his steps, letting the two girls in on his way out.
'You know,' Alecto said the next morning as they were brushing their teeth. 'You could always ask Reg and Rab to petition for your engagement if you're that worried about it. It'd take ages for the Lestranges and the Blacks to fight over which one gets you.'

'I told you, it's stupid,' Emma said, angrily spitting into the sink. 'My family's not like that, it's not like Wilkes will actually succeed.'

'I don't know,' Alecto mused teasingly. 'The Blacks hold so much sway with the Ministry that they could probably get a law approved through money alone.'

Having no counter-argument to that statement, Emma threw her toothbrush back into the pot and walked off in a huff. Or at least tried to. She stumbled over the step into their room and fell face-first to the floor.

This is not a good day.

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Lucinda was still giggling to herself on the way down to breakfast, even after the context had been explained. All she had heard was Alecto’s comment about Rabastan and Regulus. The redhead shook her head and went to torment some terrified Ravenclaws when Lucinda started coming up with wild scenarios in which the boys would have to duel to the death for Emma's hand in marriage.

'It's not that funny,' Emma said grumpily.

'Yes it is,' Lucinda smiled, before trying to arrange her face into a neutral expression. 'Is that what you were going to tell me about Rabastan? That you're also secretly dating him, and are worried they'll tell each other about you?'

'What? No!' Emma exclaimed, aghast.

'Just checking,' Lucinda said cheekily. 'Though you have to admit, either of them would be a catch, marriage-wise.'

'In need of a husband, Lucy?' Emma teased, seeing her opportunity. 'What happened to playing the field?'

'The field got muddy,' Lucinda sighed. 'I want a nice, cosy cottage now.'

Emma shook her head, both at the metaphor and in suprise at Lucinda’s wishful thinking. 'You are a strange one, you know that Lucinda Rosier.'

'Well, Evan's engaged and I have until their wedding to come up with my own suitable suitor,' Lucinda said pragmatically. 'Of course, my parents haven't mentioned it to their darling girl, but I'm not an idiot. Their baby boy's going to leave the next, and guess who the attention is going to be focused upon?'
'So you've given this a lot of thought then?' Emma probed.

Lucinda gave her a wry smile, waving to a tapestry to reveal a shortcut.

'I'm not McGonagall, Ems, I do have a heart you know. Of course, I would love to marry the man of my dreams, swept up in a romantic tale, but I have to think a little pragmatically. Unless I find a foreigner in the next few years, my business will never get the clientele I want. Purebloods want a family set, not some female designer who can't get a husband in their eyes. Plus, all the good ones go early, you know that.'

'But that's in a few years yet,' Emma pointed out the bright side. 'It's not like you have to choose right now.'

'I know, I know,' Lucinda sighed again. 'Marriage aside, I am feeling a little lonely. It's alright for you and Reg, and your forbidden romance. Why is it a forbidden romance, again?'

'I'm not quite sure,' Emma admitted. 'I think Reg just wants all of the newness of it to be over before we're seen in public. You know him, always in control of the situation.' She decided to move the conversation along. 'Speaking of control, have you noticed how Bast's grown up? I can't believe he's the same guy we had to turn into a girl to get a little respect!'

'I know, right!' Lucinda's tinkling laugh resounded through the Entrance Hall. 'He's gotten rather handsome too, this year,' she added shyly.

'Bast was always too charming for his own good,' Emma laughed along. 'But in the end, I think he's just covering a romantic heart.'

'Rab? Never! His heart is as black as stone, as he always likes to say,' Lucinda shook her head.

'No, really,' Emma insisted. 'You probably don't remember, but I got pretty upset at Narcissa's wedding and…well, accidentally used a rather powerful Cheering Charm. You know me and Charms, I always found them too easy.'

'I wish I could say the same for myself,' Lucinda said wistfully. 'What happened? You know, you're right, I can't remember much from the evening.'

'Well, let's just say that Cheering Charms aren't usually used in normal situations for a reason. I acted completely out of it, but instead of teasing me Bast Confunded everyone's memory of the last hour before the dinner.'

'Wow, he must really fancy you then,' Lucinda frowned. 'You know, I was talking to him yesterday, and I swear he blushed when I told him he hadn't been charming the girls lately and teased him for losing his touch. I just thought he had found a new way of annoying me with commanded blushes, but maybe he's in love.'

'Not with me,' Emma quickly supplied, feeling that she was giving out the wrong impression. 'I was just saying that underneath all of his pranks and bluster, he's really quite sweet. I think he would have done it for any of us, even Alecto.'

They walked a little further as Lucinda thought on Emma's words, the laughter gone from her eyes.

'You're never going to tell me what happened between you two, are you?' she asked softly. 'Not that I'm complaining, it made me closer to both of you as a result, but it's a shame… So Rabastan's a romantic, huh? I would never have guessed.'
'You know,' Emma said quickly as they approached the Slytherin table. 'I'll let you in on a secret though - he does fancy someone, and I bet if you try hard enough you can get him to tell you who. Maybe in return he'll find you a suitable suitor, as you put it.'

'You know what? I think I will,' Lucinda declared, as they sat down. 'Why shouldn't I do some underhanded business, like the rest of you?'

'You'll what?' Rabastan asked, just as Regulus snorted and said: "Underhanded business? Sweet Lucinda, you're ambitious and clever, but you definitely don't have the Slytherin sneak.'

Lucinda just raised her eyebrows and pulled out her notebook, drawing up a plan and ignoring them for the rest of breakfast. The others all exchanged looks, but decided to let the blonde have her fun.

Just as Rabastan finished his toast, a large grey owl clattered into his plate, knocking his pumpkin juice all over the table. Alecto rolled her eyes and pulled her book out of the danger zone, but Regulus and Emma both peered over their friend's shoulder, eager to read what Mr Lestrange thought of their plan.

My dear boy, it read.

Whilst it pains me to no end the number of favours you have needed to ask me - you know that I disapprove of requiring help - your mother has pointed out that times were not as troubled as they were during Rodolphus's time at school. Regretfully, I have looked over the matter and your plan is a sound one, though at no small risk to myself. However, I have long known that I must stand aside for the younger generation to pave the way to the greatness I myself had envisioned during my schoolboy days. It seems to me that you have finally grown out of your childish habits and are willing to take on the responsibilities appropriate for an heir, although not the heir, to the House of Lestrange.

Do not mistake me in this matter; I expect your devotion to your family and our allies to increase twofold henceforth. I have it on good authority that you have recently been shirking your duties. I can only hope that it is due to this underlying problem.

Take a look at the newspaper. I believe you would find section three interesting.

Cordially,

Agnus Lestrange

'Does your father always sign his letters like that?' Emma asked, once she had finished reading.

Rabastan made a face. 'He finds it belittling to be reduced to the title of "father".'

'He always was a pompous prat,' Regulus sniped unexpectedly.

Rabastan whacked him with the adjoining rolled up newspaper. 'Hey! That's my dad you're talking about!'

But no harm seemed to have been done, because he diverted his attention to the Daily Prophet. After scanning one of the inner pages, he thrust it back on the table in disgust.
'Bah,' he said, waving a hand in dismissal. 'It's about the construction of a new wing in St Mungo's for magical creature attacks, what do I care? It's not like we're the ones keeping dangerous beasts around.'

He turned towards the teachers table with a glower as if to prove his point. During the Thestral lesson, Rabastan had been nipped on the ear. He had never forgiven the Care Of Magical Creatures professor since. Another reason to avoid outdoor classes, Emma noted internally.

Regulus ignored the rant, instead carefully extracting the newspaper from the puddle of spilled juice. He frowned in concentration for a second and then rolled it back up and hit Rabastan back in a similar manner, spraying Emma with droplets of orange liquid.

'Hey!' she said angrily, but Regulus didn't care.

Emma grumbled, dabbing at her jumper with a napkin, but her attention was soon caught by Regulus's next words.

'Rabastan, you twit, did you not look at the date?' He looked around, realising that he was speaking too loudly. When he was sure that no one was looking their way, he continued in a lower tone. 'The article said it was published on the seventeenth of December. That's the day that he'll send the note into the Ministry, just before their Christmas party. It's a clever idea: you'll be back to be on the lookout for Order members and the Wizengamot can debate it during the celebrations. Bones will probably be invited at New Year, but they'll already have made a decision before they bother to contact her.'

Emma was impressed with Mr Lestrange's ingenuity. Although it was her plan, she couldn't imagine an adult ever taking it seriously. Why not? she asked herself. After all, the Dark Lord's taken you seriously so far.

But the Dark Lord is different, another voice argued in her brain. He's more -

Crazy? she thought flippantly.

I was going to say open-minded, the voice replied snidely.

'Emma? Hello, earth to Emma?'

Rabastan was waving an arm in front of her face.

'What?' she blinked rapidly, realising that she had been staring off into space.

I really need to get more sleep, she thought to herself. Hearing voices was a sign of madness, and she had already seen what path that had led to for Bellatrix and Alecto.

'I was going to ask if you wanted to come over at Christmas. That goes for you too, Reg, even if you are a horrible twat who hits me with soggy newspapers,' Rab said with fondness, smiling down on his fellow Slytherin.

Regulus rolled his eyes at him.

'Well, I promised James Regulus and I would go to Godric's Hollow for Christmas,' Emma replied after a second's thought. 'But I guess it wouldn't hurt if we went to yours, first.'

'What's all this?' Regulus asked, genuinely surprised.
Oh yeah, she thought. *That's what I forgot to tell him.* She gulped upon seeing Regulus’s face darken – he really didn’t like to look the fool, but Rabastan was oblivious as ever, turning to her with a wide grin

'Oooh, "Regulus and I" now, is it?' He jumped on her words loudly, mischief dancing in his green eyes. 'You come as a unit now, do you? When's the wedding? I heard that May was supposed to have magical properties.'

'Shut up Rab,' Emma mumbled, rolling her eyes.

Alecto was far more interested in a different part of the conversation. Her book snapped shut and she leaned forwards, Vanishing the puddle of forgotten pumpkin juice as she did so. Her eyes gleamed with a new idea.

'What's this? You and Regulus are together now? Since when?'

'Thanks Rab,' Emma muttered again, poking him sharply in the side with her wand.

Rabastan was only too happy to reply for them, squirming out of Emma's reach. 'Only a couple of weeks or so,' he announced.

Undaunted, Emma shuffled forwards on the bench to poke him again. Seeing that Alecto was lost in thought and Regulus was deep in conversation with their fellow seventh years, she took advantage of their friends' momentary distractions.

'Careful what goes spewing out of your mouth Rab,' she whispered to him evilly. 'It might just happen to me next.'

She smirked as Rabastan blanched, his eyes sliding over to Lucinda, who was watching them curiously, but who was too far to hear their words. She noted something down in her booklet. Feeling the weight of his crush’s eyes upon him, Rabastan quickly covered his moment of weakness, puffing up his chest out with bravado.

'Go on then,' he said boldly. 'I don't care.'

'Lucy?' Emma didn't need any more encouragement. 'You know we were talking about who Rab fancies? Well, it turns out hmppf-'

Rabastan had just placed a rather large hand over her mouth, effectively cutting off her next words. Lucinda cocked her head in amusement, her eyes crinkled with silent laughter.

'Ahh, children nowadays huh?' Rabastan laughed nervously, ruffling Emma's hair. 'They just say the damndest things, don't they?'

Emma ducked to free herself of Rabastan's grasp. A scuffle ensued, with each trying to discomfort the other as much as possible.

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'She doesn't look like she's your soon-to-be fiancée,' Wilkes observed to Regulus on the other side of the table, watching the two fighting. 'If anything, I'd say that Lestrange has more of a shot than either
you or I.'

Upon hearing Rabastan's announcement, Wilkes had broken off his conversation with Severus Snape and grilled Regulus with questions. He was very polite about it, after all Regulus might not have heard that he had petitioned for her hand beforehand. The only gentlemanly thing to do would be to back down immediately, for although Regulus was a Black, Wilkes was the firstborn heir to a large fortune.

Controlling the seething anger that was bubbling up - both at himself for being behind on the happenings in Slytherin, and at Wilkes for believing even for a fraction of a second that Emma would ever have him - Regulus arranged his features into one of slight disdain. He could have gone on as Emma had the night before, talking about how they were no longer in the Dark Ages, that arranged marriages were usually to the teenagers’ liking and how Wilkes was definitely, without the shadow of a doubt, not to Emma's liking, or even to James's liking, but that wouldn't do.

He needed to show Wilkes his place without creating the same sort of enmity that Emma and Rabastan had a habit of doing. Someone in the group needed to look out for their interests, and as Alecto's reasonable voice became swallowed by a pit of madness, it fell to Regulus to sort everything out.

'I'll have you know, Wilkes, that my grandfather has already made the arrangements,’ he said in his haughtiest voice which, considering he was a Black, was pretty impressive if he did say so himself. 'It would only be polite to include James Potter, the heir of the Potter fortunes, and unfortunately that means waiting until this Christmas to officially cement the engagement.’ A thought occurred to him and he smirked. ‘Why else do you think the Gryffindor would invite me to Godric's Hollow?'

Regulus decided that he quite enjoyed the look on Wilkes face. The boy seemed to realise that in pursuing his decision he would make an enemy of two prominent pureblood houses, even if none of Regulus’s words were close to the truth. Even so, he couldn't resist another little dig.

'I'm terribly sorry I didn't think to tell you before,’ he drawled, examining his nails. ‘What would the Dark Lord say if he thought you were trying to undermine his plans for the cohesion of the pureblood group?'

He glanced slyly back to the other boy to see the effect of his words. Wilkes turned green and pushed his plate away, seemingly thankful that Mulciber wasn't there to mock him. Regulus met Severus Snape's eyes and could swear he saw a hint of amusement in his black eyes, though he said nothing. Interesting, he thought.

Next to them, the scuffle had degraded into a quiet duel, with levitated goblets of pumpkin juice evidently fighting a battle to the death in the name of their masters' honour.

Regulus sighed. Why did they have to pick now to degenerate into twelve year olds?

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'You what?' Emma's voice went dangerously low, pulling her hand out of his in disgust.

Regulus had decided to tell her his clever plan to deal with the Wilkes situation during their patrol. Evidently, Emma didn't think much of it.

'I don't see what the problem is,’ he said reasonably. 'You won't have to marry Wilkes if my family finds a loophole in the law - my grandfather can be very persistent if he's promised a dowry in
exchange - and this way, there's no way anyone else can try it either.'

Emma let out a dramatic sigh, leaning against a wall.

'That doesn't mean I want to be married at the age of seventeen,' she pointed out, trying to calm down.

I will not hex Regulus, I will not hex Regulus, she repeated to herself, clutching the wand in her sleeve. She knew that the Potters were prone to rash actions, but she wasn’t sure that hexing Regulus would fix this particular problem. Besides, if James can control himself, so can I.

The familiar wood was soothing, as she calmed her heartbeat. She reminded herself that Regulus was just trying to help, but it still irked her that he had done this without talking to her. Plus, he kind of sprang it on me, she thought. This kind of impulsive action was not what she had in mind when she thought of Regulus. Then again, she hadn’t told him about Christmas with James and Sirius. She supposed it was only fair, and through this reasoning, stowed her wand back in its sheath.

'We don't have to be,' Regulus replied, mimicking her leaning stance with a hint of amusement. 'An engagement can last for as long as we want to, and in this "time of fear",' the words were said with obvious sarcasm, 'it's quite natural for couples to get serious quickly. Besides, it doesn’t really matter if it’s true or not – we only need Wilkes to believe that I’ve petitioned for your hand. We can just pretend that James is taking a while to think about it over the holidays.'

'I suppose,' Emma agreed reluctantly, seeing the truth in his words. She relaxed into a smile. ‘Thank you, by the way. I can’t believe you’d go all the way as to ask your grandfather if you could marry me, just for my peace of mind. What would he say if he found out it was fake?’

‘Hey, what are boyfriends for?’ Regulus asked, his trademark smirk sliding onto his face. ‘Besides, my grandfather has nothing on Bellatrix, trust me. Now, what do you say we ditch the patrol and go for a fly?’

‘We haven’t been in ages,’ Emma breathed, realising how stuffy Hogwarts felt the moment Regulus mentioned it.

Within minutes, their brooms were zooming towards their outstretched palms through the open window and they were out under the night sky. Emma was briefly reminded of their very first night in Hogwarts and how disappointed she had been to be put in Slytherin. She wouldn’t trade places with her brother for the world now. She whooped as she dived, and even Regulus let out a chuckle when they raced each other through the Quidditch hoops.

She wondered how he had felt that night, doomed to play the peacekeeper for the next six years. Did Sirius even realise what Regulus gave up for him? She wondered, as Regulus performed a Wronskei Feint with driven intensity. What does it feel like to have your life scrutinised, watched down to the slightest detail and knowing that, making sure of that, so that someone else could make mistakes unnoticed?

James hadn’t done that, though the relationship was incomparable. James had always supported her against Charles in their arguments – when he realised something was going on. But Emma wouldn’t have given up her brother’s innocence – idiocy and all – for the world. Still, she didn’t know if she would have been able to turn her life into a sham, the way Regulus had.

I guess that’s why he’s so comfortable with a fake engagement, she thought. Well, a fake proposal. I can still get James to say no and explain everything.
She halted her broom as high as she could go, the Heating charm she had cast protecting her against the chilly wind. Regulus was a speck darting in and out of the spectator boxes and Hogwarts was a mass of twinkling lights. Secretly, Emma thought that his hidden love for danger belied a dormant Gryffindor nature, no matter how Regulus tried to deny it.

*But after knowing everything he did for Sirius, even though his brother barely acknowledged it, knowing that I can trust Regulus with more than my life...* she let her thoughts trail off into memories, remembering how he had helped her get through so many things when even James couldn’t: the Sorting, her parents’ death, the trials to become the *youngest* Death Eaters ever... *What if I don’t want it to be fake?*
Defining Moments

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait!!

So, Emma thought. Here we are again.

It was the first Monday after the holidays. Everything had been taken care of, wrapped up like a Christmas present. The only thing missing was the ribbon to tie it all together. The full list of potential Death Eater sympathisers had been drawn up, Barty Crouch had been approached on the subject of human Transfiguration, and a tentative plan C had been broached – something to do with tricking centaurs into attacking Amelia Bones. Privately, Emma thought that Amelia Bones was made of too stern stuff to be frightened by a pack of centaurs that hardly ventured out of their forest.

Kreacher was over the moon at the idea of going to the Potters’ for Christmas, though Mrs Black had been informed that he was needed to help reorganise the Potter house. Merlin forbid the elf might have a day off. Mrs Black herself was to enjoy a stately Christmas at Malfoy Manor, courtesy of Narcissa and Lucius. Narcissa had almost insisted when Emma had told her of her plans; she couldn’t wait to throw her first real house party. Bellatrix and her husband Rodolphus would be there, but Rabastan would be visiting the family villa in France with his parents.

Judging from the sour look on his face, Emma imagined that Rabastan’s grandparents were even more unpleasant than Sirius over the holidays.

Lucinda and Alecto were also spending Christmas with their respective families, although Alecto had dismissed the holiday – her family wasn’t big on celebration. The only things Alecto’s parents thought were worth celebrating were Merlin and Morgana’s birthdays. Emma was surprised that more purebloods hadn’t taken up the trend, although she supposed Christmas was celebrated at the same time of year as most pagan magical winter festivities.

Briefly, she wondered what the old druids did celebrate, but dismissed the thought just as quickly. Regulus would know, history buff that he was. For now, she had to concentrate on the object at hand.

Another raid. A celebration this time, to mark the weakening of the Ministry. Only the Minister of Magic himself was no longer under their control. Now that they were winning the war, Emma wondered what the next step was. Oh, she knew that the Dark Lord had a plan for Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, but she was more interested in what kind of society they would have once they were able to rebuild the Ministry.

It was something that she and Regulus had dreamed of, talking late into the night about the reforms they wanted to bring about, the chance to make changes that would benefit not only wizards, but Muggles too. They had agreed that the Dark Lord was right in keeping the Statute of Secrecy. William the Muggle’s reaction had seen to that.

Emma wanted to know how the Dark Lord was going to bring about the change of heart within the
Ministry. After all, they couldn’t keep the higher ups under the Imperius Curse for long before Moody caught them. The Aurors were still a force to be reckoned with.

That was also a reason for the raid. Lure the Aurors to an abandoned village, riddled with traps that they would lay out for them. It was one of those Muggle/Magic communities, and was home to one of the highest crime rates in Britain. Emma figured that the Muggles would thank them if there were any criminals still lurking about. Still, the unnatural fog should have driven all Muggles off of the premises.

‘It’s time,’ Bellatrix said to her right, producing an umbrella from the folds of her cloak.

Emma saw Rabastan bite back a grin at the odd sight of Regulus’s cousin unfolding an old umbrella in the middle of the Death Eater ranks. She had an inward chuckle of her own, but immediately saw the reasoning behind it. A portable, but large Portkey could accommodate many more than a shoe, for example. The twenty witches and wizards each grasped a part of the Portkey, and Emma felt a fluttering of her heart as Regulus placed his hand so their fingers were overlapping.

She looked up with a smile at her boyfriend. Even after a month of dating, every contact they made reminded her of that rainy night on the Quidditch pitch. From the slight smirk on Regulus’s face and tightening of his grip, she guessed that he was thinking of the same thing.

His face blurred as the Portkey flared to life, spinning them into oblivion.

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‘You know the drill,’ Avery said, readjusting his mask. It was probably just her imagination, but Emma could have sworn his mask matched the feral grin she could hear through his voice. ‘But for those who are too... delicate... for the frontlines of the war, I’ll repeat myself. Younglings, do as much destruction as possible. It’ll leave a nice surprise for the filthy Muggles when they get back. Malfoy, Dolohov, Yaxely, you’re with me. I give the Aurors ten minutes before they catch wind of this.’

Although all three members of his designated team were older than him, it was well known that Avery had a knack for placing traps where the Aurors would least expect them. Emma thought it was because Alastor Moody had had time to study Yaxely’s strategies. The head Auror was nothing if not dedicated.

She shuddered, remembering the last time she had seen the mad, but powerful wizard. Hopefully, she wouldn’t find herself in such close proximity next time.

‘Hey,’ Rabastan said, joining her after they separated into their different groups. ‘Should be fun, right? Practicing a bit of Bombarda Maxima to release all of that pent up energy before it blows up in Black’s face?’

‘Ha, ha,’ Regulus drawled. ‘Hilarious, Lestrange. Though I wouldn’t mind not being able to recognise my dear brother’s face. It’d make a nice change from his usual expression.’

‘Oh no,’ Alecto said, frowning as she overheard the conversation. ‘You’re not separating off into your little clan. You’re going to do some real damage this time, even if you think it’s a game.’

That was how Emma found herself dragged into Bellatrix and Rodolphus’s group of five – at least three seasoned Death Eaters paired with two recently Marked. She knew that she should feel flattered that they considered her “seasoned”, since the other two were Alecto and Mulciber, but
instead a flutter of apprehension made itself known through her veins.

This was not an ideological group or a tactician’s, even. Bellatrix and Rodolphus were two of the Dark Lord’s best foot soldiers, duellists, known for taking no quarter. Alecto and Mulciber shared a sadistic streak that made even Regulus admit that they scared him, though it was late at night and he denied it the next morning.

Still, what could go wrong? Emma asked herself. It was a simple enough mission, and she would be happy for their company once the Aurors made an appearance.

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True enough, they had lit three quarters of the village on fire before the screams began. Emma tried to contain the thrill of anxiety coursing through her, but to no avail. Her head snapped around to look at Alecto, only to see the other girl’s eyes shining as they reflected the flames. Bellatrix let out a maniacal laugh and twirled Rodolphus around in a dance, kicking up a fallen beam into ashes. Rodolphus paused a second, tilting his head to the side as though he was listening for something.

‘Not ours,’ he said, confirming Emma’s suspicions.

Before anyone could answer, Mulciber let out a warning shout. ‘Patronus!’

‘This is where the fun begins!’ Bellatrix giggled, spinning her wand around a finger and casually shooting a beam of orange light at a nearby car, which exploded into pieces.

Emma was still trying to figure out how the Aurors had found them so quickly, before remembering Avery’s warning, ten minutes. She swivelled her head around on a hunch, and sure enough there it was, the Dark Mark in all of its glory. It was oddly entrancing, the green smoke of the snake blending with the rising tendrils from the village.

Right, she thought, removing any doubts from her mind. That was a sure-fire way to get oneself killed. Let’s get rid of as many of these Aurors as possible. Presumably, it was the most Muggle-loving Aurors that would come to the scene first anyway. In actual fact, Emma wouldn’t be surprised if only members of Dumbledore’s Order came. Most Aurors had been scared away already.

Not two streets down was when it happened. The masks were off by now, smoke inhalation becoming problematic, but a repelling charm had worked wonders for Emma’s vision. The village was by now a wreck, with flashes of light piercing through the fog on all sides. Luckily, the smoke also proved to be advantageous for the Death Eaters – they were well hidden and had been briefed on how to recognise Avery’s magical signature where there were traps. The Aurors were going in blind, as Emma found out for herself when she came across a particularly unpleasant aftermath of a battle.

Then she saw them. Coughing, waving their arms around as though it would dissipate the smoke, a family of Muggles were trying to escape the carnage. It was easy to spot them, the Muggle clothing; the general look of helplessness – in some ways, Emma found it unfortunate that they had become a part of the conflict. Most of them weren’t like Muggleborns, they couldn’t attack, couldn’t defend themselves. If she was honest with herself, something about them repulsed her just because they reminded her of how helpless she would be without a wand.

Before she knew it, Bellatrix had her wand up, and the girl was lifted up into the air, her braids trailing behind her. She was in her pyjamas, Emma’s brain noticed, had probably woken up to her
world burning around her. Belatedly, the witch realised that most Death Eaters, let alone Muggle-hating Avery, would have checked to see if the Muggles had really all been rounded up.

Now, she felt sick to her stomach, watching as the girl floated towards the burning buildings, getting closer every time the mother screamed for help. Soon though, the mother realised that Bellatrix was directing the girl, and marched up to the group fearlessly, her other child hiding between a building that was still partly standing.

‘Stop it!’ she shrieked. ‘Stop it! What are you doing to her? What are you?’

Out of the corner of her eye, Emma saw Alecto turn white and grip her wand until her knuckles shook from the effort. She’s probably thinking of what William said to her, some part of her brain told her analytically. A jet of blue light Emma didn’t recognise flew out of the redhead’s wand towards the father, who was trying to quietly escape with the other daughter. Immediately, he fell to the floor, bound by what seemed to be liquid cement. The more he struggled, the more Bellatrix laughed and the more Alecto added a band of cement. What had started with a strip of concrete around his knees ended up with the man being encased in stone up to his waist.

‘Daddy!’ the younger girl cried, but her eyes flitted around, not knowing where to look.

Bile rose to the back of Emma’s throat, and she had to retain herself from being physically sick. Next to her, Mulciber clapped her hands with glee, whilst Rodolphus just stood there stoically, waiting for his wife’s next command.

‘Stop it,’ Emma blurted out without thinking.

Think fast, Emma. With two simple words, six letters, she had just put herself into the most dangerous situation of her life. Shouts in the distance told her that a battle was drawing close. She closed her eyes for half a second, willing herself to turn her sentimental part off, drawing on her Occlumency training with Regulus. It didn’t work.

But that had never been her strong point anyway. Instead, Emma funnelled her disgust for her fellow soldiers’ actions towards the Muggle family, swapping the visuals around until she felt able to look up again. She allowed her face to curl up into a disdainful sneer, her features the picture of boredom as she watched the floating girl’s nightgown catch fire, the cloth steadily burning its way towards the girl’s body. The mother screamed again, attempting to scale the crumbling building to get to her child.

‘We don’t have time for this, Bellatrix,’ Emma said, forcing the words out instead of those she wanted to say. You’re a monster. Leave them be. You’re sick. ‘Remember the mission.’

‘Aww, ickle Pottie getting cold feet is she?’ Bellatrix pouted, putting a finger on her lips. ‘Who would have known that one of the Dark Lord’s favourites would turn out to be so disappointing?’

‘Guess your memory needs a little refreshing, Potter,’ Alecto added coldly. ‘Or have you forgotten our last encounter with Muggles?’

William’s screams had been etched into Emma’s brain for weeks after Alecto was through with him, although Emma had agreed that he deserved it. The memory of the Muggleborn Miller flashed across her eyes, and Emma felt her hatred for Muggleborns grow. But now she knew that that hate could apply to wizards too.

She met Bellatrix’s gaze coolly, ignoring her former friend. ‘Of course not, Alecto, but I doubt the
Dark Lord would forgive us so easily if we let the Aurors go after our trap worked so nicely. Or would you like me to tell him that you were off having fun whilst the others did your dirty work?’

‘Oh, come now little Pottie, are you jealous?’ Bellatrix laughed again, dropping the girl to the ground. A snapping noise was heard, and the girl fell limp. ‘Enervate. There. All yours.’

Rodolphus was watching her closely, and Emma knew that this was the moment they would decide whether to kill her or not. She waited for her Slytherin survival instincts to kick in, but when she pointed her wand at the sobbing girl, she couldn’t bring herself to use the torture curse. Pity rose in her heart, but she kept her face in the disdainful scowl as she spoke the only words that could save them both.

‘Avada Kedavra.’
Bellatrix was put out, but Rodolphus seemed satisfied. Emma's gaze flickered over to her former friend. Alecto held eye contact for the space of a second, then dropped her eyes to Emma's wand arm, still outstretched. Emma followed the red head's gaze. Her arm was shaking, almost imperceptibly, but not quite. *A dead giveaway,* Regulus would tell her. Quickly, she withdrew it back into a defensive position. It felt odd, like a ghost arm, able to move but disconnected from the nerves.

Her surroundings were a blur. She might have thought it was because of the smoke, if not for the circle of earth before her being sharply clear, the girl's blonde pigtails splayed out in a halo around her unmoving face.

*You did the right thing,* she told herself, trying to convince herself. *She was better off dead than being tortured by Bellatrix.*

Still, it seemed like cold had permeated her bones, as though she were the dead corpse and not the very much alive teenager standing in the middle of a burning town. She watched as Mulciber used his robes to wipe off the sweat on his forehead. *Had he been worried about her? Or was it the heat?* Suddenly, he was blasted back into a tree.

Three heads snapped around to see the glint of silver "M"s for "Ministry of Magic" on the robes of approaching wizards, three bodies leapt into cover, biding their time until the opportunity arose.

Bellatrix, however, was not one known to run and hide at the mention of a battle. Instead, she blasted a crater in the road in front of the Aurors, before leaping into the hole she had created to duel the wizards that had fallen through. Others in the vicinity had been knocked down – although Emma could no longer see them, she could hear them coughing and sputtering up the ash they had been forced to eat.

After a moment's hesitation, Rodolphus cast several Killing curses into the mix, joining his wife in the fight. Emma didn't wait to see what Alecto would do, or even if Mulciber was alright. Taking advantage of the chaos, she crawled across the debris in the opposite direction, deciding that she had played her part in this particular battle. *Besides,* the analytical part of her brain said. *It's not as if you'd be much help in your state, anyway.*

Her nerves had been frayed by the encounter with the Muggles. They weren't the kind that mocked wizards until their magic became a disability. If not for their clothing, they could have been mistaken for wizards. Deep down, Emma knew that she had just crossed an invisible line. There would be no going back though, only forwards.

With that thought in mind, she grimly shuffled on, until she came across the mother Muggle. She had obviously been struck in the head by a piece of flying rubble, her face partly submerged in a sticky pool on the ground. Her glassy eyes were staring at Emma, and although she knew that the woman was dead, she still felt an unmistakable wave of guilt wash over her. This time she couldn't prevent it, making it to the roots of a nearby tree before her evening meal came rushing up.

It was a few minutes before she felt even somewhat functional again, but when her legs began working, they started crawling in the opposite direction - towards the firing range. *What are you doing?* she asked herself, commanding her legs to stop. But it was as though her body had a mind of its own, darting from cover to cover until she was nearly back where she had started. Luckily, the battle had moved on. In the end, she ground to a halt, lost. The girl was still there, the only sign of
the battle a streak of dirt across her otherwise clear face.

A sudden noise behind her had Emma back in hiding, but when she peered around the corner there was nothing to be seen. She waited patiently, scanning the area. Just as she was about to give up, she heard it again, more clearly this time: A choked sob, followed by a muffled reprimand.

Intuition had her turning around and peering into the hallway of the broken building that served as her hiding place. There, she found the rest of the family, the father with his ash-streaked hand covering the little girl's mouth. So they managed to get away, she thought.

'Please don't hurt us,' the little girl burst out, taking advantage of her father's slackened grip.

She screwed up her face for a few seconds, before another sob burst out and this time, she was the one to slap two hands over her face.

The father watched her warily, but said nothing. Emma stared back, at a loss as to what to do. She hadn't even realised that he had managed to get free of the cement bindings. Before she made up her mind, the man spoke.

'Can you help us? That other group of...whatever you are...they killed my wife and my daughter. I need to get Marigold to safety, wherever that is,' he said quickly, his eyes beseeching. 'I have money. I can transfer it to you afterwards, just...please help us if you can.'

Emma realised that with her hood up, they hadn't been able to see her properly before. Merlin, they probably weren't even looking in their haste to get away. Bellatrix tended to garner attention that way. Now, with her hood down and her robes torn with dirt, they probably thought the Death Eaters were hunting her too. He was very calm for having been thrust into the situation without even knowing magic existed.

Ironic, the detached voice observed in her mind. She pushed it away, shaking her head at the broken family with pity.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'There are too many of them out there. I can't...' she hesitated. 'I can't help you if you can't stay quiet.'

What? she asked herself. That wasn't what she was going to say. She was going to stop at the "I can't help you". What had come over her? But it was too late, the damage was done.

'We can be quiet,' the father said quickly, looking at his daughter intently. 'Can't we, Marigold?'

The child nodded, her curls bouncing on her shoulders.

'Right,' Emma said, steeling herself. She nodded, though to whom, she didn't know.

If I'm going to do this, I have to have a plan, she told herself. I've been in crazy situations before; this can't be too bad, can it? I've already escaped a werewolf pack that refused to ally itself with the Dark Lord.

In truth, that werewolf pack didn't have wands and they weren't trained precisely in the art of deadly magic. Plus, she wouldn't just be up against her fellow Death Eaters. There were the Aurors, too. The Muggle didn't know that though, and she felt like she would be safer in not telling him this particular piece of information. No knowing how clever the Muggles really are.

'Right,' she repeated, assessing the situation.
First of all, she would call to the little piece of self preservation that she had left. Then, she would help this man and his daughter get free of this hellhole. Merlin knew that she owed it to them. Nodding to herself again, she knelt down and rubbed ash onto her face.

'You should do this too,' she gestured to the family. 'It's harder to notice dark faces in the night.'

After a second's thought, Emma duplicated her hood and passed it to the father to tie around Marigold's blond curls. *That should do it,* she thought. There was no way she would become less recognisable, or less conspicuous.

'This way,' she gestured to the Muggles, shimmying through a crack in the building.

They followed as best as they could, keeping low and waiting for Emma to distract any fighters with a spell she had just learnt from Bellatrix - shaving an ordinary spell in three so as not to give away one's position. There was a one in three chance that they would be found each time though, so she used it sparingly.

She was halfway through subtly levitating a boulder so that it would block anyone's line of sight when a body came flying over the collapsed stairwell that they had been using for cover. With a thump that knocked the breath out of the person, they collided with a doorway and fell to the floor like a ragdoll.

'Hurry,' Emma urged the Muggles across into the next building, keeping an eye on the wizard.

The person groaned as the dust dissipated, making Emma freeze in her tracks.

'Bast?' she asked tentatively, before a sudden impulse overpowered her natural reservation. She raced to the fallen wizard's side to check that it was her friend, and not his brother, sighing with relief when she pulled off the Death Eater mask.

That relief was short lived however, when she heard his wheezing breath. Evidently, the collision really had knocked all of the breath out of him.

'Rab? Bast? Bast, can you hear me? Try to control your breathing,' she told him urgently, hauling him off of his back and onto his side.

She was met with shuddering gasps as Rabastan tried to answer. 'Can't….breathe...' he wheezed, before dissolving into a fit of coughs.

Emma realised that he must have inhaled dust and smoke when he tried to suck in more air.

'Rennervate,' she whispered, hoping that the Stunning spell counter-curse would be effective in this situation too.

She closed her eyes in relief when his coughing stopped and breathing normalised, sitting back with a smile. He peered up at her, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

'Emma?' he asked questioningly, frowning. He coughed again and struggled to sit up right. 'Is that you? You look like Morgana risen from the dead.'

Emma glanced away self-consciously, rubbing at the dirt on her face. 'I can explain,' she said.

She thought about how to extract herself from the situation whilst she brushed the dust off of him as much as she could, checking for any wounds. *You should have left him here when you knew he'd be fine,* the logical voice chided her. She was preparing a counter-argument in her mind when a small
voice jolted her back to her senses.

'Miss lady?' Marigold called, her high voice carrying easily through the sounds of battle.

'Shit,' Emma swore, looking across to the building.

There she was, looking frightened and concerned, chewing one of her thumbs. Even as she watched, the father shushed the girl and brought her back into the building, but it was too late. Emma felt a tug on her arm and turned to see Rabastan staring at her in disbelief.

'Ems, am I seeing what I think I see?' he asked, incredulity making his voice break. 'Tell me I'm not.'

She didn't answer, dropping her gaze to stare at the floor. Rabastan propped himself up with his arms, wincing as he did so. Evidently, he had put the pieces together.

'Emma,' he started, his voice low with concern. 'You can't. They're Muggles! You'll be caught!'

'I have to, Bast,' Emma said, raising her voice, but never going above a whisper. 'Help me get them out. Please. We didn't sign up for the killing of children.'

'I wish I hadn't signed up for anything,' Rabastan grumbled, before falling silent.

Just as Emma's heartbeat started to accelerate with worry, the wizard gave a short nod of his head.

'Help me up, then,' he said, his eyes scanning the battlefield. 'I have a feeling Scrimgeour is out for blood.'

'The Deputy head Auror?' Emma asked, horrified.

Rabastan just gave her a tight smile, dragging himself to his feet. He took a moment to recover as he stood, before pushing past her towards the building. 'For the record, I'm only doing this because I want to get out of here.'

'Wouldn't have it any other way,' Emma replied, knowing just what he was risking, she was risking, just by being in the presence of the two Muggles.

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As soon as they arrived at the edge of the Apparition field, Emma turned to the Muggles, the stress of the battlefield giving way to worry about what was to come.

'Listen, you can't tell anyone about us, okay?' she asked forcefully, staring the man in the eyes.

He seemed taken aback by her statement.

'As if anyone would believe me,' he retorted, sensing that their alliance was at an end. 'The whole thing was out of a nightmare. And my wife...'

'Ems,' Rabastan said quietly, drawing her to the side. He shot a filthy look at the man when he tried to join them. 'You have to Obliviate them. It's the only way. Already... he hesitated. 'If it were anyone else, I would have reported you already. Instead... I just hope you have good reason for risking our lives like that. If even one of the family saw us, then we'll be dead, or worse.'

Emma opened her mouth to argue, to say that it was none of their business removing the last memories of the man's dead wife and child from his conscious. But no sound came out. She didn't have a good reason for saving the Muggles, other than some kind of twisted debt that she knew
could never be repaid. Plus, who knew if he would keep to his word?

She had lost the moral high ground, had lost any kind of ground that could have given her support to her argument, so instead she closed her mouth and nodded. She just hoped that she could muster the concentration necessary for the spell. Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the man, gripping her wand tightly. In one fluid motion, she brought it to his temple.

'**Obliviate.**'

Marigold screamed as her father fell to the ground, caught by Rabastan at the last minute. Emma knew even before he opened his eyes that something had gone wrong. It had felt as though her wand was sucking something out of him, instead of wiping his mind clean.

'What just happened?' the father asked, getting to his feet. 'Marigold?'

*Maybe I was wrong,* Emma breathed a sigh of relief, sharing a grin with Rabastan.

However, she had counted her chickens before they hatched, for the moment he tried to walk towards his daughter he fell back to the floor. The two wizards watched in growing horror as they realised what exactly they had wiped from his mind.

'He can't remember how to walk,' Emma said aloud, the words feeling like a punch to the gut. 'I shouldn't have done that. Oh, Merlin, what are we going to do now?'

'Relax,' Rabastan said, before Emma could work herself into a stressed frenzy.

He walked over to a nearby tree and pulled the rotten bark off into a crudely shaped chair. Then, he raised his wand, waving it over the wood the way they had been taught to in Transfiguration. After he spoke the incantation, a rough wooden chair on wheels appeared before them. After testing it out to see if the wheels worked, Rabastan looked back sheepishly.

'Not my finest work,' he admitted. 'But it'll do the job.'

Together, they hauled the man into the chair, where his head lolled to the side. It seemed like most of his muscle memory had gone, his arms hanging limply over the edges.

'Listen, kid,' Rabastan said. 'Can you get your dad to the nearest village?'

'Rabastan!' Emma admonished.

The child took that as her cue to burst into the long held tears, sitting on the ground and wailing with all of her might. Rabastan cringed, looking back towards the village.

'*Silencio,*' Emma cast quickly, running a hand through her hair. 'Merlin,' she moaned. 'What did I get us into?'

'Let's just leave them here,' Rabastan suggested in a voice that was higher than usual. 'Someone will find them in the end. We've done more than enough.'

'More than enough?' Emma laughed, but the sound was hysterical. 'You mean burning down their homes and removing their only chance of getting out of here? Oh, I'd say that we definitely did more than enough.'

She paced in front of the now drooling man and his silently bawling child, thinking. They wouldn't be able to stay in the clearing for long, not without the village smoke to hide them. In fact, she didn't
know how their luck had held so far.

'Look, this is what we'll do,' she said quickly. 'We'll Apparate to London, dump them there, Apparate away and wash in a stream, mend our clothes, then meet in front of my apartment building in Diagon Alley. It's better if the middle step is done apart, we'll be less conspicuous.'

'What?' Rabastan asked, stopping in his tracks. 'Have you gone insane?'

'Rabastan, look at them!' Emma said, exasperated. 'Just look at them, not as though they're Muggles. Do you really think they'll get anywhere?'

Her voice carried on the wind as they both stared back at the Muggles. They really were a sorry duo - one unable to keep himself upright, but still trying to soothe the other, whose silence only made her even more scared.

Emma took a deep, slow breath. When she looked back at Rabastan, he had softened his stance, his face filled with…pity? regret? He uncrossed his arms and sighed, shaking his head slightly.

'I know what you're trying to do, Ems,' he said. 'And Merlin knows if it's working. But there's something that - as your friend - I have to remind you. We're the ones who picked a side. We're the ones who joined the fight. There's no going back. There's only making sure our side wins, and living to see the end of it. If you're starting to have doubts, I'd suggest you remind yourself of what you have to lose.'

He gave her a considering look, evidently weighing the consequences of any future actions.

'I'll help you. Friends are the only thing we have left to hold on to through this damned war, and I'm sure as Merlin's pants not going to lose one because I refused to bathe in a river. But you can't pull something like this on me again, Ems. I mean it. We might not survive it next time.'

With that, he turned his attention to the Muggles, hoisting the girl onto his hip and conjuring ropes to tie themselves around the man's midriff. Emma watched him prepare, wondering what she had done to deserve a friendship like theirs, and what harm it might do to them if she wasn't careful.

Rabastan was right. She did have something to lose. But that only made it even more important to make sure the right side won.
The Afterparty

Chapter Notes

So so sorry, forgot to post this chapter!

‘What took you so long?’ Rabastan asked, obviously frazzled.

He had been pacing up and down the street, the tips of his dark brown hair still dripping. His jaw was still clenched, and his eyes kept darting around, assessing the situation. Emma took a quick look up and down the street, before grabbing his arm and hurrying into the alleyway to her apartment.

‘Sorry, it was a nightmare getting the mud out of my hair,’ she said. ‘We have to get to yours’, the others should be back by now.’

Rabastan had offered his house up to the Slytherin seventh years so as to provide an alibi in case anyone was caught and confessed. Unfortunately, that included Mulciber, Wilkes and Severus too, but that wasn’t to be helped. Lucinda had offered to organise it, inviting several fifth and sixth years that could be trusted to lie and that had clearly told their parents where they were going. It wasn’t much, but it might just be enough.

However, if they turned up smelling like river water - or looking too clean - their fellow Death Eaters might have some questions for them. Emma quickly performed a Scouring charm on them, before grabbing a handful of dust and sprinkling it over them both. At the same time, Rabastan used a heating charm to dry their clothes. Using magic other than Apparition at an unknown site would have been suspicious.

‘Do you know how to make a Portkey?’ Emma asked.

Rabastan raised his eyebrows.

‘Yeah, stupid question,’ she muttered. ‘Right, we’ll just have to Apparate, and say that Moody was hot on your tail. It was true about twenty minutes ago.’

‘And he’s probably duelled with five other Death Eaters since then!’ Rabastan exclaimed, his eyes going wide.

‘Relax, Bast! It’s not as if anyone’s going to question us about where we were at the end of the battle. They didn’t last time, did they?’ Emma asked.

Rabastan took a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing his eyes. He nodded, and Emma noticed that the glint had gone from his eyes when he looked at her.

‘Let’s do this now then, before I lose my nerve,’ he said.

A crack resounded through the alleyway, empty once more.

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‘You made it back in one piece!’ Lucinda cried, but the joke was lost through her worried tone. Glancing around the area, she made sure the gate’s hinges squeaked to hide her next words. ‘Regulus and Wilkes got back a while ago, Snape just arrived. Barty’s been telling people you two were stopping off at Emma’s to get more Firewhisky, so we don’t seem all that obvious. You never know who will snap at the first chance the Aurors get to them.’

‘Thanks, Lucy,’ Emma said sincerely, hugging her friend. ‘I mean it.’

‘Yeah, I appreciate you doing all of this,’ Rabastan added, unsure as how to greet her. He ran a hand through his wavy hair, trying to untangle it. ‘So…so did you find everything alright?’

‘Come here, stupid,’ Lucinda laughed, pulling Rabastan into her arms. ‘It was weird being here without you guys, but it’s not like I’ve never been here before.’

Rabastan smiled, laying his cheek against Lucinda’s perfectly styled hair. A small sigh escaped him, his muscles relaxing. Emma caught his eye and smirked. He lazily rolled his eyes and winked in return.

Once back inside, Emma surreptitiously slipped into the kitchen to duplicate the remaining two bottles of Firewhisky and crate of Butterbeer. Judging by the number of empty bottles, the party goers would be too inebriated to notice anyway. Taking a bottle of Butterbeer to go, she wandered through to the ball room slash party room to survey the situation.

It looked like a normal party, just like the ones they had just a year ago, when things weren’t so messed up. Her heart stopped pumping so loudly when she realised that no one really cared about the seventh years being there or not. Cassandra tipped her head in greetings from her circle of friends on the sofa, but other than that it seemed to just be posturing and bragging about being at a seventh year’s party. Unsurprisingly, Barty Crouch was deep in a chess tournament with a fourth year that Emma barely recognised.

Roaming the house, she discovered Rabastan and Lucinda reclining on the staircase, chatting quietly. She smiled – today wasn’t all bad, after all – but just as she was backing down the hallway to give them some privacy, Lucinda spotted her and waved her over.

‘Hey,’ she said. ‘How’s it going? Rabastan was just telling me about tonight.’

Emma looked over to Rabastan, who gave a subtle shake of his head. So he hadn’t told her about the escapade with the Muggles then.

‘Yeah, it was brutal,’ Emma settled for a generic reply. ‘I thought you didn’t want anything to do with this?’

‘Yeah, well, my best friends are all a part of it, so whether I like it or not, this war will affect me,’ Lucinda pursed her lips and took a swig of Butterbeer, shaking her head. ‘I prefer to at least know about it so I can know what to expect.’

Emma made a non-committal sound. There wasn’t really an appropriate response to that. Lucinda had a point, even if Emma would prefer her to be able to claim plausible deniability in the years to come. Hogwarts wouldn’t protect them forever.

‘Regulus is in the library, if you were looking for him,’ Rabastan said.

Emma took the hint. ‘Right, thanks. Tell me if the others get back. Even if Wilkes is creepy, it’d still
be nice to hear even he got out okay.’

‘Will do,’ Lucinda replied.

She moved to the side to let Emma pass. She noticed that instead of moving towards the wall as was usually done, the blonde moved closer to Rabastan. Emma gave him a thumbs up over Lucinda’s head and was met with yet another eye roll.

The upstairs part of Rabastan’s house was largely silent. People either hadn’t dared pair off in Rabastan’s house without him knowing, or it was too early in the evening for anyone to be truly tired. What happened last time? Emma asked herself, before remembering that the last party she attended at Rabastan’s was for New Year in sixth year. Yeah, better not avoid that trip down memory lane. Avery, ergh.

She couldn’t find Regulus in any of the bedrooms, or even the bathrooms - the doors were open - and by the time she reached the library on the third floor, she was beginning to wonder if Lucinda hadn’t sent her on a wild goose chase. But sure enough, there he was at the desk, nose deep inside some kind of history book even though it was probably past midnight.

‘Hey,’ she said softly, approaching her boyfriend.

He jumped, sending parchment flying and closing his book with a snap. His head snapped around to look at her, only relaxing when he realised who it was. He let out a sigh, bending down to pick up the papers.

‘Emma,’ he greeted her.

She frowned, leaning against the wall.

‘Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for,’ she admitted, looking down. The flutter of disappointment flared in her chest.

‘It’s not that,’ Regulus started, before glancing at his papers. His voice died in his throat as he shoved them and the book in his bag.

Did he have a bag when we went on the raid? Emma wondered, thinking it odd for him to have brought books to a Muggle village. Then again, it was Regulus, always prepared for everything. He distracted her from her thoughts, taking her hands in his, threading his fingers through hers.

‘So how did it go on your end? I met up with Alecto at one point, she said it was intense.’

Emma stayed silent for a moment, wondering how to tell him. She wanted to, oddly. They had gone past their silent suffering through their Hogwarts years and she had finally realised that it was far better to tell him things than hide them and let them both suffer. The problem was the how. The Dark Lord didn’t take defection lightly, and did she even want to defect in the first place?

Of course, there was no denying that he had become more and more anti-Muggle and anti-Muggleborn, but was that simply in order to gain the power he needed to make a change? Were the burning villages the price to pay for a better world order? After all, she tried to reason with herself, it’s not as if the Dark Lord could have expected some Muggles to be left over. Bellatrix is a good lieutenant, but maybe she’s just been given too much free reign for now.

Trying to buy herself some time before she told him about it, she asked him what he was researching so late at night, gesturing to the desk. Regulus turned to look behind him, letting go of her hand to rub the back of his head sheepishly.
‘Oh that,’ he said dismissively. ‘Um... nothing really. History of Magic stuff. It would bore you.’

Emma’s heart fell to her stomach. So it was a one-sided feeling. Obviously, Regulus didn’t trust her enough. Whatever he was doing after a raid at one in the morning, Emma was sure it didn’t involve homework.

‘Right,’ she said, trying to brush it off. ‘Well, yeah, it was a bit intense, but nothing more than the usual. It’s just that we have Order members on our tail now, as well as the best Aurors. Barty’s dad might have changed departments last year, but it’s still got Crouch written all over it. Rabastan got blown into a wall.’

As she described the superficial details of her side of the conflict, leaving out the whole part about the Muggles, Regulus in turn told her not much more than what she knew already – that the Aurors were getting harder and harder to surprise.

After a few more minutes of awkward chatting, Emma couldn’t stand looking at Regulus and knowing that he was keeping secrets from her. She had always been the one he told things, even if it was just to say that he didn’t want to talk about it. He had never outright lied to her before.

Along with the sinking feeling of disappointment, the guilt that had been assuaged by getting the Muggles to a hospital on the outskirts of London was starting to return. She suddenly couldn’t be bothered with the pretence and niceties. If Regulus had nothing to say to her, then she would better occupy her time.

‘Speaking of Crouch, I need to go and find Barty,’ she said, extricating herself from the situation.

‘Oh, I’ll come with you,’ Regulus offered.

‘No,’ Emma held her hands out to stop him. She glanced over to his rucksack. ‘I’ll let you finish up with your... homework.’

Regulus looked at her, realising that she didn’t buy the lie. He sighed, his hand going back to his head in frustration.

‘Emma,’ he started in a conciliatory tone. ‘It’s not – Look, you don’t know – It’s not that I don’t trust you...’

His excuses died in his throat and he simply shrugged, raising his arms in defeat. Evidently, he didn’t want to talk about it, even though he clearly understood that she didn’t believe him. If anything, it made Emma more annoyed.

*He can’t even make up a good reason,* she thought vehemently, closing the door with more force than necessary on her way out. The small click behind her told her that her boyfriend was following, but she didn’t slow her pace on her march down the stairs. It was only when she reached the landing of the first floor that she held an arm out, stopping Regulus in his tracks and effectively stopping his calls for her to stop.

‘What –’

Emma shushed him in an aggravated tone, shooting him a dark look. He pursed his lips, but his retort was lost as he took in the scene in front of them, unconsciously lowering himself to a crouching position so as to make himself more inconspicuous. Emma peered around the wall curiously, forgetting about her annoyance with Regulus in her will to not interrupt the two wizards at the bottom of the stairs.
‘I just don’t know how you all do it,’ Lucinda was sobbing, her face in her arms. She and Rabastan hadn’t moved since Emma last saw them. ‘I try to be strong about it, I try to be like you, and Emma, and Regulus, and even Alecto, but I just can’t. I just sit up, wondering, worrying that this was the last time I’ll ever see you again, that one of you will just not come back from one of your missions, and there’s nothing I can do about it!’

‘Lucinda,’ Rabastan started reassuringly, expression bewildered.

With Regulus as a best friend, there’s no wonder he doesn’t know how to cheer up Lucinda, Emma thought. They couldn’t be more different.

‘I know what you’re going to say, Rab, that they don’t send students to do the hard work, that you’re more protected than the rest. But I know that it’s not true. You think I don’t notice that bruise on your collarbone, Rabastan? Do you think that I don’t know that it probably goes down much farther than that, just because you hide the cuts with your robes?

‘I’m doing my best to help you guys, but nothing I do will ever be enough. All I want is to just stop being so scared all of the time, and I don’t even know why we need this bloody war in the first place!’

‘Shh,’ Rabastan hushed her automatically, glancing behind him. Lucinda’s voice had risen, but it was cut off by a sob just as Rabastan spoke.

Tentatively, he put his arms around her, stroking her hair as she cried, his face going through a plethora of emotions.

‘Look, Lucy,’ he started, voice wavering, unsure. ‘At this point, everyone’s just trying to survive. That’s the Slytherin thing, isn’t it? We can’t go back now, not when we’ve already given so much up. It’s not about winning anymore, it’s about all the people that they’ve taken from us, and for what? Muggles? Are they worth dying for? No. But Mulciber, Mulciber’s dad, and Regulus’s dad... are they worth dying for? I think they’re at least worth fighting for, to tell Dumbledore that it’s not okay that all these people have to be sacrificed just for his precious Mudbloods.’

Lucinda sniffed, looking up through teary eyes.

‘I guess,’ she said in a small voice. ‘I just – I don’t know.’

‘Well, you know what Lucy? I do know,’ Rabastan said heatedly, his green eyes locked onto her blue. ‘Because if this war has done nothing else, at least it’s taught me what’s important in life. What’s important in my life. And...’ he took a breath, exhaling loudly. ‘I don’t care if you don’t feel the same way, I don’t care if your parents have already set you up with someone else, but I do care about you. I love you, Lucinda. And I have for a while now.

‘You say that you’re weak, that you feel like we don’t see you as one of us. But the only reason that the rest of us are still holding it together is because you are here to remind us of how life used to be, to remind us that there are things still worth holding on to. And I realised that tonight more than ever. So, Lucinda Rosier, I love you. What are you going to do about it?’

Rabastan stopped abruptly, out of breath after his announcement. After a second, he turned his head, embarrassed at his emotional outburst in the middle of his staircase, but Lucinda turned it back, taking him by surprise with a long kiss.

‘I love you too, Rabastan. Even if I thought it was something else before, I’m sure of it now. And if this war is only going to get worse, I don’t want to waste any time thinking about it.’
Averting her gaze from the enthusiastically kissing couple, Emma realised that Regulus was still crouching next to her. Their eyes met.

‘Why can’t we be like them?’ Emma asked, not caring that her voice broke on the last syllable.

Quickly, she hurried away before the tears in her eyes threatened to spill over.
‘Stop worrying!’ Regulus exclaimed, catching a hold of Emma’s arm as she paced for the hundredth time in front of the fireplace.

She said nothing, but slowed to a halt for his benefit, checking her watch as she did so. *Still too early,* she thought to herself. She shouldn’t be so nervous, it was just James, for Salazar’s sake, but her stomach had been tying itself into knots all morning. Did she want to return to her parents’ house? Didn’t she?

Emma didn’t know what to think. It was the house of so many happy memories, and yet tainted by the past few. Even though she was certain that her parents would never have returned as ghosts, they would still haunt the halls of her childhood home. James himself had only gone back the day before - if only to spruce up the house before the rest of them arrived.

She didn’t care what Sirius had been doing.

‘Won’t it be weird? Christmas with just you, me, my brother and yours?’ she asked Regulus abruptly.

He stopped halfway through knotting his tie to softly run a hand down her arm.

‘Of course it will,’ he replied truthfully. ‘But James is your brother. I know how much that means to you. At least one of us deserves to have some kind of normal family, and if it means putting up with Sirius as a by product, then we’ll just have to deal with it. Besides, Kreacher will be there, won’t you Kreach?’

Regulus smiled fondly as the elf bounced up and down with excitement and trepidation. He had put on a red and green tea towel in anticipation of the festivities.

‘Yes, Master Regulus. Kreacher very looking forward to meeting Miss Emma’s brother.’ He bowed, muttering under his breath. ‘Not that ungrateful blood traitor, no sir, he’s who broke poor Master’s heart.’

‘Ahem,’ Regulus coughed embarrassedly. Emma stifled a laugh, but not without him noticing. ‘Laugh it up, Ems. I’ll let you get away with it this once.’

Emma laughed again, feeling her tension bleed out a little, but not much. Over the past few days, she had been wound as tightly as the watch on her wrist, what with mulling over their Muggle raid, what Regulus had been hiding, and today’s meal.

She had decided to stay at Grimmauld Place for the time between the raid and Christmas Eve. She was worried about staying alone with her thoughts in her apartment in Diagon Alley, nice as it was. She supposed that she should consider herself lucky for the massive amount of N.E.W.T homework they had been buried under. Only at night did she have time to think about the Muggle raid, and she usually went flying under a disillusionment spell until she was ready to drop in order to avoid mulling over it.

Meanwhile, Regulus spent hours in the library on something that he was still vague about and apparently didn’t want any help. Emma had gotten past her annoyance, but was now burning with curiosity. Was it a project from the Dark Lord? He had told her it was too dangerous for them both to be working on it, and had even insisted that they practice their Occlumency every night before going to bed.
Emma suppressed a grin at that thought. One good thing about staying at Regulus’s house was the nights that she spent curled up next to him in bed after the Occlumency training. The two of them were usually fast asleep within five minutes, but whenever she would wake up in the night, the comforting warmth of her boyfriend’s body in their duvet cocoon was enough to send her back to sleep. She had the feeling that her nights would be much more sleepless alone.

Walburga hadn’t noticed, and maybe that was a testament to how bad the once formidable woman had become. Whereas once she was willowy and pale, now she was thin and wan. It seemed as though she had aged three years instead of three months, and Emma strongly suspected that Orion’s death had its part to play, even if Walburga hadn’t been innocent in that respect either.

She reminded Emma of Bellatrix - manic in a childlike manner - and the Slytherin was sure that she had loved Regulus’s father very much. He was like a toy that Walburga had finally broken and now she wandered the halls of the house looking for him. Even Regulus’s talk of the Dark Lord winning didn’t seem to cheer her up, and after she picked at the food on her plate the first time he brought it up at dinner, their meals were taken in silence.

Sensing that she was lost in thought, Regulus released his girlfriend to finish knotting his tie, even though he knew that Sirius would probably appear dressed very casually. Once he was done, Kreacher tugged at his sleeve, the sudden movement breaking Emma’s train of thoughts.

‘Does Master Regulus um,’ Kreacher glanced around, before whispering exaggeratedly. ‘Want the letter Master Regulus wants for long long time?’

‘No!’ Regulus exclaimed, before glancing at Emma, his ears tingeing bright red. ‘I mean, no thank you Kreacher. Did you only just remember now?’ he asked skeptically.

‘Yes, stupid, stupid Kreacher, bad Kreacher,’ Kreacher shouted, punching his ears. ‘Kreacher only remembers because he sees Master Regulus’s pocket with mmfmmhph.’

Regulus had once again put a hand over Kreachers mouth, grabbing the flailing fists with the other.

‘It’s fine, Kreacher, really, it’s *fine,’ he sighed in exasperation. ‘Just, don’t mention it, when...’

‘When I’m here?’ Emma asked, raising an eyebrow. ‘So your secret project is something that you’re sending letters about? As in, you’ve told someone who is sending letters to you?’

‘No, it’s not at all about that,’ Regulus started, glancing away from Emma’s furious gaze. His eyes stopped on her watch. ‘Look, we’re going to be late, I’ll tell you later!’

Without waiting for a response, he dragged her into the fireplace, shouting out the name of the house in Godric’s Hollow as he did so. Before she knew what was happening, Emma was dragged through the magical chute, barely managing to recognise her house in time to get back out. They burst into the Potter living room in a cloud of spectacular dust, Kreacher appearing alongside them with a large cr**ack**.

‘I’ll say this for you, Potter, you know how to make an entrance,’ a familiar voice drawled.

Emma groaned inwardly. Of course, Sirius Black just happened to be lounging in the sitting room five minutes before he was even supposed to get there. She straightened herself and brushed the dust off of her dress in as dignified a manner as she could.

‘Sirius,’ she said cordially, just as James repeated her words in a warning manner.

Sirius rolled his eyes, before exaggeratedly getting up to stand in front of Regulus, trying to
intimidate his younger brother. ‘Reggie, nice to see you brought the help with you. What, think that Prongs can’t handle a simple Christmas dinner?’

‘Sirius!’ James reprimanded again, reminding Emma oddly of Lily. If only, she thought wishfully. Lily Evans would know exactly how to defuse the tension and act as a buffer for the antagonising between siblings.

‘Thanks for coming Ems,’ James said warmly, embracing his sister. ‘For a minute, I wasn’t sure you would. The house is…different, this Christmas, isn’t it?’

Emma took a look around. The house looked exactly as she had left it, but the atmosphere did seem…cooler. And it didn’t have anything to do with the frost emanating from Sirius and Regulus.

‘The important thing is that we’re spending it with family,’ Emma replied quietly, so that the Black brothers wouldn’t hear her.

Sensing the awkwardness of the situation with a tact that he hadn’t possessed before going out with Lily, James broke into a grin and steered his sister to the French doors leading to the backyard. ‘How about a game of Quidditch, then, hey?’

‘Sure,’ the three of them replied in chorus.

For a brief moment, they all looked at each other, thrown back to the time they spent New Year’s in a tent at the bottom of the garden. Then the moment was gone, and Emma went to grab the Quaffle from their Quidditch shed. Two on two didn’t really call for Beaters or Seekers, so Regulus and Sirius were on equal footing.

She paused in the doorway, taking in the view of her house and lawn. Or rather, James’s house and lawn, though he would never admit it. She hadn’t been back in over a year, and something rose up in her throat that she couldn’t quite place. It wasn’t sad, exactly, just a sense of…misplacement. As though she had replaced a missing chess piece with one of another set.

She scoffed at herself, shaking her head. Lou had been right - the Potters were too melodramatic for their own good.

‘Catch!’ she shouted, determined not to think about it.

‘Thanks,’ Regulus grinned, looping around the lawn to chuck it through the hoop.

‘Hey, that’s not fair!’ Sirius cried from the other side of the pitch. ‘We hadn’t even started playing yet!’

‘You know us Slytherins,’ Emma replied, _Accio-_ing her broom. ‘Take every advantage you can.’

To her surprise, Sirius just harrumphed and carried on playing. Evidently, James must have been blackmailing him with something.

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Two hours later, it was too dark to pretend they could see one another, let alone the goalpost or the Quaffle. Emma was disappointed. Quidditch made everything simpler, reduced to the player, the ball and the broom. They hadn’t even kept count, although all of them were extremely competitive.
Now, they were awkwardly standing around the too-large table waiting for James to bring in the food - Regulus had refused to let Kreacher do any work whatsoever, much to Sirius's disdain - and Emma found herself opposite a family portrait she hadn’t even noticed before. Rounding the table, her fingers were tracing the edges of the frame before she even quite knew what she was doing.

‘I like that one,’ James said, coming through with a plate of turkey and vegetables.

The two Black brothers wisely kept quiet. Emma didn’t turn, unable to turn her face from the laughing people on the paper. Charles was lifting her in the air, and Emma was pretending to beat him off with her new broomstick. James was being tickled by their mother, his broomstick hovering unnoticed above the family. The present James placed the turkey in the centre of the table, before coming to stand beside her.

‘We look so happy,’ he said. ‘It’s one of the rare times that...’ he trailed off, glancing behind him.

‘Well, the war’s affected most families, whether we knew about it or not. I wish...I wish that it hadn’t touched *us* as much as it had. ‘

Sirius and Regulus’s eyes met across the turkey in a rare moment of understanding, before Regulus’s hardened and he turned away. He never had forgiven or understood Sirius, just as Sirius had never forgiven or understood Regulus.

The meal passed by quietly, Kreacher having decided to Apparate to Malfoy Manor to sneak some food to Dobby, who was probably slaving away on a seven course meal. The only sound was the clatter of cutlery and for her part; Emma was lost in thought over the Black brothers. She wished James hadn’t brought Sirius and Regulus together, but she hadn’t the heart to tell him. Her twin’s optimism was unfailing, and she wasn’t going to be the one to bring it crashing down. Evidently, Sirius was of the same opinion, for he looked almost forlorn as he ate.

After dinner, they found themselves lounging around the fireplace, James having brought them together to play a game of Wizarding Cluedo, a game which consisted in finding out who murdered the host, where, and how. The Wizarding version enacted the scenarios, creating random plots which the players had to follow.

‘Aha! It was the son in the kitchen with Wingardium Leviosa!’ Sirius exclaimed, putting his cards down triumphantly.

‘How can someone die from Wingardium Leviosa?’ James asked sceptically.

‘Easy,’ Emma said. ‘Lift him high enough and then just let him drop.’

The other three turned to her, speechless, and Emma felt her stomach take a plunge.

‘Of course I would know that, she thought viciously. I’m the son in real life. I’m the one who killed that girl. Suddenly, the room felt too stuffy.

‘I’m... I’m going to check that the brooms are safely locked up. After all, a lot of people must think this house has been abandoned by now,’ she stammered, jumping up.

The excuse seemed flimsy, even to her ears. Stupid, stupid, stupid, she chanted the mantra in her head, stumbling out of the room just in time to miss Regulus’s remark.

‘I know a son that killed his father without a single spell.’

‘Take that back!’ Sirius was the one to jump up this, time, his wand whipped out in record time.

James took a deep breath, looking from one brother to the other, before deciding that this was a mess
that Sirius needed to confront. Besides, he had a sibling of his own to confront.

Tearing out of the room, James stopped in the doorway just in time for an Accio and the two’s wands flew out of their hands. Ignoring the protests that followed him, he ran out of the house, locking them in for good measure.

*I want Sirius back on speaking terms with his brother*, James thought. *That doesn’t mean that the house has to burn down for it.*

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Sirius and Regulus were left standing opposite each other, the door slamming in James’s wake. The audible click of the latch confirmed the fact that they were stuck there, alone together for the first time since Sirius had sent Snape into the Forbidden Forest, or so Regulus had been told. He suspected that it hadn’t been the entire truth, but was unable to pry with Dumbledore sitting opposite them.

‘Can’t you just…’ Sirius sighed, trying to convey his thoughts through a nondescript gesture. He dropped his arm back to his side with a thud in resignation. ‘Give it a rest?’

‘Oh, like our dearly departed father is now at rest?’ Regulus asked, hating the fact that Sirius had gotten under his skin so easily.

The worst part was that some part of him knew that Sirius didn’t mean to, but it was quashed by the bubbling resentment that had festered within his heart for the past seven years. His skin crawled with energy, every fibre of his being wishing for his wand so that he could channel a satisfying curse in his brother’s direction. Secretly, he understood Bellatrix’s need to wipe the arrogant jerk off of the face of the earth, although their reasons probably differed slightly.

‘See!’ Sirius rolled his eyes, before looking at Regulus in earnest. ‘This is exactly what I mean.’

Regulus couldn’t stand the thousand emotional changes that were always prominently displayed on Sirius’s face, proclaiming them for all the world to see, as the true Gryffindor that he was. *This was the root of all of our problems*, Regulus thought vehemently. *If only the fool would have learnt to keep his mouth shut at home, to not attract so much attention at school, then none of this would have happened.* Noticing that his brother apparently required a response, he narrowed his eyes, but kept his face in an impassive mask, the Black mask that he knew his brother the Gryffindor hated so.

‘I didn’t mean for that to happen, Reg,’ Sirius added, trying to emphasise his point. Regulus bit the inside of his cheek to keep from retorting. ‘It’s our family that’s messed up. It’s Mother - Merlin, she’s crazy!

‘Listen,’ Sirius was leaning towards him, his eyes bright with concern. ‘I know it must have been hard, having to deal with them twenty four seven, even in Hogwarts. I know why you could never have run away, the way I did, because you didn’t have the support, the friends that I have. I’ve been talking about it with James, and he’s willing to help. You and Emma both, we’ll get you out of there. I promise I won’t abandon you this time.’

Regulus concentrated on evening out his breathing, giving Sirius the same flat stare, but on the inside, his mind was awhirl. Of course, fate would have it that the words he had been dying to hear when he was young would make their way out of his brother’s mouth two years too late. There was no running from the Death Eaters, everybody knew that, even the idiot of a Gryffindor standing in
front of him. It was a little sad to think of how naive his brother really was. Did he truly believe that Regulus would drop everything to come running after him?

Another part of him just hated Sirius all the more for it. “I won’t abandon you this time.” Did that mean that Sirius knew what he had consigned Regulus to when he decided to leave home? A life of being second best to his darling brother, only to be second best to a darling brother’s memory in his father’s eyes. In a way, Regulus understood Emma more than she would ever know. Regulus knew what it was like to have everything taken from him by Sirius, who seemed to breeze through life without a second thought about the consequences.

And that was it. Regulus could never follow Sirius’s lifestyle, even if he did take his brother up on his offer. He would always be one step behind, the shadow cast by Sirius’s bright light. Ironic, isn’t it? he thought to himself. Regulus is the brightest star in the Leo constellation. Even with my name, Sirius is more deserving of it. He found himself shaking his head, allowing the emotion to seep into the marble of his face the tiniest bit. Whatever Sirius deserved, he hadn’t deserved the way he had been treated by Walburga, and it was Regulus’s fault that it went on for so long.

‘It’s too late, Sirius,’ he replied wearily, feeling as though he had aged five years. ‘I’ve sacrificed too much for this already. Who knows what would be left if you took these past years away?’

Sirius’s face crumpled at that, the tears flowing shamelessly down his cheeks. He launched himself at Regulus, pulling him into a tight hug. The latter stiffened, before letting out a deep breath and patting him on the back, rubbing circles. In some ways, it felt as though Sirius was the younger brother, the one to be protected.

‘Don’t say that Reg,’ Sirius cried, drawing away and gripping Regulus’s arms. ‘I won’t accept -’

The words were cut off as Regulus winced, automatically withdrawing the left forearm.

‘You didn’t...’ Sirius breathed; the rest of the sentence unnecessary. Once again, the emotion contorted his face in full force, this one of rage and disappointment. ‘They would never have forced you to do this, not before you left school! You must have wanted this, you must have worked for this! And here I am, apologising like an idiot, when you should be sent back to Azkaban! You’re just as bad as the rest of them!’

‘Yeah,’ Regulus said heatedly, unable to prevent himself. ‘You know what, you are an idiot! Did you think that Mother went easy on you during the holidays because she had relaxed? Did you think she didn’t know about your Muggle posters, your secret conversations with James and the rest of them? Why do you think that is, huh, Sirius?’

He stopped speaking as a wave of uncontrolled magic hit him in the chest, sending him flying into the wall. He scrambled up immediately in disbelief, and yet cursing himself for thinking that Sirius could be anything but a hot-headed Gryffindor.

‘I’m sorry, should I be thankful that she burned a hole in Father’s hand instead of mine, Reg?’ Sirius asked furiously, advancing on his brother. ‘What, Father wasn’t there to protect you, so you joined the Death Eaters in advance in the hopes of buying their affection? Even for you Regulus, that’s pathetic.’

‘It wasn’t Father who was protecting you all that time, Sirius, you arse!’ Regulus yelled back, Levitating a chair and throwing it at his brother.

Sirius merely ducked, sending another, more powerful wave at him.
‘So what, I’m supposed to believe that you, who couldn’t even stand up for yourself to a Sorting Hat, that you were the one protecting me?’ Sirius snorted, his lip curling into a sneer. ‘You know what, little Reggie, I think that the only one you’re protecting is the only one you’ve ever protected in your life: You! But I’m not going to fall for any of your Slytherin tricks anymore, you hear? You’re dead to me. If I catch you, I’m handing you over to the Dementors myself!’

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James found Emma by the broom shed, or more precisely, sitting with her back to it, staring at the stars. Remembering that she had taken Astronomy as an O.W.L., he searched the heavens, wondering what she saw there that he didn’t.

After a few seconds, he realised that the stars wouldn’t reveal their secrets to them this night, any more than they would have the last. So instead, he slid down the side of the wall to join Emma. She still hadn’t acknowledged his presence, face turned upwards. The only thing distinguishing her from a statue was her eyes, flitting from one side of the sky to the other, as though she were reading a great book.

Just to be sure, James glanced up again. Still nothing. He wondered what she was thinking, how she knew to kill someone with a levitating charm without a second’s thought. He wondered whether she was scared of the future, and remembered what Rabastan had told him. The Slytherin might be a git, but he would have no reason to seek James out and then lie to him.

*She must be wondering if she’s next,* he concluded. *Of course, we found out that Mulciber was a Death Eater only a few days ago in the Daily Prophet. His dad went on the run the next day. It must be a shock to realise that they’re only sitting seconds away from you, in the safety of your own common room.*

‘It’s alright, you know,’ he found himself saying, not knowing where he was going with this. ‘I know you’re always trying to prove that you’re brave, that you aren’t scared of anything. But you can’t be brave without being scared. And you can’t be brave all the time.’

He paused, but Emma only pressed her mouth into a thin line, biting one side of her bottom lip the way she did…or used to…when she didn’t believe him. A wave of affection overtook him, the protective feeling, the one that he had developed the moment he realised that she only did dangerous things to keep him company, washing over his body like water.

‘I mean it, Ems,’ he said earnestly. ‘I can only imagine how it must feel, living in the same quarters as a Death Eater. I don’t think I’d sleep at all, ever. Just try to remember, they might seem invincible now, with Voldemort at his height,” Emma cringed, ‘sorry, You-Know-Who, but…’ James paused again, trying to convey his point with more than just words. ‘Look at me, Ems.’

Emma’s eyes slowly swivelled to look at her brother, a depth and despair to them that James had never noticed before, not even when their mother died. On impulse, he grabbed her hand between his - it was trembling.

‘Listen to me carefully. I’m…I’m not allowed to say this, since it’s not official, in fact it won’t be official until I’m out of school,’ James realised he was rambling and took a deep breath, calming himself and lowering his voice, even though there was no one around. ‘I…Dumbledore…I’ve decided to become a part of this war. I’ve decided I’m going to join the Order of the Phoenix.’

‘No, James, you can’t!’ Emma gasped, breaking her silence and turning fully to face her brother, her
eyes beseeching. ‘It’s too dangerous!’

James chuckled, relaxing. ‘I knew you would say that. But I’m ready, Ems, and I’ll protect you if needs be.’

‘James,’ Emma shook her head. ‘You don’t understand. You don’t know what they’re capable of.’

‘You don’t know what I’m capable of, Ems! I’m ready for this! I can’t just sit by and let the world burn without doing something to help!’ James glanced at her. ‘You know what I mean. Rabastan told me that you’ve been standing up for Muggleborns in Slytherin all this time, despite the threats!’

And instead of blushing and feeling pleased or proud, James watched in confusion as his sister burst into tears.

Emma couldn’t take it anymore. She had to tell James, come what may. Anything to keep the loving look off of his face, the one she did not deserve, especially now. She pulled away from the warmth of the hug and exhaled.

‘James,’ she tried, her voice breaking with the sobs. ‘James, I’ve messed up.’

She took in a shuddering breath, but before she could continue, a voice cried from the house.

‘Emma! Emma, where are you?’

The twins looked up to see Regulus jogging across the garden towards them. After a moment, James manoeuvred himself into Emma’s line of sight, his face filled with concern.

‘Emma,’ he said urgently. ‘What is it? What could possibly be this bad?’

Emma just shook her head, knowing that there would be no time. The weight of the Muggle girl would be a burden for her soul to bear. James gazed searchingly into her eyes one more, before turning away, accepting the fact that he wasn’t going to get out any more information. He got up and turned to Regulus.

‘How did you even get out?’ he asked impatiently, searching his pockets for Regulus’s wand.

‘Wandless magic,’ Regulus replied without a second glance towards the Gryffindor.

‘Of course,’ James said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. ‘So obvious.’

Regulus wasn’t paying attention though. He held Emma’s gaze urgently. ‘Look, I know how much this means to you, but I really can’t stay here anymore. I just thought you ought to know.’

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ Emma replied, getting to her feet. ‘I’m sorry James, but there’s no place for me here anymore. Not in Godric’s Hollow. I’ll see you at school.’

James looked as though he might cry.

‘But...’ he started, his voice trailing into nothing. He shrugged helplessly, conveying through the motion everything that he couldn’t say with words.

Emma gave him one last, tight, smile and Accio-ed Regulus’s wand wordlessly.

‘Bye James,’ she said. ‘Thanks for tonight.’

‘But...’ James repeated, before falling silent.
There was no point. They had already Disapparated.
The Proposition

They reappeared on the doorstep of 12 Grimmauld Place. Oddly, it had been the first thing Emma thought of, instead of her apartment in Diagon Alley. It was for the best, she supposed. With the altercations between Death Eaters, the Order of the Phoenix and the Aurors who had no idea who was on whose side, it might not have been a good idea to Apparate to Diagon Alley in the middle of the night. *Even if it is Christmas.*

Regulus held a finger to his lips as he quietly opened the door, so as to not wake any of the sleeping portraits. If they saw them, Walburga would surely feel duty bound to return. And that was the last thing either of them wanted. They snuck up the winding staircase to Regulus’s room and as Regulus summoned Kreacher back to keep him informed, Emma studied the collage of Lord Voldemort’s rise to power.

*What a joke,* she thought, sickened. *I can’t escape him, not anywhere.* In a way, she was glad that Regulus had dragged them back. It was the coward’s way out, but at least she had left James thinking she was on the same side as him. The moving pictures in front of her seemed to be mocking her, reminding her of all she had aspired to be and all that she had become. “You wanted this,” they were saying, “You only have yourself to blame.”

With a large crack! Kreacher disappeared, probably to spend some more time with Dobby. Regulus let out a long, drawn out sigh and came to stand next to his girlfriend, taking a moment to look at his younger self’s work. Emma wondered what he thought of it now, what he thought of the Dark Lord now. She knew he had had doubts, but he barely mentioned them now. And with this new top-secret project… it seemed as though Regulus had only buried himself deeper into their work.

‘Sirius knows,’ he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Emma turned her head sharply, the Dark Lord fleeing her thoughts. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Definitely. He tried to see my Mark, but I ran before he could,’ Regulus replied unhappily, his face twisting into a mask of guilt and fear. ‘I can’t believe it. I’m such a fool; I let him get too close. Emma…What do we do?’

Emma frowned, the cogs in her mind turning faster than ever.

‘Nothing,’ she said eventually, looking Regulus in the eyes. ‘We do nothing. He’s been claiming it for years and no one has been listening. Even James doesn’t believe him, and he’s his best friend.’

Regulus looked at her incredulously, waiting for the rest of her plan. When no words were forthcoming, he spun around, walking towards his open balcony.

‘So what? That’s it? We’re just supposed to trust the fact that nobody listens to him? Mulciber died for this, Emma! I’m not going to just –’ He cut off abruptly, instead opting to grasp the balcony railing until his knuckles turned white. ‘That’s your big plan?’

‘Do you have a better one?’ Emma retorted, coming over to join him. ‘If we do nothing, then we won’t attract attention. Just act normal, and everything will be fine.’

‘Act normal?’ Regulus’s voice was barely above a whisper, but it regained strength for the rest of his sentence. ‘Is that what you’ve been doing these past few weeks, acting normal? Barty told me that you made him Quidditch Captain at Rabastan’s party last week. That’s not normal, everyone knows you love Quidditch! And I can’t believe that I found out second hand? Were you going to tell me at
all, or were you just going to spring it on me at the next practice? And James, would you have told him, too? Is that what I walked in on?’

Emma’s eyes got narrower and narrower with each accusation, and to her horror tears started leaking out, whether from frustration or because she was upset, she didn’t know. *How did the conversation turn to this?*

‘I’m keeping secrets?’ she asked incredulously. ‘You have no right to say that to me, not when you refuse point blank to include me on whatever you’ve been holing yourself up, working on these holidays. I thought we were a team! I thought that…After all we’d been through, with the Gurgs, with the Aurors…’

Emma’s voice trailed off as she realised just how betrayed she felt by the person who was supposed to not only be her boyfriend, but her best friend, the ally that she could count on no matter what in this war. A link in her heart seemed to snap.

‘Never mind,’ she said in a calmer tone, swallowing her disappointment. ‘I’ll just… I’ll just Apparate to my apartment, it was wrong of me to suppose that you would trust me. After all, you didn’t trust me after Sirius spent the summer at my parents’, did you? You’re always so quick to think I’m on his side.’

‘Wait!’ Regulus cried, grabbing a hold of her arm. ‘Wait, Emma, I’m sorry.’

Against her better judgement, Emma stayed put, waiting for the explanation that was too late in coming. Regulus’s eyes were darting around frantically, as if he had only just realised what was on Emma’s mind.

‘I…I had no idea you felt that way,’ he admitted, not knowing how to start. ‘Well, not that much, anyway. Shit, I’ve gone about this the wrong way. It’s just that…with the way you reacted at school…’

‘I can’t understand a word you’re saying, Regulus,’ Emma said flatly, shrugging his hand off her arm.

‘I know, I’m sorry. Just, wait here for a minute. I’ll cast a Heating and Cushioning charm, wait,’ he mumbled, flicking his wand at the balcony floor. Immediately, Emma felt the warmth of a summer breeze, although London was covered in frost. She hadn’t even realised how cold it was up until now. ‘Shit, shit, shit, this is not the way I wanted this to go.’

Still muttering to himself, Regulus rushed back into his room, tearing the place apart in his haste to find…Well, Emma wasn’t sure what. But if it was important enough to get Regulus in such a fuss, then she owed it to him to at least give him the chance to explain himself.

A few minutes later, he skidded back onto the balcony with a thick woolly blanket and a wad of papers. His hair was more dishevelled than James’s, and he almost looked like Sirius with the number of expressions that crossed his face.

‘This is definitely not how I had this planned, but since we’re basically living together, I guess this is how it was going to turn out. Um… Do you remember when we were talking about the whole pureblood problem thing at school?’

Emma gave him a blank stare, raising an eyebrow.

‘No, of course you don’t,’ he sighed, calming down a little. ‘Look, I’m obviously pretty bad at explaining, so just… read these first.’
He draped the blanket around her shoulders, and then around his own. It was large enough that only their knees were touching, but still warm. Curious, Emma took the sheaf of papers from her boyfriend, her icy demeanour lessening. Turning the top one around to face her, she read:

Dear Regulus Arcturus Black,

It is rare that I receive such correspondence from you. As you should well remember from your family history, that type of information is confidential, unless you wish to dispute it with a claim of your own.

However, as your grandfather, I shall simply assume that this is the case, though if it goes to the Wizengamot with Edward Wilkes, then I shall deny all part in this exchange. Burn the letters if this does not result in a dispute.

On the Fifteenth of September, in the Nineteenth Hundred and Seventy Seventh year, Morgan Elliot Wilkes submitted a petition for the hand of Emma Jane Potter. As Emma Jane Potter’s father Charles Florian Potter is recently deceased and Emma Jane Potter herself is currently schooled at Hogwarts, the petition claim goes to Emma Jane Potter’s closest living relative: Dorea Violetta Black.

Dorea Violetta Black has transferred the petition to her nephew Cygnus Pollux Black, as Emma Jane Potter’s guarantor is Narcissa Druella Black. As head of the Black family, although I cannot interfere within the marriage process, I am allowed full access to these records. A decision has not yet been made, as Cygnus Pollux Black wishes to discuss the matter with Emma Jane Potter herself upon her eighteenth birthday, respecting the six month grace period.

Should you require further information, I remain at your service,

Your grandfather, Pollux Regulus Black.

‘You brought me Wilkes petition for marriage?’ Emma asked, gesturing to the parchment with a slight frown. ‘That’s the big thing you’ve been hiding? Apart from the fact that it is completely archaic, I can’t believe…’

‘Wait, there’s more,’ Regulus cut in, turning the parchment until he found one with what Emma recognised as his flowing script. He looked at her apprehensively as he handed her the parchment. ‘I just…Well, I never found a moment I could talk to you about it.’

Dear Pollux Regulus Black,

I thank you for all of the information you have gathered on my behalf. I would now like to submit a formal petition, to both you, Pollux Regulus Black, and to my uncle, Cygnus Pollux Black, to request the hand of Emma Jane Potter in marriage...

The parchment went on, but the rest of the words refused to sink in. The sentence appeared as if in bold, masking the rest of the letter, the remaining paragraphs intelligible. She looked up, speechless. Regulus ran a hand nervously through his hair before taking the stack of parchment and placing it
underneath his telescope, so it wouldn’t blow away. *Ever the conscientious one*, said an affectionate flyaway thought in Emma’s brain.

‘Look,’ he started, and Emma could see his chest rising and falling rapidly under the blanket. ‘I know that you find these petitions horrendous, and outdated, and you said that with Wilkes there was no chance in hell that you would ever accept to be sold to his family for some kind of weird reverse dowry, but...I just figured that if it was inevitable, you would prefer to be promised to...well, me...and all we need is to be fiancééd, not even married, you can break it off as soon as we leave Hogwarts, if you want. I just thought...’

‘Regulus,’ Emma smiled, feeling all of her pent up anger dissolve with his act of kindness. ‘Breathe. I think it’s very sweet of you to think of this. It’s possibly the nicest thing anyone’s done for me, considering that Wizarding marriages are for life.’

She shuffled around under the blanket until she found herself on his lap, hugging him with as much tenderness as she could to convey her point. He opened his arms to make room for her, and soon she found herself in a warm cocoon, her face buried in the nook of his neck.

‘Your nose is cold,’ Regulus said before he could stop himself, and they both laughed.

Emma took her face out of its burrow long enough to kiss him, before snuggling back down. Regulus’s arms closed around her back, and she felt him rest his cheek against her hair a moment later. They stayed like that for a while before Regulus pulled away again.

‘What is it?’ Emma asked, before remembering what they had been fighting about. Her brow creased into a frown. ‘I’m sorry I told Barty about the Captaincy before you. I’m sorry I didn’t even pick you, but I figured that you already had a lot going on.’

‘It’s not that,’ Regulus replied, his eyes growing hooded as he thought about his next sentence. ‘I...That wasn’t all, about the subject.’

Emma felt his heart beat start to pound again through the fabric of their clothes, and he licked his lips nervously before starting to talk, pulling away even more so they could properly look at each other.

‘Do you remember the way we met?’ Regulus asked eventually.

‘Fluffy,’ Emma smiled, remembering that Regulus had found her large black cat all those years ago.

‘Well, I... I’ve fancied you ever since then. Before then, actually. Ever since I saw you and your family laughing on the platform. It was so different from anything I had seen before, from my own family, and you looked so happy and carefree, and I just thought to myself, “that’s what I want”. I guess I was like Sirius that way, wanting a family different from my own.’

He paused.

‘But my family’s not like that anymore, Regulus,’ Emma said gently. ‘I don’t have what you’re looking for.’ She gave a humourless laugh. ‘Our lives are less than carefree, right now.’

‘Wait for me to finish,’ he admonished, but his smile was back in place. ‘I realise that now, of course. But that feeling never faded. You were the first person to see me as Regulus, and not as a Black, not as Sirius’s brother. Of course, there was Rabastan, and Lucinda and even Alecto, later on, but none of them needed each other like you and me. We seemed to...bring the best out in each other. I think we still do.

‘Anyway, by this time we were best friends, and all I could think was that I was falling more and
more in love with you, but I made sure no one noticed. After all, you never showed any kind of interest, and I was scared that if I did tell you, then I would mess it all up and I would lose you forever. At this point, I think Rabastan noticed, but by fifth year I had mastered Occlumency with Bella and decided that it was best for me to try to get over my feelings. As you well know, that didn’t turn out as planned. You can imagine my horror when you told me you wanted to forget that night in sixth year on the Quidditch pitch. The best night of my life, and you just wanted to ignore it?

‘I suppose what I’m trying to say is, that even though we’ve only been dating a few months, I’ve loved you for almost half of my life. I have a confession to make: I took Fluffy so that we could meet. Back then, I thought I just wanted to get to know you, but now I think that even as an eleven-year-old I knew, somewhere deep in my bones, that the only person I have even loved…will ever love…in my entire life, is you.

‘And if we had our whole lives, maybe I would have waited a little longer, but we’re in the middle of a war that’s getting more and more confusing by the day. It’s getting harder to know what is the right and wrong thing to do, and there’s hardly anything you can hold onto without it slipping through your fingers. My father, your parents, showed me that.

‘So with that in mind,’ Regulus concluded, looking through the pockets of his robes. ‘I want to ask you properly - forget about the stupid marriage contract, forget about Wilkes and my family and the war - Emma Potter, will you marry me?’

Emma thought she might have forgotten to breathe during Regulus’s whole speech, her eyes trained on his stormy grey eyes the whole time. When he turned away, it was as though her brain restarted after a long period of inactivity. After a couple of seconds he found what he was looking for, but didn’t make a move, waiting for her reply. His eyes were trained on hers, for once betraying the entire turmoil within.

“I’ve just laid my soul bare to you,” they seemed to say. “Please don’t crush it now.”

‘We don’t have to get married now,’ he hastened to add, hand moving up to ruffle his hair once more. ‘Just, one day, I would like to…’

Emma caught his hand before it reached the top of his head, intertwining their fingers together. Her mouth twitched, knowing that she was happy, but not sure as to how to smile in this kind of surreal situation. No expression, no word seemed good enough.

‘Yes, I do want to marry you Regulus,’ she said simply, before realising that that might not be enough for him to believe her. ‘I would have wanted to marry you even without the Wilkes contract, you know. I love you. Though I might have figured it out a little late, I don’t think I could love anyone else after everything we’ve been through together.’

‘Wonderful,’ Regulus breathed, pressing his mouth to hers as though trying to convey his happiness through the contact. Emma deepened the kiss, but her boyfriend broke it quickly.

‘What?’ she asked, worried that something was wrong.

‘Nothing, I just almost forgot to do this,’ he said, taking her left hand in his and sliding a silver band on her fourth finger.

Emma felt the ring automatically tighten to accommodate her finger. It was simple enough: A silver band with an intricate oval woven on the top. Inside, two small diamonds framed an oval green emerald facing Emma. Suddenly, she felt the inexplicable urge to giggle.
'It’s my family’s ring, I hope you don’t mind,’ Regulus said quickly, misinterpreting her. ‘Bella and Cissy are girls, and Sirius was disowned, so I ended up with the antique Black ring.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ Emma assured him, and it was the truth. ‘I just laughed because, well…Slytherin to the end, aren’t we?’ She cocked her head to the side, giving him a grin.

In return, Regulus reached around her neck, gently pulling out the oval locket that she kept on her person at all times.

‘It goes with this, doesn’t it?’ he framed the question more as a statement, tracing the contours of silver serpent. ‘I didn’t realise it at first, but it’s a replica of Slytherin’s locket, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Emma admitted. A short pause went by, before she decided to show Regulus the insides. ‘I thought you might find it a bit cheesy, but after that speech, a little more cheesiness couldn’t hurt. Open it.’

‘Are you sure?’ Regulus asked, knowing how protective she was of the locket.

‘I wouldn’t say so if I wasn’t,’ Emma smiled.

‘Alright, then,’ he replied, fiddling the little catch.

Inside were two small moving pictures, one of James and one of Regulus and Emma together. He recognised the photo of James as one having been taken at the Interhouse ball in their fifth year. The Gryffindor was the most cheerful Regulus had seen him in years, and the picture seemed to have captured the boyish charm James Potter had before it evolved into the quiet confidence that he had adopted over the past year. As for the photo of himself, he had no idea when the picture had been taken, or how. They were obviously trying to pose, he was holding her by the waist as they both stared at the camera, but soon enough, Emma must have made some kind of joke, because the picture dissolved into both of them laughing and making fun of each other before reuniting.

‘Lucy took that one,’ Emma said, smiling when she saw Regulus’s reaction. ‘I don’t think we even knew she was there until she told us to say “Cheese”. I was teasing you about your love for Fluffy when you told me he had climbed into your bed at Hogwarts.’

She smiled fondly at the memory and Regulus couldn’t help but steal another kiss as he closed the locket with a snap.

‘I like them,’ he said decidedly. ‘It’s a memory of better times.’

‘And hopefully your ring is a sign of better times to come,’ Emma said, and they both contemplated the unfamiliar, but somehow natural addition to her left hand long into the night.
‘Hey, Emma!’

‘Rabastan!’ Emma said reproachfully, looking around. ‘What are you doing out after curfew?’

Rabastan grinned and slid the rest of the way out of a secret passage, dropping the last few feet. The portrait closed behind him, the friar chuckling and drinking from a newfound pot of wine. Rabastan threw him a wink before casually leaning against a sconce.

‘So, what’s got you so thoughtful that you walked straight past me?’ he asked, ignoring her question.

‘Oh…Nothing much,’ Emma replied sheepishly.

She hadn’t been paying attention to her rounds at all, Barty having been too ill to come. Left alone with her thoughts, she had ended up replaying what was one of the best Christmases of her life in her mind like the love-struck teenager that she was.

Unfortunately, Regulus had spent New Year’s with his extended family to tell them the news, warning Emma of the uncomfortable atmosphere that came with bringing an outsider - Lucius and Rodolphus being on a mission for the Dark Lord along with Rabastan. In the end, it had worked out well, since Lucinda Flooed over to Diagon Alley and the two witches spent three days gossiping about boys and eating the vast quantities of sweets Kreacher had made for Emma since hearing the news. Of course, they had nothing on those that Lucinda’s father could dig up, but the Rosiers had decided to spend their New Years putting their affairs in order.

Besides, if there was one person happier than Emma and Regulus, it was Kreacher, who bounced around Grimmauld Place with a large smile fixed on his face and a new fluffy towel for every day of the week. Emma grinned at the memory.

‘There you go again,’ Rabastan admonished. ‘See, you can’t even hold a decent conversation any more since Regulus asked you to marry him.’

That brought Emma up straight. She turned to Rabastan incredulously.

‘Lucinda said she wouldn’t tell!’

‘It wasn’t Lucinda who told me,’ Rabastan replied, enjoying the reaction he was getting. ‘But I’ll remember that for next time I see her. It was Regulus.’

‘Try again,’ Emma snorted, starting up again. Rabastan wasn’t going to leave any time soon and she may as well get her patrol over with as quickly as she could. ‘You must have spent the evening prodding him with a stick, and I know that…He…doesn’t want his followers to hang around doing nothing all the time.’

‘Who’s to say that Regulus didn’t tell me of his own free will?’ Rabastan asked teasingly, falling easily into step.

‘I don’t believe you,’ Emma replied, shaking her head, though she laughed at the way her friend was pretending to be a Prefect as they walked along the corridor belonging to the professors’ offices.

‘Well, believe it,’ Rabastan replied, making a big show of opening all of the broom closets he came across. After the third, he turned back to Emma with a grin that split his face in half. ‘If I’m honest, I
read his grandfather’s letters before he ‘fessed up. I think he was relieved, really. He was worried about what you would say. I’m glad you said yes, by the way,’ he added sincerely, looking her in the eyes. ‘If anyone deserves this, it’s Reg. Don’t go breaking his heart now.’

‘Who are you and what have you done with my crazy Rabastan?’ Emma asked. When Rabastan merely smiled, she found herself mimicking him. ‘I’m glad he’s got a friend like you to watch out for him, too. Merlin knows that his brother has been sorely lacking in that department.’

‘Hear, hear!’ Rabastan proclaimed loudly. ‘Now that that’s said and done, are you going to show me this Black family ring I’ve heard so much about? For research purposes, of course. I can’t have my future wife wearing a rock that costs less than yours. Bad for the family name, I hear.’

‘Rab!’ Emma swatted his arm. ‘You’re such a prat.’

‘Ah, alright, alright,’ Rabastan chuckled, warding off any future attacks. ‘Now, as to what I was doing looking for you, believe it or not, I did not come out of a sense of duty towards Reg. I’m not that much of a sap yet! I just heard -’

He was cut off abruptly as the next door handle he tried didn’t open. The two Slytherins stopped, looking at each other for several seconds in a silent standoff. Rabastan pointedly glanced at Emma’s Prefect badge.

‘Fine,’ she huffed, drawing out her wand. ‘Alohamora.’

Resigned to have to give detention to Sirius and his snog of the week, Emma widened her eyes in shock when the door swung open. Peering over her shoulder, Rabastan’s jaw dropped in shock.

‘Barty?’

***

At approximately nine thirty in the evening, Regulus Black approached Lily Evans in the library. He had spent half an hour debating the pros and cons of the move, but in the end, his curiosity and morbid sense of needing to know had got the better of him.

_Maybe there’s something that justifies all of this_, he thought to himself. _Maybe he had misheard the Dark Lord’s hints to having a greater power than any of them knew; that the new order would last an eternity. The problem was that Regulus specifically heard the Dark Lord say that he would reign as the Dark Lord for all of history. Not go down in history. Not make history. Reign for all of history._

Regulus had an inkling of what the Dark Lord’s power really was. Regulus had read all of the Dark Arts books in the Lestrange library. He had finished all of the Dark Arts books in the Black library at the tender age of thirteen, when he was scared that an unknown curse of his mother’s might get his brother killed.

_And yet you still seem to have ended up on her side_, a stray thought remarked the irony of the situation. His brother couldn’t stand to be within twenty feet of him, and yet his mother was beside herself with joy at the prospect of Emma finally joining their family. She congratulated Regulus as though Emma had been a prize that he had won at a duelling competition, and whilst Regulus agreed that Emma was indeed, the prize of a lifetime that had taken him half of his lifetime to win, he didn’t think that Emma would quite enjoy the allegory.

‘Hi,’ Lily Evans said, moving the stacks of books around the table to make room.
'Hi,’ Regulus replied, retrieving a Transfiguration paper that had been specifically half-finished in preparation of this moment.

Emma. That brought him back to the reason he was now sitting across from Lily Evans, a girl he had barely exchanged two words with on patrol. If only he could prove that Emma’s unwavering devotion to the cause had flaws, flaws that he himself wouldn’t have noticed was it not for the Dark Lord’s slip ups and his brother’s words.

Evans was a Mudblood, a Muggleborn, someone who statistically should be struggling in class due to her lack of wizardry upbringing and the fact that she couldn’t ask her family for help on a spell, much less go to the library in Diagon Alley to do any summer homework. The person that should have experienced a culture shock upon entering her first year, and therefore become more mentally unstable than a pure-blood as a result. After all, that was why Muggleborns weren’t really admitted as Unspeakables at the Ministry, wasn’t it?

Yet this same Evans trumped everyone in class, even Emma, who was naturally talented at Charms, even Sirius, who was naturally talented at Transfiguration, even Regulus, even though he had the best memory of anyone he knew. Of course, she spent a lot of time studying, but that shouldn’t shoot her to the top of every class.

And once Regulus had noticed the anomaly that was Evans, he started noticing others. Hestia, the Hufflepuff whose surname Regulus didn’t know, who was good enough at Potions and Ancient Runes that she went on to do them at N.E.W.T level. Helen Burke, the Ravenclaw he had ended up partnered with in Potions, who was rather witty and surprisingly level headed. And she was a Prefect to boot.

So when Emma dismissed Evans as being a witch adopted by Muggle parents, information she had received from the Dark Lord himself, Regulus found he was curious. Hestia could be discounted; her mother was a Squib, so technically she might be considered as a half-blood, since she knew about magic.

However, two Muggleborns such as Helen and Evans could not be taken lightly. He needed to know whether Helen was just a freak accident, or whether every statistic he had based his research and life around for the past six years was false. Whether he had really chosen the shameful route that Sirius said he had. Whether the Sorting Hat really should have sent him to Gryffindor all those years ago.

‘Is there something I can help you with?’ Evans asked politely, quill poised over her sheet of paper.

Regulus realised that he had been staring at her for too long.

‘I was merely curious,’ Regulus said. ‘Have you ever wished you had magical parents?’

Evans’s green eyes narrowed into slits. She wasted no time in capping her ink bottle and sprinkling sand over her parchment in order to hasten the drying process. *Touchy subject*, Regulus noted, filing the reaction away in his mind.

‘Forgive me if I said something wrong,’ he said quickly. ‘But I was suddenly struck with the realisation that your parents must know nothing of this war we find ourselves in.’

Under the table, he crossed his fingers. Going by Emma’s description of her brother’s relationship with the Muggleborn, he expected James to have shared his thoughts about Emma being against the Dark Lord. And since he was currently in a relationship with James’s twin, he expected Evans to jump to the conclusion that he must have similar views. After all, he had mostly stayed out of the pranks and hexes that the Muggleborns were subjugated to.
Evans visibly relaxed, a sheepish expression unfurling on her face. Regulus allowed himself to breathe freely again.

‘I’m sorry,’ the Gryffindor said, warmth seeping into her tone. ‘I guess maybe I’m a little prejudiced myself. My parents know nothing of the magical war - I think they might want to pull me out of school if I tell them too much. Why the sudden curiosity?’

Regulus was silent for a couple of seconds, wishing that he had Emma’s way with people. Though he had never admitted it, most people told him about their secrets simply because he had been there to listen in the beginning. Now, it was partly because he had acquired a reputation for taking secrets to the grave. Little did they know.

Just as he was about to ask bluntly if she was adopted, Evans’s eyes took on a faraway expression, one that he recognised immediately. He quickly shut his mouth, arranging his features into a neutral expression.

‘I guess it was just as well that my sister never got in to Hogwarts,’ she mused, surprising him with the revelation.

‘You have a sister?’ Regulus asked before he could stop himself. Had Emma ever mentioned one? he wondered, wracking his thoughts.

‘Yeah, Petunia,’ Evans gave a bitter smile. ‘We get along about as well as you and Sirius do. Ever since I found her letter asking if she could come to Hogwarts and made the mistake of asking her about it. She’s very proud, my sister. From that moment on, the magical community and everyone within it became nothing but freaks in her mind.’

‘What about your parents?’ Regulus probed.

‘They were thrilled, of course,’ Evans said, her frown smoothing itself out. ‘Every time I come back, they ask me all sorts of questions about spells and potions and the like. I think that might be why Petunia hates me so much - she was always the star of the family before my Hogwarts letter came. I couldn’t add up for the life of me, whereas Petunia had every plant and organism memorised. I should have guessed she would take Biology A-levels. Anyway, once the letter came, nothing Petunia could do could even come close to the wonders of magic.’

‘I imagine that it was hard for the both of you,’ Regulus said, knowing now the words that needed to be said. ‘With what you’ve told me, I’m surprised she even admits that you’re her sister.’

‘Oh, it’s not for lack of trying!’ Evans laughed, taking a piece of her long red hair between her fingers and examining it. Regulus noted that her eyelids were heavy, a sure sign that Evans was upset, but trying to hide it by looking down. ‘One day, my parents got a call from the hospital, saying that a girl that claimed to be their daughter was demanding to see copies of my birth certificate. My parents rushed to bring her home and showed her that I really was her sister and that there was no disowning me, much to her dismay. They got really angry, which I guess is a good thing, because now she ignores me. But it almost hurts even more, because at least she acknowledged me before. Sometimes I wish that I had never been a witch, but I know that I could never give all of this up.’

‘I’m sure something else would have come between you,’ Regulus replied bitterly. Evans looked up in surprise, offended at his remark. ‘Just look at Sirius and me - just because he was Sorted into Gryffindor. Look at James and Emma, they’re getting along now, but while their father was still alive there was a huge gap between the two. And they’re twins that actually love each other. What chance do we have?’
Though any Slytherin might have been shocked to hear Regulus admit all of this so freely, he knew that if he stated the bare facts, then Evans would feel sorry for him - something he hated - but all suspicion would be cleared - something he deemed more valuable in the end. Who knew? Maybe it would get around to James, and Emma’s brother would ignore Sirius when he inevitably told him the truth about his younger brother’s dark tendencies.

*Who am I kidding?* he asked himself. *Of course he already knows.* He was surprised that Evans didn’t, actually, but he could imagine Sirius asking James to keep it to himself out of disgust.

Though Sirius refused to admit they were related, if it got out that Regulus was a Death Eater then suspicion would fall on Sirius, even if he was a Gryffindor. He still remembered how the Slytherins had initially viewed Emma - a spy, a traitor, destined to gather information from within. Well, the Gryffindors were a lot more hot-headed and less loyal to their own. Sirius wouldn’t risk the chance of not getting into his precious Order of the Phoenix.

Not for Regulus.

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‘That little,’ Sirius growled, his rage making the rest of his sentence end with an incoherent splutter.

James was forcibly restraining him, reminding him that although he was taller than his best friend, he did not play Quidditch, and did not have arm muscles that could throw a Quaffle across half of the pitch. He struggled a little more, before giving up, leaving a snarl upon his face to show his displeasure.

Next to him, Remus was shushing them absently as he checked the bookshelves for DADA books that he hadn’t already read. Sirius snorted, as if Moony hadn’t read everything that wasn’t in the Restricted Section by now. He told him as much.

‘I’m surprised you would have even noticed, Padfoot,’ Remus replied calmly, sliding a couple of books out of the shelf. ‘I would have thought you were too caught up in plotting against your brother. Severus boring you?’

‘Moony,’ James hissed, saving Sirius the reply that he didn’t have. ‘You’re blowing our cover! Quick, put one of them back!’

Remus gave a heartfelt sigh, but did as he was told. ‘Besides, Padfoot, your theory makes no sense! If your brother really was a Death Eater, then he wouldn’t have even spoken to Lily, let alone have a nice conversation with her?’

‘I’m telling you Moony, I saw it! He had the Dark Mark, in all of its skullery glory!’

‘Come on, Pads, we all know you’re prone to exaggeration,’ Remus rolled his eyes, placing the remaining book back on the shelf. ‘Let’s go, before we cause a scene and I get banned from the library, yet again.’

‘Prongs?’ Sirius turned hopeful eyes to the black haired boy still peeking through the bookcase.

James shushed him, concentrated on listening to Lily’s admission. He felt slightly hurt. He had known, of course, that Lily and Petunia were not the best of friends. The way he met her boyfriend Vernon Dursley could attest to that. But he had been on his best behaviour that visit, even if he did tease him a little, and he had tried so very hard not to push the matter. Yet here she was, blabbing her
heart out to a practical stranger.

Yes, he should be happy that his sister’s boyfriend was getting along with his girlfriend. Yes, he knew firsthand how good Regulus was at weaselling secrets out of people - he remembered the story of the Bloody Baron back in first year. And still, he couldn’t help his expression sour as the conversation went on.

‘Yeah, let’s go,’ he said eventually, tearing his eyes away from the scene.

‘Is no one, no one at all, bothered by the fact that my little brother is a fucking Death Eater?’ Sirius asked in the hallway, his voice rising to a squeak that would have rivalled Peter’s Animagus. He turned back to James, his long-time ally on the subject of Slytherin behaviour. ‘Don’t you find it the least bit suspicious that he was chatting up Lily, pumping her for information, no doubt?’

‘I don’t like it,’ James admitted. ‘But I remember you telling me that you saw Emma in a raid the day Dad died, and then blamed Emma for his death. And on top of that, Rabastan told me that she wasn’t one.’

‘So I may have been wrong about your sister,’ Sirius allowed. ‘But this time is different, *I saw it! And I bet you anything my dear old mum had something to do with it!’

‘Might I remind you that we’re still at Hogwarts?’ Remus pointed out mildly. ‘What would Voldemort want with a couple of kids?’

‘I heard that Mulciber got caught over the holidays. He was sentenced to Azkaban, and he’s our age,’ James said quietly.

Even Sirius fell silent as they contemplated just how far Voldemort’s reach seemed to grasp these days. It was a terrifying thought – that he had managed to sink his claws into somebody at Hogwarts.

Just then, Regulus exited the library, his face as impassive as ever. Three sets of eyes tracked his footsteps, but he gave no sign that he noticed them. *Typical, Sirius thought angrily.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. His arm shot out on instinct, grabbing his brother’s left arm roughly. Immediately, Regulus wrenched it back, rubbing the inside of his sleeve.

‘What’s your problem?’ he asked heatedly, but Sirius wasn’t paying attention.

‘Ha!’ Sirius turned back to his friends. ‘See? This is proof.’

‘Proof of what, you idiot?’ Regulus demanded angrily. ‘My wand holster is there; excuse me if I don’t want some Gryffindor git forcing it to send sparks into my arm!’

And as if the universe was out to prove Sirius wrong, Regulus withdrew his wand from its sheath on his left forearm, making a big show of examining it for damage.

‘Oh relax, *brother*, it would take more than that to set off your wand,’ Sirius rolled his eyes at his brother’s dramatics.

Regulus set his jaw and clasped his wand in his hand, but just as he did so, Lily walked out into the hallway, the swinging of the library door alerting the group to her presence. With a scowl, the Slytherin slotted his wand back into his sleeve, shooting his brother one last dark look before stalking out of the corridor.

‘What’s going on here?’ Lily asked lightly, as though she hadn’t just been consorting with the
enemy. She slipped her wrist through James’s arm, looking at them in turn.

James met Remus’s eyes over her head in a silent agreement. True or not, it was best to keep Sirius’s accusations to themselves for the moment, especially since they didn’t have the best track record involving Lily and Slytherins. Another thing to blame Snivellus for, James thought, wishing he had taken the slimy git’s trousers off back in fifth year.

‘Sirius thinks Regulus is flirting with you, Lils,’ Remus managed to lie seamlessly through his teeth.

He’s gotten better since the ”my mum’s sick” in first year, James thought, although he could have picked a better topic.

‘Isn’t he going out with your sister, James?’ Lily asked with a frown, ignoring Sirius’s glare in Remus’s direction.

‘Unfortunately,’ James replied from habit.

Much to Sirius’s dismay, he preferred seeing Emma with Regulus, rather than Wilkes, or Lestrange. In fact, he was pleased that it was Regulus in a way, since he seemed to care about what James thought of him. On top of that, whether it showed or not, Sirius did still seem to hold an influence over him, though what kind of influence James wasn’t sure.

‘Actually,’ a girl wearing a Hufflepuff tie said from behind them. ‘I heard that they’re getting married. So technically, they’re engaged.’

James’s jaw struck the ground. A snicker slipped out of Lily’s mouth, but Sirius seemed equally as appalled.

‘And who exactly are you?’ James demanded, seeing red.

‘Erm... Hestia Jones? We have Potions, Transfiguration and Charms together?’ the girl replied, unimpressed.

‘Sorry Hestia,’ Remus said quickly. ‘He’s just in shock. What on earth gave you the impression they were engaged? They only started going out a couple of months ago.’

‘Well,’ Hestia replied, her face lighting up as she ticked each of her fingers off. ‘I heard it from Amy Macmillan, who heard it from Helen Burke, who heard it from John Langley, who heard it from Benjy Fenwick, who heard it from Barty Crouch, who heard Lucinda Rosier and Rabastan Lestrange talking about it directly! So it must be true!’
Hello! Sorry for the delay, I've been swept up with real life needs. Hopefully the posting will become less erratic soon. Thanks for all of your comments, I'll reply during the week.

'You know, this really explains why he got so upset when the girls were all over him last year,' Emma said at last, absently twirling her wand around in her fingers.

Rabastan said nothing, head between his hands, elbows propped on his knees. Lucinda sat next to him on the sofa, an impressed look upon her face.

They were back in the Slytherin dungeon, having let Barty and Fenwick off with a few deducted points and an embarrassing scolding. Thoughtfully, they had let the two boys sort out their respective cover stories by themselves rather than march Barty down to the dungeons.

'I still can't believe it,' Rabastan shook his head, staring at the roaring fire. 'Our Barty? Fraternising with the enemy?'

Just then, the secret wall slid open to reveal Regulus enter, his expression warring between self-satisfied and angry. He immediately joined Emma in standing by the fire, rubbing his hands together before the head.

'Merlin, has no one ever thought of placing Heating Charms in the dungeon corridors? It's freezing out there. I swear I even saw an icicle in one corner,' he complained, uncharacteristically not noticing the atmosphere.

Rabastan immediately rounded on him.

'Did you know?' he demanded.

'Know what?' Regulus asked turning to warm his back and cocking an eyebrow at his friend.

'Know that Barty Crouch is dating bloody Benjamin Fenwick,' Rabastan exclaimed, unable to contain his outrage.

Lucinda hushed him, looking around, but everyone had retired to their dormitories. It was, after all, a Wednesday night - no one could be bothered to summon the energy to stay in the common room. Even Lucinda had fallen asleep on the sofa, as was her habit whenever a member of their tightly-knit group hadn't returned in the evening.

Quickly, Emma cast Severus's useful Muffliato spell to prevent further outbursts.

'Of course,' Regulus replied. 'We are quite good friends after all.'

'And you never thought to inform us of that fact?' Rabastan pressed.

'Why would I?' Regulus asked casually, turning as if he were on a spit in front of the fire. 'I thought
Lucinda knew, hence that you knew as well.'

Rabastan turned his accusatory eyes on Lucinda, who quickly threw her hands up in protest.

'Hey, don't look at me, I had no idea!' She exclaimed. She turned to question Regulus, but a frown stole its way across her face and she revised what she was going to say. 'Wait a minute. The love potion that Rabastan and Emma made… I was going to find a way to use it on Fenwick, and Barty was going to help me. You don't mean…'

She looked ill.

'Barty decided to take it upon himself to strike up a romance,' Regulus finished for her. 'A love potion, after all, is pretty unreliable. If we didn't administer it in regular doses, then he might realise something.'

'That's just wrong,' Lucinda said vehemently. 'I thought Barty was better than that. Taking advantage of someone's feelings like that? Pretending he liked boys just so that he could get closer to Fenwick?'

'That's where you're only half right, Lucy,' Regulus corrected. 'Barty does like boys; I thought you knew, because you invited one of his boyfriends to Rabastan's New Year party.'

'Mulciber Junior?' Emma asked, scrunching her face up in recollection. She vaguely remembered a fourth year playing chess with Barty that evening.

Lucinda had other priorities.

'One of his boyfriends?' she asked, astonished. She blinked her large blue eyes, as though she had never even considered the possibility.

'Well,' Regulus amended. 'He's been casually dating a few people. He thought that Mulciber Junior - as Emma so kindly called Eric - might need to take his mind off the raid.' He grimaced, lowering his voice respectfully. 'With reason, it turns out.'

There was a short silence, as the four of them contemplated Mulciber's fate. Emma couldn't honestly say that she was going to miss him, or that the world was worse off without him, but his family didn't deserve for him to die so young.

'So, let me get things straight,' Rabastan started up the conversation awkwardly. 'Barty likes guys, is going out with Fenwick in order to…what? Does he fancy him? Is there a chance that he's in love with him? Do we need to give Barty the love potion?'

Regulus started in alarm, realising that he hadn't explained properly. 'Look, this is really something Barty should explain…'

As if on cue, the wall slid open a second time and a tired Barty Crouch stumbled down the entrance corridor. He glanced up and heaved a sigh upon seeing the four of them.

'I suppose it was too much to hope that I wouldn't have to deal with this until morning;' he stated simply.

Without waiting for a response, he threw himself into the armchair nearest to the fire, rubbing his eyes wearily. Emma repositioned herself against the wall, observing Barty from another angle. A thousand questions rose to her lips, but she suppressed them. Barty would be able to explain better if he was left to his own devices.
'I'm guessing by now you realise that I'm gay,' he said simply, looking around to judge their reactions. Nobody moved. 'I met Benjy before I knew he was fishing around for the Death Eater stuff…I don't even know if he suspects me, I might have let a couple of things slip.

'Anyway, when we found out that he was probably part of Dumbledore's order, I decided I'd do a little fishing myself. Don't worry, I'm not falling for him or anything,' Barty hastened to add, when Rabastan opened his mouth. 'I know clearly where my loyalties lie. I would kill him in a heartbeat if he found out about any of us.'

He paused and sighed again, adding frankly. 'It's just nice to date someone who's intelligent, for a change. With any luck, I'll be able to convince him of my point of view, you can all meet him properly and Rabastan can wipe that scowl off of his face.

'Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed. I'm sure Regulus is capable enough of fielding any further questions.'

His piece said, Barty threw himself out of the chair as quickly as he arrived and true to his word, disappeared into the sixth year's dormitory.

Emma blinked several times, admiring the ruthlessness of the younger boy. She believed him when he said he'd kill Fenwick without a second thought, but not when he said that he hadn't developed feelings. If he hadn't, then he wouldn't have been so matter of fact. In fact, he would have revelled in the opportunity to be of use to the Dark Lord in a way the rest of them couldn't.

She turned to Regulus, but found that she had nothing to ask. Instead, she straightened up from her slouch against the wall.

'The off to bed too then,' she announced, leaving the three behind them.

Lucinda joined her shortly afterwards, leaving Regulus to convince Rabastan that Barty wasn't a security threat.

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'Honestly James, I'm pretty sure that all of this is just some kind of misunderstanding,' Lily sighed, as James paced back and forth in front of the fire, stomping loudly with every footfall.

The Gryffindor common room, as usual, was packed. At ten o'clock on a Wednesday night, most of the upperclassmen were up planning their weekends or just chilling out on the squishy armchairs. Nobody took Thursday classes seriously, anyway, and everyone needed a break halfway through the week.

Sirius had unceremoniously tipped the redhead lounging in front of the fire out of his chair, the other students around giving him dirty looks as he settled himself into the coveted seat. Remus politely asked if room could be made on the sofa, and Peter had joined them soon afterwards, along with Marlene, Lily's best friend. Lily herself was standing at the other end of the sofa, watching her boyfriend with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

'What's going on here?' Marlene asked, tossing her mane of ringlets over her shoulder as she sat down, careful not to lean on her hair.

James gave a huff, Sirius gave a groan, and Remus sighed at his friends antics.
Shaking her head for the umpteenth time that day, Lily took it upon herself to explain. 'James thinks his sister is engaged to Sirius's brother.' Acknowledging the squeak from the armchair with an eye roll, she carried on. 'Apparently, Hestia heard it from…some kind of gossip grapevine.'

'She heard it from Amy Macmillan, who heard it from Helen Burke, who heard it from John Langley, who heard it from Benjy Fenwick, who heard it from Barty Crouch! Get your facts right, woman,' Sirius admonished.

'As if anyone would remember such a string of useless information but you, Sirius,' Lily flared up. They had a habit of getting into arguments, mostly from Sirius's provocations. He had decided that although he could accept Prongs getting a girlfriend, he could not accept the fact that Lily Evans was calming down.

Remus intervened before they could properly get into the fight.

'That's gossip that's travelled across a lot of Houses,' he remarked. 'I don't really see Regulus Black broadcasting this kind of information for the world to hear.'

'That's because he knows I'd beat him up,' Sirius growled.

Everyone turned to Sirius in curiosity. The animosity between him and James's sister was legendary, their tempers having translated into duels more than once. If anything, they would have expected Sirius to be angry with Emma Potter, or even happy that it was one more link between him and Prongs.

'Bloody Death Eater,' he added.

Suddenly everything made sense.

'Now look here, Sirius,' Marlene said, half rising from her sitting position, her eyes flashing dangerously. 'Just because you don't like your brother, you don't have to pretend he's a Death Eater. That's a really serious accusation. Might I remind you of the damage it caused my father?'

James stopped his pacing - Marlene never talked much about her family. A blush grew on Remus's cheeks - he had never been more embarrassed of Sirius's crazy theories than then. Peter stayed as quiet as a mouse, fitting for Wormtail. Lily crossed the sofa to put a comforting hand on her friend's arm However, Sirius was not deterred.

'He is, and I can prove it.'

'Here we go again,' Remus closed his eyes. 'Sirius, drop it for tonight, will you?'

'I think we're getting off topic here,' James agreed. 'How are we going to find out if he's engaged to my sister? She's too young!'

'I think you'll find that your sister can decide for herself,' Lily replied drily, but inwardly she was thankful for the change in the mood.

James seemed more interested in finding out if the information was true or not, rather than angry at Regulus. She didn't know him very well, but he seemed like a pretty nice guy to her - quiet, polite and respectful of authority figure. Although, she mused, that last conversation I had with him made him seem… intense. As though he had witnessed too much for someone of his age.

She banished the thought. Of course he had witnessed too much, his father had died young. That
much, Sirius knew. Besides, there was a war going on outside. None of them were safe. From what Sirius had said, their mother was a fervent supporter of Voldemort. Maybe Regulus was worried that he would get pulled into becoming a Death Eater after graduation. She didn't know much about pureblood society, but from what James said, it seemed as though parents exerted a lot more influence on their offspring than those in the Muggle world.

As she mused upon the vague idea that she could know a potential Death Eater - though she thought it unlikely, since the word brought sadistic megalomaniacs rather than seventeen year old Hogwarts students to mind - Marlene's voice attracted her attention.

'Purebloods often have long engagements,' she was saying, gesticulating to make her point. 'A lot of the time, engagements are made when we're young, take Sirius and me, for example. A contract is made, and most children go along with it to make their families happy. Of course, there's also the advantage that you can almost be sure that your blood isn't too linked, otherwise you end up with... Well...'

'You can say it,' Sirius said grumpily. 'I know my parents were cousins. There's a certain pride in the fact that the Blacks are inbred. There's a mad one in every generation. Luckily for me, Bellatrix drew the short straw for mine.'

'You're related to Voldemort's right hand woman?' Lily exclaimed loudly. She felt her face redden as there were a few winces that went around. 'Sorry everyone… Muggleborn. We're unused to the thing about the name.'

There was a pause in the conversation as they waited for the surrounding conversation to start up again.

'But Emma doesn't have a marriage contract,' James said, frowning. 'Our parents didn't believe in all of that.'

'Aha, but see, you're both still at Hogwarts, James,' Marlene nodded knowledgeably. 'Your contracts are probably held with your closest relatives until you're both out of school. You're still technically children in the eyes of this kind of contract. If you find out who holds the contracts, you'll find out who had to approve the engagement, if there is one.' As an afterthought, she added. 'You might want to see if there's one for you too. Fresh meat, after all.'

This time it was James's turn to squawk. 'How am I supposed to know who that is?'

'Dorea Black,' Peter said suddenly, drawing all of the attention to himself.

'How in the name of Merlin's saggy buttocks,' Sirius said evenly, 'do you know that, Wormtail?'

'I, um...' Peter turned red, squirming in his seat, his eyes flitting from person to person. Lily watched him sympathetically; he had never enjoyed being put on the spot. 'I heard Wilkes and Mulciber talking about it before Christmas in Herbology,' he admitted.

'What?' James roared, throwing his body across the room to land on top of Marlene.

She wriggled free with a disgusted expression, but James had already turned to face Peter, even going to take a hand with both of his own. His face took on a pleading look.

'You have to tell me, Wormtail,' James said doubtfully, as though he didn't want to know the answer. 'Why in Merlin's name would they be talking about who my closest living relative is?'

'Because,' Wormtail replied unhappily, obviously fearing his friend's wrath. 'Wilkes applied for a
marriage contract. And it wasn't for you.'
In the end, due to his Head Boy status, Quidditch practice and the fact that the professors had doubled their homework load in view of the upcoming N.E.W.T.s, James hadn’t had a chance to talk to Emma, Regulus, or any of the Slytherins, come to that, for several weeks.

After their January mock exams were over, he turned his attention back to the matter at hand. He had tried to gather information during Potions, but of course, Sirius had exploded Snape’s perfectly prepared potion just as he stood up. Not that James was complaining. The Hiccoughing Solution, when ingested in large quantities, turned out to relax your mouth muscles. Snivellus had drooled incoherently for several minutes before Slughorn remembered the antidote he had prepared just in case.

Needless to say, James had held in his laughter until the end of class - for Lily’s sake - making up for it by wheezing himself to tears with Wormtail in a nearby secret corridor moments after.

Now though, James’s mouth was set into a serious expression, staring over at the Slytherin table as though he could read Wilkes’ mind. He had momentarily put Regulus’s possible transgression to the side, preferring to deal with one crisis at a time. He was so busy with his staring, in fact, that he almost missed Dumbledore’s announcement, although the headmaster had placed a Sonorus Charm upon his throat.

‘You may all be wondering,’ Dumbledore stated evenly, ‘where our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher is.’

It was a testament to how distracted they had all been that the rest of the Marauders hadn’t noticed that fact either. Sirius and Peter temporarily halted their chicken legs duel, and Remus looked over his rather large book in concern. James turned to scan the head table, but not before he caught the Slytherin seventh years looking excitedly at each other.

‘Odd, he thought. I wonder if she’s got a special lesson planned?’

James had enjoyed every extra Defence lesson, even if it did eat up their timetable. He knew that Moony and Padfoot agreed with him, and probably most other Gryffindors as well. Finally, they were learning something that would be useful in the real world. Just the previous week, he had managed to produce a fully corporeal Patronus. It had turned out to be…no surprise, a stag. Still, it was an accomplishment: Padfoot had been teasing him mercilessly about James’s increasing frustration all year. Now, out of the seventh year Gryffindors, only Wormtail still couldn’t produce it, although he had recently progressed to a large white sphere.

‘It is with great regret that I must inform you that Ms Bones has left the faculty staff. As of this week, she is starting up on the committee of the Wizengamot charged with sentencing Death Eaters. A worthwhile endeavour, so let us all wish her well.’

There was a rumble throughout the Great Hall. Dumbledore hadn’t mentioned anything about a replacement teacher, and there were still four months to go in the school year, not to mention the exams in June. For once, Lily and Sirius put their heads together to try to come up with an explanation to the unexpected announcement, but something inside James urged him to look back at
the Slytherin table, creasing his eyebrows into a frown.

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Emma let the smirk on her face grow as Dumbledore made the announcement. When Rabastan hadn’t heard back from his father, they had supposed that the plan had failed, that Amelia Bones in all of her Hufflepuff loyalty had decided that it was more important to form the young in what was to come. It turned out that even a Hufflepuff found it hard to resist the call for vengeance.

She looked around at her fellow Slytherins to see her excitement mirrored on their faces. Lucinda couldn’t care less, she wasn’t doing well in the extra Defence lessons, but she had managed to produce a Patronus, something the rest of them were still grasping at. Upon reflection, Emma thought that the squirrel suited her friend, even if it was a bit of a Hufflepuff Patronus.

Regulus was his usual aloof self, though his eyes glinted with unmasked triumph - Hogwarts was safe again. Rabastan made her nearly laugh out loud with his ear splitting grin. Glancing down the table, Emma noticed Wilkes and Snape exchanging relieved looks, though the loss of their friend prevented them from being any more excited.

‘Well done Rab,’ Alecto mouthed from across the table, a triumphant smirk on her face.

As if on cue, they glanced over to the other tables. The Ravenclaws looked devastated, but the other two seemed to just be gossiping about the news. Emma met James’s eyes at the other end of the hall and hastily dropped her gaze to her shepherd’s pie. There was a rumour going around that she was engaged now, though there were conflicting reports on whether it was Regulus or Wilkes.

She rolled her eyes. It was a pretty obvious choice to her, but maybe that didn’t matter to a lot of purebloods. After all, it was the head of the family that had the final say. Outdated customs, she scoffed inwardly.

However, her hand went to the ring around her neck, lying side by side with the locket. The weight usually reassured her, but recently it had felt as though it were an anchor. How could she get herself out of the service of the Dark Lord? Did she even want to leave, despite the atrocities committed by many of their members? And if so, what would happen to Regulus, to Rabastan, hell even to Alecto? She didn’t want to see them die anymore than she did James.

As for her brother, she had been avoiding him as much as possible since he revealed that he would be a part of the Order of the Phoenix. He would sense that something was wrong, and although she trusted her brother, who knew what his friends would decide to do about it?

A hand brushed her elbow reassuringly, jolting her from her thoughts. She gave Regulus a quick smile and caught his fingers with her own. He leaned forwards, his breath ruffling her hair.

‘That’s Fenwick and Bones taken care of,’ he whispered. ‘We might survive the year after all.’

‘Only N.E.W.Ts, Prefect duties, Quidditch and keeping him happy to go,’ she replied, and although her tone was supposed to be sarcastic, it ended up sounding a little too real.

He withdrew to study her face, his grey eyes probing. Although his perceptiveness was one of the reasons Emma loved her boyfriend, she still hadn’t decided whether to talk to him about her fears. She was becoming more and more certain that the Dark lord wasn’t all they thought he was, but with Regulus’s recent fervour, she was worried that it would break him.
After all, what would everything he had sacrificed have been for if so?

 Suddenly feeling as though the Great Hall was claustrophobic, Emma stood up; making a garbled excuse about needing to do some homework before that night’s Quidditch practice and forcing her steps into an unhurried walk on her way to the exit.

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Predictably, she had made a beeline for the Quidditch pitch. By now, she was able to summon her broom from the dungeons with ease, so much so that she stashed it in an alcove nearer to the exit in order to facilitate its journey outside. She still wasn’t quite sure how it always found an open window to zoom through.

Her hands closed over the worn wood lovingly, instinctively fitting themselves into the sockets that had been created over time. It wouldn’t look strange for her to be on the pitch - the Slytherins had booked the pitch for the evening. Sure enough, within ten minutes, she saw the glimmer of lit wands making their way across the grounds.

Deciding to accompany them to the shed and bask in the glory of a job well done, she made her way towards the dots, drawing up short when she realised what was going on.

She thought that the light was from the *Lumos* spell, but it turned out to be a duel between the Slytherin and Gryffindor Quidditch teams - plus back up, from what it looked like. Hexes and curses were flying everywhere, rebounding off of random shield charms. So far, no one was on the ground, but Emma didn’t have time to assess the situation.

Although still several feet above the ground, she jumped off of her broom, executing a roll that Barty would be proud of and drawing her wand in one fluid motion. Knowing that she had one chance before the duellers saw her; she aimed carefully at Caradoc Dearborn, one of the Gryffindor Beaters and an excellent duellist.

’*Lolligo!*’ she shouted, slashing her wand in a triangle around his head.

A sense of satisfaction bubbled inside her as she saw small spikes appear on Dearborn’s face, growing out of his ears, forcing his mouth open and tearing apart his nose. He fell to the ground immediately, the spikes scratching a Gryffindor behind him on the arm.

Before Emma could expand upon her victory, she spotted Lucinda doubling over not far from her, her blond locks cascading to the floor. A surge of anger propelled her forwards, but Alecto was quicker to react. Her face set into a grimace, the redhead thrust her wand towards Sirius Black.

’*Cruc-*

’No!’ Emma cried, throwing herself on top of her former friend.

Alecto twisted to her feet, pushing Emma off her.

’What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ she snarled, settling into the half crouch that Bellatrix was so fond of. ’Did you not see what they did to Lucinda? Are you with them now?’ she jerked her head towards the Gryffindors.

’Of course not,’ Emma replied, her tone just as scathing. ’But an Unforgivable will just attract unwanted attention.’
‘Oh really,’ Alecto mocked. ‘Look at me, I’m Emma, and I know everything!’ Well guess what, Captain, maybe I care more about Lucinda than this farce of a school anyway.’

Before Emma could answer, Alecto relocated her target, who hadn’t noticed a thing, and cast the Crucius spell again. Sirius’s scream stopped the rest in their tracks.

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Sirius moaned, thrashing in his infirmary sheets. James looked on, ashen faced. Peter said nothing about the white hot grip Remus had on his shoulder, though it looked as though it was painful. This close to the full moon, the werewolf was several times stronger than usual.

Five other beds were filled, including Caradoc, whose entire head resembled a sea urchin. Though it was a spell commonly taught in the seventh year, the cure needed to be brewed fresh in order to work, so a spare student had been dispatched to Slughorn’s office.

Emma and her friends were sullenly grouped around Nott and Rosier’s beds, James noticed. He felt a twinge of regret. Lily had always said that their hotheadedness would be paid for by innocent bystanders, and Rosier hadn’t even had time to draw her wand. In fact, if James was honest, she had tried to stop Lestrange from lunging at the Gryffindor Keeper, who had been goading Nott about his the Auror raid on his father’s property.

He turned back to Sirius, who was the palest that James had ever seen him, a slight trail of blood running from either side of his mouth where he had bitten his tongue. One half-closed eye swivelled towards James.

‘I’ve ‘ad worse,’ Sirius managed to get out, slurring as though drunk.

_The worst part about that sentence, thought James, is that it’s most probably true._

He clenched his fists, glad for the first time that Moony had taken his wand away from him as Alecto Carrow ran away from the fight. Padfoot needed him and the other Marauders to remind him that he would be alright. Still, James’s blood boiled at the thought of the redhead who had apparently fled Hogwarts.

The staff was supposedly searching the grounds, and Prefects had been ordered to keep everyone not involved in the entanglement inside the common rooms, but James knew better. Carrow had had plenty of time to get to the apparition wards, especially with the help of the Slytherins. Of course, they denied all knowledge, but Emma and Regulus had pretended that everyone was accounted for. It wasn’t until Hagrid - who had been ordered to recheck the head count - noticed there was someone missing that the Prefects admitted that the redhead was missing. And no one believed their story that she had snuck off whilst the injured were being levitated onto stretchers.

James spared another glare in the Slytherins’ direction and was surprised with the sight of Emma making her way directly towards him.

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‘Go now,’ Regulus said, not even turning back as he surveyed the flurry of robes and stretchers in the grounds.
Emma said nothing, but gave Alecto a level look. Rabastan was kneeling over Lucinda close to the stretchers and the rest of the Quidditch team crowded around them, looking worried, but in reality also screening the two girls from view.

For the first time in two years, Alecto looked genuinely scared, her green eyes round and her cheeks childishly chubby. Her usual tight knot had come undone, breaking the severe appearance she had taken to in recent months. She looked to Emma for reassurance, though Emma had all but ignored her since the start of the year.

The dark haired girl couldn’t help but soften her gaze. Despite all of her flaws, Alecto was still just a hot headed seventeen year old who had reacted upon seeing a hurt friend. Her bravado disappeared; she would now have to face the consequences of her actions: Azkaban. Emma could relate to that, she was walking on a tightrope herself, although she was under no illusion that she deserved it.

‘You’ll be safe with Bellatrix,’ Emma said, certain that Voldemort’s right hand woman would take her protégée under her wing. *She’ll probably be overjoyed when she hears the news, she thought wryly.

Still, Alecto hesitated. After ten seconds had passed, Emma firmly grasped the redhead’s shoulders and gave her a push in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

‘You know what will happen if you stay,’ she warned.

Somehow, that was the right thing to say. The fear of the Dementor’s kiss propelled Alecto across the grounds with a speed Emma thought her unable to match. She watched the witch go; only turning when all that remained was a speck in the distance.

By that time, Lucinda had been taken care of - simply given a hair regrowth potion and told to take it in sips at intervals of thirty seconds until it was back to its usual length. Knowing Lucinda, she would probably let it grow even longer – regrowth potion made hair as lustrous as a baby’s, and there would be no split ends to contend with for a while.

However, they were all ordered to march to the Hospital Wing until the imposed curfew was over - i.e. as soon as Alecto had been found or proven to have left the grounds. Emma mulled over their choice. There had been no question about it - Slytherin protected their own - but a frown creased her forehead nonetheless.

Although Emma was grateful that the redhead had protected Lucinda from further harm than a Stunning spell and losing her hair, Sirius didn’t deserve what she had done to him. On top of that, Alecto had drawn the school’s attention to what should have been a silly student’s duel over who got the Quidditch team. Now, they would be under closer surveillance than ever. Emma was only thankful that it had happened after Bones had left…barely.

Sighing, she turned her mind to matters that she could control, i.e. getting her team’s cover straight. That was it, she still considered the Quidditch team hers, hers to control, but hers to protect, keep safe, and in return they still called her their "Captain" - even Barty.

However, at the moment she was furious. She had thought them better than the Gryffindors, or at the least cleverer. She eyed them as best as she was able on the moving staircase, giving especially hostile glares to Regulus, Rabastan and Barty.

‘Alright, what happened here?’ she asked the rest of them in a barely controlled whisper.

‘It was their ruddy Keeper,’ Barty said immediately, scrunching up his nose in distaste. ‘He was
having a go at Anthony, saying that his dad was a Death Eater and everyone knew it.’

‘Isn’t his dad a Death Eater, though?’ Emma questioned.

‘Well, yeah, but that’s not the point,’ Barty replied. ‘Anthony doesn’t know, he just thinks his dad deals in Dark Art artefacts. So of course, he wasn’t surprised that there was a raid on his house, but the thing is, that raid was supposed to be secret. My…father…decided to keep the Aurors on a need-to-know basis in case of spies.’

‘Well,’ Rabastan interjected with a smug smirk, ‘he wouldn’t be wrong there.’

‘Shut up,’ Emma instructed him, and the Beater’s face fell.

Emma wasn’t looking at him though; she was watching Cassandra’s crumpled face. The younger girl had steadied herself on the banister, which from the looks of it was the only thing still holding her up. Emma could only be glad that Anthony Nott had been taken out by a Stunning spell that had unfortunately broken his arm in three places as he fell. The fourth year was currently occupying one of the stretchers floating at the front of their odd procession to the Wing, having been given a sleeping potion to take the edge off the pain.

‘You don’t have to stay here for this, Cassie,’ Emma said gently. The Professors had instructed Prefects to take care of the younger students. ‘You’re a Prefect, you’re within your rights to go back to the dorms. At the moment, there are only two of them down there. Plus, I know it was these idiots that did the most damage.’

Cassandra’s blue eyes flitted from one face to another. Her family was one of the few in Slytherin that had no relation to the Dark Arts whatsoever. In fact, half of them had been in Ravenclaw, and her mother was a scholar in the Healing field, developing some anti-curse or other.

‘No…It’s fine,’ she replied eventually, though her voice was wispy. ‘I’m sure they can handle it. Besides, Anthony’s my friend; I want to be here when he wakes up. And in any case, it’s not as though we haven’t all guessed where you go when there are no seventh years in the dorms apart from Lucinda. We’re not stupid, you know.’

Emma felt a surge of affection for her fellow Chaser. In a way, it was true. Although they tried to keep their activity limited to those within the Dark Lord’s organisation, rumours spread. Emma guessed that it was thanks to Cassandra and those like her that the younger years didn’t spread the word to other houses.

‘It was Sirius who cast the first spell, anyway,’ Regulus interjected, obviously willing to get it all over with. He glared over towards his brother’s bed as they walked through the entrance. ‘Rabastan and I defended Nott and he was trying - unsuccessfully, I might add - to reveal my Dark Mark. Luckily, I found some robes charmed to withstand the *Accio* charm, as well as chemical burns and the like that could crop up in Potions or Herbology class.’

Rabastan nodded, but Cassandra interjected. ‘That’s true, but Rabastan did try to punch the other guy before that.’ She turned to Emma. ‘That’s how Lucinda got hit by the hair removal spell, it was meant for Rabastan, but she was in the way.’

‘Thanks Cassie,’ Emma replied, knowing that the most impartial testimony would have come from her. ‘The rest of you, I’m not happy about this, but at least the duel was innocent enough before Alecto got in the way. I know what I’m about to say sounds atrocious, but I need you to spread the word that Alecto was kind of a loner, that she withdrew into herself more and more this year. Everyone is shocked that she used an Unforgivable, especially you Barty,’ she eyed the youngest
Prefect. ‘Give them your best sob story about thinking that your father had made everything a safer place or something.’

‘Understood, Captain,’ Barty replied, standing tall.

Although he still looked up to Regulus the most, he held Emma in a special regard as well. Most of that was because any girlfriend of Regulus’s would have to be worthy of the title, but his respect was partly born out of many a Quidditch strategy discussed with him in private.

Emma didn’t insult his intelligence by giving him any further instruction, much as she didn’t override him during their Quidditch practices. Barty was cleverer by far than the rest of them, and would outsmart them all given the chance - and the experience. Instead, she nodded, and turned, squaring her shoulders.

‘Right,’ she breathed inaudibly, mustering the courage to walk the few feet over to the huddle of Gryffindor seventh years on the other side of the room.

Not surprisingly, she was there before she had even thought about what she would say. She had waited until Madam Pomfrey was done with Sirius before coming over, and now that she was here, she wasn’t sure it was a good idea after all.

Peter was the one to notice her first, his beady eyes taking everything in. Unsurprisingly, he stumbled forwards. ‘Leave him alone. Haven’t you snakes done enough already.’

Emma resisted the urge to intimidate the little worm into standing down - he wouldn’t have had half the courage had Remus not been there, glaring alongside him - and instead made her way to James’s side of Sirius’s bed. As she had expected, Sirius was awake and mostly conscious, though weak.

Emma herself had experienced the Torture curse exactly once in her life; when the Dark Lord had tested her resistance to interrogation. It was not one she would ever want to repeat, and luckily, the Dark Lord had been satisfied with her reaction. Had it been Bellatrix, she was sure that it would have been much worse.

Taking a deep breath, she crouched to Sirius’s level. ‘I’m sorry for what she did to you. I tried to stop it.’

A flash of blond plaits crossed her vision, the memory fading before she grasped it. It was enough though. Despite her apprehension about the Dark Lord’s service, she had secretly vowed to herself to never use that particular Unforgivable on anyone, nor let anyone else do if it were in her power to stop it.

Sirius’s left eye swivelled to meet hers, the right still spasming from the frayed nerves, but it was enough for Emma to know that they had reached an understanding. Feeling a weight lift off her chest, Emma straightened and made to walk back to the Slytherin side of the room.

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‘Wait,’ James said, catching her by the arm and leading her to a semi-private corner of the room, near the Potions cabinets.

Now was the time to ask her about Regulus, ask her about Wilkes, ask her about everything in her life that he didn’t understand. But the questions died on his lips as he noticed the grey tinge to her face, the haunted look in her eyes that had slipped out during the Christmas holidays.
Instead, he simply wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, ignoring the muffled protests as he buried his dirt covered face in her hair. Timidly, Emma returned the hug and James tried with every fibre of his being to convey his warmth to her body, to remind her that the war would end soon and that she would recover from Alecto’s deceit.

Over his sister’s head, he caught a glimpse of the broken gaggle of Slytherins he saw over Emma’s shoulder, their eyes darting around as though afraid of who would be next. All thoughts of Emma having aided Alecto’s escape fled his mind. He resolved there and then that he would never mistrust his friends or family. It was the only thing separating him from despair.
Three weeks later, a familiar knot in Emma's stomach was roiling, panic simmering in her veins like acid. She forced herself to breathe steadily as she paced back and forth on the shore of the Black Lake, too hyper aware of everything. Regulus was lazily propped up against a nearby tree, leafing through his History of Magic notes. Nearby, Bluebell flames flickered inside a crystal goblet Regulus had transfigured from an oddly shaped stone.

Although Emma's scarf and hair were being whipped around by the wind, she didn't feel the cold. They were supposed to be going to Hogsmeade the next day, not for pleasure, but for the next initiation ceremony. Three Ravenclaws and two Slytherins were to be presented to Voldemort for approval, and Barty was finally going to get the Dark Mark he so craved.

Originally, the Slytherins had planned to go early, and then all meet up in the Three Broomsticks for a drink. Fifth years drinking with seventh years wasn’t too strange an occurrence, especially when it was crowded. On a nearby table one of the Ravenclaws would mention that they were going to see the Shrieking Shack, at which point the Slytherins would wait five minutes, and then loudly tell each other that it sounded like a good idea. Meeting them on the far side of the Shack would be Albert Runcorn, as Rodolphus's face was plastered all over Hogsmeade via Ministry wanted posters.

One small flaw in this plan was that the whole of the Quidditch team were serving detention along with the Gryffindors. On top of that, they had their Hogsmeade privileges revoked until the Easter holidays. Barty would not be getting his Mark if he didn't turn up and besides, everyone knew the consequences of standing up the Dark Lord. So Emma had to find a way to somehow get them out of their two o'clock detention and into Hogsmeade half an hour later.

Rabastan was on his best behaviour and catching up on all of his assignments in the library, something that hadn't required much prodding. His paranoia about being found out, far from being alleviated with Bones's departure, had returned twofold after the problems with Alecto. He had become unusually serious, the roguish twinkle gone from his eye. Emma didn't want to put more pressure on him than necessary, so he hadn't been included in the brainstorming.

Barty was always off digging up more information on future members of the Order of the Phoenix - Fenwick apparently thought the son of the person who hated Voldemort above and beyond all else would be trustworthy.

Alecto was now gone, disappeared most probably for several months to come. The Dark Lord would be keeping her on a tight leash, training her to be as effective a killer as the Lestranges before releasing her into the wild. By no means did Emma forgive her, or even like her anymore - the redhead was too scary for that - but she found that she missed the stoic girl's absence in the dorm. Sometimes it had seemed like the two of them were the only sane people in the room when Lucinda, Helen and Sophie got together to discuss fashion.

Angrily redoubling her pace, Emma brushed her scarf out of her face for the umpteenth time, snagging her hair with her nails as she did so.
'Ouch,' she exclaimed, rubbing her scalp, but the pain only served to make her more incensed.

When her pacing sent mud flying over in Regulus's direction, he rolled out of the way with reflexes honed by Quidditch. Glancing up over his pages, whatever he saw on her face made him decide to stop revising.

'Give it a break, Emma,' he said soothingly, standing up as he put his books away.

'I won't “give it a break”, Reg!' Emma cried frustrationally. 'Think, think! There's an obvious solution on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't remember it.'

His eyes narrowed a little, and Emma realised that she had accidentally called him by his nickname - something to be tolerated, but avoided. It must have seemed as though she was accusing him of something.

'Sorry,' she relented, ceasing all movement. The world around her spun slightly from the abrupt halt, her legs itching to continue their march. 'It's just frustrating. The others just seem to think…that we can do anything! Apart from Rabastan, they're not even bothered about it.'

'Isn't that what we wanted though? Regulus asked quietly, his eyes holding hers. 'Gain the allegiance of the Gurgs, convert or remove top Muggleborns.' His voice rose up in pitch, imitating their triumph sarcastically. 'The youngest Death Eaters in the world! Here to make a difference.'

His eyes turned towards the lake, mirroring the flat, grey clouds reflected on the surface.

Just like that, Emma's pent up energy drained away. Her shoulders sagged in defeat as she realised that Regulus was right. Closing the distance between them, she ran a hand down his arm. As he turned, she pulled him in for a hug, relishing the warm there-ness of his presence.

She lived in her mind, in their grand delusions of a better world for wizards and Muggleborns alike. Somehow, she had lost all hope of that vision coming true, but now she realised that she had built up the despair as well. Right there, right then, they were at Hogwarts, the safest place in the wizarding world. It was pointless to skip ahead just yet, not with the N.E.W.Ts ahead of them. Even the Dark Lord knew that they couldn't be as active as a proper Death Eater.

Yet as the thought crossed her mind, she banished it. Voldemort may be fair, but he did not tolerate failure. If they were marked, then they should be prepared to bear the weight of the responsibility.

'I know it's rich, coming from me,' Regulus murmured. 'But forget about it for now. I trust that you'll find a way with Slughorn for the detention, you always do. Let me worry about getting there.'

Emma shifted her head, but Regulus read her thoughts, meeting her halfway as their lips crashed together. The lies that were so well hidden in his words came to life as he pulled her closer, as if he knew there were only so many more times he could do so.

When they broke apart, Emma found herself reaching for his face, making sure that the Regulus she knew and loved was still there somewhere. He had still been somewhat distant since the start of the New Year, and although she knew him to be studious, he had been checking books out of the library nearly nonstop.

What are you hiding behind those mirror eyes? She wanted to ask. What makes you so afraid now, when you've faced down a team of Aurors without a blink?

The questions stayed in her throat. He was looking at her as though trying to memorise her features, his eyes roaming her face with a desperation that she had only associated with his relationship with
Sirius before.

'Regulus?' she asked. 'Are you alright?'

He looked down instead of answering, sliding his fingers down the gold chain around her neck until he reached the ring he had given her for Christmas, pressing it to her chest with his thumb and two forefingers.

'Promise me you won't take this off,' he said instead, his voice husky. 'No matter what happens, you'll keep it, won't you?'

'Yes, yes of course,' Emma replied immediately, enclosing his hand with her own. 'How could I not?'

Her arm was still entangled with his, the movement pulling them even closer. Emma could feel her heart beating rapidly; years of knowing Regulus and months of dating him hadn't stopped the lurching in her chest whenever they came close.

'I just need to know...' Regulus looked as though he regretted having started the conversation at all, but the slight flush in his cheeks told Emma it was important. 'If something happens, and you don't understand why… I need you to know that I'll always love you. That's something that will never change.'

'I do know,' Emma replied, her mind ignoring the details she couldn't understand. 'He's probably just getting hit by the stress, she thought. 'I love you too. It's not something that's conditional. It's just... there.'

And as though to prove her point, she threw herself against him once more, forcing him to lean back against the tree for support as they engaged in a different sort of conversation.

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'Someone looks like they've been having fun,' Rabastan remarked ironically, some of his natural cheek coming back as the two Slytherins slid into their seats that evening.

Emma blushed, but her face was flushed enough to hide the extra red. The heat of the castle seemed like a furnace compared to the chilly exterior and she unwound her scarf before settling down to eat.

'Nice work,' Lucinda remarked quietly to Emma, glancing deliberately to Regulus.

His hair could have been mistaken for James's, mussed up as it was, and his usual perfectly knotted tie was loosely hanging over a back to front jumper. Two years ago, he wouldn't have been caught dead looking like that, but now the seventh year Slytherins felt like family and most of the Great Hall had already left the table.

'Aww, I expected love bites,' Rabastan complained as Emma placed her scarf along the table.

Despite her flaming cheeks, Emma resolutely ignored Rabastan and managed to grab a plate of pasta before the food vanished to be replaced by desserts. Her fork was halfway to her mouth when she froze in place, her mouth hanging open.

'Emma? Hello? The notion can't be that foreign to you,' Rabastan continued. 'After all, you have been going out for what... four, five months now?' He sat back, amazed. 'Whoa. I thought it had been going on for a lot longer than that.'
He looked to Regulus for confirmation, but the Slytherin seeker was too busy readjusting his tie to listen. He looked back to Lucinda, who just shrugged, eating a slice of apple pie.

'Did you see that?' Emma asked excitedly, her eyes following the furtive movements of Peter Pettigrew entering the Great Hall and grabbing a dish of trifle before dashing back out.

Rabastan twisted around, but by then it was too late. 'See what?' he asked, slighted that no one had reacted to his latest joke.

'I did,' Lucinda said. 'But what does Pettigrew stealing trifle have to do with anything?'

'Everything,' Emma breathed, and excitedly told them her plan for the weekend.

***

'Professor!' Lucinda shouted down the corridor on Saturday morning.

She brushed her hair off her shoulder as she jogged down the corridor after Slughorn, her eyes bright with emotion. The Head of Slytherin paused, looking at her quizzically.

'Professor, I'm so glad I caught you!' Lucinda said breathlessly, hand fluttering to her heart.

Underneath the Invisibility Cloak, Emma wasn't sure whether it was feigned or not. The blonde's cheeks were also slightly pink from the exertion. Regulus glanced to his girlfriend, obviously mirroring her thoughts. Rabastan had wanted to come along, but he was getting too tall to fit under the cloak, so he had been made to watch for James and the rest of his band around the corridor.

'I just wanted to say thank you for saving my hair with your regrowth potion,' Lucinda went on, withdrawing a small box from her schoolbag. 'I know Anthony feels the same way too.'

'Anthony?' Slughorn asked, slightly bewildered.

'Anthony Nott, sir,' Lucinda explained. 'He was the one hit with the bone breaking curse.'

'Ah yes, the young Beater,' Slughorn nodded. 'How is he doing?'

'Very well, thanks to you sir,' Lucinda replied, laying the compliments a little thickly. 'Actually, we had the House Elves make this for you.' She opened the box to show the crystallised pineapple within. 'They said it was your favourite.'

'Quite right, my dear!' Slughorn boomed cheerfully, taking the box from Lucinda and popping a fruit into his mouth right then. Emma and Regulus shared a look of triumph. 'Well, now. Let it not be said that Slytherin is an ungrateful house.'

'Do you think we put enough in?' Emma asked Regulus in a whisper, watching Slughorn walk off whistling a jaunty tune. He doesn't seem all that different, she thought.

'Enough to turn the head of a hippogriff,' Regulus replied confidently. 'Plus, the potion's been sitting around since before Christmas. If that doesn't work, I think I'll be so impressed it might be worth the Dark Lord's torture.'

'Don't say that,' Emma hissed immediately, and Regulus fell into an apologetic silence.

They shuffled forwards as Lucinda backed away, her part of the plan accomplished. Emma could
only hope that Barty had been as successful.

She needn't have worried.

Professor Vector appeared, standing confusedly near the statue of the one-eyed witch. Slughorn's reaction was almost comical to watch, but Regulus and Emma managed to hold in anything louder than a grin. Their potions teacher made a grand sweeping gesture with his hat, bowing low as he did so. The tall witch looked slightly bemused, but started talking hesitantly.

Emma knew that Barty had succeeded when Slughorn motioned for Vector to walk down the hall to the dungeons, where he would spend the better part of four hours listening to her talk about the importance of Arithmancy in Potions and agree to help her experiment. As the Slytherin Quidditch team's punishment was to clean out the cauldrons every Saturday, Slughorn would push their punishment back to that evening, or the following morning, depending on how long Vector would spend in the dungeons.

At least that was the plan.

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'It worked!' Rabastan yipped, prancing around the statue of the one-eyed-witch.

Barty had been called to the Head table during lunch to be informed of the change in schedule of their punishment. McGonagall had looked as though she wanted to argue, but her lips pursed back together when Barty immediately asked when the catch up punishment would be. Emma thought she had even glimpsed a hint of approval. *That boy is on the way to being Head Boy in two years,* she thought, eying the fifth year chatting with Regulus – or more likely *to* Regulus, as the latter seemed to be contented with just nodding. *He'll be able to do anything he wants once this is all over.*

'Is everyone here?' she asked, eyes sweeping over the small cluster of green-clad students before her. It was getting hard to memorise all of them, but she didn't want a single one punished under her watch.

Regulus did a quick head count. Contrary to the former Quidditch Captain, he really did know everyone inside the Slytherin dorms, and then some. And that wasn't just a figure of speech. He knew everyone by name, knew their aspirations, their stories. The younger students looked up to him and beamed with pride when Regulus remembered their first names. Emma wondered if that was what had drawn Barty to Regulus in the first place. Either way, she was glad the fifth year was on their side.

When her boyfriend nodded, Emma glanced up the corridor, but no one was there – most had either already gone to Hogsmeade or were sitting out their punishments by now.

She opened the not-so-secret passageway and motioned for Rabastan to jump in and help those who weren’t accustomed to sliding out of the back of a witch’s tongue when they arrived on the other side. Just as the last of their group – Mulciber Junior – disappeared through the witch’s maw, Emma caught a glimpse of Regulus’ face, eyebrows furrowed and skin paler than usual, fear and anger warring for dominance on his features. By the time she had processed all of this, he was gone.

With a frown of her own, Emma entered the passageway, closing it behind her as she went.

As she lead the way through the cellar of Honeydukes – Lucinda having caused a ruckus at exactly the right time outside by casting Tripping jinxes on everyone in sight from below the invisibility
cloak – Emma pondered the meaning of Regulus’s giveaway. She wondered if he had seen someone come down the corridor, but immediately dismissed the idea.

The few times she had seen him truly afraid could be counted on one hand. There was the time with the Gurgs, when both of them thought they were going to die. There was the time when he thought that the Ministry was going to go after Emma when they had disintegrated the arm of an Auror. There was the time in the burning house, when she, Regulus and Rabastan had hidden in the rubble to avoid capture during their first raid. There was the time when Rabastan had disappeared for over two weeks during the summer without word, and they believed him to be dead, or worse, captured. And finally, there was the time he asked her to marry him.

She glanced back at him, but he was wearing his impassive mask, his jaw maybe more set than usual, but that could be simply worry about being caught. Realising that she was frowning again, Emma tried to smooth her features. They were almost at the meeting point.

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'My Lord,' Emma said, bowing deeply. Her voice felt husky, though many of the Death Eaters' voices brimmed with emotion when they faced the Dark Lord.

A sense of relief washed over her as she took her place, not even minding the grin that Bellatrix flashed her way. Alecto was not there, but that could be because she was sent on a mission. Not everyone needed to be there for the branding, but Emma had requested it, as had Rabastan and Regulus. They had all felt it their duty to be there with Barty when he was marked. They hadn't described the pain, and it wouldn't have mattered if they had. The Dark Mark was not for those of the faint-hearted, and if pain could have put him off, then he wouldn't have been offered the honour.

Emma had a second reason to come to the branding. The Dark Lord always knew what to say to wash away her doubts, casting the shadow of her doubt into the flaming light. He understood her, in a way that no one but Regulus seemed to, and although they had never mentioned it, she knew that Regulus felt the same way.

The shiver of excitement that she felt when he spoke, the course of adrenaline that electrified her body when he described the new world – it all made the fight worth it. And Emma had been having more doubts than ever before.

The Dark Lord was frightening, yes, but powerful. Sometimes, the world needed to be forced to see the light. And once the war was over, the others would understand that it was for the greater good. That was the plan, anyway. Lately, Emma wondered if even she believed in the plan anymore.

Before she knew it, the branding was over. Barty and a sixth year Ravenclaw named Rowle were marked. The other two Ravenclaws and Mulciber Junior received heavy robes of the softest silk. A reminder of the weight they bore on their shoulders, but also of the way Dark Magic seemed to fit you like a glove, if only you let it in.

The Dark Lord called her forwards, and with a jolt, Emma realised that it was the first time she had been to a meeting since before Christmas. A lump of bile rose to her throat, but she forced it back down as she knelt in the middle of the circle.

'I am told that you ruined Bella's fun during the trap for the Aurors?' he asked softly, but it was not the charming voice that she remembered. The slight sibilant sound of his "s" had turned into a snake-like hiss, a promise of pain.
'Yes, my Lord,' Emma replied, forbidding herself from stammering. 'We were running out of time and the Aurors would have caught us in the open. I wasn't going to risk my life for a simple Muggle.' She spit the word with as much venom as she could, her anger at the situation helping her credibility.

'Ah, you see Bella?' Voldemort turned his head slightly to his left. 'There was nothing to worry about.' He turned back to Emma. 'I should commend you for your first kill,' he said casually. 'As a reward, I shall expect you to lead the raid on little Hangleton on Easter Sunday. Take whomever you wish. Make sure that nothing, no one, is left standing.'

With a wave, she was dismissed. Emma's insides were shaking so much; she wasn't sure how it wasn't visible. Her palms were sweaty, but she didn't dare wipe them on her robe for fear of being caught. The Dark Lord didn't do well with cowards.

She pulled herself together barely in time for the end of the meeting, realising that she hadn't listened to a word he had said to anyone else. She wondered if Regulus had been obligated to enter the circle, whether something went bad on the raid for him. A wave of guilt crashed into her - she had been too preoccupied to press him for the details. She immediately blanked it out, that kind of feeling would be easily picked up by Legilimency. She refused to even look at Regulus on the way out.

Her eyes flickered up to Rabastan instead, her partner in crime on the fateful night of the Muggle killing. His own were shadowed, but he gave her a grim smile and the barest of nods.

He would come to little Hangleton to remind her of what must be done.
Thanks everyone who commented!
After the end of May, I should be able to improve the speed of my writing, so there won't be as much waiting going on.

‘You doing alright, mate?’ James asked Sirius as soon as they walked through the doorway.

Sirius rolled his eyes. ‘I’m not two feet from my bed yet, Prongs. If you want me to fall over, you’ll have to give me a few more minutes.’

‘That’s not funny Padfoot,’ Peter replied seriously, his eyes bright with tears of fright.

‘No, I suppose it’s not,’ Sirius sighed, the cheerful smile on his face drooping.

James shot Peter a look, but it wasn’t his fault that Sirius still wasn’t himself yet. A week after the attack, as Peter had started calling it, and Sirius was only barely let out of the Hospital Wing, with instructions to come back every morning for a nerve-calming potion. At least his limbs had stopped jerking now, though James was sure that he had almost tripped over his laces on the way out.

Still, James thought he would explode with anger whenever he thought about Carrow. He hoped that he would get the chance to be the one to catch her, to force her to answer for her crimes on trial. He was starting to understand why Crouch didn’t allow Death Eaters trials now. If Carrow’s connections weaselled her way out of Azkaban, James didn’t know what he would be capable of.

Luckily, Dumbledore had allowed the seventh years to join the Order of the Phoenix meetings at Hogwarts - with the status of observer, of course. However, as Lily reminded him, they were still in Hogwarts, and their only duel - if it could be called that - with an actual Death Eater had resulted in Sirius taking an Unforgivable. They just weren’t ready for the real world yet.

‘You know what?’ Sirius asked, breaking into James’s musing. ‘I’m actually looking forward to Transfiguration this afternoon. Feels like it’s been ages since I’ve even held my wand properly.’

There was an uncomfortable silence. James wished that Moony had come to collect Sirius with them; he probably would have known what to say. But he had been up all night finishing a Charms essay and had missed breakfast, so James and Peter had insisted he take his time for lunch instead. With that thought, James’s stomach rumbled.

Sirius let out one of his barking laughs. ‘I should have given you some of my lunch. I swear, one more day of the Hospital Wing’s soggy buns and I would have lost it.’

Peter perked up after this joke and started telling them a funny story about Bertram Aubrey, their favourite victim to prank after Snivellus. Some things didn’t have to change, after all.
Emma couldn’t believe it. Her Arithmancy essay had come back with a large D scrawled on the top in red. She held back a groan. With all that had happened since Christmas, this was the fourth subject in which she was failing. In fact, come to think of it, she was currently only passing Charms and Potions.

‘I’m very disappointed in you, Miss Potter,’ Professor Archides said, frowning down on her. ‘I’ve asked your Head of House to arrange a meeting. If you still wish to continue your career choice as a Curse-Breaker, you will need nothing less than an Exceeds Expectations in Arithmancy, especially since you have not taken N.E.W.T level Ancient Runes.’

Emma slid down her seat as far as she dared after that, her cheeks burning red. Amos Diggory in particular was looking at her pityingly, but with an arrogance that made her want to slap the expression off of his face.

“We won’t even need our N.E.W.T.s in the real world”, Alecto’s words came back to her. “The Dark Lord won’t care for how well we did in a silly school test.”

Yeah, well, screw you Alecto, and screw the Dark Lord, she thought childishy. When the war is over, I would like to do something other than torturing Muggles.

If the war ever ends, another surly voice added.

Realising that her mouth had curled itself into a pout, Emma struggled to straighten her face and concentrate on the open book in front of her. The geometric shapes and calculations that usually came easily to her seemed to blur into Bellatrix bragging about kill counts and Rabastan reminding her of who would suffer the consequences of her inaction.

I haven’t even done anything yet! She mentally screamed, rubbing her tired eyes so vigorously she began to see spots of light. They danced across her closed eyelids, morphing into a featureless face, twin lines trailing down her line of sight like ropes. Looking away, red and green lights morphed into fire, no matter how hard she tried to escape it.

There was no need to study Divination to guess what that meant.

Snapping her eyes open in defeat, Emma flipped the book shut. At least, she meant to. Instead, the heavy pages slammed onto the desk with so much force that Professor Archides dropped the chalk he was using to demonstrate the use of pentagons in magical protections.

‘Miss Potter!’ he snapped, his tone brokering no argument.

But all he saw when he turned around was the door swinging on its hinges.

***

James had received a summons to Dumbledore’s office ahead of schedule. It would coincide perfectly with his Herbology lesson, but Emily, the girl tasked with bringing him the note, insisted that Dumbledore was waiting. Glancing to the side to see his clueless expression mirrored on his best friend’s face, James heaved a sigh and flipped his books shut.
Lily had convinced them to spend their hour of freedom on studying for the fast-approaching N.E.W.T.s – Lily-speak for the remaining two-and-a-half months before the exams. Surprisingly, Sirius had agreed. He was behind on all of their classes thanks to his week-long spell in the Hospital Wing, and was eager to catch up on all of his work.

Privately, James thought that he wanted to come to the library in the hopes of finding more advanced Defence spells in Remus’s supply of “light reading” he was allowed to take out of the Restricted Section.

Sweeping the rest of his things into his bag, James slung it over his shoulder and made his way to Dumbledore’s office, wondering what it would be about. He had been making the required marks for his Auror training, and he knew that if he worked as much as Lily in the weeks running up to the N.E.W.Ts he wouldn’t have much trouble with the exams.

The Marauders had rebaptised their image from conniving pranksters to heroes of the school, saving younger Muggleborns from the antics of the Slytherins and only pulling harmless pranks that made people forget about the war going on outside. So it wasn’t because he was in trouble.

The last time he had been brought to the Headmaster’s office in this way was because of his parents, but unless there was a third he didn’t know about, he now had no living relations apart from Emma and he had seen her in a couple of classes that morning.

So it had to be about the Order of the Phoenix.

Excitement blossomed in the pit of his stomach, and he picked up the pace. Before he knew it, he was at the gargoyle in front of Dumbledore’s office.

‘Fizzing whizbees,’ James enunciated slowly.

The Marauders made a point of knowing all of the passwords in the school, although there was an exception for House common rooms.

‘Enter, James,’ Dumbledore called from inside as soon as James’s shoe touched the landing.

‘How does he even do that?’ James asked himself as he pushed the door open.

As usual, the Headmaster was sitting in his high-backed chair, surrounded by all sorts of strange silver instruments. Fawkes was sleeping on his perch nearby. James gingerly settled himself into the nearest chair, refusing the proffered Lemon Drop. Those things sucked all of the moisture out of his mouth.

‘Now, you may be wondering why I have called you into my office,’ Dumbledore said, popping three of the sickly yellow sweets into his mouth.

‘The truth is that two of your fellow classmates have now been revealed to be Death Eaters. This is a place of education, not of recruitment, yet sadly Voldemort does not seem to notice the difference. He never did understand the concept of empathy.’

‘You knew Voldemort?’ James blurted out before he could stop himself.

Dumbledore gave him a level look. Averting his eyes, the Gryffindor did the only thing he could think of to avoid the stretching silence. He stuck a Lemon Drop in his mouth.
‘Yes, I knew Voldemort,’ Dumbledore sighed. ‘He is one of the few students I believe to have failed as a teacher.’

James nodded seriously, trying to blink back tears. The Lemon Drop seemed to be sucking his cheeks in along with his saliva. *This is not the time for your antics James*, a voice strongly reminiscent of his mother chided him. He sat up a little straighter, taking a chance and swallowing the cursed sweet.

‘Your sister is another.’

James almost choked; the Lemon Drop lodging in his throat. Calmly, Dumbledore handed him a crystal goblet of water that seemed to have just sprung into existence. Nodding his thanks, James gulped it down, before setting it down on the table. It wobbled.

‘My... my sister?’ he asked shakily. ‘What does Emma have to do with this?’

Dumbledore gave James a small smile, but it was the type one gave before giving someone some bad news. It was the type Dumbledore had given him when he informed him of his mother’s illness. Suddenly, James realised what Dumbledore was getting at. He felt himself rise out of his seat, knocking over his chair before he knew what he was doing.

‘Are you comparing my sister to... to Voldemort?’ he asked angrily, for once not caring that Dumbledore, the greatest wizard in the world and Headmaster of Hogwarts, was sitting before him. ‘I can’t believe what you’re saying. Just because two Slytherin seventh years turned out to be Death Eaters doesn’t mean that she is too!’

‘James, please listen to me. Your sister has given up her capacity as Quidditch captain, her marks are subpar at best in many subjects, and Professor Flitwick has noted that she is not enthusiastic as usual. If you would just calm yourself—’

‘I WILL NOT CALM MYSELF!’ James shouted, incensed. ‘Maybe you’ve forgotten this - sir - but both of my parents just died, and if you weren’t so prejudiced, you would realise that my marks also went down for a while. And instead of helping her, you’re accusing her of being a bloody Death Eater—’

‘James,’ Dumbledore interrupted. ‘I am fully aware of your familial situation, but the fact remains that your sister is friends with Alecto Carrow—’

‘If you knew anything about Emma, then you’d realise that she has barely talked to Carrow since the start of the year!’ James continued, seizing on the nugget of false information. ‘Maybe you should bring her in here so she can tell you more about Carrow, rather than going behind her back and trying to get me to turn on my own sister!’

Dumbledore waited until James had finished this time, his hands folded calmly in his lap.

‘Are you quite done, Mr Potter?’ he inquired.

If anything, this annoyed James even more, but he was panting from his speech and had nothing to add. Feeling a little sheepish, but secure in the knowledge that he was in the right, James sat back in his chair. He glared at a swinging glass pendulum, restraining himself from throwing it halfway across the room.

‘If you had only waited until the end of my explanation,’ Dumbledore continued, as if James hadn’t just disrespected him, ‘you would have realised that I am not trying to accuse your sister of anything. I merely wished you to know that Professor Flitwick and I are concerned with her wellbeing. This
year, as you so rightly pointed out, has been hard on the both of you. However, your sister’s friends are not so steadfast as your own, and we worry for her...safety.’ Dumbledore ended the sentence a little hesitantly, but plunged on.

‘James, I called you in here because the youngest of the Order are being tasked with watching potential Death Eaters within Hogwarts. Knowing the delicacy of your situation, I wished to bring up the matter of your sister with you in private, rather than this evening. The fact that two of her Housemates have been revealed to be Death Eaters makes me worried that Voldemort is exerting an influence on the more traditional pureblood families.

‘The students of Slytherin have a reputation for wanting to make their parents proud, whereas the Gryffindors are more likely to stand for what they believe in. That is why many of the members in our group are Gryffindors. I am going to assign Order of the Phoenix members to each of the older Slytherin students so as to reassure them that there is another way, and to help them resist the temptation of Voldemort.

‘James,’ Dumbledore leaned forward, and suddenly he didn’t seem like a kindly old man, but a wizened general, his face set like stone and his eyes hard with determination. ‘I need you to watch over your sister. Voldemort will not take my students from Hogwarts.’

***

Emma stormed into the Slytherin common room to find not a soul in the dormitory. She was currently supposed to be in Transfiguration, but since her meeting with Slughorn finished not five minutes before the bell would ring, she didn’t see the point in going.

The Giant Squid knocked on the glass wall as it swam by, its tentacle grasping for a second at the wall before realising the futility of its actions.

‘You and me both, big guy,’ Emma huffed aloud.

Slughorn hadn’t been pleased. She was supposed to be his rising star, a prize in his collection, and here she was, thwarting his carefully laid plans. He had lined up an apprenticeship for her in Romania - a cluster of vampire nests had been found that weren’t too dangerous for interns - and all she had to do was get three Os and two Es. That meant that one of her six subjects could slide a little, as long as it wasn’t Arithmancy. However, at the moment she was barely scraping E’s in Flitwick’s class and she had always been a favourite of the Charms’ professor.

Usually, she would have been able to play on the pity factor. She had an entire arsenal at her disposal, ranging from her parents dying to Sirius being hit by a curse (after all, they lived together for two summers) to Alecto turning out to be a Death Eater. Turn on the waterworks a little, and Professor Goldstein would be putty in her hands. That left Professor Archedis and Professor McGonagall. She should have gone to James, asked him for help, and then her marks would have been salvageable.

If she had explained all of this to Slughorn, she was sure that he would have pressured Archedis into giving her some extra credit to do over the Easter holidays.

But she hadn’t.

She had sat there without saying a word, overwhelmed by the pure confusion of her future. She had been so worried about her present, about the Dark Lord, about keeping the rest of the Slytherins safe
from Amelia Bones that her studies had been the least of her worries.

Even now, she couldn’t bring herself to argue for her case, her mind instead straying as it had for the past week to what she would do within three weeks time.

What she would do at Little Hangleton.

Slughorn had dismissed her in the end, telling her that they would have another conversation after Potions’ class the next week.

Her first thought had been to get as far from his office as possible. Now that she was in the common room, she didn’t know what to do. She wanted to talk to Regulus - he always knew how to make things seem clear - but he was still in class.

Still, her feet were too itchy to stand still in the main area, waiting for the rest of them to return. On an impulse, she entered the seventh year boys’ dormitory, deciding that she would wait for Regulus inside. If the conversation turned to the Dark Lord, then she wouldn’t have to worry. They were all Death Eaters there.

Shifting the weight of her books onto the other shoulder, she walked towards Regulus’s side of the room. It wasn’t too hard to spot: his bed was made flawlessly, his books carefully stacked by height and girth.

Her bag suddenly slipped, crashing to the floor and bringing several papers off the desk along with it.

Cursing, she knelt down to pick them up - Regulus would kill her if his notes weren’t properly ordered - and stopped as a title caught her eye.

The Dark Lord’s speech - 18th November 1977.

My friends, the time is nigh. You have followed me through thick and thin, following my ascent as the rightful ruler of our fair world. On the darkest day of the year, when the night is long and the shadows rule, we will set a trap for the remaining Aurors unfaithful to our cause. Fear not, for greatness inspires envy, and those as yet caught in our enemies’ lies will soon feel the real meaning of true power.

Her heart beating furiously, Emma dropped her bag, snatching up another page to read.

The Dark Lord’s words to me - day of the Dark Mark.

Regulus Black, the youngest of the Blacks, and yet perhaps the one who will bring the most pride to his household. For that is what you wish, is it not? Glory above all else, the opportunity to show your true talent rather than stay within your brother’s shadow, your mother’s madness, your father’s weakness. Now, now, do not close your eyes in despair, Regulus, for I have tasted power that others merely dream of. Power that will be yours for the taking, if you remain forever faithful to my cause.

The Dark Lord’s speech, the allegiance of the werewolves - 7th July 1976.

Kneel to me, Fenrir Greyback, and I will see that your people will never go hungry again. For as long as I reign, for all of eternity, the Muggles will be yours for the taking, so long as you remain on the right side on the conflict. The war itself will be long and bloody, Albus Dumbledore will make sure of that. I delegate the task of ferreting out the werewolves loyal to his pathetic “Order”
to you personally. I am certain that a man of your... talents...will know how to deal with the troubleshooters.

On and on the pages went, and Emma found herself sinking to the floor, drinking them in one after one. They were all carefully numbered, certain parts of the speeches underlined, others referenced to by numbers that Emma was sure she would find in a booklet somewhere.

She felt sick. Of course, she and Regulus had supported the Dark Lord, but Emma felt as though she had been duped, mislead, that they were going to bring about a better world order instead of simply destroying the old one. Regulus seemed to grow more and more confident with each speech written. The later dates were scribbled fervently, as though Regulus were afraid to miss a single word.

Was it possible that she didn’t know her boyfriend at all?

The door banged open, and Emma jumped, parchment scattering around her.

‘What the-’ Rabastan’s laugh died in his throat. ‘Emma? What are you doing in our room?’

The bewildered look never left his face as Emma summoned the fallen papers, grabbed her bag and dashed out of the door, nearly knocking him over in the process.
When Emma arrived on the Quidditch pitch, she was panting. As she had expected, it was empty. Easter break was in a week, so there was a lull in the training schedule. That and it was Friday evening, the time when students ordinarily let themselves relax into the start of their weekend.

Clutching her broom in her hand, she started to swing her leg over the side, but stopped.

Flying was the one thing that calmed her down, that seemed to release all of her accumulated stress. It let her escape her life and when she touched down, it was as though something had showed her what she had to do. Now, though...

Emma brought her Nimbus 1001 to her face, examining every groove, every crevice, every dent that had brought them together. The cool wood was still smooth to the touch, and her fingers slid into the handholds that had built up over the past two years from all of the flying.

Now she felt the urge to break her broom in two, to smash it to pieces and vent her rage on her prized possession.

So instead of taking off to the air, she took off to the Forbidden Forest, Banishing her broom back to her room. It would probably surprise Lucinda and the others when it appeared on her bed, but better that than giving in to her emotions.

She set off in the direction of the Black Lake, her brisk walk accompanied by the howling of the wind. It was still cold enough that it could snow, despite it already being March.

But Emma didn't mind the chill that scratched at her throat, the wind that scraped at her cheeks. They helped her focus, to concentrate her energy not on the rage that was born whenever she felt helpless, but on the task the Dark Lord set for her.

She refused to think about Regulus.

***

'Rab, have you seen my History project?' Regulus asked calmly, though on the inside he was panicking.

_Just breathe_, he told himself.

At the worst, people would think that he was some kind of nuts as Bellatrix. Others might say that he was taking notes to emulate the Dark Lord in the future. Those who knew him best would suppose that he was recording the meetings with the intent of chronicling history for the generations to come.

All three could be apprehended by the staff, who would have proof of him being a Death Eater. If
not for the Occlumency mask that had been trained into his features like hardened wax, he would be close to tears right now.

*Just as I was piecing it together,* he thought, allowing himself to blink for half a second longer than strictly necessary. *Just as, for the first time in my life, I was doing something that was right.*

None of Regulus's scenarios could have prepared him for Rabastan's words, spoke as innocently as only Rabastan could.

'I think Emma has them,' the taller boy said, lounging on his bed.

Regulus tried to prevent his body from giving him a heart attack.

'Oh right,' he said, his voice sounding strained even to his ears. 'Um… do you know where she is now?'

'Dunno,' Rabastan replied, looking up from his Quidditch magazine. 'Why, is something wrong between you two?'

'Why would you say that?' Regulus asked, schooling his lips into a curious smile.

Unfortunately, that kind of acting didn't fool Rabastan. At least, not when it came to Emma.

'Are you sure?' Rabastan frowned, getting up. 'You look like you’ve just heard a Mandrake. And Ems looked pretty upset when I came in, now that I think about it.'

Regulus didn't even deign to reply, instead grabbing his cloak and racing out of the dormitory. *Screw the Black family poise.*

***

'Anything for our little Moony!' Sirius laughed, climbing out of the hole under the Whomping Willow.

James followed his best mate, groaning as he massaged his sore neck. Being tall had its inconveniences, namely squeezing through the passageway that seemed to get smaller every time he entered it.

The Marauders were back to normal, it seemed. Partly to help Sirius not feel like an invalid, since his hand trembled with the simplest of spells, and partly to get Remus out of the sullen mood that accompanied the full moon, Peter had suggested they go and make the Shrieking Shack somewhat comfortable for Moony.

They had dusted the room, adding in a sofa and a couple of armchairs, as well as asking the House Elves for several blankets. Now, Remus could feel a little more comfortable before he transformed, although there were few full moons left.

James only wished they had thought to do something like it sooner. In the end, they had whiled away the afternoon with Butterbeer and Cauldron Cakes, just chatting and joking around in the privacy of a special Marauders' room. It felt like it had been an age since it was just the four of them.

Now, it seemed as though they had spent more time in the Shack than expected. By the time they got back to Hogwarts, night had fallen.
Alright midgets, back to the Tower before curfew!' James joked in his best imitation of Lily.

'Yes sir, Head Girl!' Sirius saluted.

'Lily wouldn't say midgets,' Remus objected, but the following snort belied his words.

'It's true,' Peter said nervously, checking his watch. 'It's nearly nine o clock already and the Common Room's on the other side of the castle.'

'Shut up Wormtail!' Sirius replied dramatically, looking around. 'Someone might hear of the location!'

This time it was James's turn to snort, rolling his eyes. Immediately, he turned his head, frowning at the silhouette he saw out of the corner of his eye.

The others didn't notice, continuing to tease each other up the path to the castle.

'Are you coming, Prongs?' Remus asked, curious that James hadn't moved.

'Yeah, yeah,' James waved them off without a glance. 'I'll follow you up.'

'I'll follow you up,' Sirius immediately parroted, jostling Peter and laughing. 'He even sounds like a proper Head Boy now.'

James didn't hear though, as he was already walking in the opposite direction.

***

'I thought it was you,' James said, falling into step with Emma.

She whipped her head around so quickly she got whiplash. She cringed, massaging her neck, but relaxed as she realised that it was her brother.

'Hey,' she greeted weakly, head still tilted at an angle.

'Expecting someone else?' James asked, looking around.

They were a quarter of the way around the Black Lake, the castle hardly visible under the clouds. The Forbidden Forest loomed ahead and to the right the water rippled ominously with twilight predators come to life. Emma stopped walking, finally taking her hand away from her neck.

'Not really,' she shrugged. She looked up at the sky, watching a cloud pass over the nearly full moon, causing shadows to speckle their surroundings. She looked to James, his face half hidden, and tried to discern whether he had followed her. 'I just needed some time to think.'

'Is something wrong?' James asked immediately, the concern transparent in his voice. *Was Dumbledore right? he asked himself. Is she cracking under the pressure of what it means to be a Slytherin?

Emma scoffed, the corner of her mouth curling derisively, her eyes flitting upwards for half a second. As her mind searched for an answer, the sheer amount of "somethings wrong" threatened to overwhelm her. Suddenly, tears were pricking at her eyes, and she found herself having to carefully hold them open to break the flow.
'Emma?' he asked, because he was James, and James always knew when she was upset.

A lump rose in Emma's throat and she made to turn away, to fill the void with some kind of platitude that would convince him. Within her House, she was renowned for her ability to spin tales out of the smallest of truths, weaving half lies into a web strong enough to catch even herself if she had wanted to contradict the story.

Where was that Emma now? Now that she needed her the most?

Realising that she would have to make do without her instincts, the small, dark haired girl cleared her throat.

'James,' she started, fully intending on reassuring her twin.

Her treacherous voice trembled, then broke, and she collapsed into tears.

***

'Emma!' Regulus called, shrugging his cloak on as he entered the Quidditch Pitch.

It was empty.

Desperately, he checked in the stands, in the stairs, in the skies, anywhere that Emma could possibly be. Breaking into the Quidditch shed with a simple *Alohamora*, he grabbed the first possible broom, taking to the air to see if she had decided to go for a fly instead of her habitual staring at the sky.

'Emma!' he shouted, but his voice was lost to the wind.

*Relax, Regulus, he told himself when he found no sign of her. Maybe it was too cold, maybe she's gone inside.*

He flew up to the Astronomy Tower, but all he saw was a couple sharing a picnic basket. He hadn't had much hope anyway, the cold had never stopped her before.

*Why didn't she come to me about it?* he asked himself. *I could have explained, I could have...*

Regulus trailed off in his mind as he realised that he didn't know what he could have said about it. He would probably have let her guess by herself. She was a fervent supporter of the Dark Lord, as fervent as he had been before he had discovered the first of several truths: The Dark Lord did not want a better world, only one easier to rule.

He could easily have passed his research off as many things, but for some reason he wanted to tell her the truth. No, he should have told her the truth a long time ago. Emma was trustworthy, she had proved that when she hadn't mentioned his secrets to anyone, when she hadn't thrown his love back in his face - even though he knew that he was far from worthy of being loved in return.

More than that, he wanted to tell her because she was...because she was Emma. The girl that he hoped would marry him. He couldn't keep secrets from her anymore, no matter how much a part of him they were. Besides, he didn't think he could bear it if she followed the Dark Lord blindly for a cause that would never come true. It would tear her apart, and through that, the rest of them wouldn't stand a chance at redemption.

***
'I messed up James,' Emma stammered through rackety sobs. Fat tears were rolling down her cheeks, the likes of which James had rarely seen, and her hands were clutching at her face as if they could tear the pain away through the skin. 'I messed up and you have no idea how much.'

James's own eyes became blurry, the frustration at not knowing what to do overwhelming him. He took his sister's arm, but she flinched, pushing him away. She started crying even harder, her sleeves soaked through, the snot running down her nose and mouth

James had never seen her in such a state.

'Hey,' he said gently, bending down to meet her eyes. He took her hands, lowering them from her face, before wiping her eyes and nose with his own sleeve. 'You're my sister. You're my twin. There's not been a minute of my life where you weren't there, and I don't think I could have it any other way. It'll take more than "messing up" to get rid of me.'

Emma's face scrunched up at that, the tears streaming out, though her sobs had quieted to coughs.

'You say that,' she choked out miserably. 'But you don't mean it.' She paused, trying to control her voice. 'You couldn't mean it,' she whispered.

'Ems,' James said firmly. 'You're my family. There's nothing, *nothing more important to me than family. I love you. That's not going to go away, not for anything in the world.'

'Not even for this?' Emma asked almost defiantly, and held out her left arm, roughly pushing away the sleeve when it caught on the watch she had received for her seventeenth birthday.

A short intake of breath escaped James before he knew it. A vivid red snake weaved in and out of a skull's open mouth, darting here and there as though daring him to touch it. Its forked tongue slid in and out of its mouth, as though tasting the twins' pain in the air. Its tail curled through its body into a figure eight - or if you looked at it from an angle, an infinity symbol. The skull seemed as though it was grinning at the scene, waiting for the moment where its master would call it.

James couldn't look away, caught between horror and fascination and dread, dread at the thought of what his little sister, as he always thought of her, had done to earn this badge of death.

He looked up at her, fully intending to let loose the sense of betrayal that mounted during his observation. But the sight he was met with made him falter.

Emma's eyes were puffy and red, blinking rapidly at the tears that still fell from her lashes, her mouth turned down in the anticipation of losing her last family member as a result of her folly. More than ever, the blue of her irises were innocent, fearful, the way they had always been just before she followed James in whatever stupid plan he had concocted.

James's heart softened.

'Not even for that,' he replied, pulling Emma into a tight hug and closing his eyes against the symbol of the Dark Lord.

He had lost his mother and father in the space of twelve months. He was damned if he would be losing his sister, too.

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Did she remember...? Regulus wondered, veering from the Astronomy Tower towards the Black Lake.

He skimmed low, as the evening fog was already descending, soaking into his cloak and dampening his skin. After what seemed like an age, he alighted near the jetty on the far side of the water, the one the first years took on their way to Hogwarts and the way the seventh years left for good.

It was empty.

Regulus sat down anyway, drawing his knees to his chest. His heart sunk into a well known disappointment and he rested his chin on his knees. Maybe Emma was walking slowly and hadn't got to the jetty yet.

Out in the open, without a soul around to see, he let his badly held mask fall, his eyelids relaxing into a half-lidded position, his mouth slackening with sadness. Every time he blinked, it seemed as though it took that much more effort to open his eyes again, effort that seemed in short supply.

He realised just how much he had been counting on being able to convince Emma of the Dark Lord’s folly, of how they had been duped and their vision of a better world was quickly being replaced by a reality in which they were instrumental in making it worse. Without her, he would never be able to talk to Rabastan, to make sure his best friend could get out, and without Rabastan out of the Death Eaters, Lucinda would always be beholden to them too. And that was without counting Evan.

Suddenly, he scoffed in derision at his reflection.

Look at me, he thought pityingly. I try to help Sirius and only drive him further away from his family. I try to help wizards harassed by Muggles, only to harass Muggleborn wizards instead. I fall in love with a girl, only to find myself on the opposing shore.

Eventually, one of the blinks found a tear trapped between lashes, so he kept his eyes closed. He didn't deserve the tears. He didn't deserve his brother. He didn't deserve the girl.

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'That's not all of it James,' Emma said sadly, as James stood up.

She had just finished telling James about the past few years for her, excluding several facts such as Regulus's initiation mission, the fact that Rabastan was a Death Eater and - of course - the girl. Her brother had stayed silent throughout the whole ordeal, though with a look of intense concentration that told Emma that he was trying, and failing, to understand her point of view. At least he believed that she was a good person.

Merlin knew that she needed at least one person to think so.

'What more could there possibly be?' James asked weakly, lowering himself back down to the tree stump.

Emma took a deep breath and told him about the Dark Lord's latest mission - the massacre that was supposed to happen at Little Hangleton.
James's eyes widened as he jumped back up. 'We have to go to Dumbledore!'

'No!' Emma shouted, leaping to her feet.

James blinked in surprise, and she realised how violent her reaction had been.

'No,' she said in a softer tone. 'I don't want Dumbledore to know. Not this, not the Death Eaters, not any of it!'

'But Ems,' James pleaded. 'He can help.'

'He'll help you,' Emma concluded. 'You're a Gryffindor. As soon as I'm out of Hogwarts, he'll have my every move watched; just waiting for the moment he can throw me into Azkaban. He'll probably be pleased about it, and convince you of just how bad a person I am.'

'It's not like that Ems,' James replied, shaking his head. 'Dumbledore treats everyone on an equal footing.'

'Oh really?' Emma asked sarcastically, shifting her weight onto one leg and crossing her arms. 'Tell me, how many Slytherins were approached to be a part of this Order of the Phoenix?'

James faltered for a second. 'None,' he answered. 'But that's because he doesn't want to put you in the position of going against your classmates, your dorm mates!'

'Let's try again then. How many Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were approached?'

'Two, no, three I think, in Ravenclaw,' James said, frowning as he mentally counted. 'And four Hufflepuffs.'

'And how many Gryffindors?' Emma asked.

'All of the seventh years, plus those of age in the sixth,' James replied immediately. His face fell a second later.

'You see, Dumbledore has always shown favouritism to his old House,' Emma said with a small smile. 'There hasn't been a single Dark witch or wizard in Hufflepuff, and yet he doesn't trust them.'

'Fine,' James replied. 'But I refuse to let Voldemort murder a village of innocent Muggles. And I refuse to let you take part in it.' His face softened. 'You've done enough. I'm sorry that your relationship with Mum and Dad was that bad in the end. You should have told me earlier.'

'I know,' Emma replied quietly. 'But I...I didn't know how to say it. As for Little Hangleton, thanks to you I have a plan. But promise me James, you can't tell anyone about any of this. Not even Lily. And especially not Sirius.'

'Of course not,' James replied, his face earnest. 'I promise.'

And for someone else, Emma might have asked for a Wizard's Oath, or an Unbreakable Vow, but for James, a promise was enough. Because James never broke his promises.
Emma walked into the Great Hall the next morning tired, but happy. She felt as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, even though talking with James hadn't technically accomplished anything.

Still, she munched her toast with a gusto she hadn't felt in a while, raising her glass of pumpkin juice towards Rabastan when he entered the room. Lucinda had already eaten, of course, and was already out roaming the castle.

Rabastan sat down at the table and – as was his custom – stole a piece of buttered toast off of Emma's plate.

'It's always the stolen food that tastes the best,' he declared, closing his eyes with pleasure. Then, never one to pass up the opportunity for a joke: 'So from your chirpy mood, I guess you and Regulus sorted out whatever was in those papers yesterday? They weren't love letters to some other bird, were they?'

Emma frowned at him, not knowing what to say. She had nearly forgotten about Regulus’s notes. She put her toast back on her plate, her appetite vanishing in an instant.

Rabastan lowered his own food, worry creasing his forehead. 'They weren't, were they Ems? They can't be. Regulus isn’t like that.'

'No, nothing like that,' Emma replied hastily. 'I haven't seen Regulus since Transfiguration class yesterday, though.'

'Really?' Rabastan said, shredding another piece of toast to strips. 'He wasn't back by the time I went to bed last night, and his bed was still made this morning. I just thought...'

As they both tried to figure out the missing information without alerting the other to their own worry, Remus Lupin walked through the doors, making a beeline for the Slytherin table.

Rabastan and Emma looked at each other with twin expressions of surprise. Remus Lupin was universally liked by the student body as a whole, with the sole exception of Severus Snape, but he wasn't one to rock the boat by sitting at Gryffindor's rival's table for breakfast.

'It must be you he's after,' Rabastan said. 'Some kind of Prefect thing.'

'I don't think so,' Emma replied, watching Remus make his way across the hall, noting his pallid expression. 'James or Lily would have come, and they're over at their table enjoying their food.'

Rabastan swivelled around. True enough, the couple were taking it in turn to heap a full English breakfast on each other's plates. By that time, Remus had drawn close enough for them to notice he was out of breath.

'Thank Merlin, I've been looking for one of you everywhere. Slytherins are harder to catch than their House mascots,' he said, hand going to his side. Emma wondered if the full moon made him easily winded, as well as tired. 'I thought I'd warn you before the whole rumour mill starts up. Regulus is in the Hospital Wing - it seems as though he got lost in the Forbidden Forest last night.'

Emma's initial reaction was fear. What had Regulus been doing in the Forbidden Forest, and what kind of creature had attacked him?
Then she realised that the story was most probably not true, especially given the way Remus was eyeing them with. She glanced up to Rabastan. *I didn't think he had anything to do for the Dark Lord,* she thought. *But the papers yesterday proved that he could be doing something on the side. But what?*

'Thanks, Lupin,' Rabastan said quickly, walking quickly towards the doors.

Emma made to follow him, but she found herself blocked by Remus, who had caught hold of her arm.

'Wait a minute, Emma,' Remus said. 'Is there something I should know? Any…conditions, any side projects that would require Regulus to be out in the forest so late last night?'

He gave her an appraising look. *He thinks Regulus is a werewolf,* was Emma's immediate thought, but she quickly dismissed it. Still, Remus Lupin was astute enough to know that this was something that was out of the ordinary. If Regulus had been ill, then he would have gone straight to the Common Room so as to not look weak in front of the entire school. Regulus despised the Hospital Wing.

Emma realised that Remus was still waiting for a response.

'No,' she replied hesitantly, before strengthening her voice. 'No,' she repeated. 'I don't know what it is.'

And it was true. And that was what scared her.

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'O one at a time please.'

Emma didn't even need to see the matron before she knew it was Madam Pomfrey who spoke. Rabastan glanced over, his pale green eyes flitting from Emma's worried expression to the matron's stern face.

'I'll go,' he offered, placing a hand on Emma's shoulder as he passed her. In an undertone, he added. 'I think he's cracked under the pressure, Ems. I'm worried about him.'

Emma looked up at her friend, but he had already left the Hospital Wing. Unconsciously gulping, she approached Regulus's bed, gingerly sitting down on the side. Looking around, she saw that Madam Pomfrey had already gone to tend a few second years suffering from Venomous Tentacula bites.

Regulus was lying propped up on a wad of pillows, smothered in layer after layer of blankets. It looked as though he had a cold, what with his puffy eyes ringed with dark circles and his red nose, but Emma knew better.

'Regulus?' she asked softly, placing a hand where she supposed his arm was.

His eyes met her own with a series of heavy blinks before he reacted.

'Emma? Glad…you're here. I needed to tell you…' he mumbled, slurring his words as though drunk.

He extracted an arm out of the blankets with difficulty, almost knocking over his glass of water as he
'Whoa,' Emma said, righting the glass and moving it to a safe distance. 'Careful, or you might bring Madam Pomfrey's wrath down upon us all.'

'What?' he asked, trying - and failing - to sit up properly. 'Didna want to...Hospital Wing,'

'I know, Regulus,' Emma replied soothingly, pushing her curiosity to the side. 'The rumours have started already. Don't worry; I'm sure we can spin it some way as to not ruin your reputation. With the Slytherins, it's easily done. Just imply that...'

'Stop,' Regulus moaned, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. Several blinks later had him looking marginally more awake. 'Don't want Emma the planner. Need...need my Emma. The real Emma.'

Emma didn't reply, instead taking one of his hands in her own. She started at how cold it was. Quickly, she covered it with the other as well, alarmed at the small tremors she could feel running through his body.

'What have you done, Regulus?' she murmured, shuffling closer and feeling his forehead. It was covered in a sheen of cold sweat.

'Need to tell you...tell my Emma...too late, not coming,' Regulus mumbled, his gaze far away again.

In the blink of an eye, Madam Pomfrey was back, administering some kind of modified Pepper-Up potion to Regulus. Emma watched as the steam unfurled from his ears.

'What happened?' she blurted out before she could stop himself. 'What's wrong with him?'

'He caught hypothermia,' the school matron tutted like a mother hen. 'He must have been out all night; it's a wonder that he made it back to the gates at all! He was very lucky that Mister Lupin found him passed out near the Entrance Hall so early, or he might have made quite the commotion! Now, shoo. He'll need his rest if he's to be up and about this evening.'

Suddenly, Remus's sudden interest made a lot more sense. But if what Madam Pomfrey said was true, then what was Regulus doing outside all night?

_Could it be..._ Emma wondered on her way out, thinking back to her conversation with Rabastan earlier.

"I guess you and Reg sorted out whatever was in those papers yesterday."

She looked back to the slumbering Slytherin. _Could it be that he was out there looking for me?_

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After having reasonably well completed her Transfiguration essay - thanks in most part to James helping her - that afternoon, Emma pored over Regulus's transcripts of the Dark Lord's speeches within the safety of the Slytherin Common Room. Now that she read it for a second time, she realised that some words were underlined, some circled, others cross-referenced.

She wished she had his notebook, then she might be able to figure out what he had been looking for - because she was nearly certain that he was looking for something. The question was.. what?

Evidence of the Dark Lord's power of persuasion? A historic observation of the wizarding world's
future leader's rise to power? His power as such? Many underscored words were referencing the Dark Lord's foray into fields of magic as yet unheard of…was Regulus trying to improve his own skills?

Or was it all about something closer to home?

Emma allowed herself to indulge for a moment, imagining that Regulus had also realised the futility of throwing their lot in with Voldemort, his unprecedented brutality that would not abate even at the end of the war.

*A girl can dream,* she thought wryly, remembering how only a year ago she had believed that her dreams of a better world were coming true. *At least Voldemort seems to believe in equality between magical races. That has to count for something.*

But she was conjecturing at best, and she knew it. James had told her of the Order of the Phoenix finding allies amongst the goblins, who were treated like vermin by some of the Dark Lord's followers.

Sighing, she bundled up Regulus's notes and carefully stowed them in her bag.

'Going to see Regulus?' Rabastan asked, looking up from his Herbology sketches.

Emma opened her mouth, before realising that half of the Common Room was waiting with baited breath for her response. Their hurried exit from the Great Hall that morning hadn't gone amiss, and the younger students were always attentive to friction between groups and information on the Dark Lord's rise.

Her eyes flickered to the corner by the fire, where Wilkes and Snape were nonchalantly playing chess together. Severus wasn't one for ratting people out, but she knew that Wilkes would do anything to get Regulus in his grandfather's bad graces. After all, his passing fancy had turned into social embarrassment when she had turned down his marriage proposal by accepting Regulus's.

'Yeah,' she said, purposefully leaning closer to Rabastan, whilst still letting her voice resound off the glass wall opposite them. 'This morning he said he'd tell me…*His…new plans for us.*'

Rabastan frowned at her, but quickly caught on and turned it into a pensive expression. 'Maybe it's about Little Hangleton.'

Emma's heart went cold at the thought of the raid, and it took all she had to gulp down her revulsion and throw a smirk back to her friend as she crossed the room.

'Maybe,' she called, ensuring the rumours would start. After all, they were integral to her plan.

***

'Madam Pomfrey?' Emma called, knocking softly on the Hospital Wing door.

A white cap appeared out of the Mediwitch's office, followed by a blond head of hair. The woman visibly sighed, then ushered her over.

'I was wondering if Regulus was well enough to be released,' Emma said quietly once she was near enough. 'We're all quite worried about him.'
'I suppose you would be,' Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips, eyeing the necklace with the ring around Emma's neck. 'I suppose you would. Well, follow me.'

The Mediwitch led Emma to Regulus's bed, where he was - predictably - reading a history book. He looked up eagerly as they arrived, snapping the book shut in an instant.

A concise history of notable Muggleborns, Emma read. By Bathilda Bagshot.

A blossom of hope flared in the pit of her stomach. She unconsciously reached out, her lips parting in a question that she quenched in the matron's presence.

'Ah, young love,' Madam Pomfrey sighed, misinterpreting the gesture. 'The purebloods always want to grow up too fast. Well, Mister Black, you're free to go, so long as you forgo any strenuous activity and make sure to keep your energy levels up.'

'Yes, Madam,' Regulus replied politely, giving a short nod of the head.

The Matron returned the nod approvingly, before bustling off to check on her other patients.

Regulus immediately tore the covers away, almost tripping over his legs in his hurry to get out of the room.

'Thanks,' he muttered as she handed him a woolly cloak, courtesy of Rabastan.

'Don't thank me yet,' Emma replied, going quiet as a gaggle of students walked past them. She pulled out the sheaf of parchment from her bag, handing them back to him. 'These belong to you. We've got a stop to make, and then...Then I think it was time I started being honest with you. Completely honest.'

'Emma,' Regulus stopped short, grasping his arm to make his point. His eyes were wide and almost fearful, the grey breaking into a shattered mirror of emotions.

'Not here,' Emma replied quietly.

She almost wanted to tell him there and then, but with his disappearance that morning, she was under no illusion that some students willing to get into the Dark Lord's graces would eavesdrop on their conversation. Still, she pulled her body to his own, kissing him softly in a rare public display of affection.

When she opened her eyes, she was relieved to find nothing on his face but affection and gratitude. Will he still look at me that way once I tell him my darkest secret?

***

Thirty minutes, two hot chocolates and one conjured jar of Bluebell flames later, Regulus and Emma were standing above Hogsmeade Station. They had taken the passageway through the one-way mirror - Emma thought that it would be better not to risk spending too much time in the cold, given that Regulus had only just recovered from freezing himself to the point of exhaustion - but it still wasn't enough.

Emma led the way down the stairs towards the Black Lake, towards the one place she could think of with no prying eyes. The room above Hogsmeade Station was beautiful, but it was a cold beauty that would forgive no transgressions.
There was only one place she believed she could make her confession, the one place where they had truly, voluntarily, let their vulnerabilities show.

'You remembered,' Regulus murmured, his eyes alit with emotion.

The jetty was the spitting image of the last time they had been there, unchanged even in the slightest of details. There was no snow to be seen, but Emma placed warming charms around them to keep the frost at bay. The Great Lake shimmered as ever, the wisps of moonlight trailing down to reflect off the slightly icy surface.

'Of course I remembered,' the corners of Emma's mouth curved upwards. 'I think this may be the place I fell in love with you.'

Regulus smiled Emma's favourite smile, the small, secret smile that showed that he was truly happy, the one even the best of his masks couldn't fake. However, the minute it graced his face, it vanished. Regulus turned away from her, eyes turned to the water, brimming with tears. He pulled the cloak tighter around himself, and Emma surreptitiously cast another warming charm on it.

'I haven't been honest with you, Emma,' he replied. 'And I think you know it. I just hope that...that you'll understand.'

He took a deep breath, turning back to her, his jaw squared.

'I have been studying the Dark Lord...Lord Voldemort's speeches for the past few months, since before Christmas. Yes, I had sent my grandfather a request for your hand in marriage, but - forgive me - I knew that he would always favour the House of Black over Wilkes.

'Instead, I compiled a list, a list of every reference to the Darkest magic known to wizarding kind found in the Black and Lestrange libraries. I wished to keep you apart from my studies. If I was wrong, then I would worry you needlessly. If I was right...' he looked down. 'I had hoped not to be right.

'The truth is, and we have been blind to it because of our devotion to the cause, I have reason to believe that...Lord Voldemort...has a Horcrux. Or more specifically, more than three Horcruxes in existence.

'This explains the changes in his appearance, the ruthlessness that has characterised his later speeches, the callousness with which he treats us, his most loyal of followers.'

He paused, letting the implications of what he was saying sink in. Emma knew what a Horcrux was - every Slytherin did. It was a horrifying, yet alluring aspect of the Dark Arts, combining that which was most evil with that which was most powerful: immortality itself.

Just as Emma was about to respond, Regulus stopped her with a shake of his head. He looked away for a split second, fleeing from her gaze, before steeling himself to tell her something worse.

Is there worse? she asked herself. Maybe what I did shows that I am more like the Dark Lord than I thought.

'I...Upon discovering this...' Regulus's voice faded into the evening fog. It was several seconds before he summoned the courage to continue. 'I can't do this anymore, Emma,' he said in a pained voice. 'I can't just follow him, knowing that he doesn't fight for what we fight. There is no noble cause, there is no better world,' he continued bitterly. 'There's just Voldemort and immortality, and we are the means to his end. Nothing more, nothing less, and we have been tricked into believing we were fighting for a greater good.
'There's nothing great, nor good about this.'

Despite the shivers convulsing through her at the idea of Horcruxes, Emma couldn't help but give a nervous laugh of relief.

'I know Regulus,' the words burst forth in a flurry, her smile growing wide at the relief that they were still a team, still on the same side. 'I know. I can fight for the Dark Lord no longer.'

In response, Regulus hugged her fiercely, lifting her feet from the ground and spinning her around despite his weakness, setting her down only to kiss her more passionately than they had since their last raid.

The laughter died from Emma's lips with that thought. She set her hands on Regulus's chest, fully meaning to push him away, but unable to.

*I just got him back,* she thought. *Would it hurt to wait, just for a few more days?*

'What is it, Emma?' Regulus asked, worry colouring his voice once again. 'Tell me.'

'I…You're going to hate me,' Emma's voice trembled.

Regulus gave a laugh of disbelief.

'I just told you the Dark Lord has multiple Horcruxes and that I plan to desert, and you're worried about something else? What in Salazar's name could be worse than that?'

Emma clutched at her jaw, which had begun chattering from the worry and anticipation. She felt sick, she felt dizzy, she felt overwhelmed. She let go of Regulus and clutched at the icy barrier for relief, taking deep breaths in order to try to calm herself down.

'What is it Emma?' Regulus asked again, more urgently. He covered her left hand with his right. 'Are you pregnant? If you are, then I won't hate you. I love you, I want to marry you, for Salazar's sake! Sure, it would be a little strange, but -'

'I'm not pregnant, Regulus,' Emma said shortly, but suddenly, she wished that she were. Better that she had brought life into this world rather than...

A flash of blond plaits crossed her vision, a streak of green following it. *Avada Kedavra.* 'I killed someone.'
Changing Course

If it had been anyone else, Emma would have expected a cry of outrage, a barrage of questions, for them to recoil as though bitten by a snake. But it was not anyone else. This was Regulus.

Instead, he looked her calmly in the eyes, probing without Occlumency. *This is why people trust him with their secrets*, Emma thought. *This lack of judgement.*

It was refreshing. Although James had been careful not to comment on anything during her meltdown the night before, Emma could see that he was burning with questions, with vengeance, with…she wasn't quite sure what. He hadn't wanted to believe that it was the whole story. Regulus simply accepted what was given to him.

'I'm sure that's not the whole story,' Regulus said, belying her thoughts. But he didn't press her, didn't ask any questions.

Instead, he huddled closer, silver eyes no longer reflecting the water but revealing the depths of his thoughts.

And so she told him about the night of the Christmas holidays, the flash of green, the screaming that preceded it, the guilt that followed, and her subsequent rescue of the rest of the Muggle family.

'I haven't dared visit St Mungo's,' Emma confessed, laying bare her innermost worries. 'I was too scared…that someone would recognise me, or that the man wouldn't have gotten better, or worse yet…that they weren't treated since they were Muggles. Where would they go? What have we done?'

The question was rhetorical, but Emma felt as though it weren't. The Muggles were a weight dragging her deeper underwater, her responsibility, and she had been ignoring them as though the chain linking them would just disappear.

She hadn't expected Regulus to answer.

'So we'll defect,' he said, voice growing stronger. 'We'll make up for our mistakes, all of them. Not everything we did was bad; the werewolves have better living conditions now that they have joined us than before.'

He stood up straighter, gesticulating passionately. 'We'll talk to the Giants. The Scottish Gurg respects you, not Voldemort. You're the go between, whilst the Dark Lord sits on his throne in the background.'

Emma watched him, entertaining the notion for a fleeting moment of happiness. Then reality descended, and she drew Regulus back down with her.

'We can't defect, Regulus,' she said heavily. She looked to the sky, the moon fully blocked by roiling clouds, and it seemed like a metaphor for the crushing of their hopes. 'We would always be seen as defectors on the one hand, Dark wizards on the other. Feared by all, trusted by none. We'd have no influence, no power to turn the tides, and even if we went to the Ministry or to Dumbledore, there's no saying they'll believe us. And Regulus,' she added, her voice quailing, 'I'm too scared. I'm just too scared.'
'Then we'll have to find our own way,' Regulus said firmly. 'A third path.'

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'There you are!' James shouted, a little louder than anticipated.

Several students stopped to watch as he bumped and pushed his way down the staircase to the Entrance Hall, looking back every few seconds to yell out a "Sorry!" to someone who had fallen over. By the time he reached the double doors, there was no sign of his quarry.

Still, James had a pretty good idea of where Regulus was heading, since for once he wasn't accompanied by Emma. Acting on a hunch, he raced across the grounds to Greenhouse 5, the one hosting the most magical and fragile of plants. He caught the slighter boy just past Greenhouse 4, using his momentum to drag him into the small alley between the two Herbology classes.

He couldn't help but think of how creepy it was that the Slytherin didn't react, just looked at him coolly, as though James should feel childish for holding him by his collar. Still, James refused to let himself be intimidated. This was the little kid who had spent half of his first summer holidays at the Potter's, and something like that had an effect on whatever influence he exuded now.

'It was you all along, wasn't it?' James asked. 'Every time Sirius thought Emma was influencing you, making you more amenable to your parents' ideals, it was you egging her along, manipulating her into believing whatever pureblood bullshit you buy into.'

Regulus blinked calmly, slowly, glancing down as though he was tired of thugs like James wasting his time.

'Emma made her own choice, James,' he replied. 'She joined for her own reasons, not mine.'

'Bullshit!' James repeated, slamming Regulus frustratedly against the edge of the greenhouse, his head knocking against the metal panels.

'I wouldn't do that again, if I were you,' Regulus growled.

James felt a sharp pain in his side, looking down to see that Regulus had his wand out. *Bastard*, he thought. _That's why he's reacting so calmly._

Still, he let go of Regulus's shirt, and in return the younger boy put away his wand, readjusting his tie. In a flash, James had his own wand out, pressing it to the centre of the Slytherin's green Prefect badge.

Regulus's mouth tightened, his eyes going sleet grey with anger. That, James could deal with. In fact, he looked like Sirius, when Sirius managed to control his bursts of anger.

'You're right,' James said, trying a new tack. 'Forget about the past. What's done is done. What I want you to do now,' he pushed with more force than necessary on the Regulus's chest, 'is to get my sister out of there. Out, completely, get it? No more raids, no more missions, no more Voldemort. I need her safe, and if you cared for her at all, that's what you would want too.'

'If I cared at all?' Regulus asked, indignation slipping into his carefully cultured tones. 'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

'You know what I mean,' James growled, the sound resonating through his chest. 'Why did you ask my sister to marry you? Why so young? I let you off earlier because she seems to really love you, but how do I know you're not just using her? I know that that's what Wilkes tried to do.'
Regulus closed his eyes for a long moment there. James realised that it was what the younger boy did to control his emotions and thoughts. True enough, when he opened them again they were as opaque as the metal at his back.

'Wilkes liked Emma, it's true. But it's common knowledge that the Potters' fortune has but two heirs now: you and your sister,' Regulus had slipped into the tone James recognised as his "storytelling voice". 'It is also common knowledge that the Blacks, the “Noble and Most Ancient House” have far more wealth than is healthy for us. So no, I'm not using her for that.

'On the other hand, you could say that marrying a pureblood is an option to secure the Black family line, since my three cousins are all female and Sirius has officially been disinherited. But let's face it. The controversy that has surrounded the Potters and their love for Muggles…and Muggleborns…is such that I would have been far better off with the likes of Lucinda Rosier, one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. So no, I'm not using her for that.

'As for why so young, well, why are you considering asking Lily Evans to marry you?'

The question disoriented James so much that he lowered his wand in shock.

'How did -'

'The question is not how,' Regulus interrupted, 'but whom. Next time you discuss proposal ideas with Remus Lupin, try not to do it next to the chattiest portrait in the castle.'

James realised that Regulus was referring to the Fat Lady. The Slytherin had already moved on, though.

'The question of why,' he said softly, as though he were almost afraid to say it. 'It's more a question of why ever not. I'm sure that my feelings for your sister do not interest you, though. The question you're really asking, is whether I would be prepared to do anything within my power to see her safe from harm, be it to ruin the Black family name, the Black family treasure, my own safety, my own life.'

James realised then and there that he couldn't have found someone he would trust more with his sister, his other half, than the person standing in front of him that day.

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'So,' Emma said, carefully positioning herself forty five degrees to the right of the glass wall in the Slytherin Common Room.

The seat by the chess board was, according to Regulus, the best place a whisper could carry across the whole room. Lucinda sat half-facing her, whilst Regulus and Rabastan played a half-hearted game of chess to keep up the front of keeping up a front.

'I've set a time,' she said. 'The Muggles will all be out for the village fête that day. The Dark Lord chose well. I believe that nine o'clock at night will be the perfect cover. Night will have fallen and they will have lit the first bonfire of the year. A few children will have gone back home, but mostly the adults will be out to enjoy a drink or two before the lighting of the bonfire. Maximum diversion under cover of darkness and smoke equals maximum panic. Only a few of the most... select of the Dark Lord's friends will be present. After all, this is a ritual reserved only for the elite.'

'By Merlin, you make it sound so sinister,' Lucinda shuddered. 'They're only Muggles, do you really need to be so...theatrical about it?'
The blonde tossed her head over her shoulder as if to prove a point, and Emma had a hard time not catching Regulus's eye. He had made her promise not to say anything about Horcruxes to the others, for their own safety, just as she had not told them about her doubts. Something she had told Lucinda though, was that Lucinda needed to be more vocal in her support for the Dark Lord in the Common Room over the next few days.

Emma had told her that if anyone asked, it was just a ploy to make Rabastan propose to her, but to maintain her neutrality at all costs.

Something in her voice must have given her away though, because ever since, Lucinda kept shooting her worried looks during Charms.

'Speaking of Muggles,' Emma put in as much disgust into her voice as possible. 'I need to go and finish that paper on the importance of the invention of the telephone. Merlin knows that I wish I hadn't taken this subject, but you know...' she smirked as best as she could. 'Anything to keep suspicion at bay.'

With that, Emma grabbed her books, heading out to the library.

'Wait!' Rabastan said quickly, looking up from the game. 'I'll join you. Here Barty, you can take my place, I'm losing anyway.'

***

'Emma! Ems!' Rabastan called, jogging down the hallway with his book bag. 'Damnit Ems, the library's not going anywhere!'

Emma slowed down, allowing him to catch up. 'Sorry,' she replied. 'I was lost in thought.'

'I could tell,' Rabastan replied, tugging his brown locks out of his eyes. He gave the corridor a cursory glance before lowering his voice. 'Mind telling me what that was all about?' he asked. 'You aren't planning anything…dangerous, are you?'

Emma frowned, pursing her lips to the side. She had expected Regulus to tell Rabastan about their plan, but it would be just like him to have her take the risk for this whilst he searched for potential Horcruxes and locations. His reputation had to be perfectly pristine. Hers just had to be…ruthless.

'Actually, I was hoping to talk to you about this,' she answered eventually. 'I was hoping you would join me, as my second, on the raid. No one's a better dueller than you, and I've seen your traps for Aurors. There's a reason you're a part of the Inner Circle.'

'Of course, you only had to ask,' Rabastan said immediately. 'But I thought you and Regulus had made up? Why not ask him, since he's probably got better reconnaissance?'

'Regulus has something else he needs to do,' Emma said quietly as they passed the threshold of the library. 'Look, I'll tell you more later, alright? Let's study for a bit; I really do need to pull my act together. I think Slughorn's getting pretty suspicious that I've abandoned my plans for the future.'

Rabastan snorted, but sat down at the table all the same. The two worked in silence for a while, occasionally asking the other some questions or passing each other a book.

Emma finished her Potions essay, working in the finest details possible in order to bring in an O. If it hadn't been for her and Rabastan's joint practical potions, she would have been failing. She was surprised to find that she enjoyed the work, although she shouldn't have been. Once upon a time, Potions had been one of her favourite subjects.
She sighed, sprinkling sand over the parchment to let it dry. One down, four to go. She would have to go to talk to her other teachers, ask for extensions, makeup exams and the like. That was not something she was looking forward to.

In the meantime, she had another piece of business to attend to.

'So are you going to hand me your Potions essay to look over?' she asked Rabastan.

He looked up, eyebrows raised in disbelief. Blinking and heaving a sigh, he handed over a blank piece of parchment.

'This is what you were after, I suppose?' he asked, slightly louder than usual. A couple of Hufflepuffs looked up. 'I warn you, if I've found that you've copied my properties of Monkshood...' he trailed off threateningly.

The Hufflepuffs shared grins and went back to their group work.

_I know you've found my behaviour recently slightly...erratic_, Emma wrote quickly. _But know that my reasons are well founded. Please keep in mind that my first and foremost concerns are you, Regulus and Lucinda. I took your advice to heart that night, but I believe that we would do better in choosing another path._

_Fear not, my dear Rabastan_, she injected a little humour into the letter. _I am not proposing that we cut ties with our previous engagements. Instead, I think that we should keep our options open. I know for a fact that Lucius keeps aside most of the Malfoy fortune in the case of our failure, courtesy of Narcissa, and I believe that we should do the same, only in a different way._

_This is why, at Easter, the Aurors will be present. I trust you to put into place your best laid traps. We must lose this battle, though it must be a personal win. There will be no Muggles to get in my way this time. You will have my undivided attention when it comes to the fight, and I put our safety into your hands._

Her hand itched to add a _yours truly_, since it seemed like such a formal letter, but she knew that the evidence would be too incriminating should Rabastan not choose to burn it.

Instead, she handed the parchment back to Rabastan.

'Dear Merlin, Rab,' she said in mock horror. 'That spelling of yours is enough to turn old Professor Binns in his grave!'

Rabastan grimaced in response.

***

'Professor, are the rumours true?' James asked at the end of their Order meeting the following Friday.

'And which rumours might these be, Mr Potter?' Minerva McGonagall asked, looking at him through glasses perched on the edge of her nose.

James shifted in his seat. Of course, he hadn't heard any rumours at all. But Emma had assured him that there would be, among the younger students who still mingled despite the differences in colour of their robes.

'That Voldemort,' James gulped. He wasn't sure he'd ever get used to saying it. 'That Voldemort is
planning on destroying an entire village of Muggles.'

'Mr Potter, this is a very serious allegation,' a small man with a top hat said quickly. James couldn't remember his name. 'Are you quite certain?'

'I've heard the same thing,' Benjy Fenwick added, looking from James to Dumbledore. 'And I've heard that it's going to happen on Sunday.'

'Two days!' McGonagall cried. 'And we haven't heard a peep from our usual contacts?' she addressed this last question to the Aurors in the group.

They shook their heads, looking troubled. Remus was looking at James curiously, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

'We have to stop them!' Sirius said, leaping from his chair and knocking it over in the process.

'I agree,' Lily said, more calmly. 'But the most important thing would be to get the Muggles out.'

James could have kissed her in that moment. Trust Lily to think of those who couldn't defend themselves. He made a mental note to tell Wormtail all about it later, since the latter was in detention that evening. He wouldn't be able to relive it with Sirius or Remus, who wouldn't have the proper reactions.

'I second that,' Marlene McKinnon added. 'But how can we do that? Without drawing attention to ourselves?'

'A few of the guys down at the Misused Artefacts owe me a favour,' one of the Prewett twins said, James couldn't tell the difference between the two. 'I could get them to fast-track a memo about something affecting the entire village, putting a Memory Charm on all of them.'

'No,' Dumbledore said. 'A Memory Charm is too risky. We will need a diversion, something that will bring the Muggles out of their homes. I have just the idea. We will have people work the weather to make them think there are violent storms coming and that they must seek refuge at the nearest village. It is nearer to the river than the rest, after all. There could be a great risk of flooding.'

'Ah, splendid idea!' the small wizard said enthusiastically.

'Thank you Dedalus,' Dumbledore smiled. 'Very well, if this is true and we are to act, then this meeting must adjourn before its time, I'm afraid. We have much to do. Thank you, Mr Potter, Mr Fenwick, for bringing this to our attention.'

James let out a breath he didn't even realise he was holding, thankful that his part of the plan was in motion, and wondering how long he could keep it up for.
'Ready?' Emma asked everyone as they stood around the Portkey in Hogsmeade.

She was nervous and could tell that Rabastan was too, even through his mask. He had told her on the way there that he was worried about not being able to scout out the village beforehand, lest the Dark Lord think that they knew there would be trouble. She tried not to show it though, letting her trademark smirk slide onto her face and lifting her mask slightly to survey her group.

Regulus was stoic as ever, wand polished and at the ready in the one hand, sleeves rolled up to display the Dark Mark in all of its glory. Barty was eager, excited even. He kept readjusting his mask, even though it was magically enhanced to partially mould to his face. Emma realised that it would be his first raid, his first mission for the Dark Lord as a fully fledged Inner member.

Bellatrix clapped her hand on Emma's shoulder, making her start. She smiled widely, showing perfectly white teeth. On Narcissa, the gesture made her look inviting; Bellatrix simply looked vicious.

'Ready, little Pottie?' she asked, brimming with enthusiasm. 'Oh, and by the way, nice catch Reggie,' she nodded her head towards Regulus, who couldn't help but wince at the nickname. 'I had to learn about your engagement from grandfather, so I was most disappointed, but you've definitely made up for that by snagging one of the purest witches available.'

Bellatrix threw a wink at Emma, who supposed that she was on the receiving end of the highest compliment Bellatrix could give. She was glad that her silver mask hid her burning cheeks. Before she or Regulus could say a thing, Rodolphus checked his watch.

'Sorry to break up the reunion, but it's time we left. Emma?' he asked.

Emma understood immediately. Tonight was her responsibility; she had to give the order. Meeting Rabastan's eyes over the Portkey, she placed a finger on the circular plate.

'Everyone on the Portkey,' she said, checking her own watch. 'In three…two…one.'

***

As soon as her feet touched the ground, Emma whipped out her wand and pointed it to the sky.

'Morsmordre'!

Green tendrils shot out of the tip of her wand towards the sky, coalescing into the signature snake entwined with a human skull. Emma took a second to watch it form, hood slipping as she did so.

A hand moved to place her hood back into place. Emma looked down to find Bellatrix staring at her, eyes soft between the snake-like slits in her mask.
'There's nothing quite like your first time casting it, is there?' she asked, uncharacteristically serious.

The moment was gone as soon as it came though, since Antonin Dolohov, the last member of their group, came running up to them, having made a cursory sweep of the area.

'The Muggles,' he panted, hands on his knees. 'They're gone!'

'What?' Emma asked immediately, letting anger lace her voice.

Bellatrix wasted no time in casting the *Homenum Revelio* spell. Emma waited with baited breath, calling the others back to the Portkey.

'No one but the seven of us,' Bellatrix cursed loudly. She rounded on Emma. 'Where are the Muggles?'

Emma pretended to search, her heart feeling like it would burst out of her chest if it beat any more violently.

'They were supposed to be here,' she said plaintively, before hearing the tell-tale crack of Apparition. 'It's a trap!' she yelled. 'Everyone, get out now! We'll come back another day.'

On cue, her fellow Death Eaters turned as one, only to find themselves spinning on the spot.

'Anti-Apparition Charms,' Rabastan stated grimly.

'Yes, thank you Captain Obvious,' Emma said angrily, making a mental note to apologise to Rabastan later. 'I guess we'll just have to fight this one out.'

'I guess it's my lucky day,' Rodolphus rumbled. 'The only thing I like better than Muggle hunting is blood traitor hunting!'

Emma raised her eyebrows at this, glad that the shift in her mask couldn't be seen over her hood. Several more cracks were heard and she ran over to Rabastan, grabbing him and bodily throwing him behind an abandoned cart. Regulus followed soon after, conjuring piles of hay to one side.

Barty would be protected by Dolohov, infamous for his purple curse, but with the lesser known trait of having the ability to protect new Death Eaters during raids. Every time Emma had been paired up with him, she hadn't received a scratch. Barty was in good hands.

'What's the plan, Rab?' she whispered. 'I didn't expect them to get here so quickly. Someone must have given them the exact time.'

Rabastan was busy massaging his arm.

'Next time, try to remember I'm not a Quaffle, he huffed, before taking on a business-like tone. 'The drill is, once we've downed enough to create a gap, we'll sprint for the Apparition boundaries. Only Dumbledore's club is here now, and we don't know if they'll even signal the Ministry. The others know that the first priority is to make sure the Hogwarts students don't get caught, since we're the closest to Dumbledore. Regulus, your job is to keep an eye on Barty. I know he's with Dolohov, but it'll be your responsibility to bring him to the barrier in one piece.'

A second later, a hex blasted through their makeshift barrier and the three rolled to the side, each going their own way.

*Dear Merlin,* Emma squeezed her eyes shut for half a second. *Please let us all get out in one piece.*
Dolohov was a war machine, taking on Alastor Moody and both Prewitt twins at once, allowing Barty to fire well-placed sneak attacks from time to time.

Bellatrix and Rodolphus had their hands full with Albus Dumbledore himself, though fortunately Minerva McGonagall appeared to have been left behind at Hogwarts in case Voldemort attempted an assault on the school. Either way, it was clear to Emma that it was a losing battle, although both Death Eaters were powerful in their own right.

Someone Emma didn't recognise stepped straight into her path, and Emma readied her wand, only to see the man blasted to the left, soaring back towards the village and falling on the broken fence. She stared as a cloud of dust rose from where he lay, unmoving.

'Come on, Ems, we've got to go!' Rabastan yelled, pulling her by the arm towards the border. 'I think Dumbledore's alerted the Aurors, they've gone on the defensive as if they're waiting for someone.'

Sure enough, now that Emma looked closely, most Order members seemed to be conserving their strength. Fortunately, it didn't seem like anyone at school was there, which meant that James would be safe at Hogwarts.

'Alright,' she said, meeting Rabastan's pale green eyes in a sea of dirt, blood and sweat. 'I know what to do. Cover me.'

As Rabastan protected her from stray spells, Emma rolled up her sleeve with difficulty, it having stuck to a scab on her wrist. Tugging the cloth, she managed to rip it free, revealing the Dark Mark beneath. Bringing her wand around, she pressed the point into the skull, whispering a small Severing Charm to draw blood.

The bright red tattoo seemed to drink the blood, the liquid travelling through the skull and snake until it turned the entire mark to an inky black.

Rabastan let out a cry of pain, showing that the magic had done its work. He glanced back, making sure that the tattoo had completely changed, before grabbing Emma's arm once more and hustling her to the village edge.

'Now we really need to go,' he said, ducking under a nearby bush. 'Have you seen Regulus anywhere?'

Emma cast her eyes about, but saw no sign of Regulus's slight build amongst the Death Eaters.

'We don't have time for this,' she said impatiently. 'Homenum Revelio!'

Rabastan looked down at his stomach, and Emma imagined that he felt the tell tale lurch of the spell identifying his body. Glancing over the village once more, Emma counted the bodies moving around and noticed something odd. There were too many, all linked in a circle, all moving slowly around the village exterior. She cast her eyes about, only to notice some not far from their own position.

'The Aurors are already here!' she cried urgently, panic surging in her veins. 'He's going to be killed!'

'Emma, don't!' Rabastan yelled, but it was too late.

Emma had run ahead in front, causing the Aurors nearest to them to reveal themselves.

'Incarcerous,' one shouted, pointing her wand at Emma.
Ropes fell neatly around the Slytherin, but with a sweep of her wand, Emma had burned them away. She might be more reckless when angry, but she was also more powerful.

'Behind you!' Rabastan shouted, sending Stunner after Stunner in a panic.

Emma immediately swivelled around, diving back to the brush. She tapped her wand on Rabastan's head, then her own, and without waiting to see if her spell had succeeded, grabbed him and made a break for the village.

The Disillusionment Charm gained them precious seconds, but it wasn't hard to notice the chameleon-like ripple of scenery and the Aurors were soon casting *Finite* in their direction.

Emma had a stitch in her side by the time she reached Dolohov and Barty.

'Aurors,' she gasped. 'All around... I called the Dark Lord.'

Dolohov nodded and intensified his spells, catching Fabian Prewett with a Conjunctivitus Curse that had him momentarily occupied. Barty took the opportunity to cast the Body-Binding Curse, effectively ending Fabian's participation in the duel.

'Go,' Dolohov urged, holding an arm out as though to shield the teenagers from further fire. 'We can handle this.'

With that, the burly man gave a blood-curdling war cry that was so unlike him it would have been funny, if Emma didn't know it was to attract the attention of the Order and Auror members.

'Look,' Barty said, pointing. 'The Order members are retreating.'

It was true. Gideon had taken hold of Fabian and dragged him towards the barriers just as the Aurors burst from their cover. It seemed as though the Order had come simply to buy time for the Ministry to organise an attack. Emma's fear redoubled.

'Where's Regulus?' she asked urgently.

Barty simply shook his head. 'I thought he was with you?'

Emma grimaced, but refused to give up hope. 'Stay close, Barty. We'll do our best to protect you.'

'I don't need protecting,' Barty started angrily, but quietened when Rabastan and Emma turned around with equally venomous looks.

'Come on,' Emma muttered to Rabastan. 'He has to be around here somewhere.'

She had barely rounded the next building before the ground exploded in front of them; the result of a *Bombarda Maxima* spell. Emma found herself knocked to the floor, her ears ringing from the blast. There was dirt in her eyes and mouth, and she quickly spat it out, rubbing at her eyes until her vision came back, albeit blurry.

'Emma! Emma!' Barty was yelling over and over, but it seemed to Emma as though he was under the Black Lake.

She rolled over, sitting up to frown at Barty. He gesticulated wildly, and she turned around to see an Auror leaning down to face her, so close that she could see the shock on the man's face.

He mouthed something, but Emma couldn't hear. Suddenly, she realised why Barty was so anxious. The Auror's navy blue robes were brushing the floor between her and her wand…but also her Death
Eater's mask.

*He's seen me!* she thought in one horrified moment, reaching between the man's boots for her wand. He moved his foot, blocking her access. She knew that she should try some wandless magic, that she should get up, that she should run, but the world was still spinning and she felt as though she would fall over if she even tried to move any further.

The whistling in her ears died down enough that she was able to hear the man muttering over and over as he transfigured ropes to bind her hands.

'So young, so young.'

Then a bright light sent stars flying over her vision, accompanied by those two fatal words.

'*Avada Kedavra.*'

*Rabastan no!* She thought as darkness took over her.

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As soon as he reached Barty and Dolohov, Regulus realised that they were in trouble. Albus Dumbledore and the Prewett siblings were there, three of England's greatest duellers. Of course, they had Bellatrix and - more importantly - Dolohov with them, but still, it was three on two, and Bellatrix had her hands full with Dumbledore.

He waited for a moment, unsure as to how to be of help. The Order hadn't picked up on his presence yet, only going after Emma and Rabastan, but Regulus was fairly certain that they wouldn't have brought so few people. Not if there was a chance to bring in Bellatrix Black, the Dark Lord's lieutenant.

Sure enough, he noticed a short man in a large hat send off some kind of Patronus into the woods. Given that there were no Dementors for miles around, it must have been a coded message of sorts. Perhaps depending on the Patronus shown?

Shaking his head of academic thoughts, Regulus hit upon an idea. Crawling back to their starting spot, Regulus grabbed the plate, which had miraculously survived the initial skirmish. Magic, he supposed.

He almost dropped it as soon as he touched it, a searing pain burning its way up his left arm. He glanced down at his sleeveless forearm: sure enough, the Dark Mark was fulfilling its purpose. After making sure that he hadn't forgotten any other missions that night, he pressed on it. Nothing happened. Someone in the vicinity must have activated it.

*That means the Aurors are here,* he thought, redoubling his pace as he tried to find the others.

By the time he had managed to creep around the various battle zones back to where Dolohov and Barty were, they were gone. Cursing inwardly, he trekked back to the centre of town, attempting to find any of his classmates.

He checked his watch. The Portkey was due to leave in three minutes. If he couldn't find them before that, he would have to make a choice: leave without them, or drop the useless Portkey and find another way out of the Auror infested place.

Suddenly, a blast tore up part of the ground to his left, so he immediately snuck that way, hoping that his friends were there, and that it wasn't Bellatrix having her way with another Order member.
He arrived on the scene just to see a flash of green light speed towards an Auror. The man crumpled to the ground instantaneously, revealing Emma also lying on the ground, unmoving.

*No!* Regulus thought, a surge of emotion coursing through him. He ran towards the motionless girl, almost dropping the plate in his haste.

'Don't worry,' Rabastan said, crouching down beside him. 'She'll be fine.'

The taller boy looked like he had been through hell and back, his face blackened by dirt, mud and blood. For the first time, Regulus noticed that Barty was standing behind him, straw blond hair scattered with hay and dirt. Other than that, the younger boy didn't have a scratch on him, although he looked petrified.

His immediate question answered, Regulus checked his watch. They had little time left. The three adults were still fighting at the risk of being overwhelmed, but Regulus had to hope reinforcements were arriving soon. Either way, the kids wouldn't be much help. He knew Cousin Bella could blast her way through the Anti-Apparition wards if she really wanted to.

'Thirty seconds,' he said, reminding himself of Rodolphus earlier. Only this time, they were fewer and a lot worse for wear. 'Rabastan, can you grab Emma's other arm? Three…two…one…'
Repercussions

They appeared in Hogsmeade, gasping for breath. Not because the Portkey had malfunctioned, or because they had inhaled too much dust at Little Hangleton, but because they were in shock from having made it out alive.

‘Wow,’ Barty summed up their feelings. ‘That was…intense.’

‘It’s not always like that, Barty,’ Rabastan hastened to say. ‘That…didn’t go according to plan.’

He looked down at Emma, disapproval and worry fighting for dominance of his features. Finally, he settled for just looking grimly at Regulus, who had been staring at the ground, thinking hard. When there was no obvious response from his best friend, Rabastan took charge.

‘Rennervate,’ he said, pointing his wand at Emma and hoping that she had just fainted, and not passed out from something worse.

The girl’s eyes snapped open and she tried to sit up, only to clutch at her head in pain. Rabastan felt the thrill of the forbidden when he saw the Dark Mark on her forearm, lazily curling around her wrist.

Odd, Rabastan thought. I was sure that it couldn’t move that much.

He shrugged it off, instead kneeling down in front of Emma. Barty still seemed to be in shock, and Regulus…well, who knew what Regulus was doing half the time? Mostly brooding and studying, from what Rabastan had experienced, though he was a more seasoned dueller than both of the other seventh years.

Still, there was a reason the Dark Lord hadn’t included him in the tactician subgroup. Regulus was intelligent and a powerful wizard, but he wasn’t a good planner, and tended to get caught up in situational analysis.

So Rabastan made himself the de facto leader, a position he usually hated. Then again, he didn’t usually find himself in an ambush planted by a friend for their own side.

‘There are a ton of Aurors there, Ems,’ he said, slightly roughly. She still looked glazed, her blue eyes unfocused. ‘Ems? Can you hear me?’

‘Yeah,’ she replied. ‘Just don’t whisper so much.’

Rabastan shot a worried look towards Barty and Regulus, who had by now tuned in to the conversation. None of them were particularly good at Healing, so they would just have to hope the noise would die down. The ringing in Rabastan’s own ears from the blast had faded when they took the Portkey, but he hadn’t been as close.

‘What are we going to do?’ he asked, a little louder. ‘My brother’s still out there, against at least twenty Aurors, with only Bellatrix and Dolohov to back him up. The others haven’t arrived yet. I’m not sure they’re even coming.’

The worry seeped into his voice as he imagined Rodolphus being carted off to Azkaban, Dolohov, his brother’s best friend, who had always been his childhood idol, dead in the field like the Auror who had identified Emma.
‘You had a plan for Little Hangleton. You have a plan for everything. What’s your plan for this?’ he raised his voice. Still, he didn’t want Barty to accuse Emma of treachery, not when she had promised Rabastan she would look after their own, so he bit his tongue from saying more.

Emma blinked a few seconds, as though processing the information, then frowned at her Dark Mark, watching it curl around her wrist and elbow.

‘I have an idea,’ she said, slightly slurring her words. ‘Show me your Dark Mark, Bast.’

Rabastan grudgingly obliged, but didn’t know if showing his mark would do any good. Plus, Emma still seemed too out of it to plan anything. Now that Rabastan got a closer look at her, he could see that there was a slight trickle of blood trailing from one ear.

‘Episkey,’ a quiet voice sounded from his left.

Regulus had crouched down next to him, obviously having resolved his internal questions. Sensing Rabastan’s gaze on him, Regulus turned to look at his friend, sharing his sense of futility. Immediately, Rabastan felt reassured.

He regretted his earlier thoughts. Though the others in their dorm never understood their friendship, Rabastan knew that Regulus was one of the few people who could be a true friend, loyal until the end. And Rabastan felt a sort of protectiveness over him. Regulus didn’t belong in Slytherin, not truly. He rarely used the knowledge he gained over others against them. Privately, Rabastan thought that Regulus might have been Sorted into another House had he not been a Black, but was glad all the same.

He was glad for all of them.

Something sharp stabbed his arm and he hissed in pain. Looking down, he saw that Emma had cut into his forearm with a jagged rock. She smiled sheepishly at him.

‘This ringing in my ears is killing me,’ she said. ‘I can’t concentrate on the simplest of spells. Press your wand to the mark.’

Rabastan did as he was told, realising then what Emma’s plan had been. The Dark Mark had blood magic, more powerful than the woven spells of even several wizards.

As Barty, Regulus and Emma clutched at their own arms, three large cracks resounded in the deserted village.

‘Thanks, little brother,’ Rodolphus said, clapping Rabastan on the shoulder.

Rabastan restrained himself from hugging his older brother in front of the others, but then changed his mind.

_If I can’t hug my brother when I thought he was about to die, when can I?_’ he thought to himself, hugging Rodolphus tightly.

The older man gave his thinner brother a few claps on the back, before clearing his throat and stepping back.

Before anything else could happen, another crack resounded, and the blond locks of Lucius Malfoy shone under a metallic mask of his own. After glancing around, he removed his mask.

‘What games do you think you are playing?’ he asked, his tone so soft it was almost hissing. ‘You
know the Mark is only to be used in the most dire of circumstances. Once could have been an accident, but twice?’

Another crack resounded, the newcomer raising his wand immediately, but before he could cast anything, Malfoy called out to him. ‘It’s alright, Avery. There’s no danger.’

‘No danger?’ Dolohov huffed, nursing a bloody wand arm. ‘I’d like to see you fight your way past Albus Dumbledore and the best twenty Aurors the Ministry had. If it wasn’t for young Lestrange here, we could have been dead meat. Last time I ever sign up for a Muggle hunt without vetting the place out first, I’m telling you.’

‘Is this true?’ Malfoy looked to Bellatrix for confirmation.

She nodded, baring her teeth with disappointment. Rabastan knew that she would have liked to be the one to bring the old man to his knees.

‘Well,’ Malfoy said. ‘That changes everything. Apparate to our new base of operations.’

He made as if to turn around, but Rabastan quickly interjected. ‘Where is that, exactly?’

Lucius turned, surprised, as though he had forgotten Rabastan even existed

_Always sucking up to the most important of us_, Rabastan thought sourly. He had never particularly liked Lucius Malfoy, who would treat people according to their importance in his view. Being Rodolphus’s younger brother made Rabastan expendable, since his brother had all the connections, and Rabastan didn’t enjoy being ignored.

‘Perhaps the children should go back to Hogwarts,’ Malfoy said, his pale eyes flickering over the four of them grouped together. He frowned. ‘What has happened to Emma? Dear Narcissa won’t be pleased if you’ve neglected her, Bella.’

‘She got caught in the fringe of an explosion,’ Barty hastened to explain. ‘It wasn’t Bellatrix’s fault.’

He looked nervous, as though it were wrong of him to address someone so high in the Dark Lord’s hierarchy by their first name. As for Bellatrix, she looked surprised, and a little amused, that Barty would jump up to defend her.

‘I think baby Crouch is starting to grow on me,’ she grinned. ‘We’ll bring them along. It’s time they knew where it was, anyway.’

With that she grabbed Regulus’s arm and Apparated away, leaving Barty to Side-Along with Avery, whilst Malfoy knelt down to half-carry Emma and Dolohov grasped Malfoy’s shoulder.

‘Come on, little brother,’ Rodolphus said, holding an arm out for Rabastan. ‘You did well today.’

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They Apparated to a pathway on the top of a hill, kissing gate blocking their path to a stately manor house. Avery went first, Charming the gate open so that he didn’t have to break his pace. The rest of them trooped after him, feeling the effects of a drawn out duel.

Rabastan felt as though he could pass out on a sofa there and then, but at the same time the adrenaline of failure feebly stirred him into action. His movements were fluid, but he had trouble
keeping his eyes open, even if his mind was ablur.

He noted the multitude of windows upon entering through the front door disapprovingly. In the case of an attack, they would provide easy armaments for either side, but mostly a hindrance. Still, he supposed that Lucinda would admire the stain glass facade on the door.

_She would probably want that in her own house, later_, he mused, before having a slight panic attack. _Wait, was I just picturing Lucinda later in life? That doesn’t mean anything, does it? Was I imagining her being in a house with me? Is this even a conversation I want to be having with myself at this point in time?_

A sharp elbow made its way into his side and he started, only to see Regulus look at him intensely.

.getRight, Rabastan thought. He had a tendency to act out his thoughts on his face, unlike a certain someone he could name.

He concentrated once more on the décor, almost snorting with laughter at the fact he was concentrating on décor. _Focus, Rabastan_, he told himself sternly. His concentration was really slipping.

They entered the drawing room, a large rectangular room with stone floor and opulent rugs. Rabastan had the fleeting urge to remove his filthy shoes and let his feet bask in their warmth, but curbed it. Lifting his head, he noticed that half of the other Death Eaters were already standing around in a semi-circle around a large, high-backed armchair.

A pale hand rested on each arm, with long fingers more suited to playing music than ordering murders. Rabastan raised his eyes, but didn’t dare look the Dark Lord in the eye, for fear of the reprimand he would see there.

‘I find myself…disappointed,’ the Dark Lord said softly, his voice seemingly whispering into Rabastan’s very soul.

He suppressed a shudder.

‘Emma, I trusted you with this operation,’ the hooded man turned his face to Rabastan’s right, where the girl was still being propped up by Malfoy and Dolohov.

Emma looked even more like hell than she had earlier. Regulus may have removed the most visible signs of her injuries, but her eyelids were moving up and down so heavily she could have been mistaken for Bellatrix on a bad day. Her mouth was slightly open, as though she hadn’t the energy to work her jaw properly.

A slight movement to his left caught his eye, and a jolt of red energy was sent Emma’s way, forcing her to clamp her mouth shut and look around with newfound clarity.

‘Thank you, Regulus,’ the Dark Lord said politely. ‘But had I needed assistance, I would have asked.’

Regulus gave a short nod and stowed his wand back in its holster, returning to watch the scene. Rabastan marvelled at his calm demeanour; he himself was sure that the worry was written plain across his face.

‘There were Aurors,’ Emma mumbled, her voice sounding nothing like her usual self-assured tones. ‘No, there was Dumbledore. Then Aurors.’
When no more information was forthcoming, the Dark Lord raised a single eyebrow and sighed.

‘I confess, I find myself most disappointed. I had higher hopes for you, but I see that you have suffered enough for your ineptitude. Very well,’ he rose from his chair. ‘Come closer, so that I may find out more for myself.’

‘Wait!’ Regulus said quickly, the words spilling out. ‘Let me, my Lord.’

*Regulus, what are you doing?* Rabastan yelled inwardly. No one liked to be probed by the Dark Lord’s Legilimency if they could help it.

For a second, he thought the Dark Lord would strike Regulus down there and then for his impertinence, but instead a cruel smile curled over his thin lips.

‘Your enthusiasm is admirable, Regulus,’ the Dark Lord said. ‘Very well, I will allow you to prove your loyalty once more. You may approach.’

Regulus walked forwards to kneel before the Dark Lord, but it wasn’t an act of submission, Rabastan noticed. Rather that of a distinguished squire about to be knighted.

The Dark Lord brushed Regulus’s hair out of his eyes in an almost kindly manner, before raising his chin to look him in the eye. A long moment passed without either of them moving, though Rabastan noticed that Emma had once more near slumped into Dolohov’s arms, who seemed rather uncomfortable with the situation.

Suddenly, Rabastan remembered that Dolohov was hurt and soundlessly motioned to the older man. Gratefully, Dolohov swivelled around, allowing Rabastan to sling Emma’s arm around his shoulder, supporting her with ease after seven years of Quidditch training.

A few minutes later, the Dark Lord released his hold on Regulus, letting the Hogwarts student fall back onto his ankles as he became aware of his surroundings.

‘Thank you for this information,’ he said. ‘Now, I believe that a few things are in order. First of all, we must tend to our wounded.’

Rabastan couldn’t hide his shock. Was that really it? Were they not going to be punished for their botched raid?

Voldemort turned to look him directly in the eye, black meeting green. ‘My dear Rabastan,’ he said in response to Rabastan’s thoughts. ‘Incompetence is met with punishment without fail. But this particular incident has given me valuable information on our enemies, thanks to Regulus’s perceptive skills. We now know the amount of time it takes for Dumbledore’s pathetic club to summon the Aurors and their preferred means of communication.’

As an afterthought, the Dark Lord added. ‘The Muggles will be dealt with another day.’

‘My Lord,’ Bellatrix said breathlessly, falling to her knees. ‘Thank you, my Lord.’

Rodolphus and Dolohov bowed their heads likewise in a sign of thanks and respect, neither quite believing their luck.

Voldemort drew his wand, a long, thin contraption that reminded Rabastan of the man himself, and with a flick and a wave, Dolohov’s arm was cleaned and bandaged. Approaching Emma and Rabastan, he looked almost paternal in his concern for them, and Rabastan felt a wave of loyalty wash over him.
Would Dumbledore have done as much? Would Dumbledore know how to do as much?

Moments later, Emma was sleeping soundly, her head trauma assuredly gone, though Voldemort warned that she would stay that way for the next twenty-four hours.

Next, he turned to Rabastan.

‘Congratulations are in order,’ the Dark Lord said. ‘Fear not, my faithful friend. You rid us of a powerful enemy today, Owen Vance. The Auror department will have to find themselves a new liaison with the Misuse of Magical Artefacts Department, allowing us to make our move.

‘Rookwood,’ he called, not turning around. ‘Make sure that Nott is recommended. Nott, let us hope that you do not fail the Auror test this time.’

Rabastan could almost taste the threat. Knowing that it was not for him or his friends made all the difference. He began to breathe easily again.

‘Rabastan, I am putting you in charge of Hogwarts operations during Emma’s recovery,’ the Dark Lord instructed, and Rabastan felt his chest puff up with pride.

As Voldemort approached Barty with words of encouragement, and Bellatrix and Rodolphus to discuss more of a new strategy to make the Ministry fall, Regulus got up from the centre of the room and moved towards Rabastan.

‘Here, I’ll take her,’ he said quietly.

Rabastan looked at his friend dubiously. The Dark Lord was notorious for being thorough in his mind viewings. But Regulus simply looked worried and impatient, his Occlumency shield having been shredded by Voldemort’s investigation.

‘I’ve carried her after a Death Eater meeting before,’ Regulus reminded him, and Rabastan remembered that his two friends had been at this for at least a year longer than he, if not more.

Rabastan shifted, ducking his head under Emma’s arm and allowing Regulus to pick her up like a baby, her head tucked close to her knees. She would have a lot of catching up to do.

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‘Where’s my sister?’ James demanded angrily.

Rabastan shushed him loudly, looking around the Potions class. Regulus wasted even less time, casting a non-verbal Silencing Charm.

‘He found out,’ he explained to Rabastan. At the latter’s shocked expression, he embellished a little. ‘He promised not to say anything, and besides, he thinks that only Emma and I...’ He trailed off, looking at Rabastan meaningfully. ‘Anyway, I’ll take care of this.’

Without further ado, Regulus shoved James into the supply room and shut the door behind him.

‘Where is female James?’ Sirius asked curiously, coming up from behind Rabastan. ‘Also, why has that git just locked himself in the closet with my brother?’

‘She’s sick,’ Rabastan replied shortly. Great, I’m left to deal with the crazy one. ‘Lucinda said it was some kind of twenty-four hour bug, but I’ll be sure to tell her you missed her. And “that git”? I
thought you and Potter were inseperable.’

‘No, the other git,’ Sirius said, his mouth turning downwards unpleasantly. ‘The one whose family I have proudly renounced.’

‘Well, sorry to break it to you,’ Rabastan said cheerfully, not feeling sorry at all. ‘But you’ve chosen the wrong surrogate family. Soon your blood brother will become a part of your adopted family. Funny, the way things work out sometimes, isn’t it?’

‘Shove off,’ Sirius growled, pushing Rabastan out of the way to get at the ingredients room.

‘Now, now, boys,’ Slughorn said, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. ‘Let’s all be nice here. Why is this supply room closed?’

‘Sorry,’ James’s face appeared sheepishly. ‘I knocked over one of the display cabinets and Regulus and I were cleaning it up a bit before anyone stepped on the broken glass.’

‘See, now that’s teamwork!’ Slughorn beamed. ‘Five points to Slytherin and Gryffindor for interhouse cooperation.’
Hey guys!
I realise that I don't give you enough love for the really sweet comments some of you have written. I try to reply to them individually to avoid a huge AN at the start of each chapter, but just wanted to say thanks so much!
Enjoy ;)

Emma blinked, rubbing her eyes, but her surroundings were still black. She panicked for half a second; sitting up so quickly her sight was obstructed by a cloud of dots. Blinking several more times, she realised that she wasn’t blind, just lying in a dark room.

‘Where am I?’ she asked aloud, her last memory being of the raid at Little Hangleton.

The others! she thought immediately.

She ripped off the blanket someone had wrapped her in and got out of bed, moving forwards only to walk into a different bed post.

She hissed in pain, rubbing her shin.

‘Emma?’ Lucinda asked blearily, her sheet of blonde hair a pinprick of light in the darkness.

Emma realised that she was back in her Hogwarts dorm and had walked into Alecto’s bed.

‘How did I get here?’ Emma asked. ‘What time is it?’

‘It’s about midnight, Ems,’ Lucinda’s disembodied voice replied. ‘Go back to sleep, I’ll tell you about it in Charms tomorrow.’

‘But we don’t have Charms on Mondays,’ Emma replied, frowning into the dark.

No response was forthcoming. Lucinda had fallen back to sleep. Emma got back into bed and tried to do the same, but found that she couldn’t without answers. Throwing off the covers, she crept back towards the door, navigating a little better now that she knew where she was.

On her way to the boy’s dorms, she noticed that there were several figures in front of the fire. Her curiosity taking hold of her, she walked back towards the sofas.

Rabastan, Regulus, Barty, Severus and Wilkes were deep in whispered conversation. As she grew closer, an incessant insect-like buzz sounded in her ears.

‘Mind if I join?’ she asked, instantly recognising Severus’s creation.

The five boys looked around, half getting up and half drawing their wands. They relaxed upon seeing who it was, and Severus made a swishing motion with his wand. The white noise relented.

‘Sorry, Ems,’ Rabastan said sheepishly. ‘We didn’t know when you would wake up.’
‘That’s all right,’ Emma replied, although she really wished someone would have just used *Rennervate* on her when she fainted. ‘How did we get back from the field? When do we brief the Dark Lord? I assume that’s what this meeting is about, though I don’t know why Wilkes and Severus are here. Don’t you have a different assignment? Namely, getting into Dumbledore’s good graces?’

‘Someone better bring her up to speed,’ Severus said, rolling his eyes.

Emma raised an eyebrow, placing her hands on her hips.

‘Well, Ems,’ Rabastan started, when no one else rose to speak. ‘You got caught pretty badly by a *Bombarda Maxima* and fainted. Reg managed to get to the Portkey and I guess you were pretty out of it when we *Rennervated* you, because you were the one to call the others using the Dark Mark again.

‘Long story short, the Dark Lord was pissed that we used the Mark twice in one simple raid, but it’s okay because we found out more info on the Aurors. Now he wants to know how the Aurors knew all of this in the first place. He put a Healing spell on you that meant that you wouldn’t wake for at least twenty-four hours, so he gave us until Tuesday to give him an answer.’

Emma digested all of this as quickly as he spoke. Glancing down, she realised that she was still in her Death Eater robes, though someone had the foresight to remove her Mask before putting her in her dorm. She made a grab for her pockets and was relieved to find her wand safely tucked away.

*It must be Monday evening*, she thought. She hated this feeling of being out of the loop, caught flat-footed with a twenty-four hour time gap in which anything could have happened.

‘So the Dark Lord really didn’t punish anyone?’ Emma asked incredulously. The last time a raid went this badly; there had been hell to pay.

‘Well, Rabastan managed to kill two Aurors, so he was pretty satisfied with that outcome,’ Barty piped up.

‘Satisfied enough to make Rabastan head of operations at Hogwarts,’ Regulus added with a meaningful look.

Emma ignored her blood boiling in her veins. She shouldn’t be angry about having been demoted. It meant that less attention was on her. But everyone knew that the Dark Lord didn’t appreciate failure, no matter what he said. She was weaker now, and everyone knew it. Still, she couldn’t begrudge Rabastan his victory. Aurors were his territory, and he performed admirably. Any further thought would be saved for later.

Instead, she simply nodded and recast the Muffliato spell, coming over to sit with the group. Next to her, Wilkes glanced nervously at her still black Dark Mark, exposed in all of its glory.

‘Where are we up to, then?’ she asked.

‘Well, the first person to ask how this happened would be you,’ Severus Snape said, his mouth curled up into a smirk. ‘Just why would you find it a good idea to belt out your plan to the whole of Slytherin?’

‘Before we get any further,’ Barty intervened, ‘shouldn’t Emma cover her mark up? Anyone could walk in here, and if the torn and bloody robes don’t give her away, then the mark of the Dark Lord sure as hell will.’
‘Good point,’ Emma replied, quickly disrobing and pulling down her shirt sleeves to cover the Dark Mark. ‘Regulus, if you would?’

‘Tergeo,’ Regulus flicked his wand, and most of the dirt came off from Emma’s clothes.

‘They’re still ripped, but they’ll have to do,’ Emma said, swivelling to look at her right shoulder, where her top was currently in tatters. ‘I’ll say that Rabastan brought me into the Forbidden Forest for some fresh air.’

‘Hey!’ Rabastan protested, but Emma ignored him.

Although Rabastan had official authority, habit made Emma take charge.

‘As for your questions, Severus, I had my reasons,’ she said, inventing wildly. She had the sketch of a risky plan in mind, and hoped that she was a good enough judge of character to pull it off. ‘One, I wanted to spread the knowledge of our power within our own House. How can we expect the Wizarding World to fall into line, if we keep all we do secret? Let the younger years gossip, I gave them no time or date. In fact,’ she said, turning to Barty. ‘I’m surprised you haven’t told them yet. After all, it was your idea.’

Barty frowned, but didn’t contradict her, preferring to keep his options open.

‘I was waiting until you were awake,’ he said cautiously, eyes probing her own.

‘Well,’ Emma said, turning to face Severus. ‘It was Barty’s idea to inform Benjy Fenwick of the date of the raid. We’ve suspected for a while that he was part of Dumbledore’s Order, and this was the perfect time to test the theory.

‘I told Rabastan and Regulus to expect trouble, but no one informed you two, as the plan would work better the fewer people knew. This way, only I, Barty, Regulus, Rabastan or Fenwick could have informed the Aurors. Who do you think it was?’

Rabastan let out an almost palpable sigh of relief. The group turned to him and he merely shrugged. ‘Wouldn’t you have been curious as to why Emma was expecting Aurors, too?’

Wilkes and Snape seemed to buy the excuse. Regulus gave a slight shake of his head, but made no comment. Emma decided to press on before Barty could say anything.

‘I’ll write a letter to Narcissa tomorrow. We correspond regularly, so no one will be suspicious, and Lucius will probably have informed her of tonight…last night’s events. As for the Dark Lord, I am sure that he will see that uncovering a potential Order source, as well as their working method, is worth much more than the lives of a few pathetic Muggles.’ She paused, before carefully adding offhandedly. ‘Besides, there are plenty more villages in the region.’

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The next day, Barty caught Emma as she was going up for breakfast. Stifling a yawn - despite having lost twenty-four hours and then some, she felt exhausted - she acquiesced, motioning Lucinda to go on without her.

‘What the hell was last night?’ Barty asked. ‘Or did I suddenly lose part of my memory?’

‘I fucked up, Barty, plain and simple,’ Emma said. ‘I wasn’t careful enough in the locations we used,
and we paid the price for it. I was demoted, and we’ll be more careful in the future, but that wouldn’t have been enough for the Dark Lord.

‘Now, look, before you say that I’m throwing you under the bus,’ she raised her voice over Barty’s protests. ‘I won’t tell that to Narcissa in my message if you don’t want me to. But think about it. Who is the Dark Lord going to reward for finding out the Order’s method of communication? For finding out that they don’t have a direct line to the Aurors? For having access to an Order member, who we can feed information if we want to? If you play this right, you can have a proper excuse for getting closer to Fenwick, and he’ll be too valuable of an asset to kill off. It’s your choice.’

Barty closed his mouth into a tight line, his eyes wide beneath straw blond hair. Finally, he gave a short nod, determination etched into his face.

‘Do it,’ he said. ‘If he has a shot after Hogwarts, this is it.’

***

‘That was an extremely risky move you pulled,’ Regulus said that evening at the Quidditch pitch.

They were sitting in the stairwell of one of the Ravenclaw stands, where not even the Hufflepuff team practicing would think to look for spies. They had brought mugs of hot chocolate and a blanket to share between themselves, although a few Heating Charms would have worked just as well.

Emma realised that although they had planned to meet this way once a week about Regulus’s plan for the Horcruxes, it was rather romantic in its own way. The musky smell of Quidditch permeated the air, and though they couldn’t see the stars, a slight breeze made its way through the wood and cloth of the structure to play with their hair.

She took a sip of hot chocolate and laid her head on his shoulder. The day had been exhausting. She had only one wish - to go back to bed and stay there for the next ten hours - but the letter to Lucinda had to be drafted, Rabastan had to be congratulated, and of course, she had grilled the others on the exact details of Sunday evening.

‘Still, I’m glad that you did,’ he said quietly, placing a kiss on the top of her head.

His mere presence seemed to emanate comfort, and Emma felt like she was in a cocoon that had nothing to do with their measly blanket. It isn’t even fluffy, she thought randomly.

‘You scared me back then,’ he added after a minute.

Something in his voice made Emma turn around. His silver grey eyes that reminded her of the moon were creased with a cross between worry and love. On an impulse, she leaned forwards, pressing her lips to his in a gentle kiss that turned long and lingering.

When it ended, she rested her forehead against his, the contact making her feel that they were somehow connected on a deeper level.

‘I love you,’ she said, the words prompted by her heart rather than her brain. ‘I don’t say it enough.’

‘I know that you do,’ Regulus replied. ‘That’s enough for me.’

He leaned back, lifting her necklace over her head and slipping her engagement ring back on her finger. Clasping her left hand with his right, he kissed her again, more passionately this time.
‘I want us to get married,’ he said when they broke apart.

‘Um, isn’t that what this ring is for?’ Emma asked, playfully waggling her hands.

‘I mean as soon as we leave Hogwarts,’ Regulus clarified, his eyes rising back to meet her own in a long stare. Emma sensed that something else was bothering him, trying to prod him mentally to confess. Eventually, he looked away.

‘I didn’t mean to give the Dark Lord the information about the Order’s Patroni,’ he said in a small voice.

‘There was nothing you could have done,’ Emma replied soothingly. ‘You’re hiding so much from him already, it’s no wonder he managed to break through your shields for the night. Shields that you shouldn’t have even needed,’ she added, her tone self-accusatory.

‘You were in no position to hide anything from him, Emma,’ Regulus said immediately. ‘The pain was nothing compared to what we would have faced as traitors.’

Emma would have liked to argue, but in her heart of hearts she was right. Still, it felt as though Regulus’s renewed marriage proposal was an act of finalising his life, getting everything in order, rather than beginning it as he should.

‘I don’t want us marrying for the wrong reasons,’ she said, voicing her concerns.

‘The world will be too dangerous when we leave Hogwarts,’ Regulus answered, his voice firm. ‘And I’d like the assurance that…if anything ever happened to me…you’d take care of my mum. And Kreacher. I don’t want him falling into Sirius’s hands. Who knows what he’d do to him.’

Emma imagined Sirius commanding the elf as he had done so in the past, barely looking at Kreacher before barking an order. She shuddered. At least Walburga made him feel like part of the family.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘But nothing will happen. I’ll make sure of it. And you’d better make sure of it too.’

‘I will.’

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‘How’re you doing, Bast?’ Emma asked, sitting by her sleep-deprived friend in the Common Room.

‘Not well,’ Rabastan replied, throwing his quill at the paper and leaning back on two chair legs. ‘I think I might have got more questions wrong than a first year.’

‘Hand it over,’ she said, moving into a cross legged position on her chair and holding her hand out. ‘You’re probably not getting enough sleep to concentrate.

Reluctantly, Rabastan passed her his mock N.E.W.T paper in Defence Against the Dark Arts. He rubbed his eyes, leaving ink stains on his forehead. Emma refrained from commenting, seeing how wan his face looked.

‘I can do it all in practice,’ he complained. ‘I just don’t understand how we’re supposed to talk about it in theory. Either you can cast Expelliarmus or you can’t.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Emma agreed, busying herself by circling spelling mistakes. ‘I guess you
just need to describe the spell. Sometimes it’s just best to dig out your spell books and write what’s on there.’

‘But then I need to remember it all!’ Rabastan groaned. ‘What are our N.E.W.T.s good for anyway? It’s not as if I’m going to get a job later in life.’

Emma glanced around the Common Room. It was empty. The seventh years had a study break and Lucinda and Regulus had decided to ask Professor Sprout if they could get some more hands-on experience in the greenhouses. The others weren’t around either, having gone to the library or the study hall. Suddenly, Emma realised just how few seventh year Slytherins there were left.

‘Are you all right, Bast?’ she asked in a low voice, trying to convey as much into her words as possible. ‘I mean it. If you need anything, I’m always here to help.’

‘You could do my Divination homework,’ Rabastan joked, as he always did. ‘I can’t believe I’m taking it at N.E.W.T. level.’

Emma rolled her eyes, but nonetheless pulled Rabastan’s homework diary closer. Examine the tea-leaves of a friend every day for the next month. Describe what symbols you find there and what their meaning is. Then write a five hundred word summary on the resulting prediction.

‘This is ridiculous,’ she noted, pushing the offending object away from her.

‘I didn’t mean it seriously!’ Rabastan laughed, grabbing his planner. ‘Anyway, I’m fine. I guess... I guess I didn’t think it would affect me this much.’ Rabastan’s eyes were trained on the table. ‘I mean, I know I haven’t exactly got much of a moral compass…or even one at all…but I can’t believe it’s so easy to snuff someone’s life out like that.’

‘I’m pretty sure that Avada Kedavra is a complex spell to execute,’ Emma replied, knowing that Rabastan wasn’t looking for sympathy.

‘I’m not talking about that,’ Rabastan brushed her words to the side. ‘I don’t regret that spell at all. It was him or us, and I much prefer it to be him. I’m talking about the guy who didn’t get up after I pushed him away. Go a little overboard on a Bombarda spell, and you’re done for. It really makes you think about how fragile life is.’

Emma was silent for a few seconds. Rabastan gathered his papers, reviewing his work.

‘I mean, look at this. It’s parchment and ink. It means nothing,’ Rabastan tapped his schoolwork. ‘It is nothing. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be wiped off the face of this Earth like nothing. Just…forgettable. ‘

‘Trust me when I say this, Bast,’ Emma said, getting up to lay a hand on Rabastan’s shoulder. ‘It would take a hell of a lot to make you forgettable.’
Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests

Chapter Notes

Thanks Alyssea and Isabelle for commenting as usual. I love knowing your thoughts about all of this. There won't be a chapter next week, seeing as I'm on holiday!

Three months later, Emma was feeling mostly back to normal.

The Ministry had proved itself more resilient than anyone had ever imagined, most likely due to the influence of Harold Minchum. The Minister for Magic was responsible for giving Barty Crouch and the Aurors full access to the Unforgivable Curses and doubling the amount of Dementors guarding Azkaban.

The Dark Lord had adopted a new tactic - the Imperius Curse. However, to use the Imperius effectively, he needed more followers in the Ministry, specifically, those whose reputations were un tarnished. Rabastan would never get in, not with Rodolphus’s infamy, but Regulus, Emma and Severus would probably get in, thanks to Slughorn’s connections.

Still, they needed excellent marks to get even remotely useful jobs, and Emma had found herself buried under a mountain of work. She regretted coasting through the better part of seventh year every day. Without James’s tutoring in Transfiguration, she didn’t think she would have gotten more than a “Poor”.

And now, the exams had started.

‘Ready, Ems?’ Rabastan asked her. He grabbed the crumpet she had been playing with off of her plate, munching with gusto.

How that boy managed was beyond her. Emma was actually impressed at how he had risen to the task of finding out the rest of the Order members at Hogwarts. He had become indispensable in the eyes of the Dark Lord and had become the happiest she had ever seen him over the course of the last weeks.

Her eyes slid over to the opposite side of the table, where Regulus’s black hair could be seen peeking over a mound of books. Under any other circumstances, she would have poked fun at him, but today she stayed quiet. They had both agreed that the Dark Lord would give them more free reign the better their marks were.

‘I for one am going to be pleased when this week’s over,’ Lucinda announced when it became clear that Emma wasn’t going to answer. ‘Maybe people will start to live a little. You’re all starting to look like the Inferi from the newspaper.’

Emma raised an eyebrow at her friend. Barty took one look at his half-finished breakfast and pushed it away in disgust.

‘On that lovely note,’ he said, dusting off his robes. ‘I’m late for Potions. Good luck, everyone.’

A chorus of thanks followed him out of the room.
'I guess we’d better leave too,' Rabastan sighed, giving the toast one last longing stare. ‘I wish I hadn’t woken up so late. My stomach’s going to be growling all the way through.’

‘Oh, for Merlin’s sake,’ Lucinda rolled her eyes, wrapping up four pieces of bread in a napkin. She handed it to him. ‘Here. Let’s go.’

They all had Charms first thing, in the Entrance Hall, since the fifth years were going to be using the Great Hall later. They trooped out of the room and looked around for their name tags.

Emma found hers, right next to Remus Lupin, who was already sitting down, quill in hand and three ink pots lined up in front of him. At Emma’s glance, he gave a sheepish smile.

‘I always get worried I’ll run out of ink,’ he explained.

‘No judging here,’ she replied, getting her own things out. ‘It’s a good idea. I just wish we didn’t have to enter so early. I hate waiting for the subjects to fall.’

Remus agreed and they fell into a companionable silence until the papers were distributed

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By the end of the week, Emma was feeling reasonably confident. She had successfully turned vinegar into wine on the first try, only missed three questions on the Transfiguration paper and had Wednesday off, since she didn’t do Herbology. As they were waiting to be called up for DADA the next day, she and Rabastan were still poking fun at their respective partners.

‘You should have seen your faces,’ Rabastan stuttered through gasps of laughter. ‘They were priceless. I can’t believe Lucy refused to bring out the camera.’

‘Yeah well, shit happens when some idiot manages to anger the Snargaluff plant!’ Lucinda replied, glaring at the Gryffindor boys.

‘Literally,’ Rabastan quipped with a snort.

Emma followed her gaze, her cheeks hurting from smiling. ‘I guess being bad with plants runs in the family.’

‘It was his friend, Pettigrew,’ Lucinda said angrily. ‘And it took me a whole hour to remove the dragon dung from my hair.’

‘You spent less time on it than Regulus, then,’ Rabastan replied, his lips quirking with repressed laughter.

Emma studiously avoided Regulus’s mutinous look. She was almost relieved when his name was called up.

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All too soon, the words “Potter, Emma,” sounded from the open doorway.

‘That’s me,’ Emma gave Lucinda a wave. Rabastan had already been and gone. She entered the spare classroom. ‘Hello again, Professor Tofty.’
‘Hello, Miss Potter,’ the wizened old wizard replied from behind his desk, noting down a few last remarks on the previous student’s performance. ‘Have a seat.’

Emma looked around. James was on the other side of the room, performing a silent Stunning Charm on the mannequin opposite him. Professor Marchbanks watched impassively, leaving no trace of her thoughts on her features.

‘Here we are again, Miss Potter,’ Professor Tofty announced, grasping Emma’s attention. ‘Let us hope that this goes as smoothly as the Charms examination, shall we?’

Emma nodded, feeling a little nervous. The replacement teacher for Amelia Bones was competent enough, but they didn’t do nearly as much practical as Emma would have liked. She didn’t think the raids with the Death Eaters would count as practice, either.

‘We will start off with something easy. Can you perform the accurate spell to ward off Inferi on the mannequin opposite you?’ the examiner flicked his wand towards a mannequin exactly like the one James had practiced on, and it transformed into a hideous corpse-like creature.

This is going to be easy, Emma thought with a grin. She had seen Inferi before, and this one had nothing on the real version’s capabilities of inspiring fear - most likely because it was immobile. She conjured a perfect lasso of rope, using the circular movement of the spell to ensnare the fake Inferius’s torso. It burst into flames, separating into two halves before Professor Tofty Vanished the remains.

‘Good work,’ Tofty approved. ‘Though I expect you to use a variety of categories in your spells as we progress.’

He next conjured a large block of wood in the place of the mannequin.

‘I want you to silently perform the Reductor Curse on this object,’ Tofty instructed, picking up his quill.

Emma closed her eyes, forcibly reminded of the first time she had seen the Reductor Curse properly in action. Regulus had cursed the man’s whole arm off, leaving nothing but a pile of dust in its wake. Since then, it had been used over and over by the Light and Dark side alike in the war. Taking a deep breath, she channelled all of her energy into her right hand, concentrating on the feeling the curse gave her when cast.

Reducto! she thought furiously.

The block of wood shuddered, then exploded into a shower of wood chips. Tofty nodded once more, clearing the rubbish with another wave of his wand.

The process went on for several more minutes, mostly involving silent curses and jinxes, but also the Protego Charm. Finally, they arrived at the bottom of Professor Tofty’s page.

‘So, I saw that this was a large part of the curriculum this year,’ the examiner said, lifting his eyes to meet Emma’s. ‘However, I am aware that most witches and wizards are unable to conjure a fully fledged Patronus. So fear not if you do not know the form of your own; I will not be removing points for that. Take your time with this one.’

A sense of dread built in the pit of Emma’s stomach. She hadn’t been able to conjure even a wisp of white during the whole term. Then again, many others couldn’t either. Still, she had read that only Dark wizards weren’t able to conjure even the faintest trace of a Patronus later on in life. There was one particular case that stood out for her: that of one infamous Raczidian. Upon attempting to cast the
spell, maggots flew out of his wand and devoured him alive.

Emma didn’t want that to happen to her.

Despite what James might think, she knew she used more Dark spells than Light. She had an affinity with the magic of the shadows, and even though Charms was her best subject, the Patronus Charm was no friend of hers.

She took a deep breath - her standard procedure before all difficult spells - and tried to focus on her happiest memory. An image of winning the Quidditch Cup in sixth year flashed through her mind before she dismissed it. Ephemeral joy was not what was at hand here.

Suddenly, an image swam to the surface. She didn’t remember feeling overly happy at that moment, but she felt a sense of deep contentment emanating from the memory, even now.

It was the summer before seventh year. Lucinda, Rabastan and Regulus had all come to Diagon Alley the day before they needed to get to King’s Cross. They had spent most of their time at the ice cream parlour - the ice cream had been half-price, as the owner was getting ready to sell it and move on. That summer afternoon had been free of worries about the war and filled with funny anecdotes from school. They had mercilessly teased one another and stolen each other’s ice cream sundaes as though they hadn’t all ordered the same.

Grasping the memory with all of her might, Emma started to turn her wand in circles, faster and faster until she spoke the charm.

‘*Expecto Patronum!*’

She opened her eyes, expecting to finally find out what her Patronus was, or at the very least, a ball of pure white light.

Instead, she was met with the sight of Professor Tofty looking at her with pity in his eyes. He made one final note on his paper before bidding her goodbye and asking her to call in the next student.

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Regulus entered the small History of Magic room for his final exam of the week. His final exam at Hogwarts altogether, in fact. He spared a brief thought for Emma, who had Arithmancy. That was something he was glad to have avoided.

‘Regulus Black?’ a kindly voice inquired.

Regulus cleared his mind of all clutter and walked forwards. He clutched his papers tightly in one hand when he saw who was sat before him. Bathilda Bagshot, the most celebrated historian of the past two centuries.

Professor Binns had warned his N.E.W.T. students that she might be the examiner, since she had taught the subject before he became a professor, but Regulus hadn’t believed him.

He half still didn’t.

‘That is I,’ he replied, somewhat stiffly.

‘And what work have you brought to us today?’ the old witch asked with a creased smile.
Immediately, Regulus began to breathe more easily. Bathilda Bagshot looked genuinely interested, and this was one of the few subjects Regulus held dear.

‘As you know, our class had to prepare a dossier on a neglected aspect of Wizarding history,’ Regulus explained, placing his papers on the desk. He knew them by heart, anyway. ‘I chose to study Parseltongue.’

‘Did you have a particular reason?’ Professor Bagshot asked, peering at the pages with bespectacled eyes.

‘As a matter of fact, I did,’ Regulus replied, clasping his hands behind his back. ‘There are many misconceptions about the language and those who use it, and I wanted to disprove the myths.’

‘Very well,’ the examiner replied. ‘It is a topic worthy of discussion. Could you tell me three key points of your paper?’

‘The first myth would be that all Parselmouths are directly descended from Salazar Slytherin. In fact, the first documented human known to speak Parseltongue is Herpo the Foul. Several others come to mind, such as the famous Paracelsus - the first to have recorded anything about the language.

‘The second legend I sought to disprove was that of the link between Parseltongue and the Dark Arts,’ Regulus continued. ‘This misconception is due to the fact that Herpo the Foul was also the inventor of the notorious Horxcrux, the darkest magic a wizard can conjure. It was inflamed further when it was revealed that Salazar Slytherin turned dark after founding Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. However, this begets the question - are all reptiles evil? Can a species truly be evil as a whole? I would argue that no, it cannot. Thus, Parseltongue cannot be associated with the Dark Arts, as its primary function is to serve as a rudimentary language between different types of Squamata.

‘Lastly, I would like to discuss the supposed fact that Parseltongue is impossible to learn, save through blood heritage. This has never proved to be the case with any human language, and I do not believe that animal languages are any different. We may be born with the capacity to speak it or not - and this is due to a magical gene not unlike that of Metamorphmagi.

‘However, it is possible to learn to understand Parseltongue as a language, and with this in mind I have included detailed notes about my own experience, plus several translations. With a willing teacher, it is possible to translate one’s mother tongue into Parseltongue, and then imitate it. Whilst I have not found it possible to become fluent in Parseltongue or be able to think in the language, translation and imitation appear to be the next best thing.’

Regulus let his voice fade into silence. He wasn’t sure how this news would be received, but he needn’t have worried. Both Bathilda Bagshot and Professor Binns thanked him for his time, before lapsing into an animated discussion about the possibilities his paper could open.

Feeling calmer than when he had entered, Regulus left the room.

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‘Regulus,’ a ghostly voice called, the telltale icy draft sweeping over his right side.

‘My Lady,’ Regulus greeted.

Few knew of the acquaintanceship between Regulus and the Grey Lady. After all, what did
Ravenclaw’s House ghost and a Slytherin boy have in common?

It had started when Regulus was eleven and had accidentally overheard the story of the Bloody Baron’s death. He figured out a few weeks later that the Grey Lady was in fact none other than Helena Ravenclaw herself. In Regulus’s opinion, anyone with eyes could have guessed. But Helena hadn’t seen it that way. When Regulus had asked for her version of the story, she had been overjoyed that he hadn’t settled for the Bloody Baron’s tale.

Since then, she had taken a liking to him, sharing secrets and tales. She shared his fondness for history and little-known facts, and delighted in telling him about Albania, the land of the eagles.

‘I overheard your N.E.W.T. presentation,’ the Grey Lady said softly. ‘I was glad the judges enjoyed it. I’m going to miss you when you’re gone.’

‘I’m sure there will be another curious eleven year old begging to take my place,’ Regulus replied with a polite smile. He had discovered early on that Helena was the old fashioned sort.

‘I don’t think there will,’ the ghost sighed wistfully. ‘The last student whose company I enjoyed was nearly forty years ago. There are so few who understand the reading of history for knowledge’s sake, even amongst my own students. He was a Slytherin, you know.’

‘And this student,’ Regulus wondered, ‘he was interested in Parselmouths too? That’s very rare.’

‘Oh yes,’ the Grey Lady replied. ‘He had a vested interest, you see. He could actually speak the language - he was born with it. I think he would have enjoyed listening to you speak today. He was much like you, you know. He liked to hear about Albania too.’

‘What was his name?’ Regulus asked, unable to hide his curiosity. There was only one Parselmouth alive that Regulus knew of.

‘Tom Riddle,’ Helena Ravenclaw replied, her mouth curving into a bittersweet smile.
The Beginning of the End

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who bookmarked/left kudos/commented. I felt so nostalgic writing this chapter, and I just want to thank you guys for being such devoted (and patient) readers. They’ve just left Hogwarts and I feel like I miss them already.

The boat ride back to Hogsmeade was a bittersweet journey.

Emma had wondered whether they'd all be able to fit inside the small vessels - first years seemed so tiny compared to when they had first arrived - but it appeared that some sort of magic held the boats together. The students left in groups of four, the way they had arrived.

Emma noticed her brother immediately get in with the other three Marauders and she was glad that he had found such steadfast friends. She smiled upon seeing James and Sirius fight to get the best seat and smiled. Some things never changed.

She looked back at the doors to the Entrance Hall - probably for the last time - and thought back to when she had arrived. She had been so sure, and yet so uncertain at the same time. She had expected to learn magic, and instead she had learnt so much more.

'Emma?' Regulus asked from behind her.

Suddenly, Emma realised that they were alone on the platform. The boats had steadily moved out of the harbour; the last of them only still there because Rabastan was hanging on to the mooring.

'Sorry,' she replied, with one last look at the double doors. 'I guess it's harder to leave than I thought.'

She stepped after him into the boat and Lucinda hung their lantern at the prow the way Hagrid had on their first day of school. The boat took off, and all too suddenly they had passed through the hanging ivy underneath the cliff face. The leaves made a rustling noise as they moved, sending tiny droplets of morning dew raining down on their hair.

Out of the cave, Lucinda craned her head to the side, evidently trying to commit the entire castle to memory. The sun had barely risen over the horizon, leaving them plenty of time to get to Hogsmeade in time. As a consequence, the castle's shadow arched over the lake, cutting an imposing figure in the half-light.

Rabastan lay back against the side of the boat with his head pillowed against his arms, enjoying the quiet ride. Regulus trailed his fingers in the water of the Black Lake, sending small ripples alongside the larger waves caused by the boats.

As Emma twisted around to get one last look before the morning mist obscured the castle for good, she thought she saw a large shadow pass beneath the water.

'Was that…the Giant Squid?' she asked.

Just then, a large tentacle shot out of the water, spraying them all with droplets before collapsing back into the lake. The water rushed towards the boats, but instead of soaking the former students, it
pushed the small ferries towards the Hogwarts jetty, giving them the speed necessary to arrive at the Hogwarts Express on time.

'Well,' Rabastan said, locating the apartment with their luggage in it. 'That was a bit…anticlimactic.'

They had arrived at the station an hour before the other students were due to get in. Emma guessed that it was to give the seventh years time to say goodbye to one another and to the castle itself. Having made her peace in front of the Entrance Hall, she had got straight into the train, enjoying the choice of compartments. Rabastan, too, had decided against the sentimentality.

'Give it a couple of years, Bast,' Emma said, settling into the window seat opposite him. 'When you have kids, you'll be regretting your idle days at Hogwarts.'

'Idle?' Rabastan snorted. 'You mean when I have kids I'll be telling them about all the close shaves we had with Bones, the difficulties of balancing school and…other activities, and the way their godmother forced me into her cousin's robes.'

'The way...' Emma trailed off, a lump coming to her throat.

Stop being silly, she told herself crossly, blinking rapidly. Rabastan isn't going to be having kids anytime soon.

'You might not think the same way in five years,' she resumed, turning the conversation to their usual banter.

'I will,' Rabastan replied seriously, his green eyes staring directly at her. 'I'll make sure whoever I marry will to. There's no one I trust more than you and Regulus. I would trust you with my life, and that extends to the lives of my children too.'

'I..' Emma stuttered, too overwhelmed to perform a coherent thought.

'Just say thank you,' Rabastan teased as Regulus and Lucinda found their compartment.

'Thank you for what?' Lucinda asked curiously.

Rabastan smirked, but his eyes remained trained on Emma's.

'Nothing,' he replied, with a wave of dismissal. 'Just managed to make Emma speechless for once, that's all.'

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At King's Cross, Emma half expected to see her parents waiting for her on the platform. Even though they hadn't been there the year before, the Slytherins had spent the entire voyage reminiscing about their best and funniest moments at Hogwarts. For half a second, Emma was ready to burst out of the train, talking a mile a minute about her newest adventure at Hogwarts.

But that wasn't to be. It had never been, in fact.

Instead, Lucinda hugged her tightly; the scent of her floral perfume and face powder engulfing Emma like a duvet cover when there was a Boggart beneath the bed. For the second time that day, tears threatened to spill out onto her cheeks, and Emma held Lucy tighter than necessary for a few more seconds.
'Promise to write, no matter where you are,' Lucinda whispered, kissing Emma's cheek. 'No matter where, do you hear me? The boys never listen, but I know you will.'

Emma nodded, wondering at when they had become so close. It seemed like only yesterday and yet a lifetime ago, that they were all holding each other at arm's length, prowling in circles in the hopes of uncovering a weakness.

Rabastan was more himself. He gave Emma a jovial wink and a wave, meaningfully tapping against his left forearm as he left with his parents in tow. Rodolphus was noticeably absent in person, and yet his face was plastered all over the walls in wanted posters.

Emma turned to Regulus, but he had already disappeared. Looking around, she spotted him next to Kreacher, who was attempting to carry both of their trunks, along with Fluffy and Wronski's cages. Regulus's owl had his feathers ruffled in annoyance, and Fluffy was meowing as though his life depended on it.

Kreacher... Emma thought, shaking her head, but she couldn't help the smile forming on her face. With a slight spring to her step, she swiftly walked over to help the poor elf.

'Kreacher,' she said gently. 'You don't have to carry everything yourself.'

'But Kreacher must,' the house-elf said. 'Mistress says that Kreacher is getting old. Kreacher must prove usefulness to Mistress!'

'You don't need to prove anything, Kreacher,' Regulus said firmly, putting a hand on the house-elf's shoulder. 'Now, you take Fluffy and Wronski to the house. I'm sure they're starving, so they're more important than the luggage. Can you do that?'

'Yes, Master Regulus,' Kreacher said eagerly, diving into a deep bow before rushing off to do as told.

'Grimmauld Place is safer than your apartment,' Regulus said to Emma simply.

She nodded once to show that she understood, and dragged her trunk towards the magical barrier and the town car that awaited them beyond.

Though she would have much preferred to return to her flat in Diagon Alley and avoid the drive, she knew that Regulus's childhood home provided the security they needed in order to accomplish their goals.

Still, the knowledge didn't stop her from tensing up as the driver revved the motor. She gripped the seat next to her, only to have her hand meet Regulus's. She looked up to see her boyfriend give her one of his no longer rare smiles. He laced their fingers together for the entire drive through London.

Looking out of the window, Emma wondered what the summer would bring. They had potentially placed themselves in one of the most dangerous positions - they were Death Eaters of the highest order, feeding a known Order member information, and searching for the Dark Lord's horcruxes all without the protection of Hogwarts' walls. Emma could only hope that the old bricks of Grimmauld Place were sturdier than they looked.

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Regulus stared out of the window as they hit a traffic jam. Not entirely unexpected, but what could
you do in Muggle London? He glanced back at Emma, but she seemed to be doing fine. She usually felt carsick in journeys like this, but he supposed that they weren't moving fast enough to qualify for that.

Her raven locks tumbled from their makeshift bun as she stretched her neck, cascading down to her waist. If he looked at her like this, without seeing her face with her lips quirked up in their permanent smirk, she resembled the Grey Lady.

Of course, the ghost could never be mistaken for Emma from the front. She looked too much like an aristocratic pureblood, with her haughty features and straight nose not unlike Regulus's own. Emma... Emma was an aristocratic pureblood, and at the same time anything but.

The Grey Lady had shown him a photo of Tom Riddle in the trophy room before he had left Hogwarts. Regulus had been shocked to see the Dark Lord in such a mundane situation. He had also been surprised to see just how much Voldemort had changed.

That's the price of horcruxes, he thought to himself, shuddering. No amount of heating could thaw the chill in his bones at the mere thought of placing a part of his soul in a lifeless object.

'Are you all right?' Emma asked, interrupting his musing.

Regulus started and let go of her hand. He had been squeezing her fingers so tightly that he could see the white marks where the blood circulation had been cut off.

'Yeah,' he replied, his voice strangled. He hurriedly cleared his throat before attempting a second time. 'Yes.'

'Good,' Emma's mouth twitched into a grin and she raised her eyebrows slightly. 'We're here.'

Regulus took a deep breath, paying the driver with the fragile paper money Muggles seemed to prefer. By now, the man realised that Regulus had no use for change, so he drove off immediately after they had retrieved their luggage.

'After you, milady,' he gave her a short bow and motioned towards the materialising house. He knew that humour would be needed to cut the knife-like tension awaiting them in the house.

Emma dropped into a fake curtsy and walked up the steps, hesitating for a fraction of a second before knocking.

'You could have just walked in,' Regulus reminded her, following her up.

'It wouldn't feel right,' Emma replied. 'I want your mother to know we're here before entering.'

'It's not as though she prances around the house in her underwear, you know,' Regulus pointed out, just as Kreacher opened the house.

'Master Regulus, Mistress Emma, Mistress is expecting you,' he said, bowing and scraping as low as the hinges on the door.

Regulus glanced at Emma, who looked grim. Whenever Kreacher acted overly formal, there was trouble up ahead. Part of him wanted to run up to his room, to cower as Kreacher had done until Walburga's mood had abated. This time, however, he had no choice but to weather the storm.

His brother was no longer there to bear the brunt of the burden.
'Regulus?' Walburga called, walking into the hallway just as Regulus and Emma hung their coats up. The blonde witch stopped short upon seeing they had company, visibly composing herself.

Too bad I've already seen you through Regulus's memories, Emma thought snidely, before immediately feeling guilty. This woman had always welcomed her as if she were her own daughter, giving her a place to stay without asking anything in return. Still, she felt her blood boil at the way Walburga had treated both of her sons. Though there was little love lost between Emma and Sirius, she would never forget the rain-soaked boy standing on the Potters' doorstep.

As Emma dealt with her conflicting inner emotions, Regulus stepped up to greet his mother, his face impassive.

'Mother,' he inclined his head. 'I did not expect you to be home at this time. I thought you were visiting Uncle Cygnus?'

'That is what I usually do, yes,' Walburga replied stiffly. 'But I wanted to be here to greet you in person. During one of my visits with Uncle Cygnus, I was informed of a recent development within our family. More specifically, with you.'

'Mother, I-

'Do not "mother" me, young man,' Walburga's voice rose and she pursed her lips before continuing in a more controlled manner. 'I understand the need for secrecy, Regulus, I do, but your own mother? Her voice took on a hint of hurt. 'You could not even trust your own mother with the information that you were engaged to be married?'

'Madame Black, Regulus isn't to blame,' Emma started, but Walburga hushed her with a perfectly manicured hand.

'Hush, dear, I did not mean to suggest that you were an unsuitable match. Quite the opposite, in fact,' Walburga flashed her a brilliant smile. 'Regulus, have I not been telling you to make a marriage contract for years with the Potters?'

'Yes,' Regulus mumbled, his face flushing a rare scarlet as he glanced at Emma.

Emma felt a smirk growing on her lips, spreading as far as it could go without turning into an unseemly grin. She would never get tired of hearing about Regulus's feelings towards her, feelings that she had no idea about until the previous year.

'Well then,' Walburga huffed a sigh. 'I will forgive you this once, Regulus, since you have seen fit to do good by your family, unlike another I could mention. Come, the both of you. I have had the elf brew some tea.'

Emma glanced again at her boyfriend, who met her gaze apologetically before following his fearsome mother into the kitchen. Quickly, she slipped Regulus's ring off of her necklace and onto her finger before following.

Somehow, she thought it would help calm Walburga.

Five minutes later, she was proved right. After the shortest of scoldings, Walburga noticed the ring -
prompted by Emma raising her tea cup with her left hand rather than her right.

'Oh and you have the family ring!' she cooed. 'I remember this from when I was young. Of course, it went to Druella, because Cygnus was the elder, but how I am glad to see it find its way into our branch of the family.' She paused to look sternly at Regulus. 'You did the right thing in appealing to your grandfather first, but I want to be fully appraised of all wedding plans in the future.'

'Of course, mother,' Regulus smiled, though Emma could tell that it was strained.

She marvelled at how she was able to notice the cracks in his facade now, hints of emotion that she hadn't been able to grasp at whilst they were merely friends. She felt a sudden urge to kiss him, but curbed her instincts. Something told her that Walburga wouldn't appreciate it.

'Now, if you'll excuse us, mother, we need to attend to some...business,' Regulus gave his mother a meaningful look.

'Of course, we must not keep the Dark Lord waiting,' Walburga replied immediately, humming as she rose from her seat. 'Oh, you are such a pride to the family, Regulus, wait until I tell Druella all about it!'

And with that, she fanned off into the dining room and the nearest Floo connection.

'She seems...lively,' Emma commented as they went back upstairs.

Indeed, Walburga was a far cry from the shell of a woman she had been at Christmas - ever since the death of Orion.

'I told you,' Regulus said, dragging his trunk into his room with a grunt. 'She's overjoyed at the prospect of a wedding.'

'You're really good to her,' Emma noted, and it was true. She didn't know many sons who would have acted as Regulus did. If only Walburga had been more deserving of her son's attention.

'Yes, well...habit,' Regulus replied with a grimace, opening his trunk and taking out his journals and papers on the Dark Lord.

'Hold on,' Emma said, taking the papers from him and putting them on the desk. 'The Dark Lord can wait for a minute or two.'

Regulus's brow creased into a frown. 'What could be more important than removing his invincibility? If your brother... and mine... have even a chance of defeating him, we don't have a moment to spare.'

Emma simply grinned, shaking her head at him.

Ever since the Dark Lord had told them to simply concentrate on their studies, she had felt almost like a normal student again. Regulus, however, had thrown himself into his research on the Dark Lord - research that she hadn't been much help with. As a result, Regulus was wrapped up in their fight, whereas Emma had been content to throw the future to the winds, taking a break from her plans for once to appreciate the people around her.

So instead of replying, she took both of his hands in hers, pulling him to the balcony where they had confessed so many things over the years.

Regulus bit his lip, looking back at the papers on the desk, but in the end his curiosity won and he allowed himself to be led outside.
Emma carefully reached past him to close the door, bringing their bodies closer.

'We have a moment to spare for this,' she whispered, tangling her hands in his lengthening hair, bringing his head closer as she raised her heels to kiss him.
Wool's Orphanage

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed. It really makes my day, and I'll reply to everyone I haven't already as soon as I can!

'I still can't believe that your mother actually allowed me to sleep in here,' Emma said, shaking her head.

At dinner the previous evening, Walburga had mentioned that she hadn't bothered to make up the guest room, since Regulus and Emma were due to be married anyway. Kreacher's eyes had near bulged out of his head at the announcement.

'Well, it's all very proper now, isn't it?' Regulus said, smoothing his bed covers so there were no creases. 'She probably noticed you sneaking in here all Christmas holidays, anyway.'

Emma flushed scarlet and threw herself on the newly made sheets.

'Hey!' Regulus exclaimed indignantly.

Emma smirked and sat up in a cross-legged position, smoothing out the creases in front of her so that Regulus could lay the sheets of parchment on top.

'Better?' she asked.

'Much,' Regulus replied, calling Kreacher.

'Master Regulus calls Kreacher?' the house-elf asked, scraping the floor with his nose.

'Has my mother gone out for the day?' Regulus asked.

'Mistress is shopping with Mistress Druella, Master,' Kreacher replied.

'Good. Would you mind making a roast for lunch? The Hogwarts elves can't quite make it like you, and I can't wait for Sunday.'

'Of course, Master Regulus, Kreacher is happy to serve.'

The house-elf disappeared with a pop.

Emma looked at Regulus in confusion.

'He takes about three hours to prepare the roast,' he explained, correctly interpreting her expression.

'So I'm guessing you have a plan,' Emma said, picking up the nearest roll of parchment and reading aloud. 'Tom Marvolo Riddle, Award for Special Services to the school.' She put the paper down. 'Who's Tom Riddle?'

'I believe he is our Dark Lord.'
Emma stared at Regulus, but his face betrayed no emotion. If it were anyone else, she would ask if they were joking. But this was Regulus. He wouldn't joke about the Dark Lord.

'Riddle's not a pureblood name,' she said eventually, trying to process the information.

'Imagine my mother's shame if she found out half of her family was following a half blood.' Regulus quipped drily.

'How do you know he's a half blood? And how do you know he's the Dark Lord?' Emma voiced only a few of the questions whirring in her mind.

'The…A friend mentioned him just as we were leaving Hogwarts,' Regulus replied evasively. 'She let slip that he was the last student she knew to speak Parseltongue.'

Emma raised her eyebrows.

'She?' she asked. 'As far as I know, your only female friend is Lucinda - maybe Cassie, but that's pushing it. And unless I'm mistaken, neither of them know the Dark Lord that intimately.'

'If you're questioning my source, know that she is highly reliable,' Regulus started hotly, before realising that the knowledge wasn't what his girlfriend was putting into question. 'I wasn't stupid enough to mention anything to Bellatrix, if that's what you're worried about. My friend has been dead for a long time now.'

'So she's a ghost,' Emma deduced.

'And that's all I'll say on the matter,' Regulus replied firmly.

Emma knew better than to press him.

'Moving on,' Regulus continued, taking the parchment from Emma's hand and putting it back on the bed. 'Whether Riddle was a pureblood, a halfblood or a mudblood is of little consequence. We would want to stop him no matter his blood type. Whether he's a hypocrite or not means nothing to me.'

'Nor me,' Emma hurriedly added, thinking of how the Dark Lord had deceived her about Lily Evans. 'We're here to stop killings, not to meddle more in blood-related affairs.'

'Exactly,' Regulus agreed. 'Anyway, what interests me more is where he went every summer after Hogwarts. I figure that we should start at the beginning. Though I doubt he'd have made a horcrux there, we can't leave anything to chance.'

'Right,' Emma replied, hesitating a moment before she asked. 'And where did he go every summer?'

'Wool's Orphanage. Right here in London.'

'And you know this...'

'Because Professor Binns will give you access to any records if you ask him nicely. Add that to Professor Slughorn's free pass, and I could get to any document in the Restricted Section, no questions asked.'

Emma was impressed. Whilst she had been catching up with her coursework and making up for lost time in her studies, Regulus had found out everything there was to glean about the Dark Lord from Hogwarts - with no outside help.
'I'm sorry-' she started, before she was cut off.

'It would have looked suspicious if you were off looking at records,' Regulus interrupted. 'No one can suspect us. No one. Not Rabastan, not Lucinda and especially not your brother until we have concrete evidence. I don't want the Dark Lord even suspecting us of not being a hundred percent with him. We don't have the mental capacity to resist him if he probed our minds as sharply as he could. Trust me.'

A haunted look came into Regulus's eyes, and Emma was reminded that the Dark Lord had looked into his mind whilst she had been unconscious. She reached for him, but he brushed her away.

'Besides, you can help now,' Regulus said. 'We've got about two weeks before the N.E.W.T. results come in and we get our next orders. That's two weeks to find the Dark Lord's horcrux whilst still participating in raids - and not to be forgotten, two weeks of my mother's wedding plans.'

This last sentence was spoken with a shudder, as though it were far more threatening than anything else said that morning. Emma wondered how bad Walburga could truly be.

'So we need to go to Wool's Orphanage,' she prompted, avoiding the topic of Regulus's mother.

'Yes,' Regulus replied. 'I was thinking that we could pose as relatives of Tom Riddle to try to get more information about him, find out as much as possible.'

'But you don't think he made a horcrux...' Emma trailed off uncertainly.

Regulus said nothing, his face grim.

'Well then,' Emma replied, gulping. 'We'll need to make sure they talk to us.'

'The easiest way would be a Confundus Charm,' Regulus said immediately. 'But we don't want to draw attention to magic being used there.'

***

'Ouch,' Emma complained, wincing as she put her hand to her stomach.

'I knew this was a bad idea,' Regulus muttered, looking at his fiancé worriedly. 'What if-'

'Shh,' Emma replied, cutting him off with a hand to his lips. 'We're almost there. It'll be worth it if it works. Now do you want to do the talking, or should I?'

Regulus looked at her.

'I guess I will, then,' Emma pushed at the iron gate with a grunt.

'Wait,' Regulus said, catching up to her and placing a hand on her back. 'If this is going to be believable, then I should probably do that.'

'Oh, you're probably right.'

Emma relinquished her hold on the gate, letting Regulus put his weight against it as she watched. As they reached the old wooden door to Wool's Orphanage, she tugged on her dress, smoothing it over her protruding stomach.
'I feel like I have a bruise,' she complained again, prodding the belly and wincing a second time.

Regulus slapped her hand away.

'Then stop doing that! Honestly, you're the one who thought of a Swelling Solution...'

'I didn't think it would be painful!' Emma retorted.

Regulus rolled his eyes and rang the doorbell, giving her one last warning look.

'And-I'm-worried-my-dress-is-going-to-stay-four-sizes-too-big,' Emma said in one breath, eager to get her last complaint out of her system before the door opened.

She needn't have worried though. It took a full three minutes for someone to open the door, three somewhat awkward minutes, since neither of the Slytherins knew quite what to do. Should Emma put a hand on her round stomach? Should Regulus? Should they make cooing noises? Should they make any noises?

Fortunately, a young woman opened the door before they could rethink their plan, taking one look at Emma's stomach and inviting them in.

'Have a seat,' she said as they arrived at a plain, but serviceable office, with one chair in front of a desk, and another behind it.

As the "pregnant" one, Emma got prerogative over Regulus for the chair. He came to stand next to her, as the woman took the chair opposite.

'I apologise for the chair,' she said. 'I don't get very many couples.' She looked curiously at the way Regulus had a hand around Emma's shoulder, his eyes roaming around the building as if to check for threats. Her eyes fell to the ring on Emma's finger. 'Especially not ones about to be married.'

Emma glanced at Regulus, who merely gripped her arm tighter.

'Well...We're not really here for this,' she gestured at her fake pregnancy. 'Actually, we are, but not in the way you think.' At the woman's confused expression, she continued. 'The thing is, having children of our own made us think about our roots. We want to be able to tell our son or daughter where they came from, what their grandparents were like. We had lost all hope for...Marvolo's father, since he never liked to talk about his past, but-

'But I was going through the family pictures and found a birth certificate that said he was born right here in Wool's Orphanage,' Regulus interjected, his eyes shining with emotion.

'Well, we can't just go about giving such information lightly...' the young woman looked hesitant.

Emma slowly lowered her eyelids, bringing a hand to her stomach as her mouth turned down at the corners. Regulus's lips quirked to the side briefly, almost unconsciously.

'Even if we have the birth certificate with us?' Emma asked a few moments later, allowing a little hope to colour her voice.

'Well...' the woman hesitated. Regulus withdrew his hand from Emma's shoulder, shifting his weight as if to leave. 'I suppose it wouldn't hurt,' she relented. 'Let me just go and get his file.'

'Wait!' Emma said, half-rising from her chair. 'We didn't really want to look at his file. Just find out what he was like when he was here. Is there anyone we can talk to, a childhood friend, maybe?'
'I better take you to Mrs Cole,' the woman replied, leaving them in her office.

***

'So, dears, what did you say your names were?'

Regulus and Emma found themselves sitting in a tea shop opposite the orphanage. Mrs Cole had no objection to spending her afternoon talking about her earlier charges, especially when the promise of free tea and biscuits was involved.

'My name's Em…Emily,' Emma stuttered for a second, thinking it was safer to give a false name. 'This is Marvolo, my fiancé.'

The old woman's teacup paused on the way to her lips. Her fingers shook for the slightest of moments before she placed it back on its saucer, a haunted look coming into her eyes.

Well, if nothing else, I think it's safe to say we got the right person, Emma thought, observing the former matron's reaction.

'Any relation to Tom Marvolo Riddle, perchance?' Mrs Cole's voice quavered for only a second before it regained its strength.

'Why yes,' Emma replied helpfully, acting surprised. 'He's who we've come to talk to you about.'

'He's my father,' Regulus added in a low voice, staring intently at the old woman.

'I suppose it would have been too much to expect you to inquire about Billy Stubbs,' Mrs Cole sighed. She squinted at Regulus, peering for a better look. 'Though now you mention it…yes…yes I see the similarities. The dark, dark hair, the proud look, the charming eyes. I don't know how I missed it.'

Regulus and Emma glanced at each other, unsure as how to greet that particular piece of information.

I suppose it's not entirely implausible, Emma thought. The Blacks are bound to have intermarried with Slytherin's descendants, if the Dark Lord is to be believed. And the Dark Lord was handsome, once.

'Tom Riddle,' the old woman sighed again, taking a sip of her tea and leaning back in her chair. 'If there was anyone I were to remember from my time as a matron, it would be him.'

'Why is that?' Emma asked, leaning forwards before she remembered she was supposed to be pregnant. She put a hand under her belly for effect - the swelling might hurt, but it wasn't as heavy as a baby probably was.

'He was…different. Special, he used to say,' Mrs Cole finished her tea. Regulus quickly poured her another cup. 'I'm not surprised he gave you his middle name,' she added, nodding towards Regulus. 'He didn't enjoy being given the common name of "Tom".'

She paused. Sensing that a comment was needed, Regulus nodded.

'That makes sense,' he invented. 'Mum never used to call him Tom, now that I think about it.'

Mrs Cole seemed satisfied. She ate a fairy cake as she continued, getting into her stride.
'He was very polite, for the duration of his stay. And very quiet, for the most part. He never cried, as a boy.' The old lady swirled her cup, as though unsure as to how to continue. 'He got accepted to a mighty nice boarding school when he was eleven. The headmaster said his mum had put him down on a list since before he was born, but his mum was from the circus. When she came to us, she wasn't in a state to be making any sort of plans. But Tom seemed to like it there, and the other kids were happy to see him gone, so...'

'Why were the others happy to see him go?' Emma asked curiously.

'Oh, you know.' Mrs Cole waved her hand dismissively. 'More room in the orphanage, one less mouth to feed.'

At this, she gave Regulus a scrutinizing stare, but didn't expand upon the matter.

'Do you have any stories to tell us?' Emma asked after the silence drew on. 'He was always very quiet about his past.'

'I always thought it was because of the war,' Regulus added quietly.

_The war?_ Emma thought, frowning. _Surely this Muggle woman doesn't know about Grindelwald? Though I guess it might have spilled over into their world._

Mrs Cole looked about, as though searching for something to trigger her memory.

'He enjoyed collecting things,' she said eventually. 'He liked to have things that meant something, that had a history to them.'

'Like stamps?' Emma wondered. That didn't sound much like the Dark Lord.

'Like prizes,' Mrs Cole corrected. She hesitated, before continuing. 'Trinkets, that were rare and had a special meaning. A marble that he had won off the reigning champion at the time, for example.'

_The horcrux_, Emma thought immediately. She looked to Regulus, whose face had grown - if possible - even stiller. They chatted for a little while, about the orphanage in general, as well as Regulus and Emma's made up past, and made up child. They had both come up short when Mrs Cole asked them if they had thought of a name, but luckily she had brushed it off as natural.

'Well, thank you very much for your time,' Regulus said eventually. 'But we must be going. Emily would never say so, but she gets tired easily ever since the baby's started kicking.'

Emma was surprised, but went along with it, schooling her features into a grimace.

'I can tell the little one's going to be a nightmare,' she joked.

'I'll pay,' Regulus said quickly. He and Emma had calculated the required amount in advance, so that it wouldn't seem too suspicious if he gave them a random amount of paper notes.

Emma pulled on her cardigan and was about to wait for Regulus outside, when a hand shot out and grasped her arm.

'Be careful with that one, girl,' Mrs Cole said quickly. 'Make sure he treats you right.'

'What do you mean?' Emma frowned angrily. 'Why would you say such a thing?'

'His father was a charmer, and a looker just like your man there,' Mrs Cole lowered her voice, looking over Emma's shoulder towards Regulus. Satisfied, she met Emma's eyes. 'Tom scared the
other children. Nothing we could prove, but...bad things happened around him. I wouldn't want you and the baby to get hurt.'

'What kind of bad things?' Emma asked, but Mrs Cole just shook her head.

'Very bad things. The prizes he took - they weren't prizes he had won. They were trophies from his victims.'
Regulus was quiet all the way back.

In itself, that wasn't too unusual, even as Emma relayed the extra information about Tom Riddle's treasures, but the silence lasted all throughout the meal Kreacher had cooked, and his mouth merely twitched into a ghost of a smile when Kreacher asked if he liked the roast.

As such, the house-elf was currently cleaning the house with gusto, blowing noisily into his tea-cosy every once in a while as he beat himself up about having disappointed his favourite master.

That was when Emma truly knew that something was wrong.

After having tried - with little success - to console Kreacher, Emma went to Regulus's room, expecting him to be buried deep within his books. Instead, she found his balcony doors wide open and her boyfriend brooding at the railing.

'Hey,' she said, lightly touching his back as she walked up next to him.

She didn't need to say anything else. If he was going to say something, then he would. This wasn't a time for prodding at each other's thoughts.

'Do you think I'm like him?' Regulus asked, and his voice was husky from trying to control his emotions. 'The Dark Lord. That woman,' he hesitated, as though he had trouble getting the words out. 'Mrs Cole. She said that I looked like him.'

'I'm sure that a lot of purebloods resemble each other,' Emma replied consolingly, searching his face for signs of worry. 'Is that really what was on your mind?'

'It's not just that,' Regulus's voice definitely quavered this time. 'Helena, my… friend… at Hogwarts. She said that I reminded her of him. That… our personalities were alike. I… I don't want to believe that I could ever be that. And yet I'm a Death Eater. What if I'm evil, just like him? What if I'm just dragging you to the deep end of the lake, like lead weights around your ankles?'

'Regulus,' Emma interrupted before he could drive himself into a panic. Suddenly, she was glad that she hadn't mentioned Mrs Cole's parting remark. 'You are not Lord Voldemort. You haven't even killed anyone, let alone make a horcrux. He only wanted power, that much we've realised, but you wanted to make a better world. You can't berate yourself because you made a simple mistake.'

'But it wasn't simple, was it? We fought to become Death Eaters, we were proud of it. Sirius got away -'

'Sirius is different,' Emma cut through, weaving her fingers through his and stroking his hand with his thumb. 'He's made different mistakes. And we're trying to make up for them now, aren't we?
That's all anyone can ask.'

Regulus was silent, but he seemed appeased. That was, until Emma looked up and saw the shimmer in his eyes. Unlocking their fingers, Emma pulled him into a tight hug. If someone like Mrs Cole could offset Regulus that much, then this had to be a weight he had been carrying around for a long, long time.

He made a noise, as if to say something, but instead took a deep sigh and held her closer. After a long moment, he drew back, and the glimmer of tears had gone.

'Let's get back to work.'

A week later, they were no closer to obtaining their goal. Staying in the house with Walburga was uncomfortable, but ultimately Regulus wanted to be able to protect his mother if worst came to worst. Sirius could not lead the Order of the Phoenix to Grimmauld Place thanks to Orion's Secret Keeper wards, but they were better safe than sorry.

Emma had met with James twice - once to tell him of all the Death Eaters she knew, and another to warn him about the hit on the McKinnon family. The Dark Lord had ordered the execution of all known Order families as soon as possible, and the McKinnons were first on the list. James was able to save only Marlene, in the end.

The Dark Lord had become more paranoid, more erratic, ordering the deaths of known purebloods where before he would shun the spilling of magical blood. There were a few new recruits, but Emma knew they had joined out of fear rather than belief in the new world order.

Regulus believed that this was due to the creation of more horcruxes. Though they gave added power and immortality, the stability of the Dark Lord's soul was reaching its breaking point. He had almost gone past the definition of what was human, and the charismatic leader that Emma had once looked up to was no more.

Now, the Dark Mark had burned black, the signal for all Death Eaters to return to Voldemort's side. A panic rose in Emma's chest and Regulus must have noticed her expression, because before he pressed his Mark, he crossed the room and put his hands on her shoulders, rubbing her arms comfortingly.

'We'll be fine,' he said. 'The Dark Lord has no reason not to trust us; he will think the spy within the Order gave faulty intel. Just remember to act calmly and don't question him.'

Emma gulped.

'Yeah,' she replied, but her voice was strangled.

There was no point in delaying the inevitable, and the faster they arrived, the more pleased the Dark Lord would be. So she gave Regulus a swift kiss on the lips and straightened her robes, summoning her silver mask as she pulled up her left sleeve to press on her tattoo.

***

To Emma's surprise, Lord Voldemort was not at the Lestrange Manor. In fact, she was surprised to be in the Lestrange Manor at all. All of their other meetings had been at the country house near Little Hangleton, where Regulus found out his family had once lived. They had combed it several times, looking for Horcruxes, but with no such luck.
This time, there was merely Bellatrix with her wand to her arm, looking paler than ever - the Dark Lord's general had barely slept in weeks - and Rodolphus at her side. Rabastan greeted his friends as they arrived, his green eyes bright with excitement.

*Whatever this meeting is about,* Emma thought, *Rabastan is part of the plan.*

As the Death Eaters trickled in during the next fifteen minutes, Bellatrix explained that the Dark Lord was on important business out of the country, but had left strict orders to continue with the elimination of all that staunchly opposed him. Attacking the Ministry directly was a surefire way to gain public disapproval, so they were concentrating on Order members for the meantime.

'We've found the McGonagalls' safe house,' Rabastan burst out, obviously pleased with his discovery. 'Rookwood found out thanks to his network of spies. Evidently, the Order still thinks the Ministry mostly safe. I need a couple of people to help me quietly disable the Anti-Apparition charms. I've seen movement within and according to our reports, both Robert and Malcolm McGonagall scout it before bringing their families there.'

'So we wait,' Alecto said as she stepped out from the shadows.

Emma had to hold herself back from starting; she hadn't seen her former friend. Alecto's teeth were gleaming as she sported a ferocious smile not unlike that of her brother's. 'Wait until the whole clan is gathered, then kill them like the McKinnons.'

*Alecto, what have you become?* Emma thought sorrowfully, remembering the cheeky and mischievous girl from her youth.

'There's no use in wasting good blood,' Lucius Malfoy announced, arriving in a flurry of robes. He set his cane on the ground with a *thunk,* bringing the room to attention. 'The young ones should not be punished for the crimes of their elders.'

'For once we are in agreement, dear brother,' Bellatrix laughed. 'Let us strike fear into old Albus's heart by turning his Deputy's very family against her!'

There was a murmur of assent. Suddenly, Emma was struck with an idea. A risky idea, but that seemed to be all that she had been running on for the past three years.

'We'd still have to wait,' she said clearly, stepping forwards and nodding at Alecto. 'If we secure the perimetre before the McGonagalls get there, we can bide our time until the men are certain there are no traps. Then as they signal their families, we lower the Anti-Apparition wards and kill them before their children arrive. They'll be so shocked at their parents' death that they'll come without fuss.'

Bellatrix let out another laugh as Alecto flashed Emma a smile, evidently pleased that they were allies of some sort. Rabastan looked taken aback, but Rodolphus was nodding in agreement. Looking around, Emma saw that most of her fellow Death Eaters seemed in agreement.

'Well, then,' Rabastan cleared his throat, recovering from his shock. 'Come with me, Emma. You're an expert on detecting magical signatures thanks to your Arithmancy classes. Barty too. And Dolohov, you're our best duellist, just in case we run into trouble.'

'Makes sense that you'd always bring your friends along,' a person Emma didn't recognise muttered loudly enough for the room to hear.

'Maybe if you weren't as thick as two planks you'd be allowed to come out and play, Crabbe,' Bellatrix sneered, her upper lip curling.
There was a smattering of laughter, and Crabbe retreated to sulk in a corner.

'It's settled then,' Rodolphus said, his deep voice carrying through the room. 'The four of you will go now and we shall when you press the mark. You know what to do, little brother.'

He ruffled Rabastan's hair, who seemed disgruntled.

'I'm not a child,' he hissed at his brother.

'Doesn't stop you from being little,' Rodolphus grinned.

Bellatrix let off another round of her laughs.

Emma's eyes flickered over to Regulus. She couldn't see his expression beneath the mask, but she saw the cloth of his hood move as he gave the smallest of nods.

The Order would not go unwarned.

***

James was stationed at the Leaky Cauldron. He could think of a thousand better uses of his time, but alas, Dumbledore's orders were Dumbledore's orders.

That didn't stop him from jiggling his leg impatiently as he drank his butterbeer, scanning the tos and fros of witches and wizards. Honestly, the Death Eaters probably knew better than to come through the pub, but Diagon Alley needed to be warned if there was an attack.

He glanced over at Sirius, who was also moving restlessly. If there was ever someone born for the field of battle, it was Sirius. Idly, James wondered what his best friend would do without the war. He'd like to think that Padfoot would become a Hit Wizard for a few years, before retiring to a comfortable life of Quidditch.

James snorted.

'What's so funny?' Sirius asked immediately, letting his chair fall back on all four feet.

'The idea of you retiring,' James flicked some butterbeer at Sirius's hair.

Sirius flicked it out of the way with ease.

'I would never retire,' Sirius said indignantly, straightening his shoulders. 'Besides, Wormy's the oldie. He was born way back in September.'

James snorted again. 'So what, he's a month or two older than you?'

'Exactly,' Sirius jutted out his chin to prove his point.

Just then, the door opened, letting in the summer heat from the alleyway. Instinctively, James and Sirius both swiveled their heads to look.

'Great,' Sirius's voice turned snide. 'Just what I needed.'

James was pretty sure that Regulus's mere existence would be reason enough for Sirius to want to curse him there and then, but they were supposed to be keeping a low profile, reporting back when information reached critical levels.
James had a feeling that this wasn't critical.

Keeping in mind Emma's request not to tell Sirius about whatever she and Regulus were doing to help the Order of the Phoenix - she hadn't even wanted to tell her own brother much of it - he laid a hand on Sirius's arm.

'Why don't I take care of him?' he asked quietly. 'You keep an eye on the door for more of them.' Seeing Sirius hesitate, he quickly lied. 'I'm pretty sure he's not that high up in the hierarchy. Seems like Voldemort recruited as many people he could when he realised he was losing this war. Regulus might be in over his head.'

James knew that Emma would kill him if she heard him, and Regulus definitely would not take kindly to the veiled insult, but he couldn't bear to have the man that had become a brother to him think that his blood brother was a bloodthirsty monster like his mother. A coward would be infinitely better.

'He always was weak-willed,' Sirius growled, biting the inside of his cheeks.

He glanced over at his brother, who was patiently waiting at the bar. After all, the Ministry had no reason to believe that Regulus was a Death Eater, not when the Blacks had so generously donated to the building of their newest fountain. James rolled his eyes at the thought, but remained where he stood.

'Fine,' Sirius said eventually. 'But I want to know every word that passes through his lips. I'll stay on the lookout for Rosier and Lestrange.'

'Lucinda Rosier?' James was surprised. Emma's ditzy friend didn't strike him as the murderous type.

'Evan,' Sirius replied.

Ah, James thought. He had forgotten about that piece of intel. According to one of Dumbledore's sources, the elder Rosier had left for France, leaving his son to take his place both as a business investor and a Death Eater. James had been rather… preoccupied during that meeting. After all, that had been the day he had bought a ring for Lily. A ring that had remained in the secret pocket of his robes ever since.

James shook his head. Now was not the time to think of grand romantic gestures. He had a feeling that Regulus coming into the Leaky Cauldron on his shift wasn't coincidence.

Downing his butterbeer, he collected Sirius's glass and made his way to the bar, sidling up beside the younger of the Black brothers.

Regulus glanced at him, barely acknowledging his presence. James felt a flare of anger. He knew that he and Regulus weren't the best of friends, but he deserved at least a proper greeting, didn't he?

'Two butterbeers please,' James told the barman, ignoring Regulus. *Two can play at that game.*

As Tom turned around, letters appeared in flaming red, hovering an inch above the polished wood of the bar.

*Can't talk here. Too risky. Urgent. Fortescue's.*

James frowned, committing the message to memory as the letters faded, leaving no trace of their existence. Regulus downed a shot of Firewhisky and left, this time not even looking in James's direction.
The Gryffindor looked back at Sirius, who gave him a short nod. He had his partner's permission to follow the potential suspect. Sirius would cover for him in the pub, in case Regulus had left a signal for other Death Eaters. At least, that was the protocol for ordinary Death Eaters. James refrained from telling Sirius that he could wait till high morn' if he expected another Death Eater that evening.

Thanking Tom for the butterbeers, James quickly brought them back to Sirius.

'I need to piss,' he said loudly.

Sirius roared with laughter.

James grinned. The ploy was immature, but effective. In the toilets, he took his dad's old Invisibility Cloak out and slipped out into Diagon Alley. Despite the fact that most of the shops had already closed for the day, the magical street was packed with people out enjoying the summer heat, whether by going to restaurants or just milling about on benches.

Fortescue's was heaving with people. James had to fight his way through several screaming children before he found Regulus, casually eating an ice cream sundae in the back of the shop.

'How did you even find a table?' James asked, panting a little from the exertion as he sat down.

'Everyone wants to be outside,' the Slytherin replied. He pushed his sundae away.

Now that James looked a little closer, the dessert had barely been touched. He studied Regulus's face. Was it paler than usual? Neither Black tanned much, so it was hard to tell.

'It's not a coincidence that you're here, is it?' James knew that it was a stupid question, but he couldn't help the words falling from his lips.

'No.'

***

Emma crept around the bushes of the McGonagalls' safe house, checking her watch as she did so. The longest broomstick fluttered back and forth, veering from green to red, whereas the shortest pointed towards VI.

'What does that mean?' Rabastan whispered to her. There was no point in announcing their presence, even though they had cast muffling charms.

'It's the number six, but there are only three. The last is eight,' Emma said to Barty, who nodded and started casting a few preliminary spells.

Her gaze flitted to where Dolohov was standing, concealed on the other side of the house. She couldn't spot him. A good thing, she thought. She hated to admit it, but Dolohov's presence reassured her. The McGonagall brothers were much more experienced duellists than any of the three kids. She turned back to Rabastan, seeing her thoughts mirrored in his green eyes.

'Six is the number of protection,' she explained. 'Four sixes are the symbol of an ultimate protection charm - blood magic or other types of binding contracts, like that of the Secret Keeper. Three symbolise the best protection one could cast without resorting to what is considered Dark. The eight is the number of power. They tried to make up for the cracks in the layers with sheer magical power.'

'So how do we get rid of the Anti-Apparition Charm without setting off all other alarms?' Rabastan asked curiously.
'We find a crack in the armour,' Emma replied, shuffling to the side as she gauged the size of her watch, which would expand with the amount of magical energy. 'If my watch turns green, then the spells in front of us are harmless. That means any kind of magic that isn't linked to a person - whether to warn the caster or to harm them.'

'All right,' Rabastan furrowed his brow, staring at Emma's watch for a few seconds, before nudging her conspiratorially. 'Merlin, Arithmancy was actually useful for something. Who would have known?'

'I knew,' Barty replied, coming back towards them. He turned to Emma, addressing her specifically. 'I think I know how to disable them.'

'Good,' Emma replied, straightening. 'Because I think we've found our chink.'

She placed her wrist at eye height, as close to the wards as she dared. It shrank to child-size, the long broomstick stuck on green.

'I think there were only three of them casting. This is the point that was obscured from their vision, where the points meet but don't overlap. Are you ready, Barty?' she asked, readying her wand.

Barty gave a short nod, but just as he opened his mouth, Rabastan clapped his hand to the younger boy's lips.

'Wait!' he ordered. 'Put on your masks. Just in case.'

Barty and Emma had removed their masks to better study the wards. Rabastan had done so to lay alarm spells of his own, but had since hidden his face once more.

'We wouldn't want to ruin our chances at the Ministry,' Emma agreed, bringing her mask from her pocket and letting it meld to her face. 'On the count of three. One… Two… Three!'

The two Death Eaters weaved their wands into patterns in rhythm, practicing a once-complicated spell that held no secrets to those having an O.W.L. in Arithmancy. A faint wind washed across them, enough to rustle their hoods, but not enough to blow them off.

'It's done,' Barty whispered.

'Good,' Rabastan nodded, letting out a slow breath. 'I'll tell Dolohov the news. Get into position, and try not to move. The rest of the families should be arriving in fifteen minutes.'
A Rock and a Hard Place

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has commented on this so far. You guys are the best!

James swallowed. The last time Emma or Regulus had taken a big risk to come and see him, nearly the entire McKinnon family had died.

‘We’ve found the McGonagalls’ safe house,’ Regulus said quietly. ‘We know that Professor McGonagall will be wherever Dumbledore is, and Dumbledore won’t be expecting us. A few will Apparate not far from the house, wait for the two brothers to make sure the coast is clear, and then disable the wards. When the rest of the families arrive, children and all, that’s when we’ll strike.’

‘We’ll?’ James couldn’t help but asking.

‘I’m still one of them, no matter my opinion on the matter,’ Regulus said, drawing his robes around him despite the heat. He paused, as if to say something else, but thought the better of it, leaving James to his ice cream.

The sundae had lost all taste, but James forced himself to finish it. There was nothing stranger than an uneaten ice cream in summer, and he wanted enough time to pass for Regulus to steer clear. The McGonagalls weren’t due to arrive for half an hour yet. As the last bite reached his lips, he thanked Fortescue and all but ran out of the parlor.

He took a moment to send a garbled message via Patronus, before running back to the Leaky Cauldron. He needed Sirius on his side.

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Emma could feel her heartbeat accelerating in her chest as she ran through a list of possible situations in her mind. Her wand was clutched tightly in her sweaty palm, her other hand securing her mask and hood. Seventeen raids, and still I will never get used to them.

Her ears picked up the faint sounds of Apparition. Regulus and Rodolphus had joined them. Bellatrix had never been one for stealth missions, so she would lead the main charge. The bushes to her left rustled as they got into position, covering all possible exits.

Ten minutes.

***

‘Sirius’. James gasped as he raced back into the bar, not caring that he was supposed to be keeping a low profile. ‘Sirius, we have to go. Now.’

To Sirius’s credit, Sirius walked into the alleyway separating the Leaky Cauldron from Diagon Alley and cast a Muffling Charm before he turned to James.

‘What was that?’ he asked. ‘Did my brother do something? You told me you could handle it yourself!’
James had rehearsed what he was going to say on the way back from Fortescue’s. Still, it didn’t make him feel any better about lying to his best friend.

‘I followed him, but before I could speak to him, I noticed him ducking into the bookshop. On a hunch, I went in, but hid a couple of shelves away. Then I saw him meeting with Evan Rosier, and they were talking about how they’re planning on attacking Robert and Malcolm’s families!’

‘The bastards! Going after children! When?’ Sirius asked immediately, his face pulling into a snarl.

James felt a rush of affection for his friend, to accept his words so readily. But he was also overcome with an uneasy feeling. Sirius was always ready to believe the worst of his little brother, and James felt as though he was breaking what was left of that bridge plank by plank.

_There will be time to sort this out when the war is over_, he thought, trying to reassure himself. He shook his head, trying to stay focused.

‘They’re gathering as we speak,’ he replied, bringing to mind the small children of Robert McGonagall. ‘I sent a Patronus to meet at home.’

‘Then we need to go,’ Sirius said, turning on the spot almost before he had finished.

James followed suit, Apparating to Godric’s Hollow. All he could do now was wait for the Order to assemble.

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Emma checked her watch. The seconds seemed agonisingly slow. Barty shuffled to her left, but Rabastan to her right was as still as stone. He was made for the chase. _He should apply to become a hit wizard_, she thought idly, before remembering who would be on his hit list. _Perhaps not._

She wished she could cast a spell to see in the dark. The lights were on in the safe house, but there was no longer any hint of noise. She wondered if the McGonagalls were done with their safety checks yet, or whether they were busy making dinner for their families. James had told her, against her will, that Robert and Malcolm pretended that it was a game to their children. Emma wondered how long the children would believe the lie.

She checked her watch again.

_Five minutes._

***

‘I’m telling you, my intell is good!’ James exclaimed, trying to convince the Order to join him at the McGonagalls.

‘What about the rest of the intell we got?’ Fabian asked. ‘All of the evidence points towards another Ministry attack. And now you’re telling us that the Death Eaters have decided to take a stroll near the McGonagall home?’

‘Yes,’ James replied simply.

‘James,’ Alice said gently, touching him at the elbow. ‘Is it possible that you might be mistaken? After all, the house is well protected. Why don’t we just get a message to Robert and Malcolm?’

‘Because then they will know something’s wrong!’ James said. He felt like tearing his hair out.
‘Can’t you just trust me on this?’

‘No one’s saying they can’t trust you, mate,’ Gideon said, looking down at his feet.

James looked around at the other Order members. Only Sirius and Lily looked him in the eye. Even Peter avoided his gaze. Remus had gone, off on some mission for Dumbledore that he couldn’t disclose. He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

‘You think I’ve been duped,’ he said, taking a faltering step back. ‘None of you believe me.’

‘Let’s just wait ’till Minerva and Albus get here,’ Dorcas Meadows offered. It was a compromise. But a compromise they couldn’t afford to make.

‘There are Death Eaters coming for an innocent family, and yet not one of you will lift a finger without Dumbledore’s permission,’ Sirius growled, leaping up from his chair. ‘By the time he gets here, the McGonagalls will be dead, and it will be on our hands.’ He turned to James, giving him a nod of approval. ‘You were right about Marlene’s family. I trust you on this.’

‘Thanks, Padfoot,’ James replied. He restrained himself from shouting. Better save my anger for the Death Eaters. ‘I’m going over there. I can’t sit by and let them die. Come with me or don’t.’

‘James,’ Lily started.

‘Don’t try to talk me out of this, Lils.’

‘I was only going to say that I’m coming too,’ she said fiercely, her green eyes ablaze.

James felt as though his heart would burst from love.

***

A cloud passed over the sky, obscuring the sun from view. It was dusk, not dark. Emma wished for the cover of night, but waiting so long would be risky. The brothers were sure to check their outer wards as soon as their families arrived. Briefly, Emma wondered if her old teacher missed her family as she went about Dumbledore’s business.

Focus on the task at hand, Emma, she chided herself. No need to make this more painful than it already is.

Almost against her will, she lifted her hand to check her watch.

One minute.

***

‘Wait!’ Gideon stepped forwards. He glanced back towards his brother, before turning to look at James with hard eyes. ‘If you feel that strongly about it, I can’t let only three of you go in good conscience.’

‘Brother, both Benjy and Peter worked hard to bring us the information about the Ministry,’ Fabian chided. ‘Will you let our efforts go to nothing?’

‘The Ministry will be able to hold their own for a while before we get there,’ Gideon said resolutely. ‘If what James says is true and we do nothing… Two families will die tonight.’

James clasped Gideon’s hand in his own. ‘Thank you for your support.’ He glanced at his watch.
‘We need to go.’

In the end, there were eight of them. James, Lily, Sirius, Gideon, Emmeline Vance, Alice Fawley, Frank Longbottom and Caradoc Dearborn. A third of the Order. It was better than nothing, but they would still be outmatched.

*It will have to do,* James thought, turning on the spot with his wand at the ready.

***

A series of loud cracks sounded, as though it were Guy Fawkes night and everyone was setting off fireworks. Taking that as her cue, Emma rushed out, towards the house, followed by Dolohov a few seconds later. Rabastan and Barty would wait in front for the children. Emma could only hope that the rest of the Death Eaters could join them before the Order arrived.

*How do I protect the families and my friends?* she asked herself. *I don’t want Rabastan to die.*

She didn’t know whether it was a good thing or not that the McGonagalls had been alerted by the noise. She could hear them, even before she blasted open the front door.

‘Robert, warn Lisa! Go, now, I’ll hold them off for a while!’ a panicked voice shouted. Emma guessed that it was Malcolm.

‘No, I won’t leave you! If we die, then we go down fighting, not cowering in some room! They’ll know what to do when they see it.’

‘When they see what?’

‘*Avada Kedavra!*’ Dolohov leapt into the room, blasting green light in the direction of the voices.

One of the McGonagalls dropped on the spot, stiff as a board.

‘The Dark Mark,’ he added with a grin, replying to the dead man’s question. He gave Emma the signal.

‘*Morsmordre,*’ she intoned, putting as much venom into her words as possible as she pointed her wand skywards.

The other brother took advantage of Dolohov’s hesitation to jump through one of the windows, crossing his arms over his head. Shattered glass flew everywhere, and Emma instinctively threw up a Shield Charm that encompassed both Death Eaters. Dolohov cursed.

‘Take the stairs,’ he ordered, jumping straight out of the window after the escaping brother.

*Better you than me,* Emma thought, nimbly avoiding the glass as she took the stairs two by two, wrenching open the door. She took a moment to scan the surroundings. McGonagall was making a beeline for where the Apparition wards should have been. He appeared to have forgotten that the Death Eaters had arrived via Apparition in his haste.

Dolohov was pursuing him, gaining on him as he shot spell after spell. That was what Dolohov did best, run whilst casting nonverbal curses so as not to waste breath. Emma couldn’t help but admire the man, though in her heart she hoped that at least one of the McGonagalls would get away.

It was not to be.

He was running straight towards where Regulus and Rodolphus had positioned themselves. Emma
started running, whether to help or hinder, she didn’t know. As the Order member drew nearer and
closer, she saw a flicker of movement. But it wasn’t where Regulus and Rodolphus had said they
would be. In fact, Rodolphus was already emerging from behind the apple tree, raising his wand.

‘Look out!’ she screamed.

Dolohov dove to the floor. The McGonagall brother faltered in his running, turning around to see
who had spoken. And Rodolphus cast his curse, the green light flowing across half the garden before
hitting McGonagall square in the chest.

Then ropes wrapped themselves around the older Lestrange, forcing him to drop his wand and lose
his balance, falling to the floor.

***

James arrived at the McGonagalls only to realise that one, they had arrived too late; and two, they
were severely outnumbered.

‘Send a Patronus!’ he told Alice, who had mastered the spell the best out of all of them.

She nodded and raced down the hillside to send the Patronus without interruptions. The rest of them
fanned out, hiding under what cover the forest could provide. The further they were from each other,
the less the area of effect spells could damage them. Of course, this also brought the added risk of
one person being ganged up on.

Still, James imitated the others. Nearly all of them were experienced Aurors, whereas he and Sirius
had only joined the Order that year.

‘Oh Potty, oh Potty, come out, come out!’ a feminine voice called, cruel and mocking. He knew that
voice. And he hated it. ‘You can’t hide in the trees forever!’

Why did she have to single me out? James took a moment to thump his head against the trunk he was
hiding behind. He could only think that she hadn’t noticed Sirius, since he had stayed in the open for
a fraction of a second longer than the others. He snuck a peek around the corner of his tree. She
wasn’t there.

‘Your sister’s more fun than you, you know,’ Bellatrix whispered from behind him. ‘A lot more.’

‘Stupefy!’ Frank shouted, and Bellatrix was forced to dodge back to avoid the spell.

‘Thanks,’ James replied, wiping the sweat off of his forehead. ‘I don’t know what I would have
done.’

‘Shut up and concentrate!’ Frank cut him off, uncharacteristically harsh. James realised that the older
man was just as scared as he was. ‘We need to last long enough for the rest of them to arrive!’

The next few minutes were spent intensively dodging and yelling Shield Charms until his voice was
hoarse. He didn’t have time to look for Sirius, didn’t have time to wonder if the McGonagalls, if
Emma and Regulus, were okay. He just had to breathe, duck, survive.

Suddenly, his routine was broken into. A cacophony of voices and explosions reached his ears, and
he had just the time to dive to the side as a particularly nasty spell set the bush he was next to on fire.

‘At your service,’ Fabian grinned, tipping his head.
James didn’t know whether he wanted to strangle the twin or hug him.

‘Sorry for the delay,’ he added. ‘Dumbledore got the Ministry so we can round up as many of these suckers as we can. Where are the families?’

_Oh Merlin_, James thought, horror dawning on him. _The families._

***

Emma watched as the dark blue cloaks with bright silver Ms swarmed the gardens, panic mounting in her chest.

_I wanted James to save them, not capture us!_ she thought, immediately feeling guilty for her selfishness.

Dolohov glanced back at her once, before attempting to Apparate. Instead, he turned on the spot, nearly losing his balance. A look of sheer terror replaced the determination on his face.

‘Run, Emma, run!’ he shouted, sprinting in the opposite direction, where the rest of the Death Eaters were supposed to be apprehending the McGonagalls’ families.

But they wouldn’t, Emma had made sure of that. Dolohov was running straight into the arms of the Order of the Phoenix. She opened her mouth to warn him, and then bit her tongue. _You’re not supposed to know_, she told herself.

Crossing her fingers in her mind for her fellow Death Eater, she dove into a nearby rose bush, biting back the cry of pain that came to her lips. The thorns tore at her clothing, leaving red angry welts that would sting when the adrenaline wore off.

_Regulus is still there_, she thought desperately. _I can’t let the Ministry get him, I just can’t._

Carefully, she raised her wand arm. With a bit of luck, the Aurors would be doing their customary checks before moving towards Rodolphus’s struggling body, and Regulus was wise enough to keep quiet.

_‘Confringo!’_ she said quietly, sure that the blast would cover the sound of her voice. A cherry tree that one of the wizards had been standing next to exploded, sending him flying into his partner.

All faces snapped towards the sound of the explosion and Emma took advantage of the few precious seconds to leap out of her bush, further tearing her clothing, to dive to the ground, crawling between the rows of carefully arranged flowers. As she had suspected, some of the Aurors were intelligent enough to follow the source of the light her spell had created.

But before they could get anywhere near the rosebush, an amplified voice cried out.

_‘We’ve found the kids! They’re all right, but we’re going to get overrun!’_

Immediately, most of the Aurors rushed to the house. Emma thanked her lucky stars that the Order had been on the other side of the house. Two Aurors stayed to watch either side of Rodolphus, wary of any rescue attempts. However, they were scanning at human height, not at ground level.

Emma rolled through the dirt towards where Rodolphus was, scanning the surroundings for Regulus. She carefully parted the lavender to check, wary of the Aurors. There was no sign of him, though Rodolphus caught her eye immediately and gave a meaningful glance towards the ropes.
‘Where’s Reg?’ she chanced a whisper.

Rodolphus said nothing. But just then, the tree rustled, dropping an apple onto Rodolphus’s face.

‘Ouch!’ he yelled loudly.

The Aurors started, looking to the bound Death Eater. When they saw what happened, one laughed, whilst the other one drew nearer.

‘That apple’s going to be the last thing on your mind when we get you out of here,’ he said, spitting on Rodolphus’s face and smearing it in with his boot. ‘I knew Robert, and he didn’t deserve to be killed by filth like you.’

Rodolphus grinned.

‘Wait ‘till you hear what I did to his wife and kids,’ he leered.

The Auror kicked harder this time, knocking several teeth out of Rodolphus’s mouth.

‘Stop that,’ the woman Auror told him sharply. ‘Don’t lower yourself to their level. You’re better than that.’

As the two Aurors argued, Emma noticed a flash of metal catch a stray ray of sunlight. Looking up, she saw that Regulus had hidden himself in the trees and was now lowering himself down, out of the Aurors’ vision. When she looked back to Rodolphus, the older man grinned again, spitting blood and grime from his mouth.

Emma felt a lump come to her throat. Even if Rodolphus was probably doing it for the chance to get free, he had no idea if Regulus and she would just up and leave him to it. He was going out on a limb for them, trusting them, and despite the fact that she hated him, she felt touched.

Perhaps there’s more of Rabastan in him than I thought.

But this was no time for pondering the state of Rodolphus’s sick and twisted soul. Regulus quickly jumped the last few feet, smoothly transitioning into a roll and then pointing his wand at the male Auror.

‘Stupefy,’ he shouted.

The man crumpled, landing on top of Rodolphus, who groaned. Emma had expected the woman to look around, but to her credit, she immediately cast a Shield Charm and placed her wand to her throat.

‘Need backup! They’re trying to free Lestrange.’

Damnit, Emma thought. The word “Lestrange” was enough to have half the Ministry on them.

Quickly, she jumped to her feet, shoving the Auror off of Rodolphus’s body.

‘Diffindo,’ she said, slicing the bonds. Rodolphus took her proffered arm, and she hauled him to his feet, taking off at a sprint for the edge of the Apparition field. Regulus soon joined them, looking over his shoulder every once in a while to check for pursuers.

‘We’re going to make it!’ Rodolphus yelled triumphantly, as they drew further and further away.

Emma ground to a stop, Rodolphus running into her and nearly knocking her over.
'What is it?' he grunted.

‘You’ll never take me alive!’ Evan Rosier yelled, saving Emma a response. He was duelling two Aurors two hundred yards away. ‘I won’t rot in Azkaban as a drooling mess!’

‘Bloody Death Eater,’ answered none other than Alastor Moody.

Emma and Regulus shared a look of horror. Alastor Moody had put more people behind bars than the rest of the Aurors combined. Emma recognised the other Auror as Savage. According to James, he was very much in favour of fighting fire with fire, Unforgivable with Unforgivable.

‘Here’s our chance to take him down,’ Rodolphus told them, charging across the grass like a maniac.

Emma stood there, stunned, wondering if maybe Rodolphus had suffered a concussion. She didn’t want to leave Evan alone against Moody, but neither did she have a death threat. One glance at Regulus had her resigned. He was readying his wand, so she sent out a prayer to Merlin, hoping that he would give her another chance at life.

‘Die!’ Rodolphus eloquently bellowed, sending out killing curse after killing curse.

Moody turned around to face his new opponent, something Evan immediately took advantage of.

‘Diffindo!’ he cried out, and Moody gave a roar of pain, clutching his hands to his face.

‘Avada Kedavra!’

The spell hadn’t come from any Death Eater, but from the other Auror, Savage. Emma could see Evan’s look of shock etched onto his face as he fell to the ground, his glassy eyes staring at the sky.

Regulus stopped still, his eyes wide and his features expressionless. It’s the first time he’s seen someone die like that, Emma remembered. The first time someone’s been full of life, and then suddenly gone. Orion had been tortured until he was put out of his misery.

‘Stay here,’ she told him, casting a Disillusionment charm on him, before sprinting after Rodolphus. The odds had evened out now that Moody was incapacitated, and she was going to give Savage hell for killing one of her best friends’ brothers.

‘Crucio,’ Rodolphus yelled as soon as he got near enough, watching with satisfaction as Savage writhed and screamed next to Evan’s body.

‘Incarcerous,’ Emma intoned when she arrived at the scene, binding Savage’s body in ropes not unlike the ones that had trapped Rodolphus mere minutes before.

Suddenly, she felt a burning pain on her face, as though her mask had turned into liquid silver and was trying to seep into her pores. With a cry of pain, she ripped it off without a second thought, dropping the hot metal into the ground and wringing her hand.

Moody was standing before her, the lower half of his face caked with blood and gore, his eyes grim with determination.

‘Potter,’ he grunted. ‘You chose the wrong side. You are under arrest for-’

Before he was able to finish his sentence, he froze and fell to the floor. Emma looked around to see that Regulus had followed them, his wand pointing straight at Moody.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘The Body-Bind won’t last for long.’
At Wit's End

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, I'm so sorry for another late post, guys!

'Rodolphus.' The Dark Lord's lip curled into a sneer. 'I'm surprised that you showed your face today.'

'My Lord, forgive me, I…' Rodolphus stammered, prostrating himself on the floor. 'We were betrayed!'

'Betrayed by your own ineptitude, or so I understand,' Voldemort flicked his wand. 'Perhaps this shall refresh your memory as to what happens to our kind that falls into their hands.'

Rodolphus twitched, then started writhing on the floor, his limbs twisting unnaturally and a look of agony upon his face. To his credit, he did not scream. Those who screamed only suffered longer.

As Emma watched, she felt twinges of phantom pain responding to the scene before her. No, not phantom pain, she reminded herself. Though she suffered for less than a minute, she had still felt the touch of the Dark Lord's curse upon her skin. It is lucky that he believes that Regulus and I saved Rodolphus, and the identity of many of our kin.

Regulus himself had received a warm commendation. Not only had he kept a cool head in battle, he had also managed to keep his identity secret, something that Emma could no longer claim to be true for herself. She had suffered for lost prospects. Rodolphus was suffering for incompetence.

She heard a faint gasp to her right, and knew that it was Rabastan. He was lucky that the initial objective of his plan had been accomplished. He had been saved from the wand, this day, and the transgression of fearing for a family member was never punished if they were on the right side.

If Emma was honest with herself, she knew that none of them would be standing there if not for Antonin Dolohov's well placed curse. It would have been hard to kill either brother, had they been able to draw courage from one another.

Her eyes flickered to Bellatrix, who watched the scene impassionately. Emma suppressed a shudder. In her younger years at Hogwarts, she had admired the older witch. Now, she found her more terrifying than Voldemort himself, if only for her bloodthirst.

As Rodolphus's cries reverberated around the Lestrange manor, Emma closed her ears and her mind, focusing on her breathing. At least she still had that.

***

'James.'

A heavy weight pressed against James's shoulder, and he knew without turning that it was Alastor Moody, the Auror who would have trained him had he decided upon that path. In the end, both James and Sirius had agreed that they would do more good in this war if they were free to do what
they wished with their time, but Moody still had hopes of James joining the Ministry's ranks once the war was over.

*Once the war is over, James told himself. He had to believe that it would be, one day.*

'Lad, I don't know how to say this diplomatically, so I'm just going to say it. Your sister is a Death Eater.'

James felt his heart sink. He knew that this day would come. In his heart, he had known that it would be after this evening's battle. He had heard the cries of his sister's name, heard Bellatrix taunting him before the Prewetts, and he knew that the Aurors were clever enough to pick up on that.

'I know,' he said. 'But she's not one of them, not really.'

He turned to face the grizzled Auror, wincing as he saw his face wrapped in bandages. Even now, James could tell that much of his nose was missing, and knowing Voldemort's followers, it would have been cursed off. But worse than Moody's nose were his eyes, filled with uncharacteristic pity.

'She was forced into it,' James explained, feeling the need to justify his sister's actions as much as possible. If possible, Moody's face softened further. James hated it.

'That may be,' Moody grunted. 'But she's one of them now, and there's no turning back from that kind of life. Most of the time, it's kill or be killed in this war.'

'But she's not *like* the others,' James protested, feeling inadequate.

He opened his mouth to explain everything, but it snapped shut of his own accord. He *would not* betray his sister's trust. He had made a promise, and intended to keep it, for better or for worse. He knew that Dumbledore would welcome Emma into his ranks, that the Order would find her a safe place, but she trusted none of them. And if James revealed her secret, she would no longer trust him.

Not to mention the spy.

'That's what they all say, laddie,' Moody's hand pressed down, once, twice, before he took it away. 'But in the end, their actions are all the same.'

'Shouldn't you be trying to find the spy?' James asked, a little aggressively.

If there was no spy, then perhaps Emma would allow him to share her information. As it was, he feared more for his sister's life if she came here, than where she currently stayed. At least at Grimmauld Place neither Ministry nor Death Eater could touch her, and she had reassured him that her friends were as loyal as his own.

Moody recognised the attempt to change the subject, and began to list suspects. But the look the Auror sent his way told James that he hadn't yet heard the end of this.

***

'I'm expendable now,' Emma whispered to Regulus as they entered Grimmauld Place, careful not to disturb Walburga, who had dozed off by the fire in the living room. 'The Dark Lord recognises that he no longer needs me for infiltration and I will be sent on scouting missions with Rabastan and Dolohov.'
'There are worse people to be paired with,' Regulus replied solemnly as they crept up the stairs. He closed the door of his room quietly, the hinges making the barest of sounds. 'We will just have to be faster. I will still be able to research Tom Riddle.'

'I do not want you venturing out alone,' Emma said worriedly, touching a hand to his cheek. 'Britain is becoming a dangerous place for everyone. What if you meet a stray Inferi? I hear the Dark Lord has created too many to control efficiently.'

'Then I shall burn it,' Regulus smiled. 'Think of it this way; you will have more information to give James, and I will do what I do best - finding out secrets.'

But he couldn't hide his worried tone.

Emma was about to respond, to share more of the worries that overflowed her mind, but just then the fire in the grate turned green. Sharing a look, Regulus and Emma both drew their wands. The Fidelius Charm protected them from unwanted visitors, but someone could still Floo Call if they so wished. Emma only hoped it was not James. Then her brother would be viewed as the Order's traitor, and the last person she cared about would be snatched from the net of safety.

The last person Emma had expected to see was Rabastan, his face worried. For half a second, Emma thought that Rodolphus had been killed by the Dark Lord, but that was not Voldemort's style. He would have held Rodolphus's body up for all to see.

'Emma, I need your help,' Rabastan said, his face as pale as ever. 'It's Lucinda. I… I don't know what to do.'

***

When everyone had finally left Godric's Hollow to their respective homes, James gave a sigh of relief, throwing himself into an armchair. He would have to warn Emma, but somehow he knew that she would already have been informed. The spy would see to that.

*It all comes down to the bloody spies*, James thought angrily, then immediately felt a wave of guilt. Emma was a spy, and so was Regulus. If it hadn't been for them, Marlene would be dead. Most probably, Robert and Malcolm's children would be dead.

The soft sound of the cushion sinking into the sofa alerted James to the fact that he was no longer alone. He turned his head, not bothering to sit up straight. He was too tired for that. Of course, it was Sirius, his head fallen back against the back of the sofa like a rag doll, his arms splayed out.

'I'm so tired, I could sleep into the next century without noticing,' Sirius complained exaggeratedly.

James snorted. It was an ungainly noise, and it jolted his body in a way that he was glad Lily was not there to see.

'No you couldn't, Padfoot,' he replied teasingly. 'You'd be too hungry.'

'That is true,' Sirius agreed, and they lapsed into an easy silence.

James's mind turned back to his previous train of thoughts. Sirius didn't know that Regulus had saved all of those people. Sirius probably thought that his brother being a Death Eater was a confirmed fact now, especially since he knew Emma was. James wondered why his best friend hadn't told Dumbledore about the tattoo he had seen on his brother's arm. *Does Sirius still have hope for his little*
Just as he had made up his mind to tell Sirius something, anything, to repair his relationship with his estranged brother, Lily walked in.

'James, what are you doing lying in that armchair?' she asked, folding her arms. She attempted to look menacing, but she was too tired to manage the true fire that usually burned in her eyes.

'Lily!' James exclaimed, sitting up straight. 'I thought you were going back to your parents?'

'Yes,' she replied, pursing her lips. 'But you were supposed to be coming too. Remember? Petunia and that ghastly Vernon's engagement lunch? We're supposed to meet Mum and Dad at my house, and then all ride over there together, since neither of us can drive.'

James smacked his hand to his head. Sirius chuckled.

'Man, I do not envy you,' he said, getting up. 'I'm off to bed. Wake me up when you get back.'

'Do we have to go?' James asked, looking at his girlfriend beseechingly.

Lily sighed where once she might have yelled. The war was making them all grow up quickly, James noted. She crossed the room to perch on the edge of of his armchair, resting a hand in his messy hair.

'Look, I know you hate him and think me a fool for still trying with my sister. But I promised my parents we would be there, and I don't want them thinking that we're blowing them off.'

**That's right, James thought. They don't know about the war.** He lifted himself out of the chair with an exaggerated groan.

'Fine,' he said in a long-suffering tone. 'But I'm warning you, I'm only agreeing for those Muggle desserts. Give me ten minutes to shower.'

'Thank you,' Lily called after him.

James just grunted as he climbed the stairs. The things I do for love, he thought, glancing wistfully at his bed through the open doorway on his way to the shower.

***

Emma and Regulus shared a look.

'Where are you?' Emma asked, as Regulus went to find their coats.

'We'll meet you at your apartment in Diagon Alley,' Rabastan replied. 'Lucy… she needs to be away from all of this.'

'Okey,' Emma replied with a nod.

She searched for something else to say, but she wasn't sure there was anything she could say. In any case, Rabastan's head had disappeared, so it was too late. With one last worried sigh, she followed Regulus downstairs, barely ten minutes after they got back.

When they arrived at the flat in Diagon Alley, it was already open. Rabastan must have used the
spare key she had given him for emergencies. Drawing strength from one last look at Regulus's calm face, Emma twisted the doorknob and entered.

Rabastan and Lucinda were already there, on the sofa. He had his arms wrapped around her, and she was still in her coat, shivering. But she wasn't shivering. It was still warm outside, and Emma's flat was on the top floor, soaking in the heat from the roof.

Quickly, she went to boil the kettle. *Tea always calms Lucinda when she's upset,* Emma thought, though the idea that tea could solve her brother's death was such a ridiculous notion in itself that Emma felt hysterical laughter bubble up in her throat. Recognising it for what it was, she gulped. *That won't help anyone.*

Suddenly, she felt Regulus's presence by her side, his arm reaching past her head for the tea bags. She didn't have to turn around to know what he would have to say. She should be comforting her friend, not idly making tea.

Seizing her guilty courage with two hands, Emma turned around, nearly marching to the sofa. Upon arrival, though, her steps faltered. Tentatively, she sat down on Lucinda's other side.

'Lucinda?' she asked gently. She couldn't ask her if she was all right. She imagined losing James. It would be like someone cutting off her right arm. 'Do you want me to light a fire?'

It would be swelteringly hot, but maybe the heat would be what Lucinda needed right now.

'They're gone,' Lucinda said, her mouth twisted into some mockery of a smile. 'They're all gone.'

'We're here,' Emma said, laying a hand on Lucinda's arm. It was immediately thrown off.

'They left me here,' Lucinda said, turning to face Emma. Her smile faltered, the corners of her lips turning down into a grimace. 'They don't even care about me now that he's gone.'

Emma's eyes flickered to Rabastan in confusion. *Who are they?* But that was a mistake. Lucinda rose to her feet, nearly scratching Rabastan as she pushed him away.

'You don't need to have secret conversations behind my back, okay?' the blonde said angrily. 'I know what you're thinking. Poor Lucinda, she's so fragile. Poor Lucinda, she doesn't understand. Poor Lucinda, she's good for nothing.'

By this time her voice had risen to a shriek. To mark her point, she grabbed the small table and threw it with surprising strength at the fireplace. A tile cracked.

'Well, I'm not an idiot!' she said again, storming to the fireplace, taking the framed photos one by one and smashing them on the floor. 'I know that no one wants me here! I know I'm a burden. I wish I had died instead of him!'

'Lucinda, where is this coming from?' Emma asked, nonplussed. She half turned to look at Rabastan before catching herself, and forcing herself to watch the blonde. 'Who are they?'

'My parents, of course,' Lucinda shouted, stamping her feet. She took off one shoe and threw it at the wall. When it made a satisfying slapping noise, she took the other one off and did the same, punctuating each sentence with a thrown object. 'I come home,' *thump,* to find them packed,' *crash,* and telling me they're *moving,* she ripped open her coat, 'to bloody *France,* she threw the coat to the floor, 'because there's nothing *left* for them here,' she took off her wizard's watch, throwing it to the floor, 'and *oh!* *Your brother is dead.*'
She made as if to stamp on the watch, but Rabastan intervened, grabbing ahold of her and pulling her back. As if on cue, Lucinda burst into tears, sobbing into Rabastan's chest as she heaved huge gulps of air. His hand rose to her head, as if to stroke her hair, but instead simply rested it there, as if to remind her of his presence.

Regulus chose that moment to arrive with the tea, wordlessly taking Lucinda's hands and pressing them against the warm cup until she took it. He glanced back at Emma as he retreated, crouching on the sofa as if he was too worried to sit down.

'Nobody wanted Evan to die,' Emma said as Lucinda's sobs died down to hiccups, the scene replaying in her mind on repeat. 'But that doesn't mean that they wanted you to either, Lucy. I know this isn't what you want to hear, but his was a noble death. He died fighting, never giving up even when they gave him the opportunity to.'

'No death is noble,' Lucinda replied, the anger back in her voice. 'He chose the coward's way out, the selfish way out. It's easy to die for something, letting everyone else deal with your death.'

'Hey,' Rabastan murmured, guiding Lucinda to sit down. 'You don't mean that.'

'Yes, I do,' she snapped, her tone derisive. 'My whole family is cowardly. Look at my parents, running as soon as things get bad. Look at me, sitting cosily by the fire whilst everyone else fights for what they believe in.'

'We're your family,' Rabastan countered immediately. 'And none of us think you're a coward. You're the cleverest one here.'

Unspoken was the war weariness that shrouded them all, weighing all the heavier as more friends joined the ranks of the deceased. Emma knew that even Rabastan was starting to think that the conflict would never end, that both sides would continue to fight until every witch and wizard lay still in their grave.

'He's right,' Emma said quietly, coming over to sit on Lucinda's other side. 'And to prove it, here. This is the key to my flat. I don't use it much anymore, and it deserves someone who can appreciate it. You're what's keeping us together, Lucy. You take care of us when we get back, keep us updated on how the others are doing even if we're sent to the other side of the country. Without you, we would be lost.'

Lucinda sniffed, looking at the small silver key in the palm of her hand. Her teary blue eyes locked onto Emma's, then moved to look at Regulus and Rabastan in turn. She squeezed Rabastan's arm, pulling him closer, before her gaze flitted back to Emma.

'Thank you.'
Hello everyone! I'm so sorry for not posting for so long, and not replying. I've had tonsillitis (twice) and a ton of work to catch up on. I promise I'll try to update more quickly, but it really depends on when I get better x) Thanks for all your patience, and have a fluffy piece of James to keep you going.

James yawned for the eighth time in fifteen minutes, keeping his jaw clenched shut so that people wouldn't notice. Once was acceptable, twice was tired, but eight was just rude. Even James knew that.

'Are you all right, James?' Mrs Evans asked.

Maybe somebody noticed.

'Oh, fine,' he waved an arm, nearly knocking over the tray the waiter had just brought to the table.

'Lily, why did you have to bring this buffoon?' Petunia asked, pursing her lips as she noticed the altercation.

Of course Petunia noticed. She had the eyes of a hawk, and the nose of one too.

The conversation – already stilted to begin with – came to an abrupt halt. Mrs Evans looked apologetically at James, before shooting a stern look at her eldest. Lily opened her mouth to reply, just as the waiter served their meals.

'Steak!' Vernon said eloquently, not waiting for Lily and Petunia to receive their pasta before tucking in.

James felt his stomach rumble – how long had it been since he had last eaten? – but patiently waited. At least he could say one thing about Vernon – he made James look good in front of Lily's parents. He remembered being so nervous the first time Lily had introduced them and nearly laughed aloud. Now, he felt almost as comfortable with them as with Lily herself.

'James, eat before it gets cold,' Lily told him, unfolding her napkin and laying it on her lap. 'I'm sure they'll have our food up in no time.'

James glanced at her parents, more out of a wish to show up Vernon than looking for consent. When they both nodded, he descended upon his food, devouring it as quickly as was socially acceptable. The meat melted in his mouth, and it was all he could do not to sigh into it as he ate.

*Good thing I ate that ice cream with Regulus in the end, he thought. I don't think I could have waited otherwise.*

By the time Lily and Petunia's dishes had arrived – ironically, they were the same – James was calmly cutting the end of his chicken into small, manageable pieces. After all, he didn't want to be sitting around twirling his thumbs as the rest of them ate.
'Vernon and I want to have a white wedding,' Petunia gushed between bites. 'I want everything to be traditional. I want Dad to walk me down the aisle, I want a bouquet of white roses on every table, I want to have it in the summer and I want to have it in a castle. But most of all,' she said, eyeing James as he innocently chewed on his last chip, 'I want it to be normal.'

'Honey, I don't think that weddings in castles are really the norm,' Mr Evans started, before he was cut off by Vernon.

'She means she doesn't want any of their lot near the ceremony,' he rumbled, wiping mustard from his moustache.

James stuffed a bread roll into his mouth to prevent himself from saying anything, wondering what to do. He knew that Lily didn't like him to rise to the bait, but he was too tired and too angry to reign himself in for much longer. They had listened to Vernon drone on about drills for half an hour, in the hopes that Petunia would reconcile with her sister, but he wasn't going to let Vernon insult them all dinner.

Mr and Mrs Evans said nothing, being too polite, but both were shooting disapproving looks at Petunia, who merely shrugged.

'How can I be sure they won't have any "accidents"? She's a freak,' she motioned towards her sister, 'and he's from their world. What am I going to say to our friends? That he's some kind of… unemployed, fumbling magician? I don't want them anywhere near the wedding, let alone involved in the preparations!'

That was it. James gulped, waiting for the bread to slowly slide its way down his throat, but it was too late.

'Excuse me,' Lily said in a choked voice, standing up abruptly. 'I need to…'

However, they never got to hear what she needed to do, because at that moment she let out a loud sob and ran in the direction of the ladies' bathroom.

'Petunia!' Mrs Evans said reproachfully, before running after her younger daughter.

James was done playing nice with these people.

'Excuse me,' he repeated Lily's words, putting his napkin back on the table. 'I'll be back in a few minutes.'

Once outside, James called Sirius on the mirror. The latter appeared immediately, despite having said that he would be sleeping. He looked worse than James felt.

'Code red, Padfoot. I repeat, we have a code red.'

'Code red,' Sirius repeated, his eyes suddenly becoming bright and clear. 'On my way.'

His image faded, and soon James was just looking at his own reflection once more. Pocketing the mirror, he went back inside to look for Lily. He bumped into her just as she emerged from the bathroom, still sniffing a little, rubbing her red eyes.

'You were right, James,' she said miserably. 'Let's just go.'

'All right,' he said, playing along for the moment. He took Lily's hand. 'Let's go and get our coats.'
He just hoped that Sirius would be able to walk quickly. There was an Apparition point not far from the restaurant that Lily had told him about, just in case Death Eaters decided to ambush the couple, but James didn't know if Sirius would be able to gather everyone in time.

He crossed his fingers behind his back just in case.

'Very sorry, Mum, Dad,' Lily started, her tone tired and defeated. James felt his heart break a little bit just at the sound of her voice.

'No, I'm sorry, Lily,' Petunia interrupted. 'I should never have invited you in the first place. I knew that you would ruin this evening. You always–'

Just then, a loud voice carried through the restaurant, cutting all possible conversation and making the guests look around for the cause.

'I've got a cauldron full of hot, strong love!' Lily turned to James, comprehension dawning on her face. Of course she would recognise Sirius's voice. She opened her mouth, but James quickly shushed her, squeezing her hand in anticipation.

'And it's bubbling for you.'

Sirius came into view, dressed in the leather jacket he donned when they went motorbiking together, giving out red roses to every female in sight with a wink. A little girl of nine giggled as she accepted the flower in amazement.

'Say Incendio, but that spell's not hot.' A female voice joined in, and James had to stop himself from bursting into laughter at Vernon's outraged expression. His friends had been practicing the cheesy ballad for a while, but the reference to magic in front of Lily's sister and her fiancé made his song choice all the sweeter.

'As my special witch's brew!' Marlene came strutting into view, her bright red lipstick matching her dress. James couldn't believe how awake she looked after the night they had had. Her eyes were shining as they both approached the Evans' table, much to the horror of Petunia.

'Don't you be afraid, come take a sip Of this steamy tasty treat.' As Sirius and Marlene came to a stop in front of Lily, Remus and Peter started up through the rows, placing wreaths of lilies on every table.

'What's in my cauldron of hot strong love Will make your life complete!' Sirius and Marlene finished their duet with a bow just as Remus and Peter arrived behind Vernon and Petunia. Mr and Mrs Evans were laughing, both at the ridiculous song, and at their daughter's embarrassed grin that seemed permanently fixed on her face.

'James,' Lily said, half-joking and half reproachful. James had no intention of letting Lily finish that sentence.
'Since your dear sister and her lovely fiancé seem unaware of your most perfect qualities, I have taken the liberty of putting together a group of witnesses,' he announced, loudly enough for the entire room to hear. He had to adapt his original speech a bit, but it was worth Petunia and Vernon's reactions. There was nothing worse for them than social embarrassment. 'Sirius, if you would like to start.'

'Evans,' Sirius proclaimed theatrically. 'In the seven years that I have known you, you have never once paused in the defense of others, even if the ones doing the bullying were friends of yours. You have always stood up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, for justice, and for what is right.' He bowed. 'I am proud to say you're my friend.'

Sirius turned to Remus, who took a spare chair and stood on it. Lily gaped at the actions of whom she had thought to be a demure friend, then hid her face between her fingers, peeking out to look up at the Marauder.

'Lily,' Remus declared. 'In the seven years that I have known you, you have never once judged a book by its cover – both literally, and figuratively. You stayed my friend where someone else might have fled, due to my… background,' he remained vague. 'You are an uncommonly kind person, especially considering the fact that you're willing to date this buffoon I call a friend,' he gestured towards James, to several titters around the restaurant. 'I feel privileged to have made your acquaintance.'

He stood back down, to be replaced by Peter. Lily had taken her hands away from her face by now, and looked at the third Marauder with a sort of benevolent gaze, not quite smiling, not quite frowning.

'Lily,' Peter pronounced with an air of grandeur. 'In the seven years that I have known you, you have never given up on anyone. You tutored me through half of my fifth year, and all through my sixth and seventh, where someone else would have told me to abandon my subjects. You see the best in everyone, even the worst of humanity,' he paused, tears in his eyes as he gathered his strength. 'I don't deserve to have had a teacher like you.'

He got down from the chair, accepting the tissue Remus had seemingly – and most likely – conjured out of nowhere, blowing his nose noisily as Marlene stepped to face her old roommate.

'Lily,' she said quietly, smiling as she took the other girl's hands within her own. 'Where do I even start? In the seven years that I have known you, you have been my roommate, my confidant, my best friend. You lighten up every room you walk into, and you make it so easy to be jealous of you, but very hard to hate you. You're the only person who outwits my sarcastic jokes and,' she stared Lily in the eyes, 'I feel blessed to call you my best friend.'

After a long moment in which Lily hugged Marlene and Mrs Evans hushed Petunia, James tapped his girlfriend on the shoulder. She turned, most likely expecting what James had in store for her, with a radiant smile on her face. James was just happy to have his Lily back the way she should be.

'Lily,' he said, his voice cracking. 'What can I say that hasn't already been said by these wonderful people around us? In the seven years that I have known you, I have loved you for every single day. Some may call it crazy, and some may call it obsession – I know you have many a time – but I knew that it was destiny. There is no one in the world who could even come close to the amazing person you are, and if I were to let you go, then I would regret it every day of my life. I promise that I will never take you for granted, that I will cherish every day we spend together, that I will never stop trying to make you as happy as you deserve. So much that,' he paused, taking a deep breath and kneeling down as he opened the small box that he had been keeping in his pocket for the past six months, 'I would be honoured if you allowed me to call you my wife.'
'James,' Lily said, and this time her voice cracked with emotion. She enclosed his hands with her own, pulling him up to kiss him. 'You're such a cheesy doofus. You know I hate big things. Of course I'll marry you.'

As Lily talked, James had started to second guess himself, wondering whether it was the wrong time, wondering whether she hated everything, wondering whether he had put too much pressure on her with a public proposal. In the end, it took him several seconds to process her words, but when he did, he let out a whoop and kissed her again, more soundly this time.

He was vaguely aware of some applause coming from around him, and Mr Evans sniffling a little, but everything seemed to fade as he concentrated on sliding the slim silver band on Lily's finger, the pink diamond glinting in the light. He looked up to see her green eyes glinting with tears, only realising that he was crying himself when his vision became too blurry to see straight.

'Thanks for saying yes,' he admitted as he hugged her again. 'I was scared you wouldn't.'

'It might have taken me a while, but I will never stop loving you, James Potter.'
Hello everyone! I’m so sorry for taking so long, but when I mentioned I was ill last chapter, I hadn’t realised that it was mononucleosis, and I was kind of wiped out for a few months! I’m trying to get back on track, so thanks for being so patient, and sorry for such a short chapter after such a long wait!

Regulus slipped out of the back door, unnoticed by the two women of the household. Walburga had cornered Emma about wedding planning, and had made it perfectly clear to him the night before that she wanted some time alone with her future daughter-in-law.

If he hadn't known how much his mother doted on his fiancé, he might have been worried, but as it was he felt perfectly justified in leaving Emma in his mother's manicured hands. Besides, it would be nice for Emma to deal with something other than the Dark Lord for once.

At least, that was what Regulus told himself as he Apparated to Darlington, a small town not far from Durham. Still, as he stopped in front of an ordinary, two bedroomed house, with a small front garden and a gate falling into disrepair, he felt a twinge of guilt at concealing his activities.

'It's for the best,' he told himself, pressing the doorbell, and putting his hands in his pockets.

Soon it was opened by a man in his fifties, his hair going bald at the top, his beard scruffy and streaked with grey. He frowned as he looked at Regulus.

'Who are you?' he asked, and Regulus had expected his voice to be gruff, but instead it was quiet, understated.

'My father grew up with you,' Regulus stated, deciding it was best if he stuck with the same backstory for everyone having known Tom Riddle in his youth. 'Billy Stubbs, isn’t it?'

'Yes,' Billy replied, phrasing it as a question.

'My father recently passed away, and I was going through some old photos of his,' Regulus pressed on, trying his best to look concerned. He had never been good at faking facial expressions. Maybe it had been a mistake not to bring Emma along. 'There were quite a few of the two of you together - would you mind if I came in?'

Without waiting for a proper response, Regulus slipped through the doorway and into the house. From what he had found out about Billy Stubbs, he was someone who was always afraid of saying no. But Regulus had the feeling that if he had mentioned Tom Riddle's name in the street, Billy's door would be closed to him forever.

He looked around, noticing the pictures of children lining the staircase, the fact that the hallway carpet was torn and stained, and the untidiness of the kitchen beyond.

'You have children of your own?' Regulus asked, motioning towards the pictures. 'How old are they now?'
Billy's eyes softened as they landed on the portrait of a girl in her teens. 'Fifteen and seventeen respectively. Not too far off your own age, I should think.'

'Yes, I'm seventeen now,' Regulus replied thoughtfully. 'Nearly eighteen.' He felt older. 'Where are they now?'

'With their mother,' Billy's face twisted into a frown, and Regulus refrained from commenting further. After a slight pause, Billy gestured for Regulus to enter the living room. 'Tea? I just boiled the water.'

'Yes, please,' Regulus replied, picking his way through the mass of objects littering the floor to the relatively clean sofa. 'Milk, no sugar.'

He waited patiently for a few minutes, listening to the man bustling around the kitchen as he tried to ignore the improbability of his situation

‘Whose son did you say you were?’ Billy asked, walking into the room with two carefully balanced mugs.

‘Tom’s,’ Regulus replied, keeping his face blank as he turned to his unwilling host. ‘Tom Riddle’s.’

***

When Emma woke, Regulus was gone. There was a note neatly placed on his pillow, though in her sleep she’d rumpled the half of the duvet he’d made up on his end. Blearily, she rubbed her eyes and read.

Dear fiancée,

My mother has made it clear to me that I am to make myself scarce this morning whilst you enjoy some quality time together. Expect tea, scones, and debate over whether ivory white or eggshell best suits your complexion. Try not to kill her, and if you ever feel the urge, just remember that one more moment spent with her is one moment closer to when we can be wed.

Yours soon to be forever,

R.A.B

Smiling, she buried herself under the fluffy white covers for a moment. Was this what her life would have been without the war? Would she and Regulus have been so close? Would Lucinda and Rabastan still be their friends? They had only been brought together through circumstance, after all. It had taken a while for Lucinda and herself to open up to each other.

Despite the atrocities that she had witnessed - at others' hands and at her own, Emma couldn't help but feel partially glad for the war. If only James hadn't been on the other side of it… but then again, without James, would she have realised that she was on the wrong side?

Pushing her questions away for another day, or better yet, for Regulus to debate over as he so loved to, Emma pushed herself out of bed with a groan. As much as she loved her boyfriend, she couldn't help but dread the coming brunch.

***
The porcelain hit the floor within moments, hot tea soaking the carpet.

‘No, it can’t be,’ Billy stuttered, stepping back as Regulus moved to pick up the pieces. ‘Tom… he wouldn’t… he couldn’t…’

Regulus twisted his mouth into a sneer. Emma could always turn her emotions to her advantage. He imagined himself as Sirius, imagined hating his family so much that the very air he breathed seemed polluted. ‘I knew that you would turn me away if I told you the truth,’ he said quietly. ‘… I need to know. What made him the way he was? What made him treat my brother and I so…’

He let the sentence trail off, and as he looked back at Billy, he made himself stare deep into the man’s eyes, deep into his soul. All too soon, he was submerged within the memories. A rabbit, hanging by its tail by the rafter. A face, all too handsome and all too cold, the hint of a smile upon its lips as Tom Riddle took everything that was dear to the other children. A trip to the seaside that would scar them for life. The pale face of a thirteen year old girl, whispering about the cave above a green lake that would haunt her until she was taken to a different type of orphanage, one that you didn’t leave when you reached eighteen.

Suddenly, Regulus resurfaced, blinking rapidly as the broken teacup slipped from his grasp. Billy Stubbs was as white as the ghost of a girl Regulus had seen in his memories, and the look of pure horror on his face stopped Regulus’s thoughts in their tracks.

‘You… you’re just like him,’ the man choked out. ‘Get away from me. Get out of my house!’

Regulus fled.

***

‘-and I was thinking we could host it at the Rosiers’ in France, nothing here is quite as nice as Malfoy Manor and we want this to be special, don’t we?’ Walburga said, her voice as soft and breathless as her flowery perfume as Emma took a bite of the fourteenth vanilla cake of the day.

‘Mmmhmm,’ Emma replied, wondering if Walburga had secretly used a refilling charm on her plate. She wouldn’t put it past the woman.

In actual fact, she was wishing she’d had the foresight to bring Lucinda. She understood the importance of appearances, but the difference between lacy white napkins and cream doilies with dentelle was lost on her. They had gone through sixteen sets of antique silver goblets, but luckily Emma had thought to show her excitement for the first lot of silverware, so they hadn’t inspected as many brands of goblin-made knives.

You could arm an army of garden gnomes with these, she thought, examining her reflection in one. A sudden wave of homesickness overcame her as she remembered her snowball fights with the Bowtruckle in Godric’s Hollow. The cherry tree would be in full bloom now, blowing petals across the Quidditch pitch.

Five knocks rapped on the door in quick succession, cutting Walburga off and startling Emma into full consciousness, nearly making her drop her knife in the process.

‘I’ll get that,’ she said immediately, ignoring Walburga’s protests that it was Kreacher’s job.
Practically racing to the door, she wrenched it open to find Lucinda.

‘Merlin’s beard, must have heard my prayers,’ she said in relief, grinning broadly at her friend.

Lucinda frowned, her blue eyes creasing, and Emma’s smile faded.

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing bad on our side,’ Lucinda said, drawing out the words in preparation of the second half of her sentence. ‘But you might want to find Barty before anyone else does. Rabastan… Well, let’s just say that Rabastan heard that Fenwick has become a liability.’

Everyone knew what a liability meant in the Dark Lord’s books. And Barty would know exactly who to blame.

‘I’ll go right now,’ Emma replied, stepping back and unhooking her coat in the hall. Glancing back, she groaned. ‘I can’t. We’re halfway through wedding planning with Walburga and Regulus will kill me if I disappoint her. She’s finally found something to smile about after what happened to his father and—’

‘Say no more,’ Lucinda replied with a wave of her hand. ‘I’m on it. I heard that it’s the new trend to surprise both bride and groom now - the bride with the décor and the groom with the dress. Go, deal with your stuff. Walburga is one battle that I’m better equipped at dealing with.’

‘Thank you Lucy,’ Emma replied, trying to convey her gratitude through her expression. ‘I really owe you one.’

‘Just make sure that Barty doesn’t murder someone.’

It was likely easier said than done.

***

It was late afternoon by the time Regulus found the infamous seaside town, walking across the cliffside until he was met with the sight pulled from Billy’s memory. The sea was choppy here, roiling waves that struck the cliffs with such force that he felt the salty spray on his cheek. As he approached the ridge, he noticed a ledge further below, barely inches above the sea, and intuitively realised that he had to get down there to find the entrance to the Dark Lord’s cave.

He knelt down to examine the cliff face. There were handholes there, ones that he supposed Tom Riddle would have used to discover the cave, but they had worn away with time and the elements, and now he almost turned back to tell Emma of his findings. Going together would be safer, he knew that logically, and yet he was reluctant to bring her. He remembered her getting caught in the blast of the last raid, the Dark Lord himself having to heal her, and how his Occlumency shields had nearly shattered at the ensuing onslaught. She had always been the quicker thinker, better at Healing charms. It was better if he were the one to be damaged, to need her when the time came.

Besides, he reasoned, I don’t even know if anything’s there. I’m basing my search on the fragments of a tormented boy’s memory and the stories of a lady old enough to be my grandmother.

No. He would not bring Emma into this until he had proof.

The rocks were jagged and slippery, and he cut his hand more than once as he scaled down to the
ledge, the warm wind drying out his shirt almost as soon as the larger waves reached out to touch it when he came into reach. By the time he reached the bottom, he was wishing that he had brought some Quidditch gloves, or even just his broom.

*I wouldn’t have risked losing my broom to the treacherous water anyway*, he told himself as he healed the cuts, watching them patch up into jagged scars that crisscrossed his once smooth palms.

Shielding his eyes from the setting sun’s glare, he squinted at the cliff face. A little further along, there was a large but thin triangular gap, seemingly swallowing the sea into the darkness.

With the muffled cries of hysterical laughter that should have died fifty years ago ringing in his ears, Regulus dove into the abyss.

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